

LOST IN WORDS: HOW EVERYDAY LANGUAGE MARGINALIZES SLUM CHILDREN

Piyali Mitra^{1*}

¹*State Aided College Teacher (SACT - I), Department of Sociology, Hiralal Mazumdar Memorial College For Women*

***Corresponding Author:**

Abstract

This article examines the marginalization experienced by children living in urban slums, focusing specifically on the role of their everyday spoken language in perpetuating social inequalities. The study explores how language practices within these environments contribute to the exclusion and stigmatization of slum children. Through a detailed analysis of linguistic interactions and social dynamics, the article highlights the ways in which linguistic features, such as vernacular varieties and non-standard grammar, are often devalued and associated with negative stereotypes. Moreover, the article elucidates how language becomes a marker of social status and reinforces existing power structures, further marginalizing slum children within broader society. The findings underscore the urgent need for inclusive language policies and educational initiatives that recognize and value the linguistic diversity of slum communities, while also addressing the systemic inequalities that underpin their marginalization. By amplifying the voices of slum children and advocating for linguistic justice, this article contributes to ongoing efforts aimed at promoting social equity and empowerment within marginalized urban contexts.

The article concludes by advocating for a shift in perspective toward the language practices of slum children, emphasizing the need for inclusive educational policies and practices that recognize and value linguistic diversity. It calls for the empowerment of these children through educational initiatives that build upon their existing language competencies, fostering a sense of pride in their cultural heritage while providing pathways for social mobility.

Introduction:

In the bustling alleys and tightly packed streets of urban slums, a vibrant world exists, filled with the laughter, dreams, and resilience of its youngest residents—slum children, these children navigate a unique linguistic landscape, one shaped by the rich tapestry of their communities, the challenges they face, and the aspirations they hold dear. This paper delves into the world of slum children and their language, exploring how their linguistic experiences reflect their realities, shape their identities, and offer glimpses of hope amidst adversity. We will see how language creates a barrier for them to enter mainstream society. As we all know language is a powerful tool that shapes our perceptions of the world, constructs our identities, and influences our interactions. However, the language we use, often unconsciously, can also perpetuate inequalities and marginalize certain groups within society. In the context of slum communities, where poverty and deprivation are rampant, everyday language can play a significant role in further marginalizing slum children. As they are leading a challenging life it naturally impacts their language like using rough words, slang, improper sentences, wrong pronunciation, etc. This paper explores how everyday language contributes to the marginalization of slum children, perpetuating stereotypes, limiting opportunities, and reinforcing social disparities. Actually Slang Is Not the Problem—it is Society's Perception only. It is important to note that slang itself is not inherently negative. Every community, including upper-class groups, youth cultures, and professional sectors, has its own form of slang or informal language. The problem arises when certain slang is associated with poverty and lack of education, leading to systemic discrimination against those who use it in their spoken language.

For slum children, this discrimination is particularly damaging because it restricts their access to education, employment, and social mobility. Instead of treating their language as a deficiency, society should recognize linguistic diversity as a strength and create inclusive environments where people are judged based on their skills and potential rather than their speech patterns.

Societal Biases and Linguistic Discrimination Against Slum Children:

Language is a powerful tool that influences perception, identity, and opportunities. However, societal biases often associate certain speech patterns with intelligence, class, and social status. For slum children, who grow up in environments where slang and informal language are commonly spoken, these biases create significant challenges in education, employment, and social inclusion.

Prejudices Rooted in Language and Class :

Society tends to equate formal language with intelligence and credibility, while slang or non-standard dialects are often perceived as improper, uneducated, or even deviant. Since slum children frequently use slang in their daily communication, they are often judged unfairly. Instead of recognizing that language differences stem from cultural and environmental factors, society assumes that children who speak in slang are less intelligent, unrefined, or even rebellious. For example, a child from an affluent background who speaks in fluent, grammatically correct sentences is more likely to be seen as capable and respectable. In contrast, a slum child who uses local slang expressions may be dismissed as careless, lacking discipline, or incapable of sophisticated thought. This bias creates a hierarchy where only those who conform to mainstream language norms are respected and given opportunities.

