

The Hindi language has been projected as the language of Hindus and the language of the nation by both secular and Hindu nationalists. This paper examines challenges mounted against Hindi by the Dalit resistance movement during the past few decades. We argue that this challenge is part of the construction of Dalit identity which is defined in resistance and opposition to Brahmanism. In Dalit discourse, Hindi is viewed as a symbol of Brahmanism and thus a reminder of Brahmanic oppression.

The Dalitist challenges to the dominance of Hindi appear in various forms; one such challenge is calling into question the numerical legitimacy on which the claim of Hindi as the official language of India is based. Rao (2001), commenting on a news report on the demand for creating a separate state of Mithilanchal for the speakers of Maithili, argues, "Hindi" is not one language... Rajasthani, Bhojpuri, Braj Bhasa, Avadhi and Mithili [sic] are deliberately misrepresented as `dialects of Hindi" when these are in fact independent [sic] languages with different scripts and grammars, and many pre-dating the Brahmins" Hindi'.

In order to understand the social and political significance of the above commentary, we adopt a language ideology theoretical framework. Language ideology refers to common-sense ideas that speakers have about the structure and use of their language. An examination of language ideology is important as it is seen as a mediating link between linguistic forms and social structure. Language ideologies are often ways of constructing and enacting social and political identity and power (Woolard 1998). Recent works have demonstrated that the construction of difference through language ideology underlies processes of identity construction (e.g. Irvine & Gal 2000). Questioning the legitimacy of Hindi, as in Rao's statement, can be seen as an act of asserting Dalit identity.

The anti-Hindi discourse of the movement cannot be interpreted without understanding the broader context of the assertion of Dalit identity. The emergence of the Dalit Panthers and the Bahujan Samaj party and the electoral gains the latter has made in recent years attest to the growing strength of the movement (Omvedt 2001). A central ideology of the movement is to fight for the equality of Dalits by attacking the oppressive ideology of Brahmanism.

Our study is based on an analysis of texts appearing on a Dalit organization's website dedicated to fighting for equality and human rights for Dalits. In our analysis, we focus on the anti-Hindi discourse of the website and show how an iconic relation is established between Hindi and Brahmanism.

REFERENCES

- IRVINE, JUDITH T., & SUSAN GAL. 2000. Language ideology and linguistic differentiation. *Regimes of language*, ed. by Paul Kroskrity. 35-83. Santa Fe, New México: School of American Research Press.
- OMVEDT, GAIL. 2001. Ambedkar and after: the Dalit movement in India. *Dalit identity and politics*, ed. by Ghanshyam Shah. 143-159. New Dehli: Sage Publications.
- RAO, SAROJ. 2001. Mithilis shrug off Hindiwalla tag. *Dalitstan Journal*. 4.4. 15 April 2005. <<http://www.dalitstan.org/journal/hindia/hin000/hind0019.html>>.
- WOOLARD, KATHRYN. 1998. Language ideology as a field of inquiry. *Language ideologies: practice and theory*, ed. by Bambi Schieffelin et al. 3-47. Oxford: Oxford University Press.