

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 8 : 1 January 2008

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Developing Sensitivity to Language Use

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DEVELOPING SENSITIVITY TO LANGUAGE USE

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Sexist, Casteist, Agist References

A recent Hindi movie (*Aaja Nachle*) has once again brought to the fore the need to develop sensitivity to language use.

These days, in English, conscious effort is made to avoid derogatory language use, which refers to the gender, age or disability, etc. of the person being referred to or addressed.

For example, in the following sentence, the reference to the age of the artist is somewhat complimentary since accomplishment at such an early age is a rare phenomenon: “The concert was wonderful. The flutist, who is only 15 years old, already plays like a professional.”

On the other hand, when we write, “As Viswanathan is middle-aged he is interested only in his family and work, etc.,” we fail to focus on the individual but bring in age as a factor to describe the individual with group characteristics. There are so many middle-aged individuals whose interests go beyond their family and work.

Gender Issues

Take another example: “A Nurse should use kind words so that she will be greatly appreciated.” Or yet another sentence: “A doctor should prescribe the most suitable medicine so that his patients will get healed soon.”

In both these sentences there is an underlying assumption that nurses are all females and doctors are all males. Or take the case of lawyers. There are male and female lawyers, unlike in the past when female lawyers were very few in number or were almost non-existent. Such a situation might have been the case in the past in India. But now there are so many doctors or lawyers who are females. There are also many nurses who are males. These professions are no more marked only for men or for women. When that is the case, where is the need to assume and assign such professions exclusively to men or women?

In Tamil, for example, *amma* is added to the term *doctor* to refer to a female doctor, which sounds somewhat an endearment revealing some respect. However, there are occasions in which *amma* is used as a suffix to ridicule and degrade women, especially when mocking at women who practice so-called lowly traditional professions.

Indian Languages Abound in Derogatory References

Indian languages and expressions abound in derogatory references to women, widows, unmarried women, older people, the disabled, and for the professions practiced by those

who are assumed to be hailing from so-called low castes. Our pronominal usage, both at the lexical and syntactic levels, strengthens such discrimination.

We Have Made Some Good Progress, But Not Enough – Coinage of New Terms

We have made some good progress in coining new terms to refer to caste-based professions. These newly coined terms focus more on the job done than on the caste background of those who do these jobs. And yet, we also deliberately break these newly developed conventions in order to humiliate or insult those who practice such professions and those groups who were traditionally ill-treated. This in itself shows the hollowness of our presumptions and our way of life. Master-servant relationships that dominated our past language use still continue to be in use and often resorted to when one is angry and when one wants to deliberately humiliate or insult another. That our Indian society is still in transition to a different mode of living is clearly revealed through our language use. (1 and 2)

Why This Conditional Apology?

The lyricist who wrote the song for the movie, the producer as well as others connected with the production of the movie all apologized. But their apology was conditional, in my opinion. They only said that if the phrase was hurtful ‘we are sorry.’ Why is it that they were not able to recognize the offensive nature of the expression used? If the Punjab and UP governments did not take some bold moves, would the producer, lyricist, et al., have realized that the phrase used was offensive?

The Rationale Against Derogatory References Not Easily Perceived

The logic against the derogatory nature of certain language use in English is not easily apparent to many Indians who speak and write English. On the other hand, English speaking native communities have moved forward to eliminate to a great extent such derogatory usage as part of modernization, if not wholly for social equality. This they do through the schooling process. English classes teach how to avoid such derogatory terms of address and reference.

This logic is not apparent for those of us who use Indian languages on a daily basis, if we are not part of the group to which such derogatory reference is made. Language conventions and even grammatical and lexical structures are deeply embedded in such derogatory usage, and so we have great difficulty in recognizing the derogatory nature of our ordinary language sentences. Situation gets worse in rural areas.

We Need to Reflect on Our Language Use

We need to reflect on our language use in relation to the social and economic changes that take place around us. We need to develop sensitivity against derogatory language use, and consciously avoid such usage.

Failure of Our Language Curriculum

This process should be part of the Indian language syllabus which, unfortunately, looks more toward the glory of the past or the excellence of the classics than on the dire need to reform language use to bring in greater amity between social groups and better effective communication. We need to educate our students and ourselves and recognize how callously our expressions still hold on to language norms that embed in them derogatory terms of address and references.

Develop Strategies

Adequate data must be collected from the colloquial language as well as written literature to document such usage, and then we must argue clearly and convincingly why such derogatory usage is not appropriate. We should devise and show alternative usage and insist on practicing such usage. Exercises should be devised in such a way that students reason out easily on their own and come to the right types of usage. Teachers should be trained in this new domain of language teaching through workshops.

Produce Workbooks

Appropriate workbooks should also be developed. Since our goal is to eliminate the current derogatory language use, the materials in the workbook should not cite the derogatory usage but devise ways to indicate the target of such usage through visuals. This is a very difficult task, but with imagination such workbooks can be produced. Moreover, we can also arrange the derogatory usages in a hierarchic format, and we may be able to use the less damaging references as citations. In general, our goal should be to eliminate such usage in a conscious manner.

These workbooks should present the possible ways of expressing the idea without making use of derogatory terms of address and reference. They should explicitly handle the grammatical and lexical structures and linguistic conventions that support such derogatory usage in Indian languages and suggest how this could be altered while using available grammatical and lexical tools.

Educate All About the Relationship Between Linguistic and Social Structures

If these steps could be part of the syllabus throughout all the grades, and if exam papers impose disincentives for recurrent derogatory usage in answer papers, we may be able to greatly eliminate such usage. However, we must also remember that persistence of derogatory usage is not supported exclusively by linguistic structures. It is the prevailing social practices that actually generate and maintain such linguistic usage. And yet, systematic attack on linguistic structures in our language classrooms will also help eliminate prejudicial social systems that support such linguistic usage.

1. ADDRESS AND REFERENCE TO WOMEN IN AN INDIAN LANGUAGE CONTEXT by M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.
<http://www.languageinindia.com/aug2002/addresstowomen.html>
 2. COMMUNICATION ACROSS CASTES by M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.
<http://www.languageinindia.com/aug2006/castecommunication.html>
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