



Book Review: Amir Kalan, *Who's Afraid of Multilingual Education?: Conversations with Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, Jim Cummins, Ajit Mohanty and Stephen Bahry about the Iranian Context and Beyond*, Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2016.

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In recent decades, much has been written about multilingual education (MLE) in educational research communities as well as in social, cultural, and political arenas in many parts of the world. However, browsing the topic singles out Iran as an exception as little attention from both local and international academia has been focused on MLE in this context. Yet, Iran, a country of approximately 80 millions, has people with diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds and has a rich linguistic diversity (around 70 languages), with the living presence of some well-known minority languages (e.g., Azari, Kurdish, and Arabic). These demographics presented, Farsi is overwhelmingly used as the official language in, but not limited to, education, government, and media. Targeting the educational sector, Amir Kalan, the author of *Who's Afraid of Multilingual Education?*, underlines the importance of creating mother tongue-based MLE in Iran by adding the views of established international scholars to the mother tongue debate as applicable to Iran's multiethnic, multilingual and multicultural society. The book consists of an Introduction, four conversations with internationally recognized scholars (Chapters 1 to 4), a concluding chapter by the author (Chapter 5), and an afterword by an Iranian-Canadian linguist.

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The Introduction is well elaborated, providing the reader with some essential information on the rationale, the literature, the context, the method, and the interlocutors of the project. Regarding its rationale, Kalan's main arguments are that (a) mother tongue education is a serious focus of attention in most countries, but it is largely neglected in Iran, and (b) a closer look at challenges of creating space for mother tongue-based MLE in Iran seems vital, which can be better taken by exploring renowned scholars' views on the topic. A short literature review of MLE comes next, with more than fifty works documented. The broad scope of the reviewed works includes a) social justice and the empowerment of minority students, the importance of using students' home languages in the process of teaching and learning, heritage language education, minority education, multilingualism in the US, Europe, Africa, and the South Asia, and b) the endeavors more or less related to minority languages in Iran. As Kalan writes, his work has been influenced by these endeavors.

Introducing the Iranian context involves a brief account of the Farsi language and two language families (i.e., Turkic and Semite) in this context. Historical developments and changes in the linguistic landscape of the contemporary Iran are also discussed in this section, with a particular focus on the policies mandated by Reza Shah, the founder of the Pahlavi Dynasty (1925–1979), which contributed to the dominance of Farsi and the marginalization of the minority languages. Here, Kalan refers to the only legal shelter for the Iranian minority languages, namely Clause 15 of the Constitution. Kalan summarizes this constitutional clause as consisting of three sub-clauses as follows:

- (1) The Farsi language is the official language of the country; accordingly, all governmental correspondence and educational textbooks should be written in Farsi.
- (2) Ethnic minorities can use their own languages in the local media and press.
- (3) The children of the members of ethnic minorities can study their own literatures at school. (p. 5)

However, Kalan warns the reader of the misunderstanding that the third sub-clause is indicative of the legality of Iranian children receiving instruction through their mother tongues as here “literatures” refer to sets of the folk literature and arts every student should read as a core school subject. According to Kalan, the proponents of multilingual education in Iran hold that these “literatures” can include children’s mother tongues as long as they are not conceived as the medium of instruction. In explaining the method of his work, Kalan first tries to persuade the reader that monolingual education is the dominant educational discourse in Iran. He claims that over 300 documents were combed through to find arguments against using the mother tongue as the medium of instruction in Iran. These documents –

mostly published over the past 40 years – included policy documents, bylaws, and statements published by governmental institutions. In search of more arguments for monolingual education, the publications and public statements of influential intellectual and cultural figures opposing mother tongue education are also scrutinized. Then, the documents and arguments are sorted into four themes; (a) the necessity of one single official language for unifying numerous ethnicities in the country, (b) fears of separatist movements encouraged by foreign powers and neocolonial designs, (c) the unique linguistic and cultural advantages of Farsi over the other languages spoken in Iran, and (4) the impracticality of actual changes towards MLE due logistical challenges. Finally, Kalan introduces the four scholars interviewed in the book and lets the reader know about their research interests and expertise.

The above-mentioned four themes are critically discussed in conversations with the scholars in Chapters 1-4. These chapters are organized based on the expertise of each scholar. Chapter 1 is very intriguing and conceptually illuminating in which Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, a prominent Finnish sociolinguist, is interviewed on the policies and legal complexities regarding linguistic human rights. As Kalan points out, this conversation would help the reader follow the later conversations, which are more pedagogically oriented and focused on certain geographical places, with an informed understanding of necessary legal frameworks and theoretical notions in mind. Together, Kalan and Skutnabb-Kangas clarify essential terms and concepts surrounding MLE, such as linguisticism, linguistic human rights, linguistic genocide, and social justice, and try to exemplify the terms and concepts by discussing linguistic cases in different parts of the world.

