

Kamalini Balamurugan

Professor Anne Bello

ENGLWRIT 111

24 October 2023

My Khichdi language.

I have three mother tongues.

Well actually I mix three languages and speak a hybrid form of those languages at home with my family. In India it is very common to be multilingual but people usually tend to speak just one language at home. Often these languages spoken at home reflect the culture they grew up in, making mother tongues a huge factor in a social setting like at school— like becoming a part of a group at school.

For someone like me – who doesn't have one specific language as a mother tongue but a hybrid— I have always felt like I didn't truly belong with any group formed based on mother tongues. My parents grew up in a place where it was common to speak Tamil and Telugu at home. As they started working in IT, they realised the importance of English in today's world. As a result, when my brother and I were born, my parents taught us a hybrid of all three without teaching the differences between the languages. I did not grow up in a place where it was common to speak a mixture of languages at home, this caused me to refer to my mother tongue as the "*Khichdi*" language. Khichdi language is a South Indian dish made with lentils and rice. It has many variations throughout the country. The reason why I compare my mother tongue with this dish is because the ingredients don't have set proportions or a set recipe. It's such an imperfect dish but at the same time it gives off a homey feeling. The language I speak isn't perfect Tamil or Telugu or English but this imperfect language gives me the feeling of being at home.

These experiences I had growing up made me question: can your primary discourse cause language insecurity?

I think the answer is yes. Growing up speaking my hybrid language at home didn't help me differentiate between the three languages. So when I was asked to speak in Telugu or Tamil by my friends I used to mess up the words and use Tamil words while speaking in Telugu and vice versa. I was often teased for speaking my "*Khichdi*" language. On an eventful day in middle school, the topic of mother tongues suddenly came up and everyone went around sharing the number of languages they knew and the reason why they speak the language they speak at home. One of my friends who knew me since elementary school, who knew I spoke my "*Khichdi*" language, asked me, "Kamalini! what is your mother tongue again?" I blanked out for a few seconds not really knowing how to explain my "mother tongue." One of my classmates broke the silence by yelling, "Who doesn't know their own mother tongue?"

In my classmates' situations, their parents did not grow up speaking two or three languages at home. They grew up speaking one and when they moved to a different state, they learned the local's languages. In their case the second language they learned was exclusively for speaking in social settings or just for communicating with locals. Since my classmates grew up in the same situation they were baffled and couldn't imagine speaking their second language at home as it was exclusively reserved for social gatherings. Their primary discourse just consisted of their single language mother tongue. I spoke a hybrid language, meaning all three languages were equally part of my primary discourse. None of the languages were reserved just for a social setting like my friends. This caused my classmates to view me as different from them.

That day when we went around announcing mother tongues, was one of my core memories that made me detest explaining my "mother tongue" situation and made me feel

insecure talking in my mother tongue in a social setting. To understand why my primary discourse caused me linguistic insecurities growing up, understanding what discourses are might help.

Discourses are groups a person is part of (Swales). My discourses included my whole family speaking a hybrid of Tamil, Telugu and English, a group at my school who primarily spoke Tamil as their mother tongue, and a group at my school that primarily spoke Telugu at home.

Discourse communities are further divided into primary discourse and secondary discourse. Primary discourse is the very first discourse a person is part of. In my situation my family where we spoke a hybrid language at home is my primary discourse. It was the very first discourse I have ever been part of and all the other groups I am part of now are something I became part of over the years. Secondary discourse is all the other discourses a person is part of. In relation to my situation, the group in school that primarily spoke Tamil at home and the group in school that primarily spoke Telugu at home were all my secondary discourses.

My primary discourse of Khichdi language made it harder for me to fit in school. Since mother tongues are ice breaker questions– at some point in my life I was tired of explaining to everyone I met why I spoke my hybrid language. People also treated me differently when I revealed that I spoke a mixture of three languages. Even though I did not particularly feel left out or ostracised I could never truly be a part of their groups since I did not speak just Tamil or Telugu. To me, they were native speakers even though we had the same level of understanding of the language. As someone whose native tongue is just a hybrid of three languages, I had always felt like I was doing a poor job talking or communicating with a native speaker. I was afraid that they would label me as a “fraud” who was not multilingual– who did not know the languages she spoke.

Even though I grew up linguistically insecure because of my primary discourse, I learnt to live with it. I spoke a mixture of three languages at home and there was nothing “wrong” with that. People around me communicate with me and I with them just fine. In the end of the day languages exist to help us communicate with each other. I got that down just fine. My imperfect Khichdi language has always been part of my home and it always will be.

Works Cited

Swales, John. "The Concept of Discourse Community: Some Recent Personal History."

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