

musings

The Dialectic Between First Language and Mother Tongue, Language Acquisition and Language Transmission

by Rebecca Haque

LET me commence with an excerpt from Sujata Bhatt's potent poem from her acclaimed *Brunizem* collection. It will serve to clarify my position, explain my title, illustrate some ideas about language acquisition and language transmission, and most significantly, highlight the ever-present dialectic — sometimes fluid, sometimes tense — that exists between a person's first language and the mother tongue. How shall I define the first language? It is, I guess, the language in which one is most comfortable and can express oneself with authority, clarity, and complete ease and facility. Express, moreover, one's desires and beliefs with total veracity. Dextrous handling of vocabulary and tasteful awareness of a word's every nuance is also a mandatory rule of the first language.

My first language is English. It is a matter of a politically conscious personal choice. Today, English is my first language because over the years my command of this language has surpassed my command over my mother tongue, Bangla. My acquisition of words from the lexicon of Bangla has lagged behind my natural flair for absorbing and enlarging my English word figure. But I love my mother tongue too, and everyday I try to replicate verbally the best of its discourse so that I am gradually beginning to have a quite sophisticated Bengali ability to discourse in it as well as I do in English. I speak a form

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Here, then, is Sujata Bhatt's poem:

Search for My Tongue

You ask me what I mean
by saying I have lost my tongue.
I ask you, what would you do
if you had two tongues in your mouth,
and lost the first one, the mother tongue,
and could not really know the other,
the foreign tongue.
You could not use them both together,
even if you thought that way.
And if you lived in a place you had to
speak a foreign tongue,
your mother tongue would rot,
rot and die in your mouth
until you had to spit it out.
I thought I spit it out

but overnight while I dream,
it grows back, a stump of a shoot
grows longer, grows moist, grows
strong veins,
it ties the other tongue in knots,
the bud opens, the bud opens in my mouth.
it pushes the other tongue aside.
Everytime I think I've forgotten,
I think I've lost the mother tongue,
it blossoms out of my mouth.

Of course, with this poem we cross the border into Post-Colonial discourse. So much of the Post-Colonial angst in Upamanyu Chatterjee's *English, August: An Indian Story* revolves around the protagonist's complicated relationship with language, starting with his Darjeeling English-medium schooling to his relaxing interludes with *Pather-panchali* and Marcus Aurelius. And what is this Post-Colonial angst that I

talk about? Again, Sujata Bhatt sums it up best in another poem from her *Brunizem* collection:

A Different History

Which language
has not been the oppressor's tongue?
Which language
truly meant to murder someone?
And how does it happen
that after the torture,
after the soul has been cropped
with a long scythe swooping out
of the conqueror's face —
the unborn grandchildren
grow to love that strange language.

I affirm that my English is not your Indian English. It is English English, as flawless and superb as your Queen's English. I speak it with sophistication, poise and panache. What is Indian En-

glish? While I find the term denigrating and condescending, I admit that nevertheless, it exists. I confess that I have not had the opportunity of looking into Sara Suleri's *Rhetoric of English India* because of a failure in locating the text despite my best efforts to do so, and am therefore ignorant as to whether she has explored the intricacies of the syntactical structure of Indian English. But I have heard the absurd, hilarious, jingling-jangling tones of female Anglo-Indians in Karachi punctuate every other statement with a beloved interrogative: "Are you coming, darling, no?" "It is a beautiful day, no?" and I have heard a male voice wax eloquent in Calcutta breathlessly in the endless present continuous: "Here I am running, running, shouting at the tonga-wallah."

So, I ask again, what is Indian English? Obviously, it is not a matter of

accent alone. It is not pidgin — it is better than pidgin, and it is certainly not "babu" English. Frankly, in my opinion, it is an illegitimate offspring which lends itself readily to parodic imitations in everyday conversation, in cable TV serials and commercials, and in Hollywood character types. It is species of the genus which, in my opinion, needs to be throttled and suppressed rather than disseminated and transmitted over the airwaves.

Where do I stand today? Let me, finally, illustrate my position with a poem once again, this time from Nissim Ezekiel's "Background, Casually" from Kaiser Haq's book, *Contemporary Indian Poetry*:

The Indian landscape sears my eyes,
I have become part of it
To be observed by foreigners.
They say that I am singular,
Their letters overstate the case.

I have made my commitments now.
This is one: to stay where I am.
As others choose to give themselves
In some remote and backward place
My backward place is where I am.

And in this "backward" place, as I serenely choose to discourse politely in Bangla, I rant and rave and rationalise and adumbrate and fraternise and synthesize in English. I even dream in English.

