Learning to Read Hindi through WhatsApp: From Deciphering to Cross-Languaging

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Abstract

This paper is auto-ethnographic in its approach. In it, I have reflected on my experiences of learning to read Hindi in the past two years, using texts sent to me on social media (WhatsApp). In the paper, I will attempt to answer two research questions regarding the actual letters in the Devanagari script that I found difficult or easy and the types of text that I found difficult to comprehend. I will end the paper with a few implications for adult learning.

Introduction

I am a 62-year-old, working at the English and Foreign Languages University. I grew up in Madras, studied in a convent school with Tamizh as my second language, and no exposure to Hindi, since Tamil Nadu follows the two and not the three language formula[1]. In the late 70s, after completing my Masters in English Literature, my elder sister and I were inspired to sign up for a correspondence course, *Learn Hindi Through English*, offered by the Central Hindi Directorate. It followed a structural approach: we were taught the letters, and then had to read aloud and write: "*yeh kitaab hai, yeh kalam hai, yeh kursi hai*", and so on. Neither of us got very far with our foray into learning Hindi, and we came to the conclusion that we were not good language learners. Reproducing strings of words, with little or no cerebration demanded as learner effort (Prabhu, 1991, 2019) was not helpful. We never went beyond the first few lessons.

Years later, in Hyderabad at CIEFL (now known as the EFL University), I taught myself to speak Hindi by listening to the language spoken around me, watching Hindi movies and television serials occasionally, and attempting to use the language whenever the opportunity presented itself. I also attempted to teach myself to read in Hindi, by looking at Hindi posters when I stopped at traffic signals, but I did not get very far. Many years later, as a 60-year-old, and armed with a smart phone, I stopped myself from getting irritated with Hindi messages sent to me on *WhatsApp* (a social media site that allows one to send messages or make free calls on cell phones),either as an individual or as a group member, telling myself: "Why don't I try to read these short messages and see if I can teach myself to read Hindi?" I began in April 2017. I am still learning.

This paper is a self-reflective narrative of my travails and successes over the past two years (2017-2019). I received and tried to make sense of 40 text messages during this period. I actually received more than 50 texts, but with the learner-centred power that I vested in myself (Amritavalli, 2007) I deleted texts that were too long, or in the form of poetry. I stayed with the texts that were within my proximal development zone (Vygotsky, 1978). Texts, in this context, were not mere strings of words but carried new knowledge. As such, I initially struggled to decipher the code only because I wanted to comprehend what was being said. This struggle to comprehend (Prabhu, 2018), I suspect, is what enabled me to become a somewhat successful reader of Hindi. This self-motivated learning, however, is not purely self-instructional. My former doctoral student, Deepesh Chandrasekharan, was and still is a very patient teacher/informal tutor to me. I would forward the messages to him, along with a text explaining what I had or had not understood. This was accompanied by queries which he patiently answered, thus enabling me to read Hindi.

Nature of the Paper

This paper is purely ethnographic in its approach. I have attempted to critically examine some of the 40 Hindi texts and the discussions around them to glean the language learning processes. I have also attempted to answer the following two research questions:
1. Which letters were easy/difficult to decipher and why?
2. Which texts were easy/difficult to read and understand and why?

Data Analysis and Interpretation

There are two kinds of data that will be examined and interpreted in this paper.

The actual texts in Hindi (transliterated, along with their translations) are the first. These are referred to as text 1, text 2, etc. The second kind of data has been collated from the discussions that I (GD) had with Deepesh (DC) either in the form of questions and answers, or comments.[2]

Hindi Letters that Were Easy/Difficult

In the first few months, my most frequent question to Deepesh was: "What is this word? I don't know." For instance, in text 1, "*nibha*" and "*sambhaal*" were difficult to read and decipher. Similarly, in text 2, I found "*gaanṭhon*", and "*sudhre*", problematic. In text 3, "*bhenṭh*", and "*chaḍhaaun*" were difficult to decipher.

