

THE USE OF THE MOTHER TONGUE IN PRIMARY EDUCATION: THE NEPALESE CONTEXT

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It is through his mother tongue that every human being first learns to formulate and express his ideas about himself and about the world in which he lives.

UNESCO, 1953

Background

It has now become a commonplace of contemporary thinking that language is a highly emotionally charged issue, an aid and a barrier to national development, an advantage and a disadvantage to an individual, a centripetal force that may unite a nation, and also a centrifugal force that may drive a society apart and ultimately divide a nation.

In Nepal, language is possibly the most important area where there are race/ethnic/caste differences. This has been the centre of much political controversy lately - so much so that a group of 77 members of Parliament submitted a memorandum to the Minister of Education for making Sanskrit "compulsory" from grade 1 through 10 in public schools, and recently, as a retort as it were, a group of 90 members of Parliament submitted a signed petition to His Majesty's Government against this political manoeuvre. It is anybody's guess what course the remaining members of Parliament might take.

As early as 1951, at a Unesco meeting of specialists in Paris, it was recommended that every effort should be made to provide primary education in the mother tongue for the simple reason that it is culturally, psychologically, and pedagogically more appropriate to do so. The Unesco report concludes:

... pupils should begin their schooling through the medium of the mother tongue, because they understand it best and because to begin their school life in the mother tongue will make the break between home and school as small as possible.

(UNESCO 1953/1968:691)

In 1990 at a World Conference on Education for All, held in Jomtien, Thailand, some 1500 participants from 155 nations recognized that

... traditional knowledge and indigenous cultural heritage have a value and validity in their own right and a capacity to both define and promote development.

(WDEFA, 1990:2)

The delegates proclaimed a World Declaration on Education for All, which declared categorically that

Literacy in the mother tongue strengthens cultural identity and heritage.

(WDEFA, 1990:6)

The Constitution of Nepal 2047/1990 guarantees the fundamental right of the individual to receive primary education in his/her mother tongue:

प्रत्येक समुदायले बालबालिकाहरूलाई प्राथमिक तहसम्म आफ्नो मातृभाषामा शिक्षा दिने गरी विद्यालय सञ्चालन गर्न पाउनेछ।

3:18:2

The Constitution also guarantees the fundamental right to preserve and foster the growth of language, script and culture of a speech community in Nepal:

नेपाल अधिराज्यमा बसोबास गर्ने प्रत्येक समुदायलाई आफ्नो भाषा, लिपि र संस्कृतिको संरक्षण र सम्बर्द्धन गर्ने अधिकार हुनेछ।

3:18:1

The National Education Commission Report 1992 recognizes the need for a clearcut policy and planning to impart primary education through the medium of the mother tongue:

नेपालका विभिन्न क्षेत्रमा छरिएर रहेको विभिन्न राष्ट्रिय भाषाहरू बोल्ने परिवारका बालबालिकाहरूलाई उनका भाषामा प्राथमिक शिक्षाको व्यवस्था गर्न स्पष्ट नीति र योजनाको आवश्यकता छ।

(NECR, 1992:6)

The Commission recommends that:

नेपाली मातृभाषा नभएका नेपालका अन्य राष्ट्रिय भाषाभाषी क्षेत्रका विद्यालयमा शिक्षाको माध्यमको रूपमा राष्ट्रिय भाषाहरूको प्रयोग गर्न सकिनेछ।

(NECR, 1992:29)

Against this background, the present paper will discuss the use of the mother tongue as a medium of instruction in primary education in Nepal.

Three Reasons and Two Objections

Three Reasons

The above brief overview presented a global as well as a national concern for the use of the mother tongue in primary education. In this section, the discussion focuses on three specific reasons for which the mother tongue should be used as a medium of instruction at the primary education level in Nepal.

