Book Review

LaDousa, Chaise, *Hindi is our ground, English is our sky: Education, language, and social class in contemporary India*. New York/Oxford: Berghahn, 2014, xx + 216 pp.

Reviewed by **Heinz Werner Wessler**, Department of Linguistics and Philology, Uppsala University, Box 635, 751 26 Uppsala, Sweden, E-mail: heinzwerner.wessler@lingfil.uu.se

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Chaise LaDousa, associate professor in anthropology at Hamilton College, New York State, has published this study on language and education in Banaras, based on continuing field trips to educational institutions in Banaras since 1996–97, which form the basis of a PhD dissertation at Syracuse University, submitted in 2000. The present book is a revised and extended version of this dissertation. It makes reference to a rich treasure of observations in and outside the classrooms, and taped qualitative interviews with students and teachers. It consists of a foreword by Krishna Kumar, preface and acknowledgments, followed by an introduction, five main chapters, and conclusion, a list of references and an index. The book intends “to illustrate some of the institutional and communicative structures that people in a small city in India struggled with as they engaged with schools and made sense of their school experiences” (p. xiii). The main title is a quote from an interview, which falls into the general pattern referring to how Hindi and English are seen by many of the people that the author interviewed in Banaras during his research as being “relational and mutually constructive. This is true for the languages as well as for the institutions that are identified by them” (p. 20).

The study explores the relationship between schools as places that produce language ideologies and socio-linguistic identities and aims to demarcate the spaces of Hindi and English and to some extent, Bhojpuri, in educational strategies and policies, identities and ideologies. The focus is on two schools, Seacrest (English medium), and Saraswati (Hindi medium), which are located in the same building. The author investigates the meaning of “public” versus “governmental”, and explores the semantics of “English medium” and “Hindi medium” in the context of Banaras, and explains how “people in Varanasi use language distinctions as a convenient shorthand for talking about education, the nation, and one’s future” (p. 68).

The strength of the book lies in its focus on interactions with the people concerned. The extended quotes from interviews also document how the author has learned to understand meanings over time. For example: “We [i.e., ‘I’]

gradually learn that proficiency in Hindi implies a lack of knowledge of English” (p. 58). He repeatedly returns to the basic points in statements about languages of his target group: Hindi is referred to as mother tongue – which, in the strict sense of the word, it is in only a few cases, since the real mother tongue of the region is Bhojpuri – but social mobility, professional career, national and international outreach, and intellectual encounter are much more pertinent to English than to any other tongue. LaDousa further explains the absence of the concept of Bhojpuri as a language for educational instruction (pp. 46–47), and the general understanding that the third language of the Three-languages-formula must be Sanskrit, together with Hindi and English (pp. 74–75). This is one of the main points of Chapter 1 “On mother and other tongues: language ideology, inequality, and contradiction” (pp. 36–67).

The study and, particularly, Chapter 2 “Disparate markets: The uneven resonance of language-medium schooling in the nation” (pp. 68–107) includes many reflections on spontaneous conversations during everyday life in Banaras, as for example the considerations on the difference between *laḍḍū* (classical Indian sweet) and “Toffee” (i.e. Western style) available on the day of Sarasvati veneration in the English medium school. The toffee as a factory-product is associated with an English-medium school, while the *laḍḍū*, even though often considered more tasty by people from Banaras themselves, belongs to a Hindi-medium school. In this context, LaDousa reports the pun relating the term *laḍḍū* to the author’s own name pronounced as *laḍḍūsā*, which causes laughter (p. 77). Observations like the following are particularly interesting: “English-medium schools provide a route out of Varanasi ... Conversations about schooling in Varanasi often involved the verb *ghūmnā*, meaning to wander or to roam. A common refrain ... is that to get a job one must relocate” (p. 90f).

In Chapter 3 “Advertising in the periphery: modes of communication and the production of school value” (pp. 108–136), LaDousa focuses on the intricacies of school boards to which schools must apply to gain affiliation. The effect of the boards is to “reinforce the division” between English and Hindi; that is, schools with high fees and with lower fees (p. 84). The author also evaluates the messages in advertising that schools want to transmit. For the Hindi speaking schools, the selection of Roman (“English”) versus Devanagari script has become a crucial issue in recent years (pp. 113–124), as LaDousa demonstrates. Private schools “of either Hindi- or English-medium ... advertise vigorously” (p. 115), similarly tutorials (pp. 125–128) in sometimes bizarre mixtures of Devanagari and Roman, English and Hindi. “Script distinctions matter too, and they mingle with language distinctions to produce an indexical regimentation of the center and its periphery” (p. 134). The central question that permeates throughout the book is whether the present language-medium divide is

inevitable, including the “‘complex’ [i.e. inferiority complex] felt by Hindi-medium students” (p. 150) – a matter that can hardly be decided conclusively.

Chapter 4, “An alter voice: questioning the inevitability of the language-medium divide” (pp. 137–154), analyses the psycho-social background and implications of statements on a micro-level in his interviews and other field material. The author explains that the methodological background is based on Michèle Koven’s theorising of the verbal enactment of the self and Benjamin Lee’s research on the semiotics of subjectivity, which he very convincingly applies. LaDousa identifies speech as verbal enactment, putting on display what the speaker really feels and thinks, as for example the function of a repetition “mimicking someone silently talking to themselves [sic]” (p. 150). It is interesting how LaDousa shifts over to “they” in his own speech, while he marks a similar shift a few lines further in a quote from Mrs. Khatri, a teacher, who “steps out of the role on line 26 by referring once again to the students as ‘they’” (p. 151).

Chapter 5, “In and out of the classrooms: a focus on English”, discusses the socio-linguistic status of English in India on the basis of the interviews.

In general, Hindi transcripts are accurate and well-analysed. I could only find one major mistake in the Hindi transcript passages from the interviews. Hindi *rūp* is consistently spelt with a short vowel, including *rūpak*, which LaDousa misunderstands as “beautiful form”, whereas it means “metaphor/simile” (p. 168). Somewhat surprisingly, “international language” (an epithet of English in India) is consistently rendered in the interviews and in the text as *antarrāṣṭrabhāṣā* and never with the perhaps more conventional Hindi collocation *antarrāṣṭriy bhāṣā*. There is a wrongly transliterated “samasyāē” on page 50.

To sum up, this is a very enlightening study with a sound mixture of fieldwork and theory. His “three concluding reflections” (pp. 183–191) on “the postcolonial nation and the dilemmas of language planning”, “the contradictions of the mother tongue” and “language, education and the new middle classes” are based on fieldwork, not on theoretical considerations. Perhaps the most important insight is that “language planning efforts, such as the three-language formula, that do not address the ways in which people construct schools by way of language distinctions are bound to fail to attain salience” (p. 189).