Discrimination in Educational Institutions :

Schools and colleges often reinforce linguistic biases, consciously or unconsciously. Teachers may correct slum children's speech harshly, making them feel embarrassed about their way of speaking. In many cases, these students face ridicule from peers, which discourages them from participating in class discussions. Over time, they may become hesitant to speak, affecting their learning experience and confidence.

Moreover, exams, interviews, and academic assessments often prioritize formal language skills. A slum child who understands a concept well but struggles to express it in standardized academic language may receive lower grades, not because of a lack of knowledge but because of language barriers. This puts them at a disadvantage compared to their peers from privileged backgrounds, who have been trained to use formal speech from an early age.

Barriers in Employment and Professional Settings :

When slum children grow up and enter the job market, linguistic biases continue to affect their opportunities. Many employers view language as a reflection of professionalism and competence. Candidates who speak in polished, formal language are often preferred over those who use slang or informal speech, regardless of actual skill level.

For example, during job interviews, a candidate who speaks with refined language may be seen as more capable, even if their technical skills are not superior. Meanwhile, a slum child who has strong practical knowledge but struggles with formal communication may be overlooked. In customer-facing roles, corporate jobs, or high-paying professions, linguistic discrimination can limit career growth for those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Social Exclusion :

Beyond academics and employment, language biases also lead to social exclusion. Slum children who use slang may be stereotyped as rude, aggressive, or poorly mannered. This can lead to them being avoided in social settings, making it difficult for them to form connections with people outside their immediate community.

For instance, if a child from a slum attends a school with wealthier students, their slang may make them a target for mockery. They may struggle to fit in, befriend classmates, or participate in social events where formal communication is

expected. Over time, this can lead to a sense of alienation, making it harder for them to break out of the cycle of poverty and social segregation.

Psychological Impact and Self-Esteem Issues :

When slum children are constantly corrected, mocked, or excluded due to their way of speaking, it can deeply impact their self-esteem. They may start feeling inferior, ashamed of their background, or hesitant to express themselves. Some may even begin avoiding interactions with people outside their community, further limiting their exposure to new opportunities. This internalized discrimination can lead to self-doubt, lack of ambition, and a fear of engaging with mainstream society. Over time, these children may believe they are less capable simply because of the way they speak, reinforcing the very stereotypes that society has imposed on them.

Stereotyping and Stigmatization:

One of the ways in which everyday language marginalizes slum children is through the perpetuation of stereotypes and stigmatization. Terms such as "slum kids," "street children," or "ghetto youth" are often used casually, yet they carry a heavy burden of negative connotations. When these labels are used indiscriminately, they create a perception of slum children as inherently troublesome, disadvantaged, and even dangerous. First of all their get-ups create a negative conception of them then an added feature is the language they use. Like using slang in every sentence. Wrong pronunciation etc.

Such language not only influences how others perceive these children but also affects how they see themselves. Constantly being referred to in terms that emphasize their poverty and perceived social deficiencies can erode their self-esteem and sense of worth. Moreover, it can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy, where children internalize these negative perceptions and struggle to break free from them.

Social Stigma and Peer Interactions:

In the social sphere, the use of slang and rough language can also create barriers for slum children, particularly in interactions with peers from different backgrounds. Slang is often associated with specific social groups or subcultures, and its use can signal membership in or affiliation with these groups.

For slum children, the use of slang may be a way to establish connections with peers who share similar experiences and backgrounds. However, it can also lead to misunderstandings or judgments from those outside their immediate community. Peers from more privileged backgrounds may perceive slang as "rough" or "unrefined," leading to stereotypes and social stigmatization.

This social stigma can result in slum children being excluded or marginalized within social circles. They may face difficulties forming friendships or participating fully in social activities due to language barriers. This sense of isolation can have profound effects on their social and emotional well-being, contributing to feelings of low self-esteem or a lack of belonging.

Language and Educational Opportunities:

Everyday language can also impact the educational opportunities available to slum children. Teachers and administrators, consciously or unconsciously, may use language that reflects biases and low expectations toward these students. Phrases like "those kids don't care about school" or "they won't amount to much" can create a toxic environment that undermines the educational aspirations of slum children.

Furthermore, the curriculum itself may reflect a bias against the language and culture of slum communities. Standardized tests and textbooks often fail to represent the diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds of these children, placing them at a disadvantage in educational settings. As a result, slum children may struggle to engage with the material, leading to higher dropout rates and limited access to higher education and better opportunities.

