Landmark

Languages of "Instruction" and Abstraction, Languages of Doing and Feeling

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Abstract

This paper examines the language related problems a social science educator faces when she is faced with children's inability to comprehend texts, to articulate their experiences and views in the class room and to write them down in the normative language. The paper argues that their roots lie in our conception of knowledge, social access to knowledge and preservation of social order based on inequality. South Asian intellectual tradition has been shaped by a long and sustained debate on the nature of knowledge and its articulation in language and the role of language in sustaining and challenging social hierarchies. It recognizes the power of language in mediating social consciousness and also academic practices. Bernstein has drawn our attention to the role played by language codes in maintaining hierarchies in school education. If language can be used for domination, it can also be used for challenging it. Recent Dalit literature demonstrates the rich possibility which 'dialects' hold. The paper concludes with a set of possible curricular and pedagogic practices that can build on such possibilities to make social science learning a transformative experience.

In the course of designing the social science curriculum for middle schools in Madhya Pradesh, the issue of language kept cropping up in many ways. We (Eklavya Social Science group members) were developing readings in Hindi which were more accessible to the children and the teachers of these schools. (Batra, 2010:42-105 for a detailed report) The teachers had repeatedly complained that the text book language was incomprehensible for the children, and often even for the teachers. Their one major request was to "simplify" the language of the books. They even agreed to using longer textbooks, provided the children could understand them without too many explanations.

In the early 1980s (and perhaps today as well) teachers typically read out a passage from the book and explained its import in Bundelkhandi or Malwi dialect. However, they faced severe problems in explaining texts which had abstract concepts (such as jurisdiction, temperate zone, etc.) and words pregnant with meaning. They eventually wrote out the answers to the questions at the end of the chapters on the black board in standard Hindi, often copying passages from the text book. The children wrote the answers many times over and memorized them so as to be able to reproduce them in the examinations. The language of the textbooks and the languages of the students and teachers, simply did not intersect.

It took us years to unpack the import of this problem as we began with a naïve understanding of what it meant to "simplify". To us it meant creating graphic images of a phenomenon in simple colloquial Hindi, (bol-chal ki bhasha), gradually introducing a conceptual term and reinforcing it with carefully designed exercises and redundancies. Thus, each major concept was introduced with a rich narrative, which explored the many dimensions of the phenomenon described

by the concept. Once the idea was consolidated into a conceptual term, it was reinforced by repeated usage in comparative contexts. We thought we had done a good job of it. All this helped of course; but it also opened our eyes to new problems. We had intended the text books not just for comprehending, but also for opening a dialogue in the class room. A dialogue in which the students discussed the merit of the issues raised and also brought their own experiences to evaluate or elaborate upon the ideas in the book. The classroom discussions usually took place in Bundelkhandi; they were often animated but incomprehensible to us. The teacher would sometimes come to our help, but when he/she got excited or angry with the text, he/she could express himself only in Bundelkhandi. So far so good.

When it came to writing answers, we hit a serious road block. The questions were in standard Hindi (manak bhasha) and the answers were expected to be in the same language. It was virtually impossible for most children to compose and write down a paragraph in standard Hindi. The teachers helped them out by writing the correct answers on the board for them to copy in their notebooks. But we were not in favour of such uniform and correct answers. We wanted each child to analyse independently and add their experiences and observations to the answers. The children were most comfortable with copying related passages from the book, but they had great difficulty in writing even one sentence on their own. We began to privilege those who wrote in "their own language"—that is, did not copy from the text book—with extra marks, but to little avail. On the face of it, the problem was a linguistic one, in the sense that children had difficulty in composing answers in Hindi. However, it was much more than that, the children and also the teachers were convinced that they could not be writing something correct if it could not be found in the text book.

Writing your thoughts in your language is something alien to our education system. Children could speak about their ideas, but they could not write them down. Evaluation however required them to write. We were seriously considering shifting from written to oral forms of evaluation when the government closed down the programme on the plea that these children were being used as guinea pigs.

Looking at children's scripts, we also realized that while our method helped them to deal with concepts better, the goal of precision and clarity which the application of concepts requires was still far away. The children remained comfortable with narratives and the possibility of diffused articulation. Fixing meaning and eliminating alternative possibilities was however not something they were comfortable with.