Text 1:
he(y) bhagwaan sabke mobile *sambhaal-kar rakhnaa, isii-se sab rishte nibhaa rahe hen.*
Oh God! Take care of everyone's mobile phone. All relationships are maintained through them.

Text 2:
adrak kii gaanṭhon-saa rahaa bachpan apnaa,
bas utnaa hii sudhre, jitnaa kooṭe gaye.

Our childhood was like a knob of ginger
We only improved to the extent we were thrashed.

Text 3:
jai shrii baalaajii kii
he(y) baalaajii aap to(h)
saare(y) jagat-ko dene waale
mein kyaa tujh-ko bhenṭh chaḍhaaun
jiske naam-se aaye khushbu
mein kyaa usko phool chaḍhaaun
suprabhaat
aapka din mangalmai rahe

Hail to thee, lord Balaji!
O Balaji, you who give the world everything,
What gift can I offer you?
You whose name spreads fragrance,
How can I offer you flowers?
Good morning.
Have a blessed day.

My discussion with Deepesh after I sent him text 1, captures the problem:

GD: "I did not get 2 words: *sambhaal* I got only half right. You know, thanks to *Swachh Bharat* I learnt the letter for *bh*, so *nibha* and *sambhaal*".
Deepesh was able to catch what I was saying; with true learner-centredness, he used shared knowledge of linguistics. This is what he said:
DC:"Oh, ok. Tamizh does not have aspirated plosives. So must be really tough for you."
I too had realized this, and reiterated:
GD: "Yup, aspirated letters are tough to remember for me, 'cos can't hear the difference."[3]
Deepesh's reply to my statement sums it all up:
DC: "... I can understand. Training the ear and then seeing the difference. Phew!"
(He went on to liken me to) "the nursery school student with no exposure to English, getting used to an English medium classroom."

But non-recognition of aspirated letters was not the only problem I had with deciphering the Devanagari script. In my own words: "Some letters look alike." I found it difficult to tell the difference not only between the aspirated and unaspirated letters such as *p* and *ph* (प and फ), but also between totally unrelated letters such as *ch*, *gh*, and *dh* (छ, घ and ध), *sh* and *kh* (श and ख), and *bh* and *th* (भ and थ). All these letter clusters looked very similar to each other, with minor variations.

Text 4:
yuddh nahiin, prem karoo
aur agar donon karnaa he
to(h) shaadii kar lo

Make love, not war
And if you want to do both
then get married.

This short and simple text, that advised people to make love not war and if they wanted to do both, to get married (text 4) was difficult to decipher initially because of the gemination but, although there was no English scaffolding (Bruner, 1985) available, world knowledge made it enjoyable to read. In this text, I also had a problem with "the squiggles below the word". It took me a while to read the word *yudhdh* (युद्ध). If by some chance, it was a different half letter below the full letter, I was completely lost.

The second "squiggle" that caused major problems belonged to the various forms of "r"[4]. First, I had to work out to which letter the "r" was attached, when it was marked as a "*matra*" above the word; and then, in some cases, the "r" would be indicated below the word with a "squiggle". For example, in Image 2 below, in the word सिर्फ '*sirf*' "r" is indicated as a matra above the 'f'. In text 10 below, in the word कृष्णा *Krishna*, the 'r' is a curved squiggle below the letter 'k'; while in the word पराक्रम *paraakram*, it is a line below the same letter 'k'.

Last but not the least; an overarching decipherability problem was caused by the medium and type of text. WhatsApp texts, by their very nature, are authentic and are intended to be read by the language user. They tend to have stylish fonts and often have images that have been copied and uploaded. For a sample of a problematic stylish font, see image 1 and for a sample of a problem in

deciphering caused by the background image, see image 2.