First is the phenomenon of heavy wastage in primary education in Nepal. A recent study has shown that: (a) wastage in primary education in terms of repetition and drop out is more than 50 per cent in grade one, (b) the repetition rate is highest in the first grade, (c) only 35 per cent of the primary pupils successfully complete the five-year cycle, and (d) one primary school graduate takes 12.51 pupil years to complete the primary education cycle (CERID: 1990). The non-use of the mother tongue of the non-Nepali-speaking pupil as a medium of instruction is known to be one of the conclusive contributing factors to the high rate of attrition in primary education in Nepal. The study concludes that:

The language spoken by the child has also much to do with his retention at school. Because Nepali is used as the medium of instruction, a non-Nepali-speaking child cannot easily cope with the classroom instruction and so he stands to a greater chance of dropping out of school.

(CERID, 1990:36)

The second reason has to do with the issue of participation (or, nonparticipation) of a pupil in the primary education program in Nepal. The government of Nepal may set its policy priorities at the primary education level to consist of such lofty goals as universalizing primary education, providing education for all, and improving the quality of classroom instruction; nevertheless, a close look at the prevailing situation reveals that

much remains to be done in realising these goals. An influential study (CERID, 1984) demonstrated that of the variables adversely affecting the educational participation of rural children, the non-use of the mother tongue of a non-Nepali-speaking pupil assumes a significant role. A major finding of the study is that:

The probability of a child participating in education was, other things being equal, higher if the language he speaks at home is Nepali.

(CERID, 1984:iii)

The study concludes that:

... the probability of participation in education for a child who spoke Nepali at home was higher by .124 than for a child who spoke another language at home. The reasons for this strong association between Nepali-speaking children and educational participation are obvious. Nepali-speaking children would feel comfortable in the classroom and enjoy school life whereas it might be a threatening experience for non-Nepali-speaking children.

(CERID, 1984:94)

A concrete example of the serious problem faced by Tharu primary school children in understanding Nepali in Sunsari, Chitawan, Dang and Kailali (incidentally, Tharus are perceived to be an acknowledged educationally disadvantaged community) was reported by CERID in 1988. The study concluded that:

... the greatest problem faced by the children in their school is the problem of communication. Nepali as the medium of instruction obstructs learning. They hardly understand anything taught in Nepali. They cannot express themselves adequately in it. The compulsion of learning through Nepali retards their educational growth.

(CERID, 1988:22)

The third reason relates itself to the findings of Basil Bernstein, a British sociologist interested in the role of language in socialization, i.e., how a child acquires a specific cultural identity and responds to that identity. Bernstein claims that there are two quite distinct varieties of language in use in society. In its simplest form, Bernstein's argument is that while the middle class has access to both an "elaborated" and a "restricted" code, the working class is generally confined to a "restricted" code of language (Bernstein 1971). Bernstein's claim, in my opinion, has grave implications for the problem of the educability of non-Nepali-speaking children in Nepal who end up being basically confined to the "restricted" code of the language of school

instruction. In particular, children from non-Nepali-speaking communities are likely to find themselves at a disadvantage when they attend a primary school for two reasons: one, there is a hiatus between the symbolic orders of the school and those of their family; second, the school curriculum and textbooks make extensive use of the elaborated code of the language of instruction. One may go as far as to say that our schools are simply not made for these children. Bernstein's observations on the disadvantageous situation experienced by a working class child in England may be applicable almost wholesale to the non-Nepali-speaking child in Nepal:

To ask the child to switch to an elaborated code which presupposes different role relationships and systems of meaning without a sensitive understanding of the required contexts must create for the child a bewildering and potentially damaging experience.

(Bernstein, 1972)

Extending the argument a bit further and bringing in an element of controversy, I would like to submit that a great majority of non-Nepali-speaking users/consumers of Nepali control but only a "restricted" code of the Nepali language. This linguistic deprivation continually conspires to be a major deficit to the non-Nepali-speaking individual, who may meet unequal chances for advancement and upward mobility in social, educational, political, economic, as well as administrative realms of life in Nepal.

Two Objections

It is quite common to come across a number of objections that are advanced against the use of the mother tongue; only two will be discussed here.

