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Linguistic Duopoly: A Case of Mewati

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Abstract

Considerable attention has been drawn recently towards the plight of immigrant languages or minority languages. Much is being done to maintain these languages and to bring the issues surrounding them to the public eye. However, not much has been done on linguistic varieties labelled as 'dialects'. This study seeks to fill this gap by exploring the issues surrounding a language variety called Mewati.

This paper examines the status of Mewati in relation to the other dominant languages of Hindi and Urdu and attempts to explain how social institutions like local state run schools and madrasas contribute towards language shift. Additionally, the study explores the relationship between language, religion and identity and the politics thereof. It is recommended that school curriculums must make a room for Mewati if its maintenance is to be ensured.

Key Words: Dialect, Identity, Religion, Hegemony, Language Policy, Language shift and maintenance, Language Politics

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Introduction

Mewat is home to a very high concentration of the Meos who are the traditional inhabitants of the region. Meos are predominantly Muslims and speak Mewati which is an Indo-Aryan variety spoken in the historical area of Mewat. Its geographical boundaries make it an interesting area to base a research upon as it has traditionally shared boundaries with Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Rajasthan and Delhi. At present, the district of Mewat forms part of the state of Haryana, one of the fastest developing states in India. It is a few kilometres away from Gurgaon, which is known to be the financial and industrial hub of the state with one of the highest per capita incomes in the entire country.

Yet, on almost all human development indicators Mewat lags far behind than any region in Haryana and is one of the most underdeveloped and neglected areas of the whole country. According to the 2001 Census, Mewat had total population of 9.93 lakhs, 95.36% of its population is rural and 4.64% is urban (Census of India, 2001). Possible reasons for this neglect are historical and political factors. Language and religion have played central roles in adding fuel to the fire. After the partition of India, Muslim majority Pakistan was created as an Islamic state with Urdu as its official language and Hindu majority India ended up choosing Hindi as its official language. In Mewat, one of the domains which have been the most affected is educational sphere.

Based on 2001 Census report, the literacy rate recorded in Mewat was 44.07%, which was lower in comparison to both the state average literacy rate (68.59%) and the national literacy rate (65.38%) (Census of India, 2001). According to Prasad (2008:52), the literacy rate of Meo women is between 1.76% and 2.13%, which is exceptionally low. On the other hand, the literacy rate among the Meo men ranges from 27% to 37% (Prasad 2008:52). It is in this context, the role of policy decision makers and educators becomes critically important.

Owing to the nature of social and political problems found in Mewat along with poverty, most Meo parents choose to send their children to local Madrasas which generally provide free religious education, boarding and lodging facilities to their students. On the other hand, government schools provide education with lower fees and are state funded and purport to be

'secular' in nature. Private schools form the third type of schools with comparatively higher fees with better infrastructure and 'secular' content.

A key policy in deciding the fate of Mewati and other languages used by Meos in Mewat is the Three Language Formula (TLF henceforth). The three language formula (TLF) was devised as an educational strategy to cope with India's multilingualism by introducing languages at the national, regional and local levels (Srivastava 2007: 43). The formula suggested the teaching of the following languages in schools:

- The regional language and the mother tongue when the latter is different from the regional language.
- Hindi, or in Hindi speaking areas, another Indian language.
- English, or any other modern European language (Dasgupta 1970: 244).

One of the stumbling blocks of implementing TLF was that every state interpreted it differently to suit their own needs and requirements. The result of this was that most minority languages were pushed out of the educational sphere (Vanishree 2011: 350).

Minority groups could not benefit from TLF as minority languages were equated to regional languages. With regional languages being the majority language of the people of the state, this majoritarian criterion invariably led to the defeat of minority languages. Such languages were rejected on the basis of not being fully developed and lacking standardized scripts, therefore being ill equipped to become languages of education (Koul and Devaki 2000: 121). This general state of affairs is also the state of Mewati which is not part of the government school curriculum either as a subject or as a medium of instruction and is dubbed merely as a 'dialect' of Rajasthani, which in turn is considered a 'dialect' of Hindi. Hindi is an official language of the union along with being an official language of the state of Haryana and a mandatory subject in the school curriculum.

