

2

COGNITION, ETYMOLOGY AND IDENTITY IN LANGUAGE

Siddiq Wahid

One cannot ignore the importance of words *per Se*, the significance of their meanings, their etymologies of words and their social contexts is an indispensable ingredient in the art of communication. And, as has been said, communication is fifty percent of the task of the intellectual. In our age, when we are so bombarded by idioms of divisiveness and divergence, the need to talk to each other with an understanding of knowledge, language, word and meaning is not a luxury as it is a vital need.

Allow me a brief digression to elaborate on this point. About a decade or so ago, during an interview with a journalist, I described myself as a “healthy schizophrenic”. My remark was casual, almost flippant, but it was sincerely meant as an autobiographical comment. As a person from Ladakh, I have been privileged to travel well beyond its frontiers, both geographically and intellectual. Schooled largely in Darjeeling and some in New Delhi, I left home immediately thereafter to return only after thirty years of wandering. So at around the time that I speak of, when I was about forty, I needed to try to make sense of my life’s wanderings. To do so, I find that one has to find meaning in language; it is as if, at bottom, I had to be able to discover a “language” that will overcome the diversity of my experiences in a way that will not fragment me but rather unite me, my inner self.

A seminal rendition of this dilemma, which I believe is emblematic of the key problem confronting modern man, is to the pain of experiencing what the important modern

poet, John Montague has called a “partitioned intellect”¹ and Seamus Heaney’s illuminating elucidation of how that condition can be avoided by a grasp of language that travels into a mental zone where one’s language is not just “a simple badge of ethnicity or a matter of cultural preference or official imposition, but an *entry into further language*”.² Given the political, cultural and social condition of the State of Jammu and Kashmir today, it seems that the study of the science of language is a critical tool for us to arrest the tragic divisiveness and divergence that plagues much of our world.

LANGUAGE AND COGNITION

We cannot underestimate the importance of the connection between language and knowledge. It has been said that “... language acquisition is one of the few cognitive skills that is ... both common and peculiar to humans.”³ It is the tool with which we pass on our heritage, our traditions and our ideas. Wrongly done, we stand to lose our heritage of ideas and thereby deprive our offspring of them just as tragically as we deprive them of clean air and fresh water-bodies, or indeed present them with the dark predictions of climate change. We can cause this loss not just in the abdication of our languages (about which I shall speak in a moment) but also by unknowingly and easily debasing it, resulting in the loss of precious heritage.

I am not a “purist” who believes that we should not allow words to change or militates against the thought that languages do “grow”; languages cannot remain static for there is, after all, such a thing as the “flowering” of a language. But there is a difference between depriving a word of its meaning and appreciating a flowering of it. The former amounts to a debasing. Let me take one example of such an occurrence in the English language which has cost us dearly in understanding concepts that may bridge divides.

The word *orthodox*, which is from the Latin *orthodoxus*, properly translates as “right opinion”. However, today the word is taken to be synonymous with the word “conservative” which is further equated with “being conventional”. In this severe devolution, we seem to have corrupted three words at once, when in fact the original meanings of each are something quite different. The loss of the meaning of that word therefore means that we lose the value of words translated from other languages into English, causing much misunderstanding about ideas that are similar and that exist across traditional societies.

¹ John Montague 1989.

² Seamus Heaney, *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation* 2000, p xxv. The emphasis is mine.

³ Devitt and Sterelyn (Editors), 1999

To illustrate what I mean, allow me to engage in a flight of imagination. The Arabic word *ijtihad* means the act of making a logical deduction about a circumstance for which one does not find a precedence; it comes from the root, *jhd*, meaning to strive and which has the sense of a certain rigor and hard work without which one could not dare *ijtehad*, or “opinion” that is in consonance with truth. It would be foolhardy of me to claim real competence in Arabic, but despite that I have often wondered, for example, whether the Latin *orthodoxus* and so the English “orthodox” would not be an apt translation for the Arabic word *ijtehad*, which is the subject of so much shallow interpretation. And this is so because some of the current translations or interpretations of the word *ijtehad* are at best facile and at worst lazy and ignorant.

