**Lost In Translation: Why Some Languages May Not Be Sufficient To Express Meaning**

**By Ilaana Chakma**

I was talking to my grandmother over the phone a few months ago about how much I liked it when it rained in Bangalore as compared to Arunachal. In my mother