Image 1

Image 2
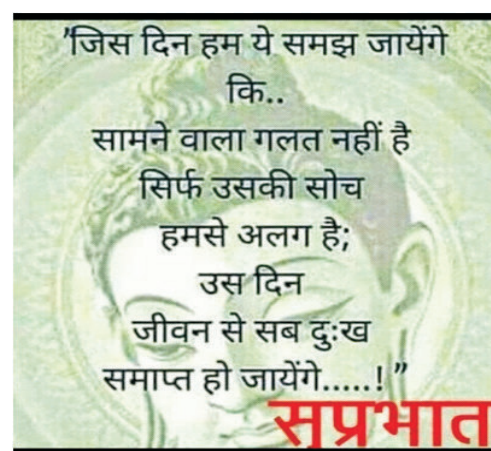
Easy versus Difficult Texts
I read different types of texts each with its own level of difficulty. The easiest yet the most boring text (text 5) was the one from my bank asking me not to reveal my card no., PIN, CVV, etc., to anyone.

Text 5:
Card *nambar,* CVV *pin,* O T P *kisii ko na bataayen.* Bank *kabhii nahiin puchtaa.*

Card number, CVV pin, OTP. Never tell this to anyone. Bank will never ask for this.

Being able to decipher and read this text was not a challenge for me. Known knowledge in a new code did not make me want to crack the code, because the demand to solve a problem and learn to read (Prabhu, 2018) was missing.

The texts that gave me my first

"satisfaction of having cracked the code" were two humorous ones, accompanied by a visual (picture/video), and where the required background knowledge was available. The first text had a picture of a woman with a phone in her hand and her baby in a huge coat pocket (text 6). This text spoke about what the world had come to, for what should be in the hand was in the pocket, and vice versa.

Text 6:
(accompanied by picture of a woman with a phone in her hand and a baby in her coat pocket)
kaisaa zamaanaa aayaa he.
jo haath me honaa chaahiye vo jeb men he, aur jo jeb men honaa chaahiye vo haath men he.

What has the world come to?
What should be in her hands is in the pocket and what should be in the pocket is in her hand.

The second text was about what a husband ought to do when his wife cried: the short video showed him taking a selfie, at which point she just stopped crying and started smiling (text 7).

Text 7:
(accompanied by a picture of a man taking a selfie of himself and his wife)
jab aap kii biiwii aapke saamne roye to turant ye karen

Whenever your wife starts crying when you are around, just do this.

There was a second set of texts which I found easy to decipher as they included a few English words. The first text in this set (text 8) was laced with a bit of humour and took a quiet dig at women. My world knowledge and the few English words used, written in English script, made it easy for me to not only decipher and read but also enjoy what was written. The text was about a child asking her father, while filling out an application form for a school,

what to write for mother tongue. With his tongue in cheek, the father replies: "*likh, beta, long and out of control.*"

Text 8:
(Baccha school *kaa* admission form *bharte hue...)*
Baccha: Papa mother tongue me kyaa likhuun?
Papa: likh betaa, very long and out of control.

(Child, while filling the admission form for a school)
Child: Father, what shall I write in the mother tongue column?
Father: You can write, very long and out of control.

I did not know that the word "*bharte*" meant "(while) fill(ing) in", but I was able to guess the meaning from the context. The same world knowledge helped me understand a text that most of us would have received at some point or the other, with a link asking us to open and vote whether we would like a Ram mandir or a mosque to be built in Ayodhya (text 9).

Text 9:
ayodhyaa men kyaa banaanaa chaahiye.
Raam mandir v/s Baabri masjid.
Open fast and vote (link given).
Sharing is caring.
Aap apnaa amulya vote zaroor karen; is message ko zyaadaa share karen.

What should be built in Ayodhya, a temple for Ram or Babri masjid? Please cast your vote and share this with all.

The third set of texts that was easy to comprehend were short ones which had small philosophical statements, normally signalled as the "*vichaar*" for the day. If such a text had some support in the form of a mythological reference (text 10), it was that much easier to comprehend.