Normalization of Inequality:

Another way in which everyday language marginalizes slum children is by normalizing the inequality they face. Terms like "haves and have-nots," "privileged and underprivileged," or "us and them" create a dichotomy that reinforces the idea of a natural, unchangeable divide in society. This language suggests that poverty and marginalization are simply a part of life, rather than a social injustice that can and should be addressed.

By accepting this language without question, society becomes desensitized to the plight of slum children. It becomes easier to overlook the systemic issues that perpetuate poverty and to justify unequal access to resources such as healthcare, housing, and quality education. In this way, everyday language not only reflects but also reinforces the structural inequalities that keep slum children trapped in cycles of poverty.

Impacts on Self-Expression and Identity:

The use of slang and rough language can also impact slum children's ability to express themselves authentically and shape their identities. Language is closely tied to identity, reflecting cultural, social, and personal experiences. When slum children are discouraged from using their native slang or regional dialects, they may feel pressure to conform to a standard that does not resonate with their lived experiences.

This pressure to code-switch or adopt a more "acceptable" form of language can lead to a loss of authenticity and a sense of disconnection from their roots. Slum children may feel torn between the language spoken at home, which holds deep cultural significance, and the language expected in educational or professional settings.

Furthermore, the association of slang with negativity or "bad behavior" can create a self-fulfilling prophecy. Slum children who internalize these perceptions may come to believe that their way of speaking is inherently inferior or unworthy. This can have long-lasting effects on their self-confidence, aspirations, and belief in their own potential.

Observation:

This study aims to uncover the hidden realities of slum children growing up in Metro Colony, a marginalized community located beside the Railway track and Metro railway track of Dakshineswar, Kolkata—a place of significant religious importance in the city. By employing deep observation and qualitative research methods, the study attempts to provide an in-depth understanding of the experiences and struggles of these children.

Economic Hardship and Lack of Organization:

The children in Metro Colony face severe economic hardship, which affects their basic living conditions, education, and future prospects. Unlike children from more privileged backgrounds, access to organized learning environments, structured education, and proper mentorship is extremely limited. The lack of financial stability within their families forces many children to prioritize survival over education, often engaging in informal labor or assisting their families in earning a livelihood.

Challenges in Basic Education:

For many children in the slum, education is considered a luxury rather than a necessity. Schools may exist in nearby areas, but financial constraints, lack of motivation, and the absence of parental guidance often prevent children from attending regularly.

To bridge this gap, a local clubroom serves as an informal learning space where volunteer teachers, sponsored by community organizations, conduct basic educational sessions. This initiative, while commendable, has limited impact due to various socio-linguistic and structural barriers.

Language as a Barrier to Learning:

A major observed challenge among the children of Metro Colony is their way of speaking, which significantly affects their ability to receive education effectively.

1. Pronunciation Issues & Linguistic Variations:

- The children speak in a local dialect or colonial-influenced slang, which differs from the standard language used in formal education.
- When reading aloud, they pronounce words in their own localized way, which makes comprehension difficult. This alters the perceived value of the text, as incorrect pronunciation affects meaning and clarity.
- Teachers and outsiders often struggle to understand their speech, leading to misinterpretations, lack of engagement, and discouragement in classrooms.

2. Handwriting Challenges:

- Similar to spoken language issues, handwriting is another area of struggle for these children.
- Due to a lack of structured education and fine motor skill development, many of them fail to write legibly, making it harder for teachers to assess their work accurately.
- Poor handwriting further contributes to academic marginalization, as teachers may dismiss their efforts, reinforcing the cycle of educational neglect.

Overall Impact:

The combination of economic struggles, lack of structured education, and linguistic barriers creates a self-perpetuating cycle of disadvantage. Even with volunteer-led educational initiatives, the deeper issue of linguistic discrimination remains unaddressed. This results in:

- Lower confidence levels among students.
- Limited participation in mainstream education due to fear of ridicule.
- Reinforcement of stereotypes that children from slums are academically weaker.
- Reduced chances of higher education and employment opportunities.