Aside from official government policy, Urdu is unique in that even though it has been granted an official status and is commonly hailed as a language of Muslims, it is absent from the government and private schools. An understanding of this can be achieved through an examination of the broader sociohistorical and political background. After the independence

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and partition of India, political division between Hindus and Muslims led to linguistic division between Hindi and Urdu which later became the battleground for playing identity politics. This Hindi-Urdu divide further led these languages to be assigned different social roles and group identities - Hindi as Hindu and Urdu as Muslim (Abbi, Hasnain and Kidwai 2004: 1).

The sociopolitical context of Urdu has appeared to have a bearing on the ontological welfare of the language itself as it has been relegated from once being a language of the dominant elite to one associated with illiteracy, poverty and backwardness (Abbi, Hasnain and Kidwai 2004: 3). Hasnain (2004: 4) attributed this to the covert policies of the states which contribute to the discouragement of Urdu as a medium of instruction in schools through lack of educational facilities, teachers, textbooks and teaching materials, consequently forcing children to take instruction in Hindi rather than Urdu.

It is generally believed that TLF with regard to Urdu has miserably failed because of the way its directives have been applied. At the core is the state board curriculum of the north Indian states where Hindi and Sanskrit are mandatory subjects. Those students whose mother tongue is Urdu are denied their basic linguistic right to attain education in their mother tongue (Matthews 2003: 62). The absence of Urdu from the school curriculum and is particularly noteworthy as this is said to be one of the reasons Meos have hostility toward the 'secular' school system (Sikand 1994:139).

This, in turn, leads to higher rates of illiteracy and an increased mistrust towards government and the language policies they tend to advocate. It is in this context madaras are preferred to government schools because of the provision of Urdu and other Islamic subjects that the secular system tries to keep out of its educational domain. Aggarwal (1966: 1680) also lent support to the argument when he contended that the provision of religious education and Urdu instruction are the main reasons for madaras' widespread presence in Mewat

I argue that the covert policies of the state which tend to keep Urdu out of government schools end up encouraging madaras which use Urdu as a form of resistance towards state policies. This pushes minority languages like Mewati out of the educational sphere due to the prestige Urdu carries and its close association with Muslim identity. This is in line with

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Pandharipande (2002: 21) who claimed that perception of the (desired) identity changes over time and so does a choice of language to express that identity. It is in this context I argue that Mewati is possibly undergoing a shift towards Hindi-Urdu with Urdu playing a key part due to its association with Islamic identity. This is in correspondence with Spolsky who pointed out that religion is a key contributing factor in language maintenance and loss (Spolsky 2003: 89).

A deeper analysis of the relationship between Urdu and the influence of Tablighi Jamaat (henceforth TJ) in Mewat sheds light on the role that Urdu has played in literacy and identity construction. TJ is an Islamic reform movement that came into existence after the political decline of Mughals due to the rising influence of the British rule in India. It found a foothold in Mewat and has ever since played a key role in shaping Meos' identity. It is one of the most popular reform movements in the Islamic world (Robinson 2001:15). The organisation was founded by Maulana Mohammad Ilyas in the 1920s to 'purify' the Meos of Mewat in Rajasthan (and Indian Muslims more generally) of un-Islamic customs, traditions and beliefs (Jasani 2008:436).

This was found to be even more significant in the case of Meos who earlier belonged to the Kshatriya (Warrior) caste within Hinduism but later embraced Islam, they formed a unique tribal community who continued to practice an amalgamation of Hindu and Islamic customs, beliefs and traditions. This distinctive identity alienated them from the mainstream community that itself was marked along different castes, religious and ethnic lines (Arvind 2009:6). In these circumstances, TJ exercised its influence on Meos' daily lives and played a key role in creation, maintenance and negotiation of their identity.

