

Islands in the stream: Dialects and Culture

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Abstract

Under the dual signs of internationalism and globalization, the process of multicultural ethos is first affected by either jockeying into power position or erosion of status of dialects. If the field of language can be metaphorically perceived, borrowing from Hemingway as a stream then dialects are veritable islands in the stream constantly locking their promontories or drifting apart, to use yet another metaphor, this time from A.D.Hope, the Australian poet. The paper shall attempt to look at geographic, political, economic and cultural proximities and distances that form the atmosphere within which dialects survive, grow or lose out. The paper will base itself on the notion that no nation is linguistically monolithic. In other words, the hegemony within the field of dialects will be perceived as one that arises out of certain real time politics.

Further, a broad view of the forces that drop similarities and produce balkanization of the dialects as inimical to one another within a linguistic arena will be examined. The perpetual attempt at producing "standard" dialect as opposed to the "non-standard" in an attempt at gaining status will be explored in the paper.

Finally, the paper shall attempt to argue the necessity for making the modern nation a multilingual state. Kind of addition is observed in Sangsari dialect which is derived by adding a vowel between the initial clusters or adding a vowel or a consonant before the initial clusters. The interesting point in the repeated letters is the enclitics form of the auxiliary verbs and the place of voiceless explosive consonants between the two vowels which are repeated in pronunciation. There is a shortening of the mid neutral vowel of [ə] in the syllabus without stress a tendency which has even influenced the prefixes of the verbs.

Key words *dialect, Sangsari, Mahdishahri, language, Semnani.*

That we begin with the binary of dialect and language is itself a status marker in our mind. The appellation of “Language to a speech and a writing code establishes it as having a cultural status and a viable tradition. The term “dialect is therefore in a shadowy region associated with such underpinnings as “low”, non urban, “vulgar”, “ignoble” and is something that is not to be used on formal occasions. Chambers and Peter point out to such misconceptions that have been formulating the general attitude to Dialects:

“In common usage, of course, a dialect is a substandard, low-status, often rustic form of language, generally associated with the peasantry, the working class, or other groups lacking in prestige. dialect is also a term which is often applied to forms of language, particularly those spoken in more isolated parts of the world, which have no written form. And dialects are also often regarded as some kind of (often erroneous) deviation from a norm – as aberrations of a correct or standard form of language.”(Chambers, J.K. and Trudgill, Peter. **Dialectology**, Cambridge: CUP, Second Edn., 2004, FP 1998, p.3)

It is good to remember that each one of us speaks an idiolect that is different from the other and every language is in itself a dialect. It is then the politics of language that creates a schism in order to gain currency and status to establish a hegemony of sorts within which one either manipulates the economy of survival or not. The Babel theory indicates that the dispersion of population over a vast geography instantly also creates a differential in language creation and use. And thus we must bear in mind that dialects are what are also consanguine with spatial distinctions. It is not therefore very surprising that speech communities that live in low access zones like archipelagos, deserts, mountainous zones and forests have little chance of communication with other linguistic groups and thus

evolve into distinct dialects. Both Chambers and Trudgill do point out to this phenomenon in their work. One of the distinctions that characterise a language from a dialect pointed out to is that of “mutual intelligibility”. Yet, it is not unknown that times are very few when we either make an effort or show enough respect to the other’s speech in our act of listening. There is a characteristic impatience that marks the antagonism or antipathy of the user of the status language toward a “strange” speech which others that speech and therefore pushes it to the margins.

Quite interestingly, in India the ability to speak English fluently is at once associated with a certain kind of education, class and social mobility which all accord the speaker a high status within the community. The loss of status is also linked, though not surreptitiously, certainly silently, with varying degrees of one’s inability to use the English language. This is so vis-à-vis Hindi. The clamour for making Hindi the National language and the attempt to see it as the one language that would unite the myriad linguistic comities of India under a common speech has a history that dates back to the times of Freedom struggle in India. There are instances when within a linguistic group, dialects either resist or conform to their status. For instance, Havyaka a dialect spoken in the Malnad region of Karnataka, Kodava a dialect spoken in the Kodagu district seem to accept the status of dialect while Tulu spoken in the West coast of Karnataka stridently affirms itself as a distinct language. Chambers and Trudgill define language as “Normally, it seems, we employ this term for a variety which is autonomous together with all those varieties which are dependent (heteronomous) upon it”(p.11) Thus, more proximate the variant, no matter the geographic and the demographic distribution of the variant, to the status language more heteteronomous it is. The ability of a dialect to lay claim to a language status rests on its political, economic and social status within the gamut.