One common objection to the use of the mother tongue assumes the form of a threat perception to national unity. In other words, a common plea from political zealots is that the use of non-Nepali languages is potentially divisive and therefore unsuited to national interests. Little do the zealots realise that they merely speak the language of politics, i.e., they use words that succeed and policies that fail. The Constitution of Nepal 2047/1990 dispels the mist of doubt lingering in the minds of zealots in unequivocal terms:

विभिन्न धर्म, जात, जाति, सम्प्रदाय र भाषामाषीहरूका बीच स्वस्थ एवं सुमधुर सामाजिक सम्बन्ध विकसित गरी सबैको भाषा, साहित्य, लिपि, कला र संस्कृतिको विकासद्वारा देशको सांस्कृतिक विविधता कायमै राखी राष्ट्रिय एकतालाई सुदृढ गर्ने नीति राज्यले अवलम्बन गर्नेछ।

The second objection to the use of the mother tongue as a medium of instruction assumes the form of the following argument: the nation is "just not ready" for it - in view of the lack of textbooks and reading materials written in the medium of the bewildering mass of languages spoken in Nepal.

Two immediate reactions spring to my mind. First, the argument is reminiscent of the Panchayat regime when it was blurted out that the people of Nepal were just not ready for democracy. Time has shown to the contrary. Secondly, about 40 years ago, when I was still in the middle school, textbooks and reading materials in Nepali were virtually nonexistent. Suddenly, a set of glossy textbooks written in Nepali and printed in Darjeeling appeared on the scene. Today we are ready to impart education through the medium of Nepali; 40 years ago we were not. By the same token, given the political commitment and the concomitant financial support coupled with linguistic research, we believe that we might very soon be ready with the textbooks and reading materials in a number of languages of Nepal. It is surely utopian to hope that Nepal can endow every speech community with a complete vernacular school system and a complete library full of vernacular textbooks and reading materials, but a start will have been made after all. And this we believe is significant.

The Number Game

How many languages are spoken in Nepal? No definitive answer to this question can be given at the present state of research.

The Census Report of 1952/54 lists 36 languages as being spoken in Nepal. The Census Report of 1961 lists 36 languages, and the rest are relegated to "Others" and "Unspecified Languages". The Census Report of 1971 lists 17 languages, and the rest are subsumed under such vague categories as "Local District Languages" and "Other Languages", while the Census Report of 1981 lists only 18 languages as being spoken in Nepal.

The latest Census Report, published in June 1992 as *Population Census-1991 (Advanced Tables)* lists 32 languages spoken as mother tongues in Nepal. These are: 1. Abadhi, 2. Bengali, 3. Bhojpuri, 4. Byashi, 5. Chepang, 6. Danuwar, 7. Darai, 8. Dhimal, 9. English, 10. Ghanghar, 11. Gurung, 12. Hindi, 13. Jirel, 14. Kumhale, 15. Limbu, 16. Magar, 17. Maghi, 18. Maithili, 19. Marwadi, 20. Nepali, 21. Newari, 22. Rai/Kirati, 23. Rajbanshi, 24. Raji, 25. Santhal, 26. Satar, 27. Sherpa, 28. Tamang, 29. Thakali, 30. Thami, 31. Tharu, and 32. Urdu.

Of these, 12 languages are spoken by above 1% of the population of Nepal, as shown below:

| | |
|---------------|--------|
| 1. Nepali | 53.21% |
| 2. Maithili | 11.83% |
| 3. Bhojpuri | 6.60% |
| 4. Tharu | 4.85% |
| 5. Tamang | 4.66% |
| 6. Newari | 3.44% |
| 7. Magar | 2.24% |
| 8. Rai/Kirati | 1.94% |
| 9. Abadhi | 1.72% |
| 10. Limbu | 1.30% |
| 11. Gurung | 1.14% |
| 12. Urdu | 1.03% |

Most linguists of Nepal are convinced that the linguistic demographic data reported by the Central Bureau of Statistics are both inaccurate and indefensible. In the mid 1970's, the SIL linguists had estimated that 40 "mutually unintelligible" languages existed in Nepal. Currently, in the light of the Linguistic Survey of Nepal carried out by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (German Research Council), it is estimated that about 70 languages belonging to four language families are spoken in Nepal.

