

EXPERIENCING LANGUAGE – A STEP TOWARDS GLOBAL CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

The study of linguistics involves dealing with numerous terms. An attempt has been made in the paper to simplify the issue of language acquisition by explaining it in the fewest possible terms. The chief tenet is that language is neither learnt nor acquired but it is experienced. Pointing out the close relationship between language and culture, it has been stated that language is a part of culture, which is 'internalized' by an individual. Consequently, language is also internalized along with culture and it is a part of personality. One individual reacts to another in totality and individuals belonging to different communities react totally with each other, resulting in exchange of languages as well as cultures.

This exchange is fostered and accelerated in modern times due to quick and easy means of communication. This will soon lead to merging of cultures and a by-product of global language will be global culture.

Key Words: *Mother Tongue (MT), Language Acquisition, Experiencing Language, Internalization, Global culture*

1 INTRODUCTION:

Of all the areas of study related to human nature, the most baffling and most challenging until now, has been the nature of language and language learning. On account of its very complex nature, it has attracted philosophers, linguists, psychologists and researchers since earliest times. The more one delves into it, the more one gets caught into it. Research into one aspect leads to another and this has continued till date. Yet, nobody has successfully, completely and satisfactorily unravelled the business of language acquisition, language teaching/learning and the systems that are involved in bilingualism and multilingualism. Human nature prompts one to deal with whatever is mysterious and restless researchers continue to knock at one theory after another, state all kinds of hypotheses and strive to prove them.

Based on an overview of research in the nature of language and pedagogical systems, and with a few additions from my own experience, I shall make some observations about these issues in this paper.

2 A NEED FOR NEW TERMINOLOGY

One fact is certain that every individual acquires a mother tongue. Any other language that he happens to

learn to any degree of mastery is thus other than his mother tongue (MT) and various labels have been attached to those languages like second language (SL), foreign language (FL) etc. There is always a difference between the first language or MT and all other languages that an individual may learn during his lifetime. Learning of MT just happens naturally; there is no issue about it. It is all about Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and FL, ESP (English for Specific Purposes) etc. that has baffled the intellect of researchers for centuries. A bulk of research has been carried out and volumes written about methodologies, approaches, purposes, techniques and so on and this continues till date, yet linguists and their co-researchers are as much in darkness as they had been from the start. Together, they have produced a long list of terminology like acquisition, learning and so on. Experts such as Jim Cummins differentiate between social and academic language acquisition. Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) are language skills needed in social situations. It is the day-to-day language needed to interact socially with other people. Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) refers to formal academic learning. This includes listening, speaking, reading, and writing about subject area content material. This level of language learning is essential for students to succeed in school. Students need time and support to become proficient in academic areas. (Cummins, 2004)

All this has made matters all the more complicated and the theories fail to explain the concept of language learning satisfactorily, as matters stand today in the 21st century. All kinds of theories from behaviourism, Naturalism, Humanistic to CBT have been propounded to explain the nature of language learning but they seem to give only a limited view which somehow, does not explain the process completely.

Considering all the above facts, it can be concluded that a new approach is necessary to look at the whole issue and new terminology needs to be created for the purpose.

3 EXPERIENCING LANGUAGE

Chomsky stated that every human being possesses a Language Acquisition Device (LAD) which enables him to learn the language that has been fed into the device, which he terms as 'input'. (Chomsky, 1968) Since MT is acquired with the help of this device at a very young age and in a very natural way, efforts focus on investigating the process of acquiring MT so that the techniques of teaching SL, FL etc. can be modified. Chomsky used the term 'acquisition' of MT since it is natural, while he differentiated it from 'learning' a SL which mostly takes place through instruction. I would prefer to use the word 'experiencing language' rather than learning or acquisition. Let me make the reason clear.

An individual learns a language in some context or situation. He may learn it consciously and deliberately if he wants to learn it for a specific purpose. He may acquire some phrases or words incidentally, in an informal situation. It is not important whether he acquires it through graded, systematic, well-prepared instructional strategy or picks it up casually and unintentionally. The fact is that whether in a language classroom or outside it, he **experiences** the language. An individual cannot really be said to understand the full purport of any language unless he experiences it. Language is a part of one's experience. It cannot be separated from the experience of a human being who reacts to language in totality; this totality includes the individual's culture, profession, socio-economic status, education and every other aspect of his personality. Whatever amount of language in whatever form is experienced by the individual, it becomes part of his personality. Let us name this as 'internalization' of the language.

