

## Meaning of Language and the Place of English in India

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Language is the most effective medium of expression. The term language has been defined by the scholars variously. According to Oxford English Dictionary language is constituted by “words and the methods of combining them for the expression of thought.” Emphasizing upon the significance of language as the means of expression Sweet opines that “language is the expression of ideas by means of which speech sounds are combined into words, words are combined into sentences and combination of sentences gives answer to ideas and thoughts.” Similarly, Edward Sapir terms language as “a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols.” Language reflects the personality of the man, highlighting this aspect Ben Jonson says that “Language most shows a man, speak that I may see thee.” Defining the term more candidly Jespersen says that “Language is a set of human habits, the purpose of which is to give expression to thoughts and feelings; and specially to impart them to others” and that “language is activity, purposeful activity.” Nicholas Hans treats language in yet a broader sense and says that it is “one of the symbols of a nation. It expresses the mental character of the people who speak it and reflects the features of their natural surroundings.” Similarly, to Bloomfield “each community is formed by the activity of language.” According to B.M.H. Strang, “language is an articulated system of signs, primarily in the medium of speech.” Louis H. Gray also opines that “a language is said to be any means of expressing emotional or mental conceptions by any living being whatsoever, and of communicating them to or receiving them from other living beings.” Whereas according to Black and Trager “a language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group cooperates.” On the basis of the above definitions it becomes obvious that language reflects the personality of not only an individual but the society and nation at large. It also serves as an effective means of communication by which one can give vent to one’s thoughts and emotions.

Unlike human beings, who express themselves by way of sounds, gestures and words; birds and beasts convey their feelings only through sounds and gestures. In this way the use of language is the major factor which distinguishes man from other animals. In this regard Balasubramanian (2005) thus rightly remarks that “Communication is quite possible without the use of language. For example, a dog barks and informs its master of the approach of a stranger. A child cries and informs its mother that it is hungry, thirsty or uncomfortable. In both the examples...communication does take place but no language is used” (2). The mode of expression through words can be called in technical terms as the linguistic communication. Being the most spontaneous and effective means of communication,

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language seeks to serve a social purpose. Emphasizing upon this aspect of language, Balasubramanian further observes that “Language has a very important social purpose, because it is mainly used for linguistic communication” (1).

As a matter of fact, it is the kind and quality of language one uses that determines one’s status instantly and enables him to be classed as good or bad. Therefore, a teacher who has good command over the language, even if not so well equipped in the knowledge of the subject, can impress his students more than the one better informed in the subject but ill-equipped in expression. Not only a teacher but any speaker for that matter who has a good command over the language can captivate his audience at the very first instance. Highlighting the importance of language Leonard Bloomfield in his *Philosophical Aspects of Language Studies in History and Culture* says, “Each community is formed by activity of language; speech utterances give us the most direct insight into its working and play a part in everything that is done. In order to observe a human group, we must understand its speech. If we want to probe deeper into the ways of the community and their historical origin; we must possess, to begin with, a systematic description of its language. In order to know anything about mankind we must study in this way a varied set of communities. What little we know about man has come from a study of this kind. Without such knowledge we are slaves in this matter, to rationalization, prejudice and superstition.” Thus according to Bloomfield language is an effective tool to study the socio-cultural aspects and behaviour of a community. In the same way, indicating the functions of language Edward Sapir opines that language is a “perfect symbolic system,” as it is capable of “handling all references and meanings” of a given culture.

In this way language and culture are interdependent and neither can exist without each other. It is, therefore, rightly believed that “A language is the part of the culture of a people and the chief means by which the members of a society communicate.” Deliberating upon the same point it is further opined that “The content of every culture is expressible in its language” and it is, therefore, highly important to realize that once the form of a language is established it can discover meanings for its speakers. Explaining this point of view by way of an illustration it is stated by Sapir that “if one man, who has seen an elephant can speak of ten, twenty, hundred, thousand or of million elephants without hesitation,” and that “language has the power to analyze experience into theoretically dissociable elements and to create that world of the potential inter-grading with the actual which enables human beings to transcend the immediately given in their individual experience and to join a larger common understanding.” This ‘larger common understanding’ can be understood by ‘culture’ which is capable of affecting or adulterating the ‘modes of interpretation. However, the projection and continuous transfer of relations suggested by the forms of our speech continues for ever.

Thus the importance of language need not be over-emphasized as it not only reflects the traits of the personality of an individual but the society as a whole. As a matter of fact it is the language which gives rise to society and the society in turn helps to reshape and remodel the language according to the need of the time. Thus both language and society are interdependent, therefore, it is rightly

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remarked that language is the flesh and blood of the culture. In the preservation of culture and civilization of the people it also serves as one of the most effective tools to secure national integrity and solidarity. Similarly, language is also an effective weapon through which a cultural invasion is launched by the belligerent communities to extend their sway over the less important communities. It was, in fact, in this way that the European countries in the wake of industrial revolution tried to enslave the backward communities of the world by exposing them to their language. The story of the expansion of English in India is the sequel of one such move.