This influence was also strong in the sphere of education where a study conducted by Sikand on TJ showed their insistence on keeping Meo students out of government schools as these schools were perceived as threat to the students' Muslim identity. They claimed that the presence of highly Sanskritised Hindi found in the textbooks was being used to Hinduise them (Sikand 1994:139). One of the complaints generally has been with regard to the content of textbooks in which they believed the contributions of Islam and Muslims are usually ignored. Sikand's view also finds resonance with Arvind (2009:6) who reported that the local influential clergy in Mewat along with community members had shown resistance towards

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the introduction of Hindi in school curriculum as a medium of instruction. Additionally, they showed their disapproval of pictorial representation of certain phenomena, as well as singing and dancing activities by labelling them as 'anti-Islamic'.

Sikand (1999:50) also noted that the organisation insisted the role of women should be limited to the home domain and discouraged social mobility and independence. Sikand (1994:138) put forth one of the reasons Meo girls are discouraged to attend schools is because there is no seclusion of women within the four walls and the absence of 'purdah' (veil) and because they are more likely to be taught by strange (ghayr) men. This, I believe, leads to low literacy rate found among Meo girls.

In spite of these beliefs held by TJ, they maintain that their movement is apolitical in nature and does not deal with the worldly affairs (Ali 2000:22). However, the organisation's religious beliefs must also have some bearing on their language ideologies. This view of the relationship between religion and language ideology finds its expression in the ideas of Ferguson who posited that "all religious belief systems include some beliefs about language" (Ferguson 1982: 103). Since Arabic is the language of Quran and Urdu is used to transmit religious knowledge and employed for communication and literacy purposes, it can be assumed that these languages would carry more weight and value than Hindi or Mewati for at least some members of TJ.

Therefore, I claim that the local clergy plays a key role in Mewat, even if unintentionally, which goes beyond the realm of religion and is in conflict with the policies followed in state run schools. I make a case that the conflict of Hindi-Urdu will lead a shift away from using Mewati among Meos. Schools, whether government or local madrasas, both act as agents in contributing towards this language shift. This view corresponds with Fishman (as cited in Lo Bianco 2010: 4) who put forward that "schools are unreliable allies of language maintenance, frequently and appreciably leading to language shift."

The survival of many minority languages and 'dialects' such as Mewati is in danger in India and schools can either accelerate this process or help in maintaining languages. Taking this into account, a hierarchy of languages denoting inequality in power and status in the Indian context with regard to Mewati in particular is demonstrated in Figure 1.