To support this point certain examples can be quoted. A plumber whose MT may be any Indian language, uses

words like *pipe, washer* etc. as part of his jargon. He is well aware of the usage of these words and uses them correctly and in appropriate situations. Similarly, an electrician would correctly and confidently talk about *wires, fuses, lights* etc. Even though uneducated or even illiterate, people use words and phrases which belong to a foreign language since they are a part of their experience. Hence, we can also say that MT is acquired because it is experienced; the difference is that MT is experienced since birth and to a greater extent in varying situations compared to SLs. We come across an astounding example in case of illiterate urchins who work as tourist guides at the Taj Mahal or other tourist spots. They can talk a limited number of sentences about the places in six to seven different languages. Their livelihood may be their motivation but the tourist spots and foreigners are part of their daily experience and their knowledge of languages is limited to their experiences. Language borrowing and loan words, especially from English are too common. Words like *pen, pencil, table, chair, fan, bed* etc. are now part of Indian languages. People prefer to use them just as they prefer to use English words for taboo words in their own regional languages. Words associated with sex particularly, are considered to be indecent and the equivalents in English seem to blunt the indecency a little. Hence, it can be said that irrespective of the motivation, purpose, manner, method, degree of mastery etc. all languages that an individual knows including the MT are part of experience and consequently part of his personality. They are 'internalized' by the individual. He may have found some easy on account of transfer in case of considerable similarity to his own MT or on account of total immersion due to physical migration. The concept of 'universal grammar' also assists in learning different languages. (Chomsky, 1968) Whatever, the case, language is experienced.

Someone may even learn a language for its own sake. A person interested in the literature of a particular language may take special efforts to learn it and make it a part of his experience. People are known to learn languages like Sanskrit, Latin (although they are dead languages) or Urdu for the love of these languages.

Every individual plays a social role. A social role is a cluster of rights and obligations and involves a certain range of behaviour more or less clearly defined, depending on the nature of the role in question. In most societies, the members may not have to play all the multiple roles but only a few of them. Their linguistic performance and competence may be accordingly delimited to play the roles that lead to their total experience.

Let us take a hypothetical case of someone who goes to a foreign land for a very short period. He stays at a hotel. He has to go to a particular place every day. He travels by cab. He asks the waiters how to call a cab. He also picks up a few words that would serve his needs like asking for tea, ordering meals etc. He has experienced that language to a limited extent for a limited period. After returning to his homeland, he may tell his friends the new words he has learnt. In due course of time, he will forget them altogether if he has nothing to do with the country. On the other hand, if he visits that country again, he may add to his knowledge of the language and also 'internalize' the culture to some extent. This may increase with frequent visits.

If an individual happens to go to several different lands one after the other in succession (and this is not impossible in modern times) and picks up a range of languages as he proceeds, how many terms would one assign to them? 4th language, 5th language, 6th language – there can be no end to these terms. I think it is more convenient to call them as language spoken by Germans, by French, by Nepalis and so on.

This view also explains why people forget languages. If knowledge of a particular language ceases to be relevant to their lives and is shut out of experience, it can be forgotten. One more supporting proof in this regard lies within the experience of most teachers. Individuals learn subjects like literature, linguistics, physics etc, during graduation or post-graduation and the subjects require them to be familiar with specific terminology as long as they study for examinations. When beginning career or teaching jobs, they feel a need to revise the subject and terminology for the purpose of teaching. Sometimes, entire concepts are blackened out along with terminology. If you ask a student of literature what is meant by 'comic relief', he may answer that he knew about it, he had studied it but it is forgotten. Of course, brushing up his knowledge is possible, but he can forget it if it ceases to be part of his experience. This also explains why children in slum areas talk and behave in a particular way. They reflect what they experience. A university scholar, on the other hand, will show a sharp difference in speech, manner and behaviour.

This explanation conforms to most of the language theories and approaches to learning languages. It agrees with Krashen's idea of 'input' and 'output' and also his Affective Filter Hypothesis. It does not defy the Naturalistic Approach. It is also in consonance with the Humanistic Approach. It does not go against the Interactionist theory and has some similarity to the Total Physical Response Approach.

4 MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT MT

It cannot be denied that every individual is not a great master of language in his own MT. He possesses only that much knowledge of his MT which falls within his scope and experience. Every individual cannot give a spiritual lecture or discuss recipes with an equal degree of competency. He lacks the necessary vocabulary, he may not be able to use the standard dialect and of course he lacks necessary content on each subject with which he is not concerned. All that can be said is that he is most comfortable with his MT and also very confident because he has been using it since childhood and is most acquainted with it.