Text 10:
chhoṭii unglii par puraa govardhan parvat

uṭhaanewale Shri Krishna
baansuri dono haathoon se pakaḍte he.
bas itnaa hii antar hai paraakram aur
prem men.
Isliye rishton me paraakram nahiin prem
dikhaayiye

Shri Krishna, who lifted up the whole
Govardhan mountain on his little finger,
holds his flute in both hands. Just such is
the difference between valour and love.
So show love in your relationships, not
valour or strength.

The texts that were the most difficult to
understand were the ones which had a
superficial as well as a metaphorical
meaning, or had a sarcastic tone. Text 2 is
a good example of such metaphoric use. I
"got the ginger statement all right, but not
metaphorically." I did not realize that the
text had a deeper meaning—it was all
about how "...our childhood was as uneven
as the "joints" of ginger; that we improved
only as much as we were crushed" (DC).
First of all, I did not know the literal
meaning of the word "*gaanṭh*", that it
means knots, let alone that it referred to
"the joints, like pieces in ginger" (DC). The
meanings of "*sudhre*" (improve), and
"*kootna*" (to pound) were also not known
to me. As such, even "*kooṭe gaye*",
meaning "got pounded" (DC) was beyond
my level of comprehension. As a result, in
the words of my tutor: "yeah, the ginger
one was too metaphorical for you to get it"
(DC).

A text (text 11) I got in September 2018,
more than a year after I began trying to
read, was about the similarities and
differences between different kinds of
clothing—pajamas, palazzos, shorts and
bermudas.

Text 11:
pajamaa aur palaazzo
asl men sage bhaii hain
fark sirf yeh he ki pajamaa
sarkaarii skool men padhaa huaa
jabki palaazzo convent educated *he*

barmudaa [sic] bhii apne kaccheey ka
bhaai he
jise videsh padhne bhejaa thaa.
nalaayak ne wahaan jaakar
naam badal liyaa.

There was a range of problems with this
text. Initially, all that I understood was:
"Something about 2 girls, government
school and convent; bermuda, shorts, or
country (not sure), name changed maybe".
Deepesh had to explain this text in detail
to me.

> Pajama and palazzo are actually
> "own brothers" [*sic*]. The difference
> is merely in the fact that the former
> went to a government school and
> the latter is convent educated. The
> Bermuda is also the brother of our
> *kaccha* (underwear), who was sent
> abroad for studies. The fellow
> changed his name there (to
> Bermuda). Essentially saying that
> palazzo is pajama and Bermuda is
> underwear shorts; using the
> metaphor of convent educated and
> studies abroad as a metaphor for
> westernization [*sic*].

My comments to Deepesh on this text
summarize many of the problems I
encountered with it. First, "I actually
thought it was about genuine sisters and a
Bermuda brother. Never thought of it as
clothes." Secondly, I realized that when
English words are written in Devanagari
script, it takes a lot of language capability
to read it and yet perceive it as
transliteration. Deepesh actually thought I
did not know these four terms of clothing
and therefore glossed them for me before
explaining the metaphor.

"Palazzo is the name given to women's
pants that flare at the bottom. Bermuda is
what people call shorts that come up to
the knee". I told him that I was very sure
that "with English or Tamizh I would have
caught it at once. So, when reading the
script itself is difficult, [the] mind does

not look at metaphor?" I was convinced that "even if someone had set a question, in Hindi, I think I would have got it."

This makes one wonder whether higher order comprehension in a new language needs a "trigger" or maybe scaffolding. I never understood the humour or the metaphor implied in this text. But I was equally sure that "if the question and answers had been in English and I only had to read and understand, I would have got it without any extra effort!"

