

# Holding our tongues

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### Holding our tongues

I watched fascinated as my English-speaking neighbour broke into fluent Marathi with her husband.

They are both Maharashtrians from Bombay, but have lived abroad for many years before settling down in Bangalore. I asked if her daughters speak in Marathi, too. No, she said. “Every time we spoke to them in Marathi, they replied in English,” she added. Now in their 20s, both girls have lost touch with their native tongue.

An Australian friend once remarked how wonderful it was that most of us, Indians, knew at least two languages. In cosmopolitan India, in an increasingly aspirational, upwardly-mobile society where all barriers of religion and region are fast-blurring, English, which was the language spoken outside home, is fast becoming the language spoken at homes, with immediate family. Many urban Indian families are now completely English-speaking.

The use of the term ‘mother tongue’ may be unsuitable in our evolving awareness and sensitivity to gender roles, and we’re better off calling it the ‘native’ or the ‘first’ language — still meaning the ‘mother tongue’ — the language the child hears first and is spoken to by the immediate carer, still more often than not, a mother. The acquisition of the mother tongue is instinctive and natural. The child hears the language spoken by the parents, grandparents, older siblings and other family members and learns it from them. These days, children hear and learn English. Whose is the mother tongue?

Shifting family dynamics; mixed-marriages — what was earlier grouped within the term ‘inter-caste’ but are actually inter-regional, inter-religion or inter-cultural; movement of people across states and countries; and greater awareness of different cultures through the medium of social networks are some of the reasons that have set in motion this change in our linguistic makeup.

In mixed marriages, where both parents do not speak the same native language, they generally prefer to talk to their children in English. To some extent it also helps circumvent the sticky question of which of the two native languages should be taught or would take precedence. Sandra’s children speak only English, which is her own mother tongue, while her husband Soumik’s is Bengali. Soumik would like the children to know Bengali, and tries to speak with them in it, but the kids, not having heard it spoken at home, are conscious of their halting Bangla. The conversations don’t get too far.

Alisha’s mother tongue would be Haryanvi, if she was called upon to name one, but having lived across the country as a defence kid, Hindi is what came to her naturally. When she married a Mangalorean, she never felt the need to learn his native tongue, Tulu. Their two school-going kids picked up Hindi living in Delhi. Alisha could not teach the kids Tulu. She thinks the onus was on the father. Does language become a barrier when they visit the husband’s side of the family, especially with elderly members and those who speak only Tulu? Yes, it does, she concedes, but it’s not such a problem that will make her learn a new language that she has no ear for.

In migrating for work, people are increasingly moving from joint family set-ups. The elders who cared for or stayed with the kids and from whom they picked the native tongues are generally absent from their early lives. How do kids who speak only in English converse with their grandparents who do not speak the language? Many parents admitted that living in different cities and countries, the children meet grandparents only occasionally and get by somehow, adding of course that communication does not really need a language. Very interestingly, in a reverse learning situation, one parent in a mixed marriage shared that when her kids started to speak in English, grandparents on both sides who spoke Tamil and Hindi decided it was a great opportunity for them to start learning English too. This, we know, is not uncommon. More and more grandparents are learning the language of their grandkids — English.

Nanny tongue, local tongue

Raghu, a restaurateur whose mother tongue is Tamil and his wife’s is Hindi, does not think mixed marriages are as much the reason for teaching kids English as is the phobia of school admissions. Nursery school admission, flawed and random as they are, place undue weightage on the child’s ‘interview’ — their ability to understand and respond to questions in English. I know of a harried mother who taught her pre-kindergarten child the name of each object in two languages, in the mother tongue and in English — kela-banana, water-paani. This is more likely to confuse the child and lead them to prefer one

language over the other, and maybe gradually end up learning only one language properly. Languages each have their own, unique flow, rhythm and idiom. They cannot be acquired by words alone.

The school admission phobia did not bother Priya Singh, a software professional who let her toddler learn Hindi, their first language. Priya was very clear from the beginning that home was where her kid would learn Hindi. As for the all-important English, she was confident the child would pick it in no time playing with other kids and at school.

Raghu's daughter picked up Hindi from her nanny. Many other kids of working parents, left with ayahs at home or in crèches, acquire as their primary language the language of their carers. I recently met a nine-year old who is fluent in four languages — the Hindi of his nanny, Spanish of his mother, Bengali of his father and English. The early years are the best time for children to learn to speak in native languages. Parents who did not think it a good idea when their kids were small, have regretted it later when they meet kids fluent in their first languages and well as in English.

First languages have emotions attached to them. And emotions are best expressed in one's first language. Rahul, a Tamilian married to Swati from UP, concurs. Their two school-going children speak in English. As busy software professionals, they left the kids at day-care and English was the language the kids learnt to express themselves in. Sometimes now, Rahul wishes his kids would understand Tamil, especially when he has to paraphrase expressions that are best captured in his own tongue.

Another way we acquire language, especially a local language, is through social interactions — with neighbours and those we interact with in the course of our day — the house-help, drivers, istriwalas, security guards, subziwalas and shopkeepers. But changing lifestyles have impacted this too. Shopping malls and large chain grocery stores have little need for interpersonal communication — whatever little exchanges are required are carried out in English that most salespersons and attendants these days are equipped with.

For Indians moving from one state to another, there used to be the regional language barrier between them and the locals. English has obliterated this to a great extent. Two decades ago, all the local words that I learnt at the subzimandi — kottambari, soppu, batani, sapota, ondu, eradu, eydu, are redundant today. Even the subziwalas call fruits and vegetables by their English names. But of course, when it comes to demolishing barriers of the heart, the one thing we can do is to talk with the locals in their language. In the words of Nelson Mandela, “If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart.”

### First language first

Living in Delhi's Chittaranjan Park, referred to as 'little Kolkata', where Bengali is the street language, I asked a two-year old playing House what she was cooking. “I'm making tarkari,” she replied, and looking up at me, immediately corrected herself and said,

“subzi”. The child knew I did not speak Bengali and she also had the Hindustani vocabulary to translate for me.

Children have an amazing ability to assimilate. They learn sounds and pronunciation by mimicking. It is a myth that they cannot learn two or more languages at the same time and that it will confuse them. When the child is still acquiring the first language, they can as easily acquire a second and a third one. Parents’ anxiety on this account is totally unfounded. Sometimes children may mix up languages, but that they do while learning just one language too.

By not teaching our children our first languages first, we may be bringing up a generation that knows and uses only English. Besides losing our native languages, we may be losing out on other advantages that multilingual children and adults have. Several studies have shown that multilingual people are better adjusted, more adaptable, and have more acceptance of cultural differences. Learning at least two languages makes people more receptive to more languages. All the fears of children not being able to learn ‘good English’ later are unfounded. “You can never understand one language until you understand at least two.” (Geoffrey Willans)

Run out of lemons, I sat eating moong sprouts and commented that there would have been a great izafa in the taste with a dash of lemon. Sure enough, the daughter asks, “What’s ‘izafa’?” Translating the Urdu word into Hindi or English would have been like explaining a joke. Go figure! I tell her.