Some aspects of MT may also be deliberately and consciously learnt. MT for the sake of communication is rather an inevitable experience. However, literary or academic functions have to be learnt with conscious efforts. Grammar that describes MT is also not naturally acquired.

Figurative language and metaphors in MT which are associated with religion, customs, myths etc can be understood and appreciated. At the same time, a joke or comparison connected with computers cannot be understood by someone who has no knowledge of computers, although the joke is in his MT. The fact is that it is beyond the scope of his experience.

A number of students approach me and tell me that they wish to be able to communicate fluently in English. I always ask them whether they can do so in their MT, and advise them to master the MT before thinking of any other language.

There are many Indian writers who feel more comfortable writing in English rather than in their MT. They can successfully convey their Indian feelings and ethos through English and raise Indian culture to a universal level.

If this is the case with MT, why make an issue about learning SLs? All individuals can acquire enough knowledge of numerous languages which are relevant to their life and experiences.

5 INTERNALIZATION OF LANGUAGE

The next key word in this paper which needs clarification is 'internalization', which can be understood by noticing the relationship between language and culture. All linguists admit that there is a close relationship between language and culture. It was a linguist called Benjamin Lee Whorf who expressed a view for the first time that our view of the world, the way we can categorize our experience and conceptualize

our environment, is effectively determined by our language. (Wharf, 1956). Pit Corder has dealt in detail about the relation between language and culture.

Normally, man as a social being, has a desire to know more and more people and associate with them. This process begins with introduction and can proceed to all kinds of relationships ranging from mere acquaintance to wedlock. Knowing the new person does not stop with knowing his name, background and a few other details. Knowing him better means knowing everything about him, including his past life, future ambitions etc. He has his own social identity. He is a part of his culture, belongs to some religious community and shares some beliefs and attitudes. He speaks a mother tongue which is part and parcel of his personality. I believe that a person's character is shaped by the place and community where he is born, his religion, culture, socio-economic background, and of course, his mother tongue. Just as all these factors shape his perception of the world and the people around him, his first language or MT also influences his personality. 'Meanings are concepts', according to R.A. Hudson and concepts are formed in a cultural setting. (Hudson, 1980).The language, its nature, the thoughts and concepts expressed in it, the lexis and structure, phonological structure, all shape his views, attitudes and insights into the world and human life. Thus, indirectly and to a significant extent, language has a contribution in the formation of character and personality. Language is embedded in culture. Culture implies a number of things and language is one of them. In other words, language is one of the elements of culture. Language and culture are firmly bound to each other. A human being is a product of his culture. His thoughts and attitudes are fostered by it. Culture nourishes the character of an individual. If language is a part of culture, it follows logically that language lends social identity to the individual. An individual speaking a particular dialect is immediately identified as belonging to a certain geographical region, a social stratum, a cultural and linguistic community. One's social status is decided by one's language. I can thus say with some degree of conviction that personality of an individual revolves around two factors, language and culture.

Along with culture, language or languages that lie within the experience of an individual at any given time in his life are said to be part of his personality and thus 'internalized' by him.

6 THE CURRENT SITUATION

Power relations that exist between nation states in our society are directly linked to modes of production, trade, commerce and media that operate at global levels. Constituted in these modes of production, communication technologies are paramount, and most of these technologies are transmitted in English. Hence, English is currently considered a globalized and international language, which in the past fifty years has gained much prominence and power over other languages. (Crystal 1997).

Communication systems are only means to communication. It cannot be said that people have come together, not in the true sense until they change, cross the cultural boundaries and communicate heart to heart. While the majority of the world's population do not speak English as their MT, English is the second most widely spoken language, with 5.4 per cent of the world's population having proficiency in its use. However, Crystal (1997) reminds us that English has not become a powerful language because of its inherent linguistic or grammatical features, or because of the number of people who speak it, but rather because of the political, economic and military might of its people. So, because it is a powerful language everyone in the world wants to speak it and gain social and economic power through its use.