Let me delve on this a little along another line of argument. Debasement of language is one end of the spectrum. But it seems to me that at times we also suffer a kind of apologetic or unnecessary purism by which the meaning, or “spirit”, of a word is lost as we engage in an excessive purism and a kind of misplaced identification with the “letter” of the word. Let me take an example that illustrates what I mean by this in our Kashmir of today. In days past, when parting after a meeting we were in the practice of saying “*Khuda-hafiz* “. But increasing, perhaps out of a sense of loyalty to Islam, we seem to be saying “Allah-hafiz”. This usage, of course, is not incorrect. But why are we taking to using it in our everyday language when, in fact, the word in translation conveys the meaning of the word more immediately. Is it a case of an assertion of a religious identity at the cost of another identity, even of understanding?

Let us speculate a little on the etymology of the word “*Khuda hafiz*”; the word *Khuda*, comes from the Pehlavi *khotai* through the old Persian *qudhai*, and the Persian *khud + am*, all cognate with the Sanskrit *sva+dhatta*, meaning “having his own law” or “the Supreme Being”⁴. Put otherwise, the use of the word *Khuda* as a translation for “Supreme Being” for the Arabic allows us, in West, South and Central Asia, to assimilate the meaning of the word into our consciousness and absorb its meaning (which is after all the purpose of language) in an Indo-European language group with which we are culturally, and “mentally”, more familiar than the Semitic language group. This of course has to be done, without in any way compromising the continued use of the holy Name, Allah, in rites and ritual practice where it has a sacral and psychic quality and cannot be translated for the sake of convenience or even rational comprehension. But surely the use of the word *Khuda* in the quotidian and our everyday language, which is not Arabic, can only bring us closer to an understanding of very meaning of the Name.

⁴ Cf. John T. Platts, *A Dictionary of Urdu*.

LANGUAGE AND MEANING

Let me now take a few minutes to speak about the importance of understanding the etymology of words in our languages. When properly understood, words can convey the values of a culture, the nature of its contacts with its neighbors and its adaptation of new ideas into the lexicon of its knowledge systems. To illustrate this, let me make use of a sample of a few words from my own mother tongue which is Ladakhi, a western dialect of the Tibeto-Burman language family. Since my intention is to illustrate a concept, I have chosen just two sets of three words each from Tibetan: they are words used in everyday language that convey a cultural *ethos* and words from other cultures that are *borrowed* demonstrating cultural interaction.

SOME EVERYDAY WORDS — In Ladakhi, the word we use when a person is behaving foolishly, abnormally or unacceptably is *chos-med*. The word, in everyday spoken Ladakhi is pronounced just as it is written *cho-med*. However, if a person is literate in the language, she would know that it is written *chos-med*⁵. Literally translated this would be “without religion” or the Sanskrit *adharma*. In other words, the Ladakhi is so dependent on religion in practice, that to do anything that is abnormal, silly or

Similarly, when a person acts or behaves in an aggressive, or even an assertive, manner we say he is being *rang-rgyal*. Again, literally translated it would mean “self-victorious, with a tinge of a sense of ego-affirmation, which is not considered good-manners in Tibetan polite society. To use one more example of how words can convey a sense of cultural heritage, let me illustrate it with the use of a word that alludes to mythology, although often not grasped. When a decision is made, we often say so-and-so “*thag mchod pa*”, the compound word meaning “to decide”. Now if one were able to read and write in the language, it would be clear that the literal meaning of this compound is “to [pa] cut [mchod] the rope [thag], a seemingly odd phrase to use for making a decision. However, familiarity with Tibetan mythological history tells us how this word might come to have been used.