Textbooks and Reading Materials

The main obstacle to the use of the mother tongues in primary education is the lack of textbooks and educational materials in these languages. What should be done to overcome the situation?

Linguists may tend to view the multiplicity of languages as a positive and potent resource to be harnessed to aid the development of a nation; nevertheless, the existence of a complex and heterogeneous linguistic situation is not always an entirely unmixed blessing for a newly developed democracy like Nepal. There is thus an urgent need to begin to plan the use of the mother tongue as a medium of instruction in a systematic and phase-wise manner.

Circumstances no doubt disallow us from beginning to impart primary education in 70 languages at once. A need therefore arises to decide and determine the number of languages to be selected for the purpose on a principled basis. Two criteria are generally used for the purpose of selection: (i) the linguistic demography, i.e., the number and percentage of speakers of the language, and (ii) the literary status of the language, i.e., the orthography, availability of printed texts, grammar, dictionary, folk literature, other literatures, and so on.

Viewed strictly from the above criteria, Nepali, Maithili, Limbu and Newari may stand out as successful candidates for the purpose in the first phase. In the second phase, a few other Indo-Aryan languages such as Bhojpuri, Awadhi and Tharu (?) may also be chosen as probable candidates since efforts, however scanty, are underway to publish reading materials in these languages. A concerted effort is recently being made at the Royal Nepal Academy to develop a suitable Devanagari writing system for Limbu through a Limbu-Nepali dictionary project; this may facilitate and pave the way for developing an effective and uniform writing system for Tamang, Gurung, Magar, Rai, Sherpa and other hitherto unwritten Tibeto-Burman languages of Nepal. Only the other day the publication of a Rai journal written in the Devanagari script was announced.* It is anticipated therefore that at a later stage these languages may be considered as potential candidates for use in primary education.

What about the languages of those speech communities that are both small in size and socioeconomically disadvantaged? Languages like Kumhale (1150 speakers), Byashi (1450 speakers) Darai, (5030 speakers), Jirel (5220 speakers), Santhal (5870 speakers), Thakali (7470 speakers) and Dhimal (8870 speakers) especially come to mind. The Constitution of Nepal 2047/1990 guarantees the right to linguistic self-determination to all speech communities of Nepal. A policy decision therefore needs to be made to enrich these languages to enable them to cope with educational needs of the respective communities.

The crucial question thus is: how can a language be enriched in order for it to lend itself readily to the exigencies of the modern world? In other words, what does 'language development' entail?

Language planners have determined that language development involves three principal stages: codification, standardization, and elaboration. A brief presentation of the three stages of development in the context of the languages of Nepal is given below.

Codification

In the case of hitherto unwritten languages like Tamang, Gurung, Rai, Sherpa, Darai, Dhimal and a host of others, there is need to select a code, i.e., to create or to use a modified form of an existing writing system. This calls for extensive linguistic research into the morphological, phonological and syntactic structures of these languages. A few hitherto written languages

* Following immediately in its footsteps, a periodical journal of Limbu literature and culture entitled *Yakthung Sapsok Nu Sakthim* and written in the Sirijunga script has been published in Kathmandu in September 1992.

have eschewed the use of traditional scripts and espoused instead a more widely used script for practical reasons. Examples are languages like Limbu, Newari and Maithili, which now use Devanagari. Until recently, however, Maithili had a separate writing system - Mithilaksar - which is historically akin to the Bengali and Oriya scripts. Newari also had its own scripts; "no fewer than nine" different types of Newari writing systems, all deriving from Devanagari, have been enumerated. Limbu too had a well-known script, the Sirijunga script.