It took us a lot more time to realize that the shift from oral language to written language and narrative to conceptual text, required major shifts in patterns of thinking and a great discipline of the thought process itself. What we were confronting was not so much to do with inadequacy as it was to do with resistance; resistance to the disciplining.

Later still, while working with textbook writers in different SCERTs and even NCERT, we came across a singular insistence on a highly formalized and sanskritized Hindi and resistance to anything that appeared to be colloquial (chalu bhasha) or "foreign" (videshi). Diverse reasons were given for this, "There is no end to the dialects, how many can we accommodate? This is not respectable enough. This is not Indian. This is too casual for textbooks...." There was more to it than an insistence on purity or formal language. However, this kept eluding us until a world of explanation was opened up by an investigation into the millennia old debates on language and truth in Indian philosophical tradition.

Languages of Power

Brahmanic philosophical tradition in general and Purva Mimamsa in particular argued in favour of the eternal nature of truth as well as the purity and fixity of the language used to express it, which too had to be eternal. Strict adherence to grammar (which had not been corrupted by dialectical usage) marked the purity and fixity of the Sanskrit language which alone was considered capable of expressing the truth. In essence, the tradition sought to negate any dialogical character of truth or ambiguity in expressing it. Kumarila Bhatta (7th Century CE?), a brilliant exponent of Purva Mimamsa, contrasted this with the rival Buddhist contention of conditioned and transient nature of everything, including truth and language.

The Buddhists not only denied eternal quality to everything including language, but also asserted that the relation between the word and what it signifies was a matter of convention, without any sacred or eternal sanction behind it. On the other hand, Truth, to the Mimasakas could not be transient or conditional, it had to be eternal and unconditional. Kumarila dismissed the truth claims of the Buddhists and the Jainas, because their scriptures were in the vernacular, with vocabulary with shifting meanings, stating "when the words themselves are unreal, how could the objects denoted by them be accepted as real?" (Jha, 1924, p. 235). To put it simply, truth claims cannot be made in dialects or languages liable to change and corruption.

In contrast with the Brahmanic obsession with purity of language and fixity of meaning and eternality of truth, the Buddhist tradition opted for the very opposite from early on. When two monks suggested that the sayings of the Buddha be fixed in the language of the Vedas (Chandas), the Buddha explicitly forbade

them. "You are not to put the Buddha's words into Chandas.... I authorize you, monks, to learn the Buddha's words each in his own dialect" (Pollock, 2006, p. 54). This essentially amounted to a license to reinterpret and restate the doctrines based on engagement with local experiences.

It appears that the Buddhist doctrine of conditioned origin of everything including knowledge, enabled it to get over the anxiety around fixity of knowledge and opened the possibility of using dialogues to determine knowledge. This in turn opened the gates to the use of multiple dialects and indeed languages.

Sheldon Pollock traces the transformation of Sanskrit from a liturgical language confined to sacrificial rituals, into a language of secular poetry and sastra. This was accompanied by the use of Sanskrit kavya to build and legitimize royal power during the 1st millennium CE. Grammar based systematization of Sanskrit was central to this transformation, which enabled it to create a cosmopolitan literary-political culture spread over most of South and South East Asia. While all languages and dialects have an implicit grammar and are rule based, spelling it out in a text enables the practitioners to fix and formalize usage and meaning. Thus it is possible to restrict and channelize the fluidity of language use over a larger span of space and time.

Sanskrit became the language of power in this entire region as Sanskrit kavya was used in prasastis to consolidate and express royal power. However, imperial languages require the "dignity and stability conferred by grammar", to convey the power wielded by the king. At the same time, grammatical correctness had a more important role.

Grammatical correctness on which was founded the correct language became coterminous with political correctness

and preservation of a hierarchical social order. The poetic technique of slesha (use of words with double meaning) was used to transfer the many meanings of the term varna (colour, syllable and caste based social order) to different contexts. Just as grammar maintains varnas (syllables) in place, the king maintains varna-ashrama dharma or hierarchical social order. Thus, grammatically correct language became central to maintaining social hierarchies (Pollock, 2006, p. 183, 255).