While globalization and the dominance of English are on the rise, the fact remains that language is a significant marker of identity, and identity is inextricably linked to the ways in which we understand others and ourselves. Despite the fact that people around the world desire to pass on to their children the language through which local identities are expressed, families are under considerable pressure to abandon their home language in favour of English. Parents see the benefits in their children speaking English, but this is often at the expense of their MT. Linguists predict that of the 5000–6000 languages spoken in the world, half will be extinct by the next century. This is often looked upon as a threat to MT. On the contrary, it is a dawning of Globalization. The modern world which is marching in great strides towards Globalization has its own special characteristics. The most prominent among them, is the technology that has fostered the systems of communication. Extremely quick and effective means of communication have been established and all business organizations are taking advantage of them. Business has become quick and smooth as a result of communication facilities, which has certainly brought people and countries closer to each other. People do not hesitate any longer in order to deal with traders and businessmen in far off countries. Banking facilities have

also become hassle-free due to progress in technology. This strong support from technology has benefitted all business men, traders, politicians, educationists, scientists etc from all over the world and for whatever reason people contact others who belong to far off countries, a little human exchange is enough to narrow the psychological gap between them. Along with people, their cultures also come in contact. The general understanding of people across the world regarding foreign cultures has increased. Greater sympathy has been established as individuals react in totality to other human beings from any part of the world. There is some intermediate state where languages are mutually influential. Social networking sites like Facebook and Orkut cater to human acquaintances beyond commercial purposes. Old school friends in some distant part of the world are discovered and united with joy and hilarity. There will not be much of a 'culture shock' as it is called, if sudden and unexpected migration takes place to any far off country.

This is not a totally new concept. It is well-known that when two culturally different communities come into contact and develop common economic and political systems, there appear to be several possible outcomes. They may eventually merge, they may remain culturally distinct whilst being politically and economically a unit or they may both continue side by side suffering some degree of mutual influence (Weinerich, 1953). Bilingualism, diglossia, superposed variety, pidgins, creoles are all terms used to describe the various possible outcomes. Languages will merge and mix. Multilingualism will be the order of the day. It will be difficult to classify instances of code-switching and code-mixing which will become too common. The mixing will not be limited to one or two languages but may involve any number of languages. It will be situational as well as metaphorical. Language mixing will lead to culture blending. In short, it can be said that cultural boundaries are fading.

Considering the direction of progress and the speed with which technology is assisting the development of communication systems, it can be predicted that these cultural boundaries will disappear and it will happen in the near future. Learning a second language implies learning to see the world as the speakers of that language habitually see it, it does involve learning their culture. This process can be accelerated by living among the native speakers, eating the food that they eat and interact with them more and more. This is not impossible though it may be difficult. At the same time, learning a new language is definitely not a question of acquiring a new set of names for the same things; it does

not involve learning a new 'world view'. An Indian need not lose his 'Indianness' by learning a foreign language. He remains an Indian at heart, only a little alien colour is added to his personality. He has nothing to lose by it; on the contrary, it enhances his personality, widens his perspectives and enriches his sphere of experience.

While concepts like Global language and Global currency are already well-established, the day is not far when a global culture will be established. The chief role in creation of a global culture will be played by language.

Exchange of thoughts, beliefs and patterns of life will mainly take place through language. Language will reduce the psychological, religious and cultural gaps. We cannot say anything certain about political boundaries yet, but linguistic and cultural boundaries will certainly be wiped out and a new culture will emerge, a global culture.

7 CONCLUSION

Over the years, abundant research in linguistics, psychology, philosophy, anthropology etc, has taken place. The world has changed in every respect. With due respect to the substantial work carried out by linguists across the world, it can be said that changing times have made it mandatory to change the way of looking at the issue of language acquisition. Linguists tried to explain the position of languages by introducing a list of terminology. Most of this can be disposed of by looking at the issue from a modern perspective. The chief tenets of argument are as follows:

- Language learning may be deliberate or incidental.
- It may take place through instruction, exposure, or total or part immersion.
- It may take place in a language classroom or anywhere outside.
- It may take place for short or long periods of time.
- One may learn language for a specific purpose like the study of medicine or motivation like survival or learn a language like Urdu just for its own sake.
- The amount of language/languages learnt may vary in case of every individual.
- Whatever the case, language is either made a part of his experience by an individual, or becomes a part of his experience.

- That amount of language is acquired which is part of the individual's experience.
- MT is also experienced. Some aspects of MT are learnt deliberately and consciously, sometimes even for specific purposes.
- Languages can be forgotten if they cease to be part of experience.
- In the modern age, communication systems have improved on account of technology.
- As a result, languages and cultures come in contact.
- Culture is a part of one's personality and language is one element of culture. Hence, languages that come within a person's sphere of experience are 'internalized' along with culture.
- Cultural boundaries are rapidly disappearing and the way is paved for the creation of a global culture.

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