The adoption of Devanagari may not be wholly without problems. Examples from Limbu and Maithili are cited here for illustration. In an attempt to reduce Limbu to writing through the Devanagari script, it was found that Devanagari lacked graphemes for such Limbu phonemes as the glottal stop, the low vowels [ɛ] and [ɔ], and for a series of phonemic length contrasts at various vowel heights. Recourse had to be made to interpolating the Devanagari graphemes with a number of diacritical marks to serve the purpose. In the case of Maithili, a number of inconsistencies remain. For example, not all vowel characters in Devanagari correspond uniquely to the sounds they represent in Maithili. Thus, no unique symbols exist for the vowels [æ] and [ɔ]. [æ] is represented by such vowel combinations as ae, ai, aya while [ɔ] is represented by au or ao, e.g.,

| | | | |
|-----|-------|-----------------------|-----------|
| [æ] | [bhæ] | bhae bhai bhaya | 'brother' |
|-----|-------|-----------------------|-----------|

Occasionally, [æ] is also represented by ae, e. g.,

| | | | |
|-----|----------|--------------------|------------|
| | [kæ] | kael | 'did' |
| [ɔ] | [pɔlɔhu] | paolahu paulahu | 'got (2H)' |

One striking peculiarity of the Maithili writing system deserves special mention here. The fully inflected verb forms containing person and honorificity agreement affixes are written variously; thus, [kɔhlɔinh] 'He (H) said to me' is written as *kahalanhi*, *kahalainhi*, or *kahalainh*. Similarly, [bajɔith] 'He (H) may speak' is written as *bajathi* or *bajaiithi* or *bajaiith*.

Standardization

Once a language is codified in some way, it becomes possible for it to be standardized. Standardization is "the process of one variety of language becoming widely accepted throughout the speech community as a supradialectal norm - the "best" form of the language - rated above regional

and social dialects.....” (Ferguson 1968:31). This usually involves the development of such things as reference grammars, dictionaries, and possibly a literature.

A standardized variety can also be used to give prestige to speakers who use it, marking off those who do not, i. e. those who continue to speak a non-standard variety. It can therefore serve as a norm for linguistic behavior of a speech community.

Most languages of Nepal are obviously not so standardized. Nepali is itself still in the process of being standardized. Nepali may boast of an extensive literature but no standard reference grammar of Nepali written on modern linguistic principles is yet available. Besides, the orthography of Nepali is in need of reform and standardization. Some of the main problems of Nepali orthography may be summarized as follows:

- (i) Whether to continue to retain both short and long i and u;
- (ii) Whether to use $\underset{\cdot}{s}$ consistently for \acute{s} and \grave{s} ;
- (iii) Whether to use $\underset{\cdot}{_}$ or $\underset{\cdot}{_}$ to make vowel nasalization; and
- (iv) Whether to retain separate graphemes for palatal and retroflex (and even velar) nasal consonants.

It should be noted that most of the above questions attain salience in view of phonological studies of Nepali which demonstrate conclusively that such distinctions are not phonemic. The issue of the existence of a multitude of spellings is further complicated by the pundits' extensive knowledge of Sanskrit, which makes them want to stay as close as possible to those spellings, and at times to adopt etymological spellings.

That attitudes of the speakers of a speech community are all important is demonstrated in the case of Maithili. It is a common practice to speak of the Madhubani dialect in north India as the 'standard' dialect of Maithili. The reasons, however, are more extralinguistic than linguistic. Such extralinguistic factors as caste, social status, elite formation, and the Brahman's and Kayastha's inner sense of superiority and pride in their form of speech are chiefly responsible for the label. Furthermore, the so-called 'standard' dialect of Maithili renders itself both uninteresting and unilluminating for serious linguistic research for the simple reason that it is in essence a direct phonetic characterization of Devanagari orthographic symbols as they appear in concatenation to form written words in Maithili.

Elaboration

The third stage of language development is elaboration. A language needs to undergo the process of elaboration in order to possess adequate vocabulary to

meet educational and scientific needs of the modern day society. The process of elaboration may be thought of as expanding the vocabulary of a language by a variety of means, such as lexical borrowing, or the borrowing of whole words; loan translations or calquing; coinage; giving new meanings to existing words; compounding new words; and so on.

