Landmarks

Theory and Practice of Language Teaching in India

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India has a long pedagogical tradition in language teaching. Of the six Vedangas (sciences auxiliary to the study of Vedas), four are devoted to language – phonetics, grammar, etymology and prosody/metre.

Education, particularly early education was built around two disciplines, language and mathematics, as the primary goal of Indian education was to produce virtuous (discriminating) minds and for that the first requirement is to develop and sharpen cognitive processes. So education was centered around language and mathematics and language teaching was centered around grammar because grammar develops cognitive and analytical abilities. Indian thinkers thought of education as a whole and located it in the moral and virtuous growth of individuals and society.

The issue of how language was institutionally taught in India - one of the world's longest lasting oral cultures and societies - cannot be discussed except in the two wider contexts of (i) the goal of education, and (ii) the place of language in Indian society.

We recall that India has the world's most ancient system of knowledge[1] and education. Takshashila University was destroyed in 7th-8th century. We do not know when it had come into being but going by the galaxy of thinkers (Ashvaghosha, Caraka, Kautilya, Panini, Sushruta to mention only a few) and sciences that originated there (phonetics, grammar, medicine, surgery, branches of Buddhism, to count a few) one may say that Takshashila must have existed for quite a few millennia before it perished. The general Indian educational practices were founded on the following assumptions:

(1) central role of memory

(2) centrality of the teacher as the agent

(3) the text (oral or written) as the instrument

(4) the training of the mind as the instrument of knowledge that was designed to shape thinking (virtuous) minds.

In this way, language learning and teaching is the keystone of the arch. Language[2] is central to India's intellectual history[3]. As knowledge is the supreme purifier (*Bhagavadgita*, 4.38) and is inseparable from language[4], language understandably, has been the central object of inquiry and of sustained and intense investigation in all Indian schools of thought. It has been studied in its two aspects — its *svarupa*, form, and its *samarthya*, potential to denote/connote. In a remarkable analogy, language, *shabda* is compared to *dipaka*, lamp (*Vakyapadiya* I, 44, II.298-299) – when it is lighted, it reveals itself and also reveals other associated meanings – it is the object to be grasped (*grahya)* and the means of grasping objects (*grahaka*).

The Indian conception of language differs in three ways from the Western:

(i) language is speech, not writing (script);

(ii) language is a cognitive system (not, primarily, of communication) and,

(iii) language is a constructivist system (not a representational system).

All the three Sanskrit words for language, *bhasha* , *vak* and *vani,* denote the 'sound-substance' of language. The most significant effect of this assumption was the rise of phonetics as the first science in India and the sophisticated phonetic analyses achieved in the tradition. Panini's grammar is also founded on this assumption. The other two assumptions concern the philosophy of language and are relevant here in so far as they encourage a certain plurality and tolerance of different ways of thinking and believing[5] .

The assumptions about the nature of language inspired a long line of thinking about the relationship between language, thought and reality and governed the teaching of language. Under the two aspects of object (*grahya*) and means (*grahaka*), and the three divisions of language - substance, form and the potential of words to denote/connote –lay the objects of language learning/teaching[6] .

The theory of language, (*bhasha*, *vak* and *vani)*, enshrined in linguistic texts such as *Ashtadhyayi*, *Mahabhashya, Vakyapadiya* and *Upanishads*. A *Rgvedic* chant says – "May my speech rest in mind and may my mind rest in truth". In one of the *Upanishads*, the human body is compared to the divine lute suggesting that speech ought to be musical.[7]

In Indian language teaching theory, language is best taught and learnt by teaching the grammar of the language which includes the best specimens of that language as examples. Patanjali in the first *ahnika* of his *magnum opus* [8] describes and argues the method of teaching grammar. He defines grammar as *'a short precise enumeration of **lakshana*** (markers or rules) of ***lakshya*** (language use or performance)". A Grammar according to him consists of general rules (*vidhi*), exception rules (*nishedha*), *uddharana* (examples) and *pratyuddharana* (couter examples). Such a *shastra,* teaching text, is the economical means

of learning a language because language, being open ended, it cannot be learnt by the method of learning words and sentences one by one. Should we teach by prescribing (*vidhi*) 'the right or acceptable usage' or by proscribing (*nishedha*) the variant usages? He asks and answers we should teach the acceptable usages for the universe of variation is endlessly large.

The teaching-learning of language was primarily in the oral frame-work as language was basically understood as speech and the writing practice followed speech as a secondary activity. Indian definition of intellect, *prajna*, being *smriti + vimarsha + prayoga* (memory + permuting what is in the memory + use at the right time), students were expected to memorise examples of good, thoughtful or musical compositions in that language. They later went on to hold the whole texts in their mind[9] .