My attempts to read Hindi also made me realize that with knowledge of the world and the word in other languages, even with limited proficiency, it is possible to not only read and interpret a text but even ponder over paradigmatic choices for a word and end with a pragmatic translation. The Cumminsean threshold hypothesis (1980) was at work here. A text I read in December 2018 (text 12), spoke about how we as people need to understand that other people are not wrong, but just different from us; the day we do this, our worries will disappear.

Text 12:
jis din hum ye samajh jayenge ki
saamane waalaa galat nahiin he
sirf uskii soch
ham se alag he;
us din
jeevan se sab dukh
samaapt ho jaayenge.....!
suprabhaat

The day we understand that others are not wrong; just that their thinking is different from ours: that day we will be rid of all our worries. Good Morning!

As I asked Deepesh, in the text it says that "the day we are able to see or state, or accept that others are not wrong but different, all misery will disappear from our lives." I had gone on to tell him: "In my mind, I had thought of "perceive" as the verb to be used, because I thought of

perspective, but dropped it as way too off. As for the word "*samajh*", I actually had 4 or 5 verbs in mind—state, accept, perceive, understand—which I did not want to use". Interestingly, I knew that "even in Tamizh I would not have so many options".

Interpretation of Findings and Conclusions

This very brief foray into an analysis of the difficulties and successes I faced as an adult learning to read Hindi through WhatsApp has thrown up a range of issues for adult language learning and teaching. First of all, there is the issue of learner interest, which is an absolute prerequisite. Secondly, learners have to be given the freedom to choose their own texts. Thirdly, these texts have to be easily decipherable as far as fonts and print size are concerned. Texts with images have to be very carefully chosen, with beginner decipherability in mind.

With reference to the selection of texts, the length of the text also needs to be taken into account. In the initial stages, longer texts will be a deterrent to learning. As far as themes are concerned, a range of themes ought to be available. Texts with dual meaning ought to be introduced only after a certain level of proficiency has been attained. Most importantly, if adults have to learn a language or even just become literate, one should think of these texts only as a collection or a resource book which they can dip into. This should be the case even if adults have to take an examination and receive a certificate. There is no need to restrict one's teaching to specified pre-determined content when the aim of the course is proficiency development.

Notes

1. The three language formula was introduced by the Government of India in 1957 and modified in 1964. The formula provided space for education either through the regional language or English, with the proviso that other than the medium of instruction, two other languages would be studied in middle and high school. If English was the medium of instruction, Hindi and the regional language would be studied. If the regional language was the medium of instruction, then Hindi and English would be studied. Tamil Nadu protested against what was perceived as the imposition of Hindi, and therefore the state was permitted to follow a two language formula, with an exemption being granted to studying Hindi.

2. The transliterations of Hindi texts are in italic font. Many of these texts were in the form of verse. While I have attempted to retain the format of the text in the transliterations, the translations are in prose and not in verse.

3. Voicing is predictable in Tamil (intervocalic, or preceded by a nasal sound). So, where Hindi has *p, ph, b, bh,* and so on, Tamil, whose alphabet is scientific enough to reflect its phonology, has only the letter *p*, which can be understood (and read) as *b* intervocalically, and in post nasal contexts. (Recall that aspiration is absent in Tamil).
[Compare the comment about intervocalic voicing versus germination in Malayalam, in Paroma Sanyal's article – Ed.]

4. Ed.'s note: The symbol for 'r' in words like ऋषि /rishi/, कृष्णा /Krishna/, अमृत /amrit/ etc. in modern Hindi represents the sound sequence 'ri'; in Sanskrit, this was a vocalic sound.
When 'r' occurs in a cluster with another consonant, if 'r' is the second sound in the consonant cluster, it is written as a diacritic on the first consonant, as in क्रम /**kr**am/, श्रम /**shr**am/, ट्रक /**tr**uck/, etc. If 'r' is the first sound in a consonant cluster, it is written on the 'head' of the second consonant, as in कर्म /ka**rm**/and शर्म/sha**rm**/.

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