Chapter 2 narrates a revealing conversation with Jim Cummins, a Canadian applied linguist working mostly on language education and literacy practices and development in language learners. Consequently, during the conversation, Cummins responds to Kalan's questions with an eye on pedagogy. The main topics discussed in this chapter revolve around the issues of identity and power and their relations with language practices, the *laissez-faire* approach that intricately violates the rights of minority speakers in multilingual nations, and a pedagogical perspective on Iran as a multilingual context. Kalan's promise for Chapter 2 is that Cummins's pedagogical guidelines, if taken into account, can help foster educationally nurturing conditions for the speakers of the minority languages in Iran and beyond. In Chapter 3, Ajit Mohanty, a social psycholinguist, presents his views on the complexities of implementing MLE in a multilingual society, bringing evidence from his homeland, India, a country that Kalan calls as one of Iran's civilizational cousins (China as the other one). The chapter is eye-opening given that both Iran and India are multiethnic and multilingual societies, and thus, comparing their multilingualism practices, both

in general and in education, can be very insightful. Kalan argues that, unlike the relative academic silence about multilingualism and MLE in Iran, the need for multilingual social space in India is more largely recognized, and the country is more flexible with implementing MLE. On the similarity side, Mohanty talks about the challenges of conceiving India as “an officially multilingual nation” (p. 103). He believes that the problem lies in the notion of the “supremacy of one language” as endorsed by the government (p. 107), with repercussions for MLE practices in India.

In Chapter 4, Stephen Bahry, a Canadian professor of comparative education with a research interest in language education in China and the Central Asia, shares his views on multilingualism and MLE. In doing so, the interlocutor discusses examples of language rights violations in these multilingual regions and calls for deploying MLE in them. As Kalan points out, multilingualism and MLE in China and the Central Asia have mostly remained unexamined in the western academia, a lacuna also observed with respect to the Iranian context. Bahry presents histories and assumptions that can enrich the mother tongue debate, with particular applications for mother tongue-based MLE in many Asian countries due to their geopolitical and socio-historical proximities. Bahry also emphasizes the importance of addressing the practical challenges of undertaking MLE in these Asian multilingual societies, such as costs of textbook development, teacher education, etc.

In the concluding chapter, which borrows its title from the book's, Kalan surprisingly begins with criticizing and rejecting the arguments against monolingual education. As a result, the author presents a new list of arguments against mother tongue education. The four arguments in the Introduction are now expanded into six as follows: (a) A common language creates a united nation, (b) dominant languages enjoy natural superiority because of their linguistic structures and historical privileges, (c) languages with a long history of written text production are culturally superior to other languages, (d) students should adopt the language of success as a pragmatic move, (e) mother tongue-based MLE is an appealing idea but not practical, and (f) mother tongue-based MLE will cause separatism and political disintegration. After explicating these arguments, Kalan attempts to refute them one by one, providing the reader with new evidence on violation of language human rights in various parts of the world. Here, Kalan repeatedly refers to the views presented in the interviews to strengthen his analysis and discussion. He concludes that mother tongue-based MLE is not an academic fad, but an educational need in every multilingual nation, and undoubtedly, the Iranian society is not an exception. The book closes with an afterword by Jaffer Sheyholislami. He is a Canadian linguist of the Kurdish origin from Iran who is critical of the one-language one-state policy and advocates for practicing mother tongue-based MLE in Iran. The afterword, beginning with a personal memory of Sheyholislami, presents a short

discussion and conclusion of the topic covered by Kalan's book. Sheyholislami praises Kalan's endeavors and gives his book the seal of approval.

In all, there is no doubt that MLE has become an important topic of discussion in academics, education, politics, and social and cultural studies in many parts of the world and will be a controversial topic in foreseeable future. Thus, Kalan's book can be contextualized within the linguistic, educational, and sociopolitical complexities of Iran along this prediction. However, its audience is not Iranians *per se* as the book proves itself an essential reading for anyone interested in multilingualism and multilingual practices, particularly MLE. Due to its written style as well as illuminating content, this book appeals not only to researchers dealing with multilingual issues, but it can also draw attention from legislatures, policymakers, activists, and applied linguists, among others.

Author's Biography



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