A great controversy has raged in the Indian grammatical tradition, from Patanjali through Buddhists to Kumarila Bhatta, which bears directly on the question of the role and place of grammar in language pedagogy. Panini's *Ashtadhyayi* is not a pedagogic grammar in the strict sense - it is a linguistic grammar that makes explicit the native speaker's knowledge of Sanskrit. But this 'knowledge' is the knowledge of *sadhu shabda* the 'acceptable' forms - the 'rules' that embody this knowledge generate the acceptable variety of language, both written and spoken. Now this 'norm', if one may use this term, in Panini is an internally complex norm - the language generated is not equal to any one actual 'dialect' of Sanskrit. And yet it is a 'preferred' form and a whole lot of dialectal variants are *asiddha*. On what justifiable grounds can we exclude those words that are widely employed and as successfully communicate their meaning as the *sadhu shabdas*? This is the crux of the controversy. The grammarians (Patanjali and Bhartrihari) argue that this precisely is the function of grammar - to lay down restriction (*niyama*).

What are excluded are *asadhu* forms and the *shishtas*[10], the cultured, do not use them. But the Buddhists disagree - "only an indistinct sound, or single letters, or a conglomeration of letters without any reference to their signification...that can be said to be incorrect/unacceptable (*asadhu*)...the vernacular words, *gavi* and the like are found to be capable of denoting the cow as well as the Sanskrit word *go*...in fact are quicker ...in their action of denoting...are used more commonly...they cannot but be recognised as correct...".But if this position is accepted, how does one justify the discipline of grammar? It is interesting to understand the grammarian's response which defines and extends the domain of grammar as a science. And as, Bhartrihari argues, variation makes sense only because there is a traditionally recognised and recognisable norm which constitutes the domain of grammar. Buddhists are, understandably, variationists and they argue that *sadhutva* is determined by expressiveness - a word that conveys a meaning is *sadhu* and one that fails to is *asadhu*.

So, the Buddhists say, "... we should make use of all words; they are all equally correct." (Ganganatha Jha 1983: 298). To support this, they forward a number of arguments: (1) the words *gavi*, *goni* are equally expressive of *cow* because they are used in that sense like the word *gauh* etc.; (2) since they have a denotation, they are correct (*sadhu*); (3) because they are comprehensible, they are not corruptions; (4) they are also given (*nitya*) in that their beginning is not known; (5) no transcendental result follows from the use of *sadhu* words - the result is exactly the same, denotation of an object; (6) grammar is not necessary for the use of words because usage precedes grammar (Ganganatha Jha 1983: 298). Besides, it is argued that because grammar does not have the form of the Veda , because it does not deal with the subjects that are treated of in the Veda, and because the Veda is found to express a meaning even without the

help of grammar, grammar is not rooted in the Veda and therefore does not have the same authority. In fact its status is no different from that of a drama or a story or the words of a human being. (Ganganatha Jha 1983:298-299)

Therefore, it is concluded that the words *gavi*, *goni, gauh* &c., being synonymous are all found to be used in ordinary speech, and that such usage cannot be prohibited particularly when we note that such forms are used by even the eminent grammarians (Ganganatha Jha 1983:272), and many excellent writers and even the Veda are found to be using words at variance with the rules of grammar. (Ganganatha Jha 1983: 271-272).

Patanjali distinguishes between the principal purpose and the ancillary purposes of the science of grammar. Apart from questioning the chief enterprise of separating acceptable and unacceptable forms, the Buddhists also deny the auxiliary purposes of *raksha* (defence), *uha* (interpretation), *laghava* (economy), *asandeha* (removal of doubt), *agama* (study of Veda),etc. We are here concerned only with the principal function of establishing the acceptable forms. If the Buddhist position is accepted, grammar ceases to have any function at the level of lexical usage. Patanjali had argued and subsequently Bhartrihari had reinforced the position that when *loka* is authority and in the *loka* all kinds of variants are successfully employed, what the grammar does then is to lay down *dharmaniyama*. *Niyama*, according to Mimamsa, means 'restriction' - restricting the choice to one of the available possibilities, just as furniture can be made of all kinds of wood but teak is to be preferred; hunger can be assuaged by eating the flesh of any animal but the flesh of only some animals is to be eaten; all water is water but only *ganga* water is auspicious; all colours are colourful but only some are soothing. In a speech situation, the intended meaning may be conveyed by (1) a 'standard', form or (2) any of the dialectal

variants or (3) an erroneously articulated or deviant (*apabhramsa*) form. In this situation, grammar lays down a restriction - the standard form is to be preferred. As stated by Bhartrihari, while meaningfulness is common to all the three choices, *dharmajanakatva*, the property of 'linguistic righteousness', 'being generative of *dharma*' belongs only to the 'norm'. What is this *dharma*? There is reason to think that dharma here is to be taken in its civilised and cultured (*sastraic*) sense of consisting in such actions as bring about a desired result which in language transaction is the successful transfer of meaning and it is the function of grammar to lay down *niyama* - this is *dharmaniyama*, restriction laid down for an efficacious transfer of meaning. As Kumarila Bhatta notes, discrepancies may arise in the use of variants.

