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# 'I AM HUMAN'

MAHBUB PIAL

## How language reflects the way we think

Language represents locality, kinship, clan, lineage and other socio-cultural aspects of all human societies around the world. And in our case, we may even call it a decisive factor in the formation of our nation. The whole world now recognises 21<sup>st</sup> of February as the International Mother Language Day for promoting cultural diversity with paying tribute to those who fought or sacrificed their lives in the language movement of 1952. But are we showing proper respect to it and several other languages spoken by ethnic communities in this country?

Our regional dialects are victims of gross negligence which is indoctrinated in people's attitudes towards those who speak in different dialects. Even those who seem to be so concerned for the mother tongue have prejudices regarding regional dialects. Many derogatory terms, which are culturally sensitive, are often used in various formal and informal spheres of the Bangali society. It may be politically correct but should we promote vocabularies containing negative connotations in any composite culture and language? For example, people living in *char* areas do not like to be called '*Chaira*' but many living in the

family) asks his 'servant' what is he doing. '*Ahar korchhi moshai*' (I am eating), the 'servant' replies. Then the *karta* says, '*tui ahar korbi ki, tuito gilbi*' (you are not supposed to eat but swallow). The word *ahar* represents the posh Bangla vocabulary, which is supposed to be used by people living in the higher echelon of the society where the 'servant' has no access. This notion reflects a deeply-ingrained social 'hierarchy' in the Bangali society.

*Promito Bangla* (Formal Bangla) is taken for granted for formal representation, which is fine but it also originates from a particular regional dialect. This is also worth noting that the local dialect that contributed to the making of national language and vocabularies are always borrowed and incorporated in the *promito* expression as this is an ongoing process. However, significance of regional dialects in our country was properly understood by the prominent language scholar Dr. Muhammad Shahidullah. He conducted a number of studies on the social and linguistic aspects of regional dialects in Bangladesh. He also developed the dictionary of local dialects.

We are aware of the fact that meaning of the same word vary in different contexts. There is a saying '*ek desher buli, arek desher gali*' (what is an accepted form of expression in one region may be a curse in another). It happens due to the socio-cultural context in which a specific word is being used. It needs to be noted that local dialect is not only a linguistic phenomenon, it has socio-cultural dimension to it. A word may carry a particular meaning in a specific region, which may be totally missed by others. For example, the kinship term *mama* (maternal uncle) is adored all over Bangladesh. But in Rajshahi and Chapainawabganj, if someone is called *mamur beta* (son of maternal uncle), it is considered an insult.

Each dialect has local intonations. Local intonations of regional dialect are very important as far as folk music and its tune is concerned. For example, when a *Dhamail* song of Sylhet is performed with the formal accent then it loses all attraction and disembodies its local cultural context. The audience



Chakma, Marma, Mro and Rakhine letters.

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all of them claim themselves as human beings. The term *human* creates a space for the entire humanity under the same umbrella. The same notion is applied to *Marma*, *Mro* and other indigenous communities. This may also reflect the idea of egalitarianism. As animists they would have distinguished themselves from the spirit by claiming their existence as human being. This notion of equality derives from the clan society where existence of social stratification or hierarchy is insignificant. All of these are "small" aspects of our languages and we may deliberately overlook them as we always try to address the "big" issues at the national political sphere when these socio-cultural aspects also demand adequate attention from all stakeholders.

When we try to view another dimension of relationship between socio-cultural aspects of Bangla and other ethnic languages, we may focus on a common word *tui*. In Bangla, use of *apni*, *tumi* and *tui* depends on socio-economic and cultural "status" of an individual. The word *tui* has derogatory uses in some specific contexts if someone is treated as having lower status or attention in society. But among the indigenous or ethnic groups the word *tui* refers to a homogenous entity. It is perceived that *apni*, *tumi* were adopted in Bangla language during the historical process of social transformation in the later eras, which endorsed the sign of hierarchy in the social order.

Extinction of any language results in loss of knowledge. Linguistic incorporation of different vocabularies and respective ideas from the marginal population may enrich our culture if they are taken into consideration. At a time of rising inequality around the globe, these languages hold notions of equality as their societies do not have class divisions like ours. Moreover, learning from other languages would also enrich one's own language. This may also resolve conflicts and bring in coherence in our society by reducing disparity and an unhealthy race for wealth.

The writer is a folk-singer and associate professor of Anthropology at the Independent University, Bangladesh.

mainland often call them so. '*Chaira*' also constructs a particular notion of this small population living in *char* land, which is judgmental and misrepresents their true characteristics.

Many years ago, one of my favourite teachers in his anthropology class gave reference to a novel by Bankim Chandra, where the *karta* (Head of the

may not get any interest in that as they miss the whole context and essence due to the 'wrong' accent. Even in our country people who practice 'standard' Bangla vocabularies and accent in public spaces, communicate in their regional dialect at home with the family members. However, there is a tendency in the national electronic media to portray dialects of certain regions of the country in a derogatory manner. In contrast, it was a real surprise to learn that migrated people from certain regions of Bangladesh in the UK have maintained and even mastered a particular regional dialect, which provides them with economic opportunities.

We often show concern regarding the risk of extinction of indigenous languages practiced by different ethnic groups in hill districts and the plain land. There are more than 45 indigenous languages and most of them are endangered. The extinction of those languages would be a huge loss of cultural knowledge and the state

needs to play the key role in this regard. Moreover, with this linguistic deduction many socio-cultural notions that contribute to social tolerance and harmony may disappear. We see very limited or even no visible effort to highlight these issues that may contribute to our greater existence when we are enormously creating or subscribing to many chaotic and conflicting notions in our everyday life consciously and unconsciously.

For example, members of most of the indigenous ethnic groups have their own words to describe themselves. The name *Santal* is called by outsiders when the population call themselves *Hor*; *Hor* means human being. Similarly, the name *Garo* is also given by outsiders when the population call themselves *Mandi*. The meaning of *Mandi* is also human. If someone of this group is asked 'who are you?' The answer would be *Mandima* (I am a human being). Amazingly, no hierarchy and discrimination against each other is evident amongst them as

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