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**Language puzzles - Part I**

On November 14, I participated in an event jointly organized by the Ma Boli Centre of the Institute for Art and Culture and the Trust for History, Art and Architecture of Pakistan (THAAP) at the latter’s beautiful premises in Lahore to discuss various aspects of native languages including their contribution to the creative process as also their future in Pakistan.

The event, besides being informative and entertaining, succeeded in its objective by provoking many thoughts and raising many questions. I explore some of them to include those who might be interested in the issues but were unable to join for one reason or another.

To start on an incongruous note, I was struck by the fact that in an event aiming to highlight native languages the opening addresses leaned on English with forays into Urdu when emotions welled over. This recalled Khaled Ahmed’s claim that English is the language of reason and Urdu of emotion. I don’t subscribe to this hypothesis but I confess that I did have a twinge of doubt. I felt the addresses could easily have been entirely in Urdu, which is decidedly more native than English and also because there was no one in the audience unfamiliar with it.

I do know there are many who speak Urdu well but are unable to communicate abstract or academic ideas in it – although I don’t believe that was at all the case with those who delivered the opening addresses. As dean of humanities and social sciences at LUMS, I urged faculty members to speak on their subjects in Urdu to college students in smaller cities and was often told they lacked the vocabulary to do so. One teacher of economics said there was no equivalent in Urdu of ‘rationality,’ a fundamental concept in the subject. This is something that requires conscious deliberation and effort if we wish to include the majority of our public in discussions at the frontiers of knowledge.

The flip side of this is even more problematic. I have in mind all the development workshops and conferences where one or two representatives of donor organizations are in attendance for whose benefit the entire proceedings are conducted in English. At one stroke, all the beneficiaries for whom development is ostensibly being planned are excluded from the deliberations.

The first part of the event, highlighting the importance of native languages for the creative process, made the case well but also threw up a conundrum. Three of the four presentations were related to the visual arts; they were all of exceptional quality and the artists were able to argue convincingly that conceiving and executing them in their respective native languages had added to the appeal and effectiveness of the outputs.

The fourth presentation was an oral reflection in Punjabi which was excellent in its own right, but whose nuances were lost on those who were not fully familiar with the language. This highlighted the dilemma of native languages – how does one communicate their aesthetic pleasure to those who are unfamiliar with them? As one participant observed later, if he were to communicate in his native tongue no one in the entire audience except his collaborator would follow the argument. The author of the oral reflection was conscious of this dilemma and went to some length to argue why, although he had an English version of the text, he wanted to communicate in his own language, even at the cost of losing a part of the audience. After listening to the reading, one could empathise with his feelings.

In the face of such barriers, the second-best recourse is to have a vigorous programme of translation from native languages into a cognate language like Urdu that shares their sensibilities much more than English and is also accessible to a wider audience.

Watching the visual presentations, which were mostly by alumni of the National College of Arts (NCA), I was prompted once again by an observation I have harboured for some time – that of all the academic institutions in Pakistan, NCA has been the one that has produced by far the most graduates that have achieved international recognition in recent years.

This could be because of the diversity of its student body admitted on the basis of portfolios of recognizable talent and a highly qualified faculty. But could it also be because the visual arts are much less dependent on alien languages for their pedagogy unlike most other domains in Pakistan where English is dominant? Is it this environment, where almost the entire discourse can be in native, near-native or universal languages, that provides the critical difference in the flowering of talent? If so, this would constitute a very strong affirmation for pedagogy in native languages.

An argument made in subsequent discussion that stressed the relationship of the native language to the creative process needs to be teased out a little. Without denying the existence of the relationship, it should not be misconstrued to imply that artists cannot be creative in languages other than their own. Rather, the more subtle point being made was that the absence of a deep foundation in a native language could inhibit the creative process.

This seems to be quite obvious in the case of the vast majority of those in Pakistan who receive their early education in English and are creative neither in it nor in their own language because they have been severed from the intellectual and aesthetic nourishment that emanates from the latter. The counterexamples are poets like Faiz and Faraz whose early education was in native languages but whose creativity blossomed in Urdu.

To be continued

The writer is a former dean of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at LUMS.