To cite an example, Nepali, the national language of Nepal, tends to employ the following measures to expand its vocabulary:

- (i) Sanskritization: Sanskritization seems to be the most common principle behind the expansion of Nepali vocabulary. Conscious efforts are continually made to replace English 'high' vocabulary into the language. *Vimānasthala* for 'airport' and *mahānyāyādhivaktā* for 'Attorney General' are examples.
- (ii) Anglicization: The impact of English is so strong that in most cases a wholesale transliteration of the English word is retained, i. e., as far as the Nepali spelling system allows. *ḍīna* for 'dean' and *kyāmpasa* for 'campus' are examples.
- (iii) Borrowing from other sources: Yet another tendency is to attempt to enrich the vocabulary of Nepali by borrowing words of local color from various regional dialects of Nepali and from other neighboring languages of Nepal.
- (iv) A few ridiculous coinages in the form of direct translation of loan words, e. g., हदुईशून्य for 'H₂O', are not hard to come by in the literature. Nevertheless, these words have soon fallen out of use.

Elaboration is a slow and arduous process for language development. Development of scientific and technical vocabulary in particular is exceedingly time-consuming. Even at the present advanced stage of language development of Nepali, for example, it may be infelicitous to carry prolonged discourse on metaphysics and nuclear physics. The less said the better about languages like Dhimal and Kumhale.

To sum up thus far, the production of textbooks and everyday reading materials that might appeal to the young, e. g., comic books, mystery stories, and collections of folk tales in a language, presupposes that the language in question is suitably codified, sufficiently standardized, and well-equipped with adequate vocabulary. The moral of the lesson is that at this time barring a few most languages of Nepal will be hard put if asked to carry the responsibility of serving as the medium of instruction. To help ameliorate the situation, we propose that a Central Institute of Languages of Nepal (in the fashion of the CIIL, Mysore, India) be established: this Institute will promote linguistic research in the languages of Nepal, appoint

committees for scientific and technical vocabulary development, and prepare pedagogical and educational materials in the medium of the languages of Nepal.

Finally, textbook writing is a difficult job, which requires professional skill and acumen. Textbook writing also entails a thorough linguistic research in the area of vocabulary frequency count. Without such research it may be difficult to specifically determine the content of the teaching material, and the well-known principles of selection, gradation and presentation may not be adhered to. Exactly how important the study of word frequency might turn out to be is evident from a gleaning at lesson 1 (p. 7) and Exercise 2 (p. 33) of the Grade 1 Nepali textbook which, we are told, is prepared after three years of extensive consultation with hundreds of teachers, parents, headmasters, and educationists. The first lesson of the Nepali textbook, used throughout the country by non-Nepali-speaking children, contains such infrequently used lexical items as अगुल्टो and उछिट्याउँ. Exercise 2 (p. 33) of the said textbook uses such lexical items as कत्र (whatever it may mean!), पत्र (a *tatsama* word!) and सत्र (since when did number 17 become a lucky number in Nepal?). As a matter of fact, the very first lexical item in Exercise 1 (p. 33) is कर : are we to assume that कर is the most frequently used word in the Nepali language?

Summing Up

By way of summing up, a word of suggestion to the policy makers. No matter how strange and linguistically schizophrenic it may seem to a monolingual, it is uniquely the case that a Nepali from a certain *terai* locality makes love in Maithili, discusses politics and resents discrimination in Hindi, makes an application for a job in Nepali and does research on laser beam in English. Equally interesting is the fact that our political leaders discuss bills in the Parliament in Nepali and ban the use of other national languages of Nepal in the Parliament, address a mass gathering in Janakpur or Sarlahi in Hindi, and address a NAM Summit in English which is broadcast on Nepal Television in Nepali. The government of Nepal in order to ensure equity should weigh these facts in perfect balance before it determines a language policy on education.

I started this paper with a quotation from a Unesco report; I might as well conclude it with a quotation from a World Bank policy paper on primary education:

Determining a sound language policy will necessarily be heavily influenced by the unique economic, cultural, political, and linguistic factors in each country. However, the balance of available evidence indicates that, under the circumstances in many developing countries, it is most effective to begin with the home language as the medium of instruction and later to switch to the necessary second language.

(World Bank, 1990; 38)

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