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essay

Role Playing Dilemma: The Legacy of Muslims in America

by Jamal Hasan

DANIEL Pipes is known to be a notable scholar of Islam. He is also a renowned expert of Middle Eastern Studies. Recently, Dr. Pipes had written an interesting syndicated article. I read it in the Baltimore Sun. The headline of this mind-boggling write-up is "It matters what kind of Islam prevails in U.S." As the title indicates, the essay covers the political mindset of the American Muslims. The author distinguished two basic trends in American Muslim psyche. He termed the adherents into two categories as integrationists and the other chauvinists. Dr. Pipes has written a fundamental predicament of the integrationists as they "accept that the United States will never become a Muslim country and are reconciled to living within a non-Islamic framework; they call for Muslims to become useful and influential participants in public life." The aforementioned integrationists are not far cry from the secular forces in many Muslim majority countries. Like integrationists, secularists do not want to make the religious issue as the omnipresent dogma in everyday life. But like the chauvinists in USA, the secularists have religionists, a viable force to reckon with.

It is noteworthy that typical chauvinists have very much similar views as

There is also epoch making discussion among Muslim religious scholars in USA on core theological issue like reinterpretation of Sha'ria laws. All these are a good sign indeed! In a developing parochial society often times the orthodox cleric has the final say in many of the state affairs. It is also quite customary to observe that sermons in mosques become the final philosophical guidance of a practicing Muslim. In USA where the religious establishments do not have the iron grip on societal matters, a Mullah does not necessarily have such sociopolitical control of Muslim community.

those of the Islamic fundamentalists. A supremacist and absolutist religio-political mantra give them the constant inspiration of turning the whole world under the domain of Islamic Umma. Many of them dream that someday USA will become an Islamic country. It hardly matters if a violent overthrow of the existing government is needed in the process. Their literatures give the analytical reasoning. The logical strength comes from some historical realities. Primarily as a new religion, Islam is the most modern and many social dictums of the religion gives a disciplined lifestyle. Secondly, in countries from Iran to Indonesia, Islam came as a religion with distinctively progressive traits and it flourished luxuriantly throughout the region. The main thesis is because of the underlying weaknesses of the existing indigenous religions Islam could become the ultimate choice of mankind.

America, being predominantly a Judeo-Christian society, has no problem in embracing another community of monolithic belief system. But a separatist or supremacist ideology should not bring disharmony and chaotic situation in certain segments of this mostly tranquil society. Imbued with zealotry, some newly converts in USA have unique interpretation of Islam. A case in point is the so-called Afro-American Islam, which has become another offshoot in Muslim society. So there are different mosques of Nation of Islam. It may be relevant to cite that the patriotism and religion came in collision course in the early 1960s when celebrated heavy weight boxer Mohammad Ali refused to join the Vietnam War because, according to him, his "Islamic teaching" refrained him from going to a killing field. In another incidence Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf, a 27 year old convert to Islam playing in the Na-

tional Basketball Association, decided to sit through as the American national anthem was being played before each game. His argument was, as a Muslim he could not pay respect to a symbol of tyranny and oppression.

In a puritanical Islamic country like Saudi Arabia, there is the ultimate example of separatist and supremacist ideology. A non Muslim lacks fundamental rights there. In highways, some signs clearly show which ways a non-Muslim is barred from driving. Similarly, no religious shrines other than Islamic are allowed in the territory. And of course, a person who is not a Muslim will hardly ever be allowed to visit the city of Mecca. In the similar vein, Muslim Americans would have a rough time leading a life of less than a civilized human being if an orthodox Christian U.S.A. would follow a similar path.

As a fastest growing religion, Islam

has established a strong foothold in this country of the North American continent. Also, as part of a tolerant and democratic society, American Muslims are enjoying the fortitude of religious freedom. Already legislators in some U.S. cities had made Islamic Sabbath day as religious holiday. There is also a resurgence of debate among Muslims on certain important basic issues like the moon sighting during Eid-ul-Fitr and duration of fasting. The immigrant Muslim community has found that in most of the Nordic countries the sun hardly sets. There is also epoch making discussion among Muslim religious scholars in USA on core theological issue like reinterpretation of Sha'ria laws. All these are a good sign indeed! In a developing parochial society often times the orthodox cleric has the final say in many of the state affairs. It is also quite customary to observe that sermons in mosques become

the final philosophical guidance of a practicing Muslim. In USA where the religious establishments do not have the iron grip on societal matters, a Mullah does not necessarily have such sociopolitical control of Muslim community.

This is why a common American Muslim does not hesitate to challenge the legitimacy of baseless sermons. The new generation born in American Muslim family are experiencing a new reality that could be quite different from their forefathers' world vision. They are growing up in an open society that is speedily moving towards the constantly changing frontiers of new technology.

