

# Understanding 6,800 languages

BY THE YEAR 2006, IT IS expected, it will be possible to use software on a floppy disk to translate text from 6,800 languages spoken in 192 countries of the world into 10 major languages including English, Chinese, French, German, Arabic and Spanish.

There was a time, not very long ago, when sun did not set on the British empire. If darkness of the night covered half the British colonies, the sun shone on the other half. The Union Jack, therefore, flew all the time. The British colonies included America, the one and only super-power today, that got its independence in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.

It is hard to say whether it is nature's revenge or reward for the genocide of America's Red Indians and the Australian aborigines and destruction of their cultures and civilisations associated with 150 languages that 150 languages are now spoken in England's capital, London. The city has thus become home to peoples speaking the largest number of languages.

Three million of London's eight million citizens, according to a report, have a mother tongue other than English. The three million citizens have come to seek employment in London from the countries where the Union Jack once flew. The three million people speak more than 150 languages. People from South Asia or the Indo-Pak subcontinent alone speak more than 60 languages including Assamese, Bengali, Gujarati, Tamil, Kashmiri, Hindi, Malayalam, Marathi, Punjabi, Telugu and Urdu.

It was only after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks that the fact of 150 languages being spoken in London came to light. When America and Britain started a joint campaign against global terrorism, the appre-

## VIEW



### MUNNOO BHAI

*A survey of people of foreign origin taken after 9/11 revealed that three million people in London alone spoke more than 150 languages*

hensions of reprisals from the terrorists necessitated improved security. Among other things, this required taking a census of the workers of foreign origin in London and knowing the languages they spoke. A survey revealed then that three million people in London alone spoke more than 150 languages. The survey also revealed the presence of a large number of foreigners who had illegally entered the country most of whom were forcibly deported. The metropolitan police also started an emergency service — phone number 999 — that provides interpreters for those who do not understand English.

Most of those 'benefiting' from the interpreter facility during the first three months spoke Portuguese, Turkish, Spanish and Somali. Tamil, Bengali, Arabic, Italian and Polish speakers came next.

Social scientists in Britain believe that a close liaison is vital for London's residents because a close liaison alone can provide protection in times of emergency. It is necessary therefore to have the ability to quickly translate into English all languages spoken here so that people can understand each other. Tim Connel, director of the London city university's linguistics department, believes that the number of languages spoken in London exceeds 150. The information technology revolution has made it possible to write translation software for nearly 100 languages. Writing such software for all 150 or so languages, however, would require two years. By the year 2006, it may be possible to translate all 6,800 languages spoken in 192 countries of the world into 10 major languages. The software, available on floppy disks, will make such translation a matter of minutes.

Munnoo Bhai is a writer and columnist

## Uncalled for rumpus

students' lives. Though the argument makes good civic sense, it is regrettable that the government should have acted unilaterally in the matter and without taking the university authorities into confidence.

Thursday's unfortunate incidents have demonstrated that students and teachers have made their point and registered their protest over the government's act of omission. The university buildings on both sides of the canal are still connected through the three overhead bridges, which give students a safe passage across the canal without hampering traffic movement. The completion of two additional underpasses the government plans to construct will ease matters even further. The academic community should not turn the matter into one of prestige or pride. Any further attempts at damaging public or private property or to block traffic on the main arterial roads linking the city with the motorway and the national highway will be hard to justify.

THE demolition in Lahore of pedestrian bridges over the canal linking the Punjab University New Campus with students' hostels has caused quite a stir in academic circles. The authorities, under orders from the Punjab government, pulled down eight such bridges on Wednesday night, leading to a riot-like situation the next day. Angry students blocked the road and pelted the police with stones while the latter resorted to teargassing and arresting rioters for disturbing the peace. The university teachers' association has condemned the move and called for a strike today. For its part, the Punjab government has said that three overhead bridges already exist linking the university buildings spread across the canal and plans are underway to construct two additional underpasses. The pedestrian bridges at the road level had to be dismantled because pedestrian movement across the two roads on either side of the canal hindered the flow of traffic, besides endangering