In mythic Tibetan history, the first kings of Tibet were gods descended to earth, their role being to restore order. Now once their work was done, they would return to the heavens through the use of a rope, called *dmu thag*, by which they would climb up to the “sky”. (This “rope” is often depicted in Tibetan Buddhist pictorial symbolism by a rainbow.) But the 31st Tibetan king picked a fight with the evil spirit and the two had

⁵ Tibetan orthography consists of consonant clusters which result in a unique sound or the pronunciation of that word by ignoring some consonants or an altogether different sound created by a particular cluster. Thus, for example, the cluster of consonants in the word for the number eight is pronounced “gye” in Lhasa, “rgyad” in Ladakh and in Baltistan “brgyad”, which is exactly the way it is written in literary Tibetan.

a famous duel. In the heat of the duel, the king inadvertently cut off the rope that had transported his predecessors to heaven at the end of their earthly lives; in turn, it resulted in him and his successors having to die on earth before they could return to their origins.

SOME BORROWED WORDS — In a seminal work in the early 20th century, Berthold Laufer, one of the pioneers in the study of Inner Eurasian languages, addressed the question of loan-words in Tibetan.⁶ He began his study by wanting to “deal only with Chinese loan-words in Tibetan”; however, he soon found that this would not be an accurate study because the interface between cultures in Inner Eurasian was so wide that there was considerable interaction resulting in a “chaos of languages”; in Tibetan this included words borrowed from many other languages. Just a list of the borrowed words will be enough, I am sure, to make the linguist’s mouth water:

Indian (both Sanskrit and Prakrit), Persian, Arabic, Uigur, Turki, Mongol, Manchu and Chinese (both Old and Modern) and Portuguese; and these without a careful examination of the dialectic lexicography of Tibetan. Pertinent to today’s discussion, for example, is the absence of a discussion of Kashmiri loan-words in Ladakhi, which Laufer acknowledges his inability to address even as he points out to examples of such borrowings.

In this category of words, let us first examine the very word by which this ethnic group is known by the outside world. The world calls the region Tibet; but this is not what the Tibetans, or the Tibetan-speaking world, calls itself. They refer to themselves as “Bod-pa”, or the people [pa] of bod. How then do we get to “Tibet” from “Bod”? It comes to us from the Chinese, via the Arabic. As I have just related, the Tibetans call themselves Bod-pa, or “the inhabitants of Bod”. In eleventh century, amongst the Liao, it was written T ‘u pot ‘e, the second syllable being the Chinese rendition of the Tibetan “bod”.⁷ When the Tibetans first encountered the Arab armies in Western Central Asia during the 7th and 8th centuries, they began to refer to the Tibetans as al-tubbat, and thence, through the use of it in English, the word has come down to us as “Tibet”. Similarly, the word “dalai”, which has come to be almost synonymous with Tibet as the appellation for the reincarnation of Lord Avalokitesvara, the Dalai Lama is also a borrowed word. It is in actual fact a

⁶ cf. Berthold Laufer, 1916, pp. 403 — 551

⁷ See Charles A. Sherring, 1906, p 62. Christopher Beckwith 1987 demonstrates an even earlier transference of the native ethnonym to Greek sources through Kaludios Ptolemaios who mentions a people called the Baitai or Bautai. p 7

Mongolian word, and is a literal translation of the name of the century head of the *ge-lu gs-pa* (pronounced *gelugpa*) order of Tibetan Buddhism who was named rgya mts 'o, meaning "ocean", and who patronized and given political charge of Tibet by the ascendant Mongol leader of 16th century Central Asia, Altan Khan. One more borrowed word: ch'u-ba. This is the word used in the U-Tsang, or Central Tibetan province. It comes to us from the Turkic word, *juba*, which in turn was passed on to many other languages including the Russian, *shuba*.

Let me conclude this admittedly amateur foray into the importance of etymology not just for the sake of scholarship, but to conserve language itself Why is it important to know the history of a word, even in ones native language? What does such knowledge help us conserve? And why is such conservation important?