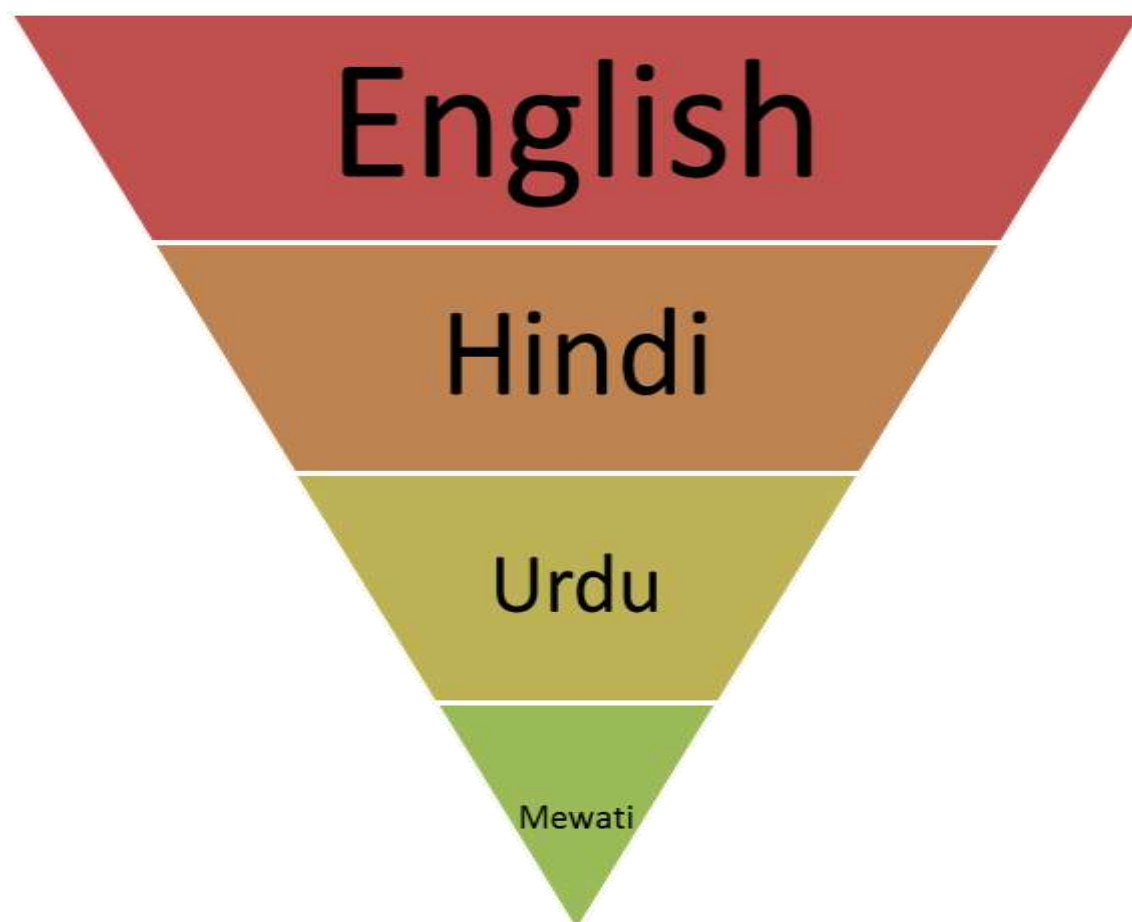
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Figure 1 - Hierarchical ordering by status of the Indian languages with regard to Mewati



In order to analyse this hierarchy of languages, I draw on the concept of hegemony proposed by Gramsci (1971) which provided a philosophical framework within which relationships between dominant and minority groups could be analysed. Suarez (2002:513) explained hegemony as "intellectual and moral leadership through consent and persuasion." Figure 1 shows English at the top of the hierarchy due to its elite status that it enjoys as it is the language of government, higher education, administration, and business and its status as a lingua franca of the world. For the purposes of this paper, I will only focus on the hierarchy of relationship between Hindi, Urdu and Mewati. These languages are the most significant in

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the context of Mewat for the reason that the speakers of these languages come into contact most often, leading to an overall influence of these languages (and their speakers) on one another. The dominance of Hindi over Urdu and Mewati illustrated by Figure 1 is easy to comprehend as it is the official language of India. The dominance of Urdu over Mewati is also easily understandable as Mewati is only termed as a 'dialect' (Census of India, 2001).

This hegemonic hierarchy is not necessarily permanent and can be challenged resulting in a new hierarchy. As Gramsci (1971) noted in his theory of hegemony, mere economic domination is not enough for a hegemony to stay in place. The consent of the dominated group is required at each stage. The dominated group needs to believe that their subordinate position and that of the dominant is legitimate. In the context of Mewati, I argue this is achieved through social institutions such as schools and madrasas to the point where the hegemon influences them to the extent that the unconscious beliefs and assumptions (or ideologies) of the subordinate group are 'naturalised'. It is through this process the hegemonic hierarchy of languages is sustained and the absence of Mewati from the school domain is justified.

Additionally, I claim that while this hierarchy holds true at the national level with English being the clear hegemon, the notion of hegemony as Lull (1997:61) mentioned "the power or dominance that one social group holds over others" is inadequate to explain the situation in Mewat where multiple languages, language groups and ideologies compete and are in a conflict. Therefore, an alternative notion is needed to explain this situation. A broader concept of linguistic hegemony provides insight into the social power relationships between the majority and minority languages and language groups. Wiley suggested "Linguistic hegemony is achieved when dominant groups create a consensus by convincing others to accept their language norms and usage as standard or paradigmatic. Hegemony is ensured when they can convince those who fail to meet those standards to view their failure as being the result of the inadequacy of their own language" (Wiley, 2000:113). I argue, this linguistic hegemony is produced, maintained and reproduced by institutional practices and policies that favour the dominant languages which in turn legitimize their status and position within the hierarchy.