Like other religions, Islam ought to adjust to survive with this new reality. Any aspiring American Muslim will someday set foot on the moon. And definitely one day before the Eid-ul-Fitr he or she will have to get the final word on evanescent crescent moon sighting from NASA scientists stationed on the planet earth. As the new millennium knocks at the door, we are turning the whole world into a global village. As the century is passing, the appeal of the supremacist ideology is gradually fainting. We have no choice but to embrace the doctrine of 'Live and Let Live'. The earlier the chauvinists understand it, the better it would be for the humanity.

book

Induction of Sukhoi-30 : A Watershed in History of IAF

by Nirendra Dev

THE induction of the Sukhoi-30 fighter aircraft is a 'watershed' in the history of Indian Air Force (IAF) and it is capable of meeting the security challenges before the country, says a new book.

"The state-of-the-art SU-30 fighter aircraft was inducted on June 11, 1997 in the IAF signalling a watershed in the history of IAF and the beginning of a new and dynamic phase in our ongoing modernisation process."

"The air-to-air armament of SU-30 can match the best in the world in terms of lethality and pin-point accuracy," the book titled "Sentinels of the Sky — Glimpses of Indian Air Force".

The aircraft "fitted with canards and thrust vectoring variable jet nozzles would be a super agile, high performance, multi-propose fighter with excellent aerodynamic features."

"Twin cockpit manning with clearly defined roles would enhance the overall effectiveness of SU-30 MK1 in its operational role and would give it the desired punch and lethality when and where required," says the pictorial book designed and edited by squadron leader

Tracing IAF's growth since 1970s, the book says that in the ensuing decades while making history and creating legends, "air force settled down to consolidate and assimilate the lessons learnt which were mainly in the sphere of refinement then any substantive change.

R K Pal and published under the authorisation of air headquarters.

"An assessment of the threat scenario of the future indicates that greater challenges would have to be faced by IAF if we are to secure and safeguard our skies against potential adversaries," the book says.

The book suggests that it was 1964-65 conflict with Pakistan that had first brought country's defence preparedness into sharp focus.

"The 1964-65 conflict (with Pakistan) launching 'Operation Gibraltar' brought many issues concerning India's defence preparedness into sharp focus."

"This was particularly true of the Indian air force, which had faced a modern adversary in an all out open aerial conflict," the book says noting it was realised that operational preparedness

of the air and ground crews and other support personnel were paramount.

"During the period 1966-69, a number of Mig type-77s were imported from the USSR to re-equip squadrons still operating obsolete aircraft such as the vampire FB MK52."

Further in 1966 Sukhoi SU-7 bm entered IAF service.

"By 1968, IAF was nearing its authorised force level of 45 squadrons. Obsolete aircraft in frontline combat squadrons were steadily being replaced by Mig 21 FLs, SU-7 bms and HF-24s. By 1971, IAF had attained its 45-squadron goal. It was now fully prepared, both in body and in sinew, to meet the opponent in the next round."

The fact that IAF was well prepared since then has been vindicated when it successfully rose to the myriad chal-

lenges, tanks and demands in 1971 war again with Pakistan and in subsequent period, it notes.

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"IAF continued to mature and consolidate well into the seventies. While specialist professional institutions such as the college of air warfare, the tactical combat development and training school and aircraft and systems training establishment continued to develop, the service was simultaneously consolidating its force levels," it says.

Spearheading this leap into the future was the jaguar deep penetration strike air-craft (DPSA). The first batch of Anglo-French jaguar strike fighters were ferried into India in July 1979. They replaced the veteran English electric canberra and the hawker hunter, the book notes.

In 1982, the IAF inducted Mig 25 R trisonic reconnaissance aircraft into service. In the transport fleet, the vintage dakotas, packets and caribous which had become a familiar sight in the Himalayan valleys and in the hills of the northeast were finally replaced by Antonov AN-32 medium transport aircraft (Metac) in July 1984, it says.

In 1985-86, two squadrons were re-equipped with the new mirage-2000 delta wing fly-by-fire fighter.

Shortly afterwards the IAF acquired

the latest Soviet air superiority fighter, the Mig-29 'fulcrum'. IAF personnel were sent to Russia for conversion training in later 1986 and returned in early 1987 to take over the first of about 50 Mig-29s.

The past two decades have also seen the helicopter fleet of IAF greatly expand and mature, the book says.

From a few US types in the sixties, the fleet today operates more than 500 helicopters.

"Another vital aspect of the country's air defence which has been constantly modernised and upgraded since 1980s is the surface-to-air-missile (SAM) force.

The limitations faced by earlier SAM system particularly against fast, low flying enemy aircraft have been overcome with the induction of SA-3 pechora low level air defence SAM into the IAF's air defence network."

"Sentinels of the Sky — Glimpses of The Indian Air Force", designed and edited by squadron leader R K Pal, published by Ritana Books, New Delhi, pages-175, price Rs 2000.