The modern world's conceptualization of communication, in the full sense of that word, we live in an age of cursory understanding and instant interpretations; we no longer bite into a thought or an idea and are happy with a second or even third hand communication of it. One result of it is a debasement of meaning, as we just discussed. But it is also the loss of a thought, a value or even a concept. In the case of everyday words I discussed, for example, an understanding of the meaning of such words as *cho-me*, *rang-rgyal* and *thag-mchod* convey to us, respectively, the value of a tradition that places the utmost importance on the application of spiritual values in everyday speech, a sense of respectful tolerance of the other and a concept of history that collapses space and time rather than discussing them as specialist subjects. We cannot afford to lose the "letter" these words in the interests of changing with the times. "The letter", in this case, "giveth Life [and] only the literal text, the word made flesh, can take us to the word behind the words."⁸ Words correctly understood and aptly used help us to conserve values, ideas and histories.

LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY

Regarding the issue of attitudes of Kashmiris especially young Kashmiris towards avoiding Kashmiri and preferring a more widely spoken language such as Urdu, Hindi or even English which appears to be a trend nowadays, I believe it is a trend which needs to be reversed. It needs reversal because it goes to the question of identity much more than political sloganeering or even politics, in the narrow sense of that word, if Kashmir is to survive as a distinct culture. And "survive" not just for

⁸ See A. K. Ramanujan, 1973, p 13. Incidentally, this is a masterly translation of select Kaimada poems of four poets from the vacana tradition of South India from the 12th century onwards.

sentimental reasons but for reasons having to do with its inhabitants' relationship with the world at large; so for *instrumental* reasons.

But why in the first place has this trend, the trend of ignoring and even being embarrassed by one's first language?

Undoubtedly one reason is our very flawed system of schooling. Recently I had occasion to glance at the new books of my little nephew who is in the second class. As I went through them, I saw that he was being taught in an English-medium school, required to study Urdu for "regional" reasons and prescribed Hindi for "national" reasons. Nowhere in sight was the "local" language, which happens to be Kashmiri in this case but could just as easily have been Ladakhi or Dogri. Now a fact that has been established by several studies is that a child's cognitive skills are considerably strengthened if he or she were to study in the mother tongue. Ironically, that is the one language that is being ignored by our formal educational system! We only have to pause briefly to wonder what it does to a child's mind to be forced to study in three different, and foreign, languages! My point is simple; there is a great need to re-examine our educational system so that we can in the first place conduct some research that will study the effects of this educational phenomenon of learning and teaching in "foreign" languages, determine the implications of this for our educational system and the ways and means by which we can better meet the real challenges facing our younger generations in an increasingly globalized and homogenous world in which the so-called "new world order" is dictated from the current centers of power and in the process a growing homogeneity, with which we probably will have to be reconciled, is often confused with hegemony.

CONCLUSION

The paper has touched three aspects of language, each very vast and very specialized: cognition, meaning and identity. My approach has been to deliberately attenuate my analysis from the broadest purpose of language — to communicate that which we know — to its most narrow one of identifying our individual place in social relationships at large. And to try to connect this to our condition in the present day. The key points I have wanted to make are that (a) to understand language in the full sense of the word is first to know it as a normative instrument, (b) we therefore use it to derive meaning in our lives and (c) in language we derive a "identity-lexicon" that allows us to locate ourselves in our interaction with the world at large.

REFERENCES

- Beck, Christopher. 1987. *The Tibetan Empire in Central Asia*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Heaney, Seamus. 2000. *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux.
- Laufer, Berthold. 1916. *T'oung Pao XVII*. Series 2.
- Montague, John. 1989. *The Figure in the Cave*. New York: Syracuse.
- Platts, John, T. 1988. *A Dictionary of Urdu, Classical Hindi and English*. Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal.
- Ramanujan, A.K. 1973. *Speaking of Siva*. London: Penguin Books.
- Sherring, Charles, A. 1906. *Western Tibet and the British Borderland*. London: Edward Arnold.