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In the context of government schools in rural Mewat, Hindi is mandatory as a subject and is the medium of instruction at all levels with English being taught as a subject as well. Private schools, while rare in the region, boast of teaching using English medium with Hindi as a mandatory subject in the school curriculum. The common feature between both types of schools is the exclusion of Urdu. This in my view achieves two purposes.

Firstly, in the name of providing 'secular' education, it keeps some minority students like Muslim Meos outside the school system by leaving them with no option but to attain education through Madrasas as they provide education in Urdu and Islamic subjects. This only helps in making the case for Urdu as an 'Islamic' language stronger which madrasas may utilise for their own vested interests thereby keeping the language in the hands of a few who control the fate and the outcome of its status. Secondly, this legitimizes the weak position of Mewati in the minds of Meos who are signalled that if an official language like Urdu fails to find a place in their school curriculum then the prospect of a language variety like Mewati must be worse still.

However, the same linguistic hegemony may also be contested and challenged through institutional practices. This is the case with many Meos who instead of attending state run schools would rather be part of madrasas. Madrasas become sites of resistance which help them to assert their Muslim Meo identity and oppose the existing hegemony maintained by English and Hindi. This may in turn lead to establishing a new order of hierarchy with a different language exercising its linguistic hegemony. In these circumstances, Urdu may become the new language of hegemony by replacing Hindi from its previous position and subsequently also Mewati thereby contributing towards language shift. Therefore, the claim that I make in this paper is that both the state run 'secular' schools and 'religious' Islamic schools (madrasas) act as agents in shaping the educational structure of Mewat which consequently has considerable impact on the economic, political and socio-cultural structures too.

These structural changes contribute towards forming what I call a "linguistic duopoly" or a dual hegemony. Gramsci's notion of hegemony is defined by Lull(1997:61) as "the power or dominance that one social group holds over others". I argue that two divergent social groups

