

ENG124: Language and Society

Language in a Social Context: Linguistic Variation-2

Language-Dialect Distinction

- Can the distinction be stated in terms of numerical strength or linguistic criteria such as script, grammar, literary tradition?
- No, language-dialect distinction is a question of standardisation
- What is standardisation?
 - State intervention into language ecology through an explicitly defined language policy

Standardisation

- Engineering the language ecology of a region
 - through measures such as inventing scripts, or constructing dictionaries and grammars
 - or simply by promotion of one variety among a host of varieties as the “standard” through state controlled institutions such as education, or the media

Marginalisation

- Powerful vs. marginal language groups
 - Political and/or economic power and the power of decision making
 - A direct correlation between the “standard” and power on one hand and the “non-standard” and marginalisation on the other.
- Marginalisation is both a cause and an effect of language engineering.

A standard language

- An instrument of social /political power and control
- Functional elaboration and modernisation
- Institutions of government recruited to ensure this
- Literary canon and tradition
- Codification
 - Creation of a uniform norm through suppression of any kind of variation
- Standardisation as an ideology

Some Answers...

- Language-Dialect distinction — is the distinction real and tenable?
 - A question of standardisation
 - Engineering of the linguistic ecology by state-defined language policy
 - Marginalisation — another logical outcome

Some answers...

- What is dialect X a dialect of?
 - A matter of territorial divisions, which is a matter of political decision making
 - Sylheti: a dialect of Bangla or Assamese?
 - Chakma: a language in Bangla Desh and a dialect of Bengali in India
 - A matter of political expediency
 - Constituent assembly debates (CAD) on the status of Urdu in post independence India when Urdu was already being identified with Islam
 - What today counts as Urdu as opposed to Hindi, Hindi-Urdu, Hirdi, Hindustani, Hindavi, rekhta and a number of so-called languages, dialects and speech varieties has been a matter of controversy for a long time.
 - Urdu-e-mualla: an exalted cantonment (Babar in 16th C), zuban-e Urdu-e mualla, zuban-e Urdu-e shahi (18th C poets)

Zuban-e Urdu

- Middle Ages: Sauraseni Apabhramsha to Hind or Hindavi
- Aurangzeb's imperial headquarters in Aurangabad and in Shahjahanbad
- Dakani/Deccani of the poet Wali Dakani from Aurangabad and the Urdu-e mualla of Delhi converging to give us what eventually came to be known as Urdu.
- CAD debates on whether the language of the nation should be Hindustani or Hindi/Urdu

What is dialect X a dialect of?

- A Matter of political expediency
- Communities clamouring for their dialects or languages to be given the status of constitutionally recognized languages
- Three amendments in the 8th Schedule of the constitution of India since independence signifying the change of status of several varieties from dialects to languages (Maithili, Santhali, Bodo, Dogri)

The army and navy metaphor

- A language is a dialect with an army and a navy. (Weinreich)
 - Emergence of a variety as the standard language is a contingent, socio-economic and political phenomenon
 - A political power backed notion of “standard” language
 - All languages are dialects – its just that some dialects are more equal than the rest

Post-standardisation

Challenging the ideology of standardisation

- Increasing globalization of English
 - A resistance movement which challenges the standardising process
 - Emergence of new Englishes, a process which naturalizes the language in new geo-political contexts
 - A similar challenge faced by powerful languages the world over, including India

Post-standardisation

- The post-standard situation
 - New assertiveness of regional and “popular” (Vernacular) forms of speech
 - Draws attention to the heterogeneity on which the standard varieties are superimposed
 - Questioning the hegemony of the standard English across the world or of the standard Hindi in the northern belt of India.