One may add that such a penchant for "grammatization" was not intended as much for standardizing and creating a universal language as for reinforcing social and varna differentiation, by putting some languages on a higher pedestal. Down the history of India, language became an important marker of caste differences. In popular imagination in India, "grammar" is the marker of a language as opposed to a dialect, which is not supposed to have a grammar or script of its own. What is meant here is the existence of a grammar text which controls language usage so that it is not subject to "degeneration" of day- to- day colloquial usage.

This civilizational obsession with grammatically correct language and spelling (varnasthiti) may explain the deep resistance of Indian school teachers to allow children to explore spellings and sentence constructions on their own. In contrast, Anglo-American pedagogy uses this extensively as a device for teaching children to read and write. In a varna-ordered social world, language is also a marker of caste status. Thus grammatization is really an instrument for separating the language of the upper castes from that of the lower castes and not for creating a single standard language. We shall presently consider how Sanskrit and grammar entered the picture in our school education.

Matribhasha Vikas Parishad, an organization dedicated to promoting the use of Hindi technical terms, went to the Supreme Court to ensure that school textbooks used these terms. Sometime in 2004-2005, the National Council for Educational Research & Training (NCERT) textbook writers were notified that they were bound by a Supreme Court order to use technical terms developed by the Standing Commission for Scientific and Technical Hindi Terminology (under Ministry of Human Resources Development), something they had resisted so far. These terms were found to be too difficult to be used as substitutes for colloquial words, used till then. (For details see, http://csttpublication.mhrd. gov.in/english/documents.php) However, the Supreme Court order had to be complied with. The problem with the work of the technical terms commission was its highly sanskritized terminology with outlandish sounds and spellings. In fact, this penchant for Sanskrit was not an innovation of the Commission. It was its mandate that had been derived from the Constitution of India itself. Sections 343-351 of the Constitution try to strike a complicated balance between the warring language interests in the Constitution Assembly, instead of cutting through the Gordian Knot. In the final section on the issue it states:

> 351. It shall be the duty of the Union to promote the spread of the Hindi language, to develop it so that it may … secure its enrichment … by drawing, wherever necessary or desirable, for its vocabulary, primarily on Sanskrit and secondarily on other languages. (emphasis added) (Article 351, Constitution of India)

Privileging Sanskrit in the development of a new vocabulary for Hindi affirms a belief in the Sanskrit origins of Hindi. It also seeks to inherit for academic Hindi, the literary and social prestige of Sanskrit, which by the middle of the 20th century had been reduced to a Brahmanic

liturgical language. Further, it revives the old Brahmanic notions of fixity of knowledge, word meaning and language use and social exclusivism in an era of democracy, science and linguistic admixtures. The NCERT, by the dictum of the Supreme Court at the instance of the Matribhasha Vikas Parishad, was forced to fall in line despite its serious pedagogic reservations.

The Power of Language

The forgoing discussion may seem to indicate the need to exorcise the Brahmanic ghosts from our education system and the public sphere in general. However, as the profound insight of the Buddha tells us, the language we adopt has deeper connections with our notions of truth and the sociology of creating and articulating knowledge. Is truth to be seen as fluid, changing and conditioned, and knowledge to be produced and expressed through democratic participation and dialogue? This will decide what kind of language is adopted.

While we physically inhabit a material world, we simultaneously live and function in a world created by language and discourse. As Sheldon points out, it is this ability and power of language to create a world, that Brahmanic grammar and kavya sought to control and channelize.

The power of language to express reality, shape it, even pass off the un-real as real, and condition action was well understood and theorized upon for a long time in South Asian scholarship. Bhartrihari, a contemporary of Kumarila for example, made some path-breaking discoveries in this regard. He declared, "There is no cognition without the operation of words; all cognition is shot through and through by the word. All knowledge is illumined by

the word." (Murti, 1997, p. vii; Coward & Raja, 1991) Recently, this has become a major theme of post - structuralist speculations on the mediation of language and discourse. R. Kosseleck for example, has written about the mediation of language in social life, recording or remembering the past and in the interpretation of the past.