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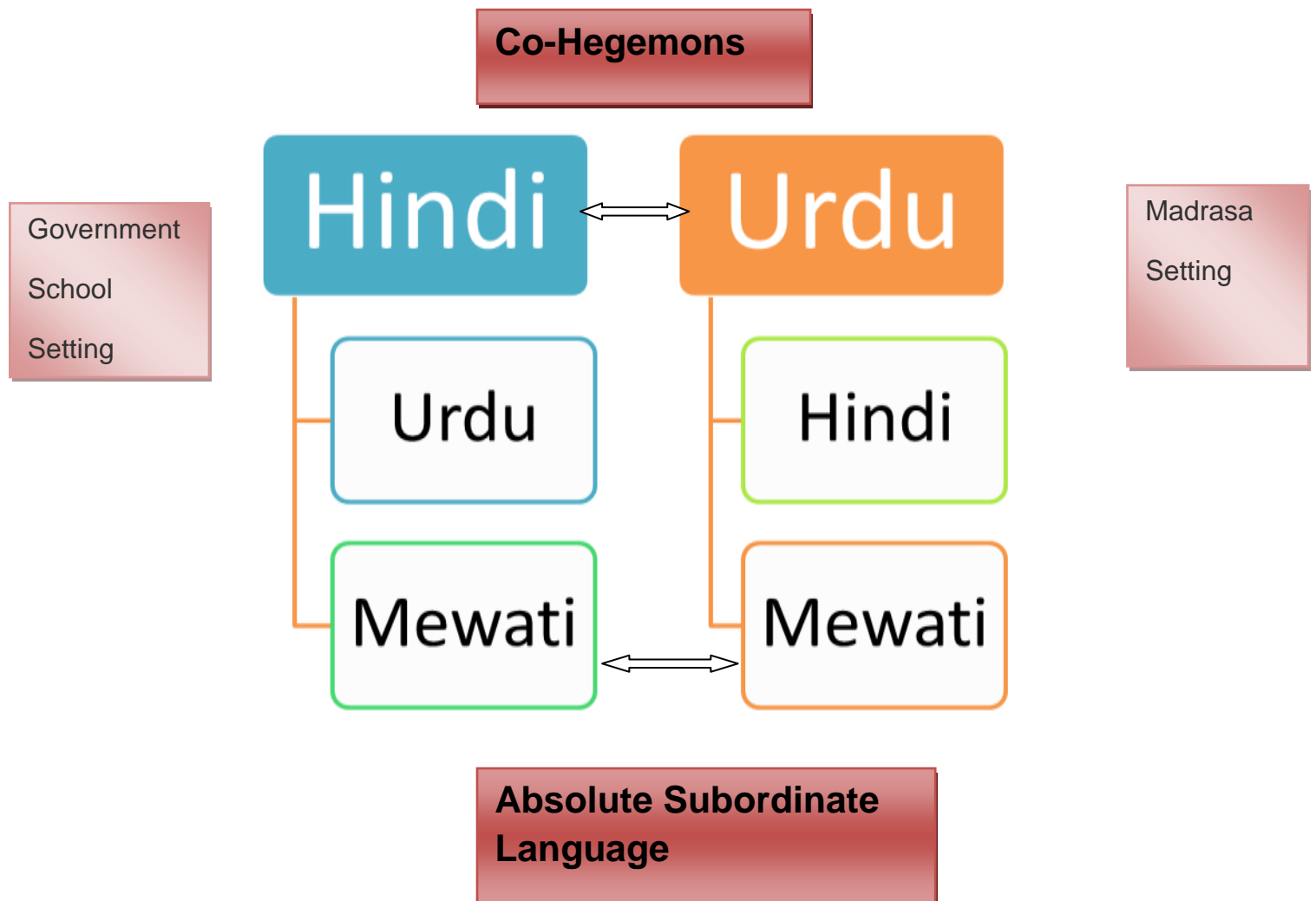
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with two opposing ideologies, may be in a dominant-subordinate relationship in the national context, but in different micro settings, each have their own hegemony. This subordinate group/s or its members can be understood through reference to two categories, "relative subordinates" and "absolute subordinates".

Relative subordinates are those members of a subordinate group who have a certain authority, provide leadership and guidance, are involved in decision making processes and exert a certain degree of influence over its members. Absolute subordinates are those who have less political, social or economic power and are usually persuaded by comparatively more influential and powerful people in a subordinate group. A dual hegemony of dominant and relative subordinate group is established when they work simultaneously to persuade or seek consent from absolute subordinates.

Thus, in the context of Mewat, Hindi as the official language of India acts as the dominant language in a government school setting and hence Hindi speakers and teachers form a dominant social group. In a madrasa setting, Urdu is the dominant language and those who teach and speak it as their mother tongue form a relative subordinate group. The absolute subordinates are those Mewati speakers who lack political, social and economic power and are persuaded by these two dominant social groups in two different settings. This argument is illustrated by Figure 2.

Figure 2 - Co-hegemony of Hindi and Urdu over Absolute Subordinate Mewati



As a result, there exists what I call a "linguistic duopoly", a situation in which two languages or language groups control the majority of the linguistic 'market' to the extent that they are the only ones selling their 'products', their languages. Seen in this light, Hindi and Urdu have a duopoly over the market of schools in Mewat. The existence of a linguistic duopoly would lead to the following effects:

- Firstly, there would be a reduction in competition. For the absolute subordinates such as Mewati speakers and their advocates, it will be hard to gain recognition or 'market share' in the presence of two dominant languages Hindi and Urdu. This will ultimately lead to the expansion of these language groups at the expense of Mewati as a language group.
- Secondly, there would be a barrier to entry. Owing to the forces of this linguistic market, Mewati speakers would have to learn the dominant languages like Hindi or Urdu which would ultimately contribute towards shift and make it difficult for Mewati to enter in the school market.
- Thirdly, price competition would occur. Since Hindi and Urdu control most of the language market of schools in Mewat, they also would control the price that 'consumers' (speakers of various languages) have to pay. Mewati (or other minority language) speakers pay a price both in terms of
 - the loss of their language and culture in the socialization process in school; and
 - in terms of the necessity of paying to gain access to the 'product' that is to learn Hindi or Urdu.