In the 1960s most school textbooks in Kannada were written in a dialect that was largely spoken in North Karnataka. However, by the seventies with the power centre shifting to Old

Mysore region, the textbooks began to be edited by Mysore and Bangalore centred academicians. The result was that the textbooks began to register a change. In fact the textbooks at schools are the silent weapons of standardization. They surreptitiously empower and propagate one dialect over the many. The very choice of the dialect in which a prescribed Textbook is written valorises that dialect over the many.

It is interesting to note how if Canada persists with its identity as a Bilingual state, to accord both French and English a special status, thus affirming and reaffirming the superior status of both the Anglophone and the Francophone speeches, in multilingual countries like India and China, the National policy on language carefully allows space to the right of the ethnic groups to develop and foster their own specific languages. This notwithstanding a special status accorded to Hindi in India and Putonghua in China(cf. Yang, L. Dali. "Politics of Identity in China in the Age of Globalization", 161, http://iir.nccu.edu.tw/chinapolitics/NO53TH/Part1_07.pdf)

Thus Hindi in India and Putonghua in China become the standard languages, through a National policy statement. Look at the change that has come over the very attitude towards the variety of English that is being used. It was unthinkable in the sixties, in Indian Schools to write or speak what was called and referred to, pejoratively, as American English. The phrase meant it was wrong, uninformed about spelling, slangy, etc... . The situation has vastly changed today with PhD thesis using consistently American English. More interestingly the increased status that is silently being gained by "Ebonics" or the African American parlance, thanks to the fast growing presence of the African Americans in various prestige situations from Sports to Politics shows how fluid the power situation is in language use, and how dependent it is on factors of social status and image of the speakers of that particular language.

The fast growth of the Electronic industry and its global implication has today led in India to a situation where no parent would like his child not to be educated in English. The result is an increasing disaffiliation from mother tongue education,

leading to an alarming drop out in the enrolment of dialect based learning. The mushrooming of English Medium schools has given rise to rabid resistances as well as language protection civil groups as well as forcing the states to reformulate their language policies to be aggressively protectionist, by making the regional language the administrative language, funding regional language education, reserving employment and slots of admission in educational institutions for regional language users.

However much a language or a dialect receives the state support, for it to arrive on the scene it needs the bolstering of an entire sociology. Hindi is a case in point. No amount of funding and encouragement from the state achieved what Hindi movies did for the popularity of the Hindi language in the southern states. The role of the Media in the evocativeness and the emotional bonding through language of the masses can never be minimized. In fact, the particular dialect of Hindi spoken in Mumbai, though has no profiling whatsoever in terms of its linguistic demography is perhaps the one which is familiar to all Hindi movie buffs. In proportion to the increased popularity of the Hindi movie actors vis –a-vis actors in the regional languages, Hindi began to occupy a status symbol. It was not unusual from 1970's onwards to find youth using emotive phrases and words from Hindi in their speech. Hindi began to jockey for position against English. The Indian youth was reconstructing its identity in the image of the "Angry Young Man" after the movie **Mere Apne** starring Amitabh Bacchan, Shatrugun Sinha, Danny Denzongpa, Vinod Khanna and others. As against such learning through a mimetic mode, is the schooling in language. What schools do is to at first inculcate in the child a notion of the binary: pure and impure. The texted language as what is pure and the variants in vogue at the time of learning in school as what constitutes the impure or the imperfect utterances, is an idea that is forced on the early learners. Such a prejudice leads to a schism and setting up of hierarchy of speech practices. This act of linguistic power play has been very succinctly commented upon by Huntington

Lyman and Margo A. Figgins in their paper “Democracy, Dialect and the Power of Every Voice”:

“Throughout the early phases of America’s public schooling, waves of immigrant children relied on their experiences in school to introduce them to their new country’s dominant language, Students who came to school with variant dialects were taught a standard form of English typically framed as “correct” and thought of as “pure”. Variant dialects represented corruptions or degradations to be extirpated for the benefit of individual speakers and for the purity of the language. And this teaching of what has been called Standard English was seen as a noble enterprise intended to help all students move beyond limitations sure to be imposed on those speaking other languages and variant dialects of English. Historically, then, teaching Standard English has been simultaneously motivated by a democratic impulse to provide students with greater opportunities and an authoritarian impulse to maintain the purity of the language, creating a tension of purpose that remains with us today.” (Jstor: The English Journal, Vol. 24, No. 5[May 2005] p. 40, col.1-2)