> . . . language becomes the primary factor without which no recollection and no scientific transposition of this recollection is possible. The anthropological primacy of language for the representation of past history thus gains an epistemological status, for it must be decided in language what in past history was necessitated by language and what was not. (Koselleck, 2002, p. 27)

Education is yet to digest the implications of this revolution as it is still caught up with language as a medium of communication and expression. Of course, there have been some exceptions such as Basil Bernstein, whose theory of codes of language has been somewhat influential in understanding how education reproduces inequalities.

Experiences of a society can be comprehended either in and through its own language, or through the language of another society, or as it happens most often, through a dialogue in multiple languages. The case of Sanskrit scholarship brings to fore this central problematic of academic enterprise. The academic, being a member of a class often with claims to maintaining distance from the principle protagonist social groups, and at the same time being a transnational strata, speaks and comprehends reality through a very special language. To begin with, these languages have much in common with what Basil Bernstein describes as "elaborated code", which is unemotional, and favours analysis, abstraction and generalization. Most folk languages

function in concrete and shared contexts, using the rich physical and metaphorical resources of the context, supplementing the words with gestures, expressions and other visual codes. If the "elaborated code" is rich in abstract concepts, the "restricted code" is rich in metaphors, proverbs and allusions to folklore, shared and constantly reworked by the community. More often than not, silence is a potent language used with great effect, but whose meaning is comprehensible only within a shared context.

Academic language, even when used with empathy, has limitations in comprehending and describing the experiences enshrined in the folk languages. Often, it ends up as humorous lace to pepper the academic text. The depth of feeling emerging from a very rich and nuanced life activity and experience, and the fine variations experienced by people of different ages in different gender groups is almost irretrievably lost to academic imagination. Nevertheless, despite its impoverished perception, it can create a tantalizingly powerful narrative of the reality, used then by those in power and in policymaking to determine the larger course of history. Schooling then is used to share this narrative with the folk and share in a manner that obliterates their own perceptions and acquiesce in the new narrative doled out.

Challenge of the Marginalized Languages

Hazariprasad Dwivedi described the poet Kabir as a "dictator" of language. What he meant was that Kabir forced language to express his ideas by twisting and turning it at his will and language complied helplessly (Dwivedi, 1992, p. 171). The language of Kabir is characterized

precisely by those features which imbue a "restricted code". It is full of metaphors and proverbs, it colloquializes technical terms drawn from philosophical discourses (yoga, vedanta, etc.), it profusely uses paradoxes and "sanjabhasha" whose meaning is never fixed and is left to the audience to interpret and make sense of. With his disrespect for grammar, he thus turns the argument of Kumarila on its head: corruptibility and fluidity of meaning of words is essential to express ideas about the final truth, to question what has been taken for granted and fixed and to lay bare one's deeply felt pain and anguish. Thus, the apabhramsha becomes the vehicle of the most oppressed, downtrodden and excluded, while at the same time serving the purpose of talking about the most abstract philosophical and metaphysical truths.

Like the Buddha, Kabir preferred the oral tradition, entrusting his ideas and language to the masses to rework, restate, add and subtract.

Dalit literature in what are considered dialects of Tamil, Telugu, Marathi, etc., in recent decades has posed a serious challenge to professional social science writing to make sense of a vast reservoir of human experience, which was hitherto lost due to the eclipsing of a range of apabhramsha languages. These relate to fleeting pains and pleasures of labouring women and children in groundnut fields; to the transformation of marginalized and oppressed persons into gods and goddesses feared, loved and worshipped; to the working of caste societies. Languages which were not considered capable of being printed for a wider readership were transformed in the course of a couple of decades into literary languages, which broke the impasse of upper caste literature.

I would like to posit that formal academic scholarship has a compulsion to develop a language and a kitbag of concepts,

which needs precise definition and fixed meaning. However, the more this enterprise succeeds, the more it turns away from, and indeed obliterates languages and expressions which are more closely tied with life, labour and struggles of diverse peoples. This in the long run only impoverishes the academic language and its ability to penetrate social reality. Perhaps we need to work towards a via media where the two languages are able to listen to each other and understand each other. The current spate of subaltern literature would not have been possible but for a close acquaintance with scholarly literature on caste, gender, post-modern culture theories, etc. This literature has not only used the conceptual baggage of academia but has made deep inroads into professional print media. Formal academic language has to take cognizance of this phenomenon and come to terms with it.