In the wake of European renaissance the European adventurers belonging particularly to the coastal countries like Portugal and Spain embarked upon a series of sea-voyages to unknown destinations to locate new lands. It was in this process that sailors like Columbus and Vasco de Gama were able to reach America and India respectively. Thereafter the merchants of the above countries began to pour into the above regions and at times making the same as their permanent settlements. It was in consequence of this that the Portuguese and the Spaniards were able to settle in Goa and Bombay situated at the western coast of India. The stories of the affluence of India began to take rounds in the whole of Europe encouraging the French and the British to follow suit. The industrial developments sweeping across the whole of Europe also provided impetus to these countries to come to India in search of the markets to sell their finished goods as also to trap raw material for their industrial units. This also triggered a strong rivalry among these people and particularly the French and the British, wherein the British represented by the East India Company came out victorious. The defeat of the French in India and the inherent weakness of local rulers paved the way for the East India Company to gain political mileage. As a result of this the character of the East India Company was drastically altered and they from traders became a political force who in due course taking advantage of the weaknesses of the local rulers were able to make their permanent settlements in Calcutta, Madras and Bombay (now Kolkata, Chennai and Mumbai respectively). The internal bickering and the court conspiracies due to the over-ambition of the chieftains of the Nawab of Bengal provided the British the desired opportunity. Following their victory in the mock-fight of Plassey (1757) succeeded in capturing the power of Bengal. This eventually placed under them a large number of Indian natives, both Muslims and Hindus. Therefore, to run the administration effectively the need of greater interaction between the local masses and the East India Company naturally became the need of the hour. The British people now sincerely needed such experts who could work as interpreters translating the oriental language into English and the *vice versa*. In view of this the need was felt to educate in English select Indians from both the major communities, Hindus and Muslims, so that they could interpret the respective laws before the British judges to help them deliver justice to the Indians. This is how English came to be introduced in India.

The British government took calculated steps to ensure the growth of English in India and universities, colleges including technical and medical colleges, and schools were established throughout the country. Even Missionaries and private entrepreneurs did also champion the cause of the education. This is how English became the main language of the intelligentsia of the country. As a

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result of this Indians were able to qualify even the highest civil service i.e. the ICS and came to occupy important administrative positions under the British government at par with the British officers. Not only this, the Indians also contributed immensely to the growth of English literature, the contribution of the Bengali intelligentsia to which is superb. As a result of this, English being the language of the ruling class became very popular particularly among the aspirants for positions in the British administration. It also became the status symbol and those who were well-off made it a point to educate their children abroad thereby providing them the opportunity to learn the system and institutions of the British. This eventually paved the way for the rise of patriotic Indians who championed the cause of the freedom of the country fighting the mighty British Empire using the weapons used by the British themselves for the protection of their authority.

Prior to the independence, English enjoyed a prominent position in India. It was considered as an effective medium for the Indians to get entry in public services. It also opened the floodgates of knowledge for the Indians who in the process also got acquainted with the liberal and democratic ideas of the west. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the idea of independence and nationalism that swept across the country was the outcome of the spread of English education in the country. In fact, while introducing English the British then could hardly foresee that it would so strongly embarrass their position in India and would eventually become the root cause of their expulsion from the country. After independence the opinion, however, was divided with regard to the position of English in India. There were leaders who thought that English is the symbol of slavery and, therefore, it should be totally uprooted from the Indian soil. But as against this the number of leaders was far greater who wanted English to retain its position as they thought that English being spoken across the world would serve as a link language in the era of internationalism which had already got consolidated after the Second World War. C. Rajgopalachari, in his bid to retain English at its place, even said with anguish that “we in our anger against the British people should not throw away the baby with the bathing water.” In view of this it was found worthwhile to retain English as a link language till Hindi becomes in a position to replace the same. Speaking in a press conference about the retention or otherwise of English Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, the then education minister of India, said “so far as general studies are concerned it was never my intention to suggest that there should be any falling in the standard of English.” This statement *ipso facto* suggests that at the highest political level in the country it was decided that it would not be fair to scrap English education at once. In this context the following remark of Pt. Jawahar Lal Nehru is worth quoting: “150 years of intimate contact has made English an integral part of our education system and this cannot be changed without injury to the cause of education in India. In addition, English has today become one of the major languages of the world and Indians can neglect its study only at the risk of loss to themselves.”

In the above background, in 1950 it was unanimously decided to continue English as the official language of the country for the next 15 years. At that time it was visualized that during this period concrete steps would be taken to develop Hindi as the national language. At that time it was, however,

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missed to be appreciated that there are certain parts of the country like south and north-eastern India where Hindi is quite alien and would never be allowed to replace English. As a result of this the government retracted its stand and in 1963 a Bill was passed according to which English was declared to be the associate official language of India for an indefinite period. In view of the growing international needs the government of India moved a step forward and in 1968 it adopted the National Policy of Education wherein it was emphatically asserted that "special emphasis needs to be laid on the study of English and other international languages as world knowledge is growing at tremendous pace. India must make her ever significant contribution to it. For this purpose the study of English deserves to be specially strengthened."

But there is no denial to the fact that at present teaching English to school and college students has become a challenging task. Now the generation of English teachers has emerged which did not have occasion to learn the intricacies and nuances of the language directly from those of whom it was the mother tongue. Therefore, they naturally encounter problems particularly about the accuracy of pronunciation while teaching their students. The deceptive nature of English wherein the same letter gives different sounds in different words makes the comprehension of correct pronunciation of a particular word difficult. Even while writing, this trait of the language poses problems making it difficult for the students to spell a word correctly on the basis of its pronunciation.

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