The linguistic gap observed in Metro Colony highlights how language can be a social divider, restricting access to education and opportunities. While efforts are being made to provide basic education, a more inclusive approach—such as linguistic adaptation, code-switching education, and teacher sensitization—is essential to help these children integrate into mainstream society. Only by addressing the root causes of their struggles can we create a sustainable and meaningful impact on their educational journey.

Empowering Language and Solutions:

While everyday language can be a tool of marginalization, it can also be a tool of empowerment and change. By being mindful of the language we use, we can challenge stereotypes, advocate for equal opportunities, and promote a more inclusive society. Instead of "slum children," we can use terms like "children from underserved communities" or "young scholars overcoming adversity."

Furthermore, educational institutions can implement language-sensitive policies that recognize and celebrate the linguistic and cultural diversity of slum communities. Incorporating local languages and cultural references into the curriculum can

make education more engaging and relevant for slum children. Teacher training programs can also focus on cultural competency and sensitivity to ensure that educators are equipped to support these students effectively.

Beyond language, addressing the root causes of poverty and inequality is crucial to truly empower slum children. This includes investing in infrastructure, healthcare, and social services for slum communities, as well as creating pathways to economic opportunities for residents. When combined with language that uplifts rather than marginalizes, these efforts can help break the cycle of poverty and create a more equitable society for all.

Breaking the Cycle of Discrimination: To prevent language-based discrimination against slum children, several measures can be taken. As a tool to break this cycle of bias and exclusion, society must adopt a more inclusive approach to language diversity. Some possible solutions include:

Educational Reforms: Schools should adopt inclusive teaching methods that respect different linguistic backgrounds while encouraging proficiency in formal language. Teachers should focus on guiding rather than punishing students for their speech patterns.

Encouraging Bilingualism: Instead of forcing children to abandon their natural way of speaking, they should be taught to switch between formal and informal language as per the situation. This skill, known as "code-switching," helps them navigate different social and professional environments.

Public Awareness: Society needs to move beyond linguistic biases and recognize that one's way of speaking does not determine intelligence and capability. Campaigns promoting language inclusivity can help change perceptions of society.

Workplace Inclusivity: Employers should be encouraged to focus on skills and qualifications rather than judging candidates based on their accent or choice of words. Work environment should be more inclusive and barrier free in nature.

Mentorship Programs: Pairing slum children with mentors from diverse backgrounds can help them develop confidence in using formal language without feeling ashamed of their roots.

Encouraging Linguistic Acceptance in Schools: Teachers should promote respect for different speech patterns while helping students develop formal language skills without shaming them.

Workshops on Code-Switching: Teaching children how to switch between informal and formal language depending on the setting can empower them to navigate different social and professional environments.

Changing Hiring Practices: Employers should focus on skills and capabilities rather than judging candidates based on their speech patterns.

Various Campaigns: Challenging stereotypes and educating people about linguistic diversity can help reduce discrimination against slum children.

Media Representation: Positive portrayals of diverse dialects in media and campaigns can challenge stereotypes, making society more accepting of linguistic variation.

Community Programs for Language Development: NGOs, schools, and local communities can offer workshops and mentorship programs to help slum children develop communication skills without losing their cultural identity.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, everyday language plays a significant role in the marginalization of slum children. Through stereotypes, limited educational opportunities, and the normalization of inequality, language can perpetuate social disparities and hinder the prospects of these children. However, by consciously choosing language that empowers and includes, we can work towards a more just and equitable society. It is not merely about changing words, but about changing mindsets and creating environments where all children, regardless of background, have the opportunity to thrive.

Societal biases against slang and informal speech create significant disadvantages for slum children, affecting their education, career opportunities, and social interactions. Instead of equating language differences with intelligence or capability, society should embrace linguistic diversity and ensure that no child is unfairly discriminated against due to their manner of speaking. Moreover, the use of slang language should not be a factor that determines a child's future, yet societal biases often discriminate against slum children due to their manner of speaking. Addressing this issue requires a shift in attitude, where language diversity is embraced rather than judged. By creating inclusive educational, professional, and social environments, we can help break the barriers that prevent slum children from reaching their full potential and ensure that language is a bridge rather than a wall.

Since this response is based on general knowledge, social theories, and linguistic discrimination studies, here are some academic sources and references that discuss the topic in more detail. You can use these references to support your research on how societal biases against slang language discriminate against slum children.

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