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Introduction to Linguistics - Brook Lillehaugen

From a Country of Bilinguals

Abstract: Arjun Khandelwal is a senior at Haverford College who is fluent in English and Hindi, with some comprehensive abilities in French and Swahili. The dynamics of a bilingual country like India shows that language fluency can relate with other character traits, along with creating interesting and unique mediums of conversation. Despite not often thinking about his bilingualism, Arjun has a clear attachment to both the English and Hindi, as it is a part of his Indian culture.

Arjun Khandelwal has been a great friend of mine for the past four years. Considering how much we talk and do things together, I was surprised at how long it took me to really acknowledge that he was, for sure, bilingual. One could definitely be friends with him for a long time without knowing that at all, as he rarely mentions/uses languages other than English, even if he's on the phone talking to family. Although I was able to deduce that he was bilingual by his faint accent and knowing that he grew up in India, it is definitely not something that is obviously apparent, and that made me really curious as to how his second language impacts and influences his life.

Arjun is a senior at Haverford College, who has spent most of his life in New Delhi, India (3). Other than being in the United States once to visit family, he has had little experience with the US before college. In New Delhi, it is very common for people, especially where Arjun grew up in particular, to speak two languages, English and Hindi. Due to that, and the fact that he now attends college in a location that speaks one of his two native languages, Arjun provides an interesting and more unique perspective to what it means to be bilingual.

In India, despite many people there growing up in a bilingual society, they are typically required to learn a tertiary language in school. Arjun mentioned that at his school he had a choice between French and German and Sanskrit and back then he decided to go with French because he thought it looks cooler. He also is currently enrolled in a Swahili class at Bryn Mawr, so he has at least some experience with speaking four languages.

Arjun has grown up in a household where they spoke both English and Hindi, but not necessarily at an equal balance. He mentioned that in his household it varies between person to person (9), and in his house most people were more comfortable with English as opposed to Hindi (with the exception of his mother). He explained that people in his town may have different levels of fluency in both languages, which creates an interesting dynamic and setting for conversations: “If I’m talking to an English speaker I’ll use English, vice versa with Hindi. However a majority of people in India have fluency in both. Therefore, depending on how fluent the other person is, I will try to speak the language they are most fluent in so it is most comfortable for the two of us.”

There is also a strong relationship between bilingualism and many other factors that can be seen in India, such as socio-economic class, age, and location. Arjun mentioned that almost everyone will know some English, as English is the language of business. Taxi drivers, shopkeepers, and people who interact with others a lot will typically be able to speak basic English, but typically people from a higher socio-economic class and a certain location are more likely to speak English. Arjun stated that “even if I am speaking in Hindi it depends, I’ve never had a large vocabulary in Hindi as opposed to English, and that is true of a lot of people of my generation who have similar education and socio-economic status. It correlates a lot with your educational attainment and which part of the country as well.” Everyone strives to speak better English in India because of its importance and implications. “Relatively speaking, people who are older have less expertise with English, while people who are younger have been speaking English since a young age and have more people around them who are speaking English.” It is also vice-versa for younger and older people speaking Hindi. The amount of fluency one may have in both languages seems to be a really interesting social marker to some degree. Fluency seems to have some dependence on age, wealth, and family, which are not typical variables one would consider when thinking about how well they speak a language.

Since Arjun has spent a majority of the last 4 years in the US for college, his fluency in Hindi has dropped some. In reality, Arjun never really felt as though he was that good at Hindi. He recalled that once he received a 2/15 in a spelling test in Hindi, which he said is absolutely horrible: “I was the second worst in my class[concerning spelling], and normally I’m not

anywhere near the second worse.” He definitely make mistakes in Hindi when he spoke it while living in India, so not being there that often in the past few years has definitely makes it hard for him to not make mistakes when speaking. He also makes mistakes in English, just like everybody else. Arjun doesn’t consider himself to be the best speaker: “sometimes I make mistakes with articles, which might not necessarily be grammatical mistakes it might just be me changing what I am about to say. I don’t need to think about English grammar, english flows naturally for me, so I mean I make mistakes in the same way I think most people make mistakes in English.”

Arjun also thought deeply on the cultures that he considers himself to be apart of during the interview. When asked if he felt like he belongs to more than one culture, he immediately replied with “that is a hard question.” Arjun definitely belongs with Indian culture in the very strong sense that he was born and brought up in it; however, he was also exposed to a lot of American media. He enjoyed watching hollywood movies and TV shows, and even had family in the US. In these past few years especially, he feels as though he shares strong ties with both Indian and American culture. He has really enjoyed his time at Haverford College and being in the United States, so much so that he believes that he will stay in the US, or go to another western country after graduation.

When asked about how other people view him as a speaking of English/Hindi, he believes that most people would see him as a native of both languages. Hindi seems to have a wide range of fluency in today’s India, so being fluent in English in the US might not be the same level of comprehension as being fluent in Hindi while living in certain parts of India. He mentions that he would definitely be view as a native speaker of both Hindi and English in India, but he’s not entirely sure whether Americans would view him as a native speaker of English. The Indian dialect of English is more-so comparable to a British English. Although he believes that most people would obviously be able to see that he has been speaking English for all of his life, he wouldn’t rule out the possibility that someone thinks he is not an English-speaking native.

Arjun says he doesn’t find himself thinking about the fact that he is bilingual often, but acknowledges that it does have some benefits, such as looking good on his resume. He would definitely love to have his children speak be bilingual as well, which means living in a household

where two languages are regularly spoken. Even if his spouse spoke a third new language, he would also be happy having his kids learn all three of them, the more the merrier it seems.