The long quotation offers us one specific insight into the manner in which languages are artificially hierarchised. That there can be inculcated from a very early age a certain notion of what is appropriate speech is an agenda that should worry us. The notion that there is a “pure” language which can be learnt outside one’s immediate society is an idea and a praxis that makes of a living language situation and therefore an imaginatively creative situation both redundant and ultimately despicable. It is such endeavour and thinking that not only others but also creates a situation in which writing in dialects slowly wanes to finally disappear. Such a dialect was once called *patois*, “A patois then is a language norm not used for literary (and hence official purposes), chiefly limited to informal situations.” (Haugen, Einar. “Dialect, Language, Nation”, American Anthropologist, New series, Vo. 28, NO. 4(Aug. 1966),P.924, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/670407>) It is quite evident then that the dialects always run the risk of becoming

patois and so lose political space. Haugen in the same breath points out how any act of standardization of language results in keeping dialects out of bounds and consigned to the status of a non-urban, non-elite and therefore what I wish to infer a most sordid existence. In other words the existence of a vibrant field of dialects then challenges the notion of a unified people. However, the entire business of modernity is one of restructuring the world under a monolithic project, the global language.

An understanding of the above situation raises the question as to which of the languages is the favorite in the race. Obviously, the answer would perhaps be, the one which is directly related to the most powerful economic principle at work today, which is Capitalism. Yet, is language and its manifestations after all so intricately related to capital? The answer perhaps is no. For, language as politics predates the rise of the capital industry. Then again, it has always been linked to power of one kind or another. Whatever is outside the principle of production in society tends to be marginalized is a truism that we accept most of the time. Under the dual signs of internationalism and globalization, the process of multicultural ethos is first affected by either jockeying into power position or erosion of the status of dialects. If the field of language can be metaphorically perceived, borrowing from Hemingway, as a stream then dialects are veritable islands in the stream, constantly locking their promontories or drifting apart, to use yet another metaphor, this time from A.D.Hope, the Australian poet. The modern Urbana is interestingly divided between the public language and the private language. The public language is cosmopolitan, elite, related to production while the private language is emotional, imaginative, sublime and increasingly marginalised. The last effect is due to abandonments and exiles. With increasing solitudes, erasure of family, and what Baudrillard might call the death of the social, the once powerful language of the home is now dying out. If the dialects in a region are found to face the threat of extinction the reason for that could perhaps be found in the power that the urban space,

which is also the economic space, wields over the non-urban terrain. The possible adumbration of the cosmopolitan language over the language of the indigene is the result of the expansion and colonization of the former over the later.

Ironically, distance from the urban centre appears to help preserve the dialects. In other words, the question that we need to ask is “Is urbanization inclement to the survival of dialects?” One answer to that question may lie in the agenda of rooting for a national language. The very act of constructing and rooting for a national language is to force many tongues to a monolingual existence. Only the other day, the November 22, 2010 edition of the Indian Express reported on p.3, columns 6-7 a demand to set up an academy for tribal languages. Mr. M.B Prabhu, the Director for Bharatiya Girijan Shikshana Samsthe was afraid that the tribal languages may not be able to survive the day if those 40 languages were not conserved proactively. It is of perhaps some interest to note that urbanization impels a certain demographic movement which puts stress on smaller linguistic groups that are not empowered in modern states. The sheer impossibility of living anymore in the traditional habitats and increasing economic inability of such groups combined with dispersion of population and dissociation from cultural praxis leads to a veritable situation of linguistic extinction. Karen Wigen commenting on the East Asian realities, however, controverts the idea just stated in her article and asserts that both China and Japan have a long political and cultural history of not only cartographing but also venerating the regional specificities and the dialects. (“Culture, Power, and Place: The New Landscapes of East Asian Regionalism”, AHR Forum, The American Historical Review, Vol. 104, No. 4 (Oct., 1999), p. 1184, pub: The University of Chicago Press, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2649566>) She further refers to G.William Skinner’s hierarchised “regional-systems model” to argue a case for how power devolves on the manner one constructs one’s society.

In India, the province from where I come, the border districts have always been a bone of contention between

contiguous states, mainly on linguistic identity. Belgaum for instance is always in the news as Maharashtra time and again lays claim to the region, though it is politically a part of Karnataka. The reason why passions run strong is not far to find. The fears of marginalization on the part of a section of the Marathi speaking community within the larger milieu of the Kannada speaking community lead to a schism. Yet, such provincial roots and affiliations are also, as Wigen points out, unifying forces, “In fact, it is now clear that local loyalties and spatially organized solidarities informed the nation-building project at every step.”(p.1191) At the International forum, the neo- Diaspora, I mean the later day immigrant communities that for a variety of political, economic and status reasons have reified themselves as Diaspora, are raising fears of security among the settler population, post 9/11. Therefore the question to tackle is, would a multi linguistic situation a far more grave cause for worry than a multi ethnic topography? Modern nations are slowly veering towards multiculturalism, yet are averse to be more than bilingually egalitarian. In her own incisive way Karen Wigen observes that “creating a domestic counterpart to the "portable localisms" that are such a striking feature of the overseas diaspora today”.(Wigen, Karen. p.1189)