Teaching Disciplines and Language Indiscipline

With this I return to the language of school education in general and social science learning in particular. The real issue is not the alienness of the "medium" of instruction (whether English or Hindi or Tamil) but the very idea of instruction. It denotes a hierarchy and fixity which does not allow comfortable entry to even native speakers. It is time we abandon our mistrust of children's ability to learn languages even of distant people, and instead introspect on how a language becomes inaccessible to them.

Even a cursory reflection on the issues raised here will indicate that we need to vastly expand the scope of orality in our education. Presently, it is based so heavily

on negotiating the printed text that, what little oral exchange occurs is devoted to explaining the wisdom enshrined in the texts or repeating them as a proof of comprehension. There is a need to open up spaces and time for children to speak extensively with each other, with the teachers and with the community in general. The task of the educators then would be to structure these oral conversations and draw from them pertinent conclusions to reopen new conversations.

Another way in which the weight of text can be reduced in education, is to use multiple forms of representation, visuals, performances and encounters with the world of practice. Our textbooks have only recently woken up to the possibility of illustration and design (even this is perhaps fleeting). In an age when technology bombards our children with powerful images, reliance on texts may be somewhat welcome, but it will be a poor response to the new technologies. Technology enables us to enlarge the scope of "total experience", which in turn opens up possibilities of multiple oral dialogues and lines of abstraction which can then lead to diverse kinds of texts.

A second major "take away" would be to open up spaces for multilinguality in the textbooks, library books and in daily conversations. Today we are better positioned to do this, thanks to the assertion of diverse dialects, voices and their literarization. Teachers have a problem with multilingualism because they are worried about their inability to comprehend the meanings of diverse dialects. However, if we shed the anxiety of comprehension and correcting deviations, we can appreciate the vast new dimensions of speaking from the heart. Eventually the problem of comprehension too can be addressed.

An important implication of this discussion for social science education would be on the teaching of concepts. By

and large, teaching concepts and demarcating their meaning have been a major concern in education. Much of the meaningfulness of social science education springs from its claim to build an arsenal of concepts necessary for social analysis. These concepts appear as fixed entities governed by a grammar of definitions which need to be absorbed intact and used appropriately. Social sciences can do with some fluidity in this area. This can be easily done by combining concept teaching with another important objective of social science teaching, namely historicizing and spatializing phenomenon. Historicizing and spatializing key concepts such as tax, class, king, democracy, industry, demand, supply, colony, etc., can demonstrate that the meanings of these words have never been fixed and have in fact evolved over time and space through much negotiation. For example, the term for tax in Sanskrit is "Bali", "Irai" in Tamil and "Kharaj" in Persian. Each of them are rich in connotations and have meant different things at different points of time and even simultaneously. This would be true of virtually all concepts. Demonstrating the variation in the meaning of a concept will go a long way towards relaxing the inflexibility of academic language usages.

Another takeaway would be to reinforce an important objective of social science education, namely to empathize with diverse points of view of a phenomenon by investigating into its impact on diverse social groups. Phenomenon such as industrialization, nationalism, Green Revolution or Blue Revolution meant different things to different social and ethnic groups. Listening to them in their own language will go a long way towards making truth conditional and transient as the Buddha had pointed out. It will also force us to develop new concepts to grasp the complex reality and practices. Many categories that we use indiscriminately, such as farmers, workers, housewives, transgenders, tribals, etc., will dissolve and be replaced by more nuanced

categories. Above all, the critical apparatus—methods of evaluating the sources of information and categories and concepts and frames of problems—will become much more sophisticated when confronted with a range of sources and issues.

To me the most important take away is the last one. We need to abandon our fear of the apabhramsha, the corrupt language, and allow our children to articulate their views in their own way and language, spellings, words, codes or what have you. As Bhartrihari said, apabhramsha too can communicate and that is what matters.

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