

The Scales of Languages

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A few years ago, I was invited to attend a seminar on the teaching of Sanskrit in schools. Academics (especially, those teaching Sanskrit) from various educational institutions, and representatives of various NGOs were also invited.

When I reached the venue, the inauguration ceremony had already begun, and one of the speakers was holding forth on the greatness of Sanskrit. “Sanskrit is a great language because it has existed since time immemorial. It is the language of the ancient sages, of the religious works, nay, the language of the Gods themselves,” he echoed, amidst a huge round of applause.

As it often happens, logic seemed to be shrouded by emotion. Most people tend to ‘evaluate’ languages by putting them on a scale — at one end are the ‘inferior’ or ‘primitive’ languages, while the other end has languages perceived to be ‘superior’.

The belief that some languages are superior is found in a fairly large number of people across the world.

Like Sanskrit in India, Latin has occupied a similar position in the West. This may imply that other languages, by default, are not so superior.

However, it may be noted that there is no consensus as to which language is the most superior. There cannot be. This is because the reasons given for superiority vary — that a language is the oldest, or its words are the easiest to pronounce, or it being the language of the Gods, etc. For example, Arabic is strongly identified as the ‘Language of the Quran’. So, it is said to be the most beautiful language with incredible lexical richness. Other classical languages like Hebrew and Sanskrit lay claim to be the oldest languages, and therefore, superior — a topic hotly debated. Latin and Greek, for hundreds of years, were viewed as

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model languages of excellence in Western Europe because of their massive literature and philosophical thoughts expressed therein.

However, just because a language is the oldest, it does not mean that it has to be superior. Again, if a language has become widespread due to information technology, it does not lend it superiority.

Some languages like Persian were more in use in certain periods of history, and were considered more prestigious as they were the languages spoken and used by the ruling classes. Some languages may have got political recognition or status due to colonisation but that does not make them intrinsically superior. Some languages, for instance, French and Spanish, may be used solely for religious purposes, thereby, gaining sanctity. But they, too, cannot be termed 'superior'.

Quite often, there is a strong correlation between the prestige a group of people enjoy and the language they speak. For example, the prestige associated with European clerics and lawyers, who used Latin to communicate.

It is interesting to note that even an uneducated person has a view on language. It is a fact that mother tongue is the medium through which most knowledge is constructed. So, it is closely linked with the thoughts and identity of an individual.

Moreover, a sense of 'belongingness' gets attached to a language, making it 'personal', and as such, difficult to

think about critically and objectively. Because a layman knows to speak (and, perhaps, read) a language, one feels confident of understanding the corresponding literature as well, and therefore, has the right to hold an opinion about it. Language, in a sense, belongs to everyone. And when opinions differ about the nature of language, for instance, the 'purity' of language, or the way in which it grows, the debate has chances of deteriorating to irrational responses as emotions run high.

Languages developed naturally because of the need to express thoughts and emotions. For example, primitive humans, who led a nomadic way of life, and lived and worked in social groups, used various sounds, signs and symbols to warn their fellow mates of the probable risks and dangers while hunting or shifting to different places. So, they needed a language. Sounds, gradually, developed into words as they became referents to objects present in the environment. Some sounds got associated with time, home, safety, and so on. Thus, language developed through the travails of time.

There is no community in the world without a language in its spoken form. All languages are products of the human mind. Just as no human being is superior or inferior, no language is intrinsically superior or inferior. There is nothing intrinsically limiting or demeaning in any language.

All languages are, thus, equal in the sense that each was developed to meet the social and psychological needs of its users.

But many people may find it difficult to accept as they may not have thought deeply about it. They would probably brush off the idea and reject it. It may be mentioned here that 'equal' is not used in the sense of amount or quantity of grammar, vocabulary or phonology. Language cannot be quantified. It is not possible to rate the excellence of a language in linguistic terms.

As society develops, and as social and psychological needs grow and change, languages, too, change. It is a fact that words are continually being added to the existing vocabulary, and that meanings of words are continually changing. Growth of vocabulary, generally, manifests itself in three ways. For instance, new words are added due to inventions, or improvements being made on existing things, or cultural contacts, etc. Inventions lead to the coinage of new nouns, and sometimes, verbs. For example, the word, 'Xerox', could not have existed in the fifteenth century for the simple reason that the 'photocopying machine' had not been invented then. Similarly, 'wristwatch' was coined as a result of the improved smaller version of 'watch' and the convenience of wearing it on the 'wrist', as opposed to the larger, heavier timekeeper, which more often than not, rested

in a pocket especially made for it. Words like 'restaurant' and 'jungle' have entered the English language vocabulary due to interaction with other cultures.

The study of any language provides valuable information about the language, in general, and the human nature and society, in particular. Thus, all languages are equal in terms of self-sufficiency, with reference to the community, where they are used, and also in the sense that they are equally worthy of scientific study.

Pedagogically speaking, all teaching includes the use of language. Thus, language is central to the educational process. And a teacher's attitude to a language influences the teaching-learning process.

It is, therefore, important for teachers to internalise that all languages are equal. Such an attitude would be manifested by the teacher both through articulation and behaviour, and would influence one's pedagogical practices, which, in turn, would boost the confidence and morale of students. This would, particularly, be so in case of first generation learners, whose mother tongue may not be the language being used at school.

In a pluralistic society like India's, each social field, including the classroom, is multilingual. So, recognition and respect for the diverse linguistic backgrounds of the learners is essential. In addition, it should be made clear

to the learners that all languages are equal, and that all languages are equally difficult or easy (depending on how one looks at it) to learn, and that no language is inherently superior or inferior. This would help in establishing a link between

knowledge acquired in the classroom and reality of the outside world. It would instill in children a sense of individualistic value, and the feeling that each one of them, their home, community, language(s) and culture, are valuable and valued.