The very idea of the “other” implies an exclusionary practice, in which clear borders are drawn. Bonnie Urciuoli in the article “Language and Borders” talks about how sharing a language is also to belong to a particular group. (*Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 24, (1995), pp. 525-546, Published by: *Annual Reviews*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2155948>, p. 525) Urciuoli argues that political change triggers linguistic change too. (p.530) it therefore becomes quite important to any notice of dialect study to keep in mind the changing contours of power groups that either allows participation of certain linguistic groups or exclusion of some others. In other words, we move away from the notion that some languages are intrinsically inadequate to extra linguistic factors in attributing causes for the decline or growth of languages. Any attempt at an organized attempt at educating through dialects has invited a baffling

number of questions as to the logistics of it. Joshua A. Fishman raises some critical questions ranging from issues of compatibility between the educator's dialect and the learner's dialect to dialect denoting a sense of inferiority. ("Standard" versus "Dialect" in Bilingual Education: An Old Problem in a New Context, *The Modern Language Journal*, Vol. 61, No. 7 (Nov., 1977), p. 315, Published by: Blackwell Publishing, N. F. M. L. T. A., <http://www.jstor.org/stable/324550>) He distinguishes the linguists' notion of the dialect as what is tributary in nature to the common attitude toward the term as something low and inferior. (p.316) The field of dialectology therefore necessarily contains a whole gamut of socio-cultural conundrums within which the politics of affiliation and disaffiliation get released.

The ability to construct a modern Nation as a unified force also depends largely on an agenda of producing a single language community, through which its citizenry emerge as a monolithic force. This has been remarked upon in an interesting argument by David A.B. Murray in his "The Cultural Citizen: Negations of Race and Language in the Making of Martiniquais" (*Anthropological Quarterly*, Vol. 70, No. 2 (Apr., 1997), pp. 79-90, Published by: The George Washington University Institute for Ethnographic Research, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3317508>) He finds the "cultural citizen" an idealized person in a neo-colonial context where the former colony as yet retains political linkages with the former master. (p.79) His argument very lucidly puts forth the idea how shared ideologies tend to reconstruct the individual in a given zone in the image of the other. Such an argument is not unfamiliar to those who have read Edward Said's *Orientalism*. An offshoot of such an understanding is the worrisome situation wherein the right to one's own language is limited or completely denied. Eerik Lagerspertz, quoting von Humbolt asserts how it is fundamentally important to protect one's language in order to foster one's culture. ("On Language Rights", p. 182, *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, Vol. 1, No. 2, "Nationalism, Multiculturalism and Liberal Democracy" (Jun., 1998), Published by: Springer, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27504027>) Lagerspertz, says the choice that a nation makes in recognizing some languages as official is a "distributive decision" (p.184) as

it involves onerous responsibilities as to ensure an effective communication, wide based llearning environment, proper utilitarian modules vis-avis the language. As soon as a language is made offial, the others are forced to learn that language because of itsd increased transactory nature and its ascendancy in economic power.

Today, the electronic media plays a great role in the visibility of languages. A language or a dialect that has little role in the media is virtually erased. Patrick Eisenlohr talks of the significance of the media in what he calls “ language revitalization”. (“Language Revitalization and New Technologies: Cultures of Electronic Mediation and the Refiguring of Communities”, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 33, (2004), pp. 21-45, Published by: Annual Reviews, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25064844>) It is commonsense that loss of language affects one’s intellect radically. World over intellectuals and academicians have insisted on the right to educate the child in its mother tongue. The electronic media, especially the television and the computer technology, have produced a new ecology in which languages have either flourished or languished thanks to sponsorship from within the linguistic group, from the State, from industry, etc... . Eisenlohr therefore argues, “the ideological climate defining the relationships between nation-states and communities associated with lesser-used languages is important. Even those groups of small size with limited resources may gain state support for electronic broadcasting or digital mediation if their cultivation of an ethnolinguistic identity is ideologically compatible or even desirable within the national imaginaries in which they are located”. (p. 26) In other words, the modern state will have an interest in the agenda.

Thus it has been attempt in this note to reiterate some of the key issues that have been the focus of many dialectologists and linguists. It is hoped that in the next two days, this conference will take up many more issues and discuss them threadbare.