This *sadhu* form one can infer from Bhartrihari's discussion, is an extant form, is widely in use, is historically older being one from which the *apabhramsha* forms can be shown to have developed. (*Vakyapadiya* 1.23, 148). In keeping with the principle of *ekatva*, the many variants are manifestations of one. Three kinds of such variants, *apabhramshas*, are noted (first by Patanjali) in the tradition: *mleccha*, *apashabda* and *dushta shabda*. There is some division of opinion about what they exactly stand for (see, Ganganatha Jha 1983: 270) and without getting into details one may define these as follows:

(1) *mleccha prayoga* is the usage of the non-native speakers, the language of the foreign countries, of the lands that lie outside the limits of Aryavarta;

(2) *apashabda* is any of the dialectal variants; and

(3) *dushta shabda* is an inaccurate or deviant usage caused either by physical infirmity or ignorance.

Grammar establishes *sadhu* words as *siddha* and *asadhu* words as *asiddha* for it is a learned discipline and as such it records the tradition of

usage of the 'educated', the 'cultured' and the 'learned', that is the *sistas*. This is the dharma of grammar and of a good man. When one can achieve one's purpose by both *shabda* and *apashabda*, the man of virtue employs *shabda*.

It remains to be reiterated that this debate about the function of grammar is strictly with reference to the product of the rules of grammar, that is the forms that are shown to be *siddha*. There is no dispute about the other function of grammar, namely to describe the structure of language or about its pedagogical use.

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Notes:

[1] We have the world's first book on statecraft, Kautilya's *Arthashastra* (4th century B.C.), the first book on prosody, the world's first grammar of a natural human language, Panini's *Ashtadhyayi* (7th century B.C) and the world's first text of interpretation, Yaska's *Nirukta* (9th century B.C.), the first to conceptualise the numerals, zero and the value of p, to count a few peaks.

[2] The need to maintain the Vedic Knowledge texts was the original impulse for linguistic studies. Maintenance of texts in the oral tradition depended on a complete understanding of (i) the phonetics of speech, and (ii) the morphology of continuous utterances (*samhita*), which in turn depended on (iii) an understanding of meanings of utterances/words. This accounts for the rise of the sciences of phonetics, grammar and etymology (*Nirukta*) respectively in the pre-Paninean period.

[3] So central is language to the Indian mind that four of the *Vedangas* are devoted to one or the other aspect of language— *shiksha*, phonetics, *Nirukta*, etymology or exposition of word meaning, *chhanda*, prosody or metrics and *vyakarana*, grammar. Of these, says Patanjali, *vyakarana,* grammar is primary (Patanjali, *Mahabhashya* I.1)*,* because as Bhartrihari asserts, grammar is the grand ladder, *siddhi sopana,* to a true understanding of language.

[4] Bhartrihari, *Vakyapadiya* I.123

[5] Speech rests in a human speaking voice and as such no truth-claim is asserted about what is said as the source of utterance is always identifiable as the individual consciousness. The speaking voice is an individual voice and not *the* Voice, there is no one God and there is no one Voice. This enables a multiplicity of points of view. This is linked to the second postulate – language is a cognitive system and not just a system of communication. As explicated by Bhartrihari, language is the form that knowledge takes and therefore language is indistinguishable from intelligence (*sanjna*) and consciousness (*cetana*) (*Vakyapadiya* 1.126). What grammar, *Vyakarana*, studies and describes is the 'language in the mind', the system that is shared by all the speakers of that language. Thirdly, and finally, language is a constructivist system. As all *cognition* (*bodha*) takes the form of language, reality that is cognized by us is, therefore, necessarily a linguistic construct. Language is not a system that 'names' some pre-existing reality, but one that constructs the reality that we claim to be out there. The grammarians say that it is through naming that the objects, outside the mind and inside, are cognized as separate or different[5] from each other creating for us this *itiamnaya*, 'this enumerable universe' (*Vakyapadiya* 1. 120).

[6] The science of etymology or exposition of words, *nirvacana,* is an interface discipline between phonetics, grammar and meaning as it studies/fixes the meaning of words in terms of their derivation from given verb-roots in the course of which the sound form undergoes changes. Going to the root of words to get what they mean is an established pedagogical practice.

[7] Considering all this, look at the decline in public speech these days, the violence, the abusiveness and the untruthfulness that we hear all around. Language is used now to conceal the truth and promote discord.

[8] *Mahabhashya* Pratham Ahnika, Pashapashahnika.

[9] That is the configurational process of knowledge in the oral culture.

[10] A *shishta* is defined as "one whose worldly goods are constituted by a jar of grain and who, without a worldly goal or purpose, devotes himself to a branch of learning and excels in it".

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