In the light of this claim, I propose that in multicultural, multiethnic, multireligious and multilingual settings such as India the concept of hegemony is difficult to apply as it is not easy to demarcate the boundaries between language and identity affiliations. As demonstrated, a case in point is the hegemony of Hindi and Urdu, both of which are official languages. While linguistically both languages fall in the same domain, politically they do not. I argue that it is this political domain which is left open to many interest groups, organisations and social institutions which use it to extend their own agendas by creating a new social order with a new hierarchy and a new hegemony. It is in this background I argue

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that there is a dual hegemony in the context of Mewat in which both Hindi and Urdu act as co-hegemons depending on the setting.

The marginalization of Urdu has been well noted by many scholars (Matthews, 2003; Abbi, 2004; Ahmad, 1996; Hasnain 2007). Urdu suffers from linguistic hegemony established by English and Hindi in most domains including education and particularly in the state run government schools and private schools. Despite this, Urdu can act as a hegemon in a different setting such as madrasa where it is the dominant language of teaching and learning. Urdu's position is not dominant overall as it still suffers from prejudice and marginalization. To keep Urdu out of schools for those whose mother tongue is Urdu is to devoid them of their language rights. However, the point I make in this paper is that in different settings with different social groups in command with each perpetuating its own ideology, there can be co-hegemons. In the face of this hegemony, if Mewati is to be maintained for the future it is important that it has a place in the school curriculum either as a subject or as a medium of instruction or both.

Conclusion

This paper examined a linguistic variety called Mewati spoken by a minority community of Meos in the Mewat district in India. Meos form a religious, ethnic and linguistic minority with their language dubbed as a 'dialect' of Hindi. Since the Meos are a Muslim community, the influence of Urdu, Islam and the local clergy plays a major role in shaping their identity. Another such identity is based on a linguistic and national identity for which Hindi is a key element. One domain in which the politics of identity and issues of language policy and planning come to the fore is that of education. This domain was explored in detail in this paper due to the widespread poverty, illiteracy and politics surrounding the region of Mewat. I put forward that schools become the site of imposition and resistance when minority languages are in question and this is even more of a case when the boundaries between different linguistic, ethnic and religious affiliations are fluid and complex.

I critically analysed the TLF and argued that the absence of Urdu from the government schools' in Mewat is one of the contributing factors for the preference for madrasas and it is here where different interest groups would use Urdu to resist local schools' policies and to

keep the Muslim identity of Meos alive. Tablighi Jamaat plays a significant role in this process. This in turn creates, maintains and reproduces a dual hegemony of Hindi and Urdu, both of which dominate Mewati in different institutional settings. In order to account for this hegemonic relationship, I suggested that the concept of hegemony proposed by Gramsci would not be easily applicable in the context of Mewat and perhaps pluralist and complex societies like India more generally.

Consequently, I proposed a concept of "linguistic duopoly". This helped to explain that unlike Gramsci's theory of hegemony in which one social group (or class or language) is a hegemon, I put forward that there could be a dual and contextually dependent hegemony when different values are ascribed to different social groups (or languages). I propose that Hindi and Urdu are co-hegemons in Mewat and social institutions such as local schools and madrasas both contribute towards language shift. It is important to note that recent trends have shed light on the fact that minority languages and 'dialects' are in great danger from more dominant languages and if Mewati is to be maintained then there has to be a room for its encouragement in the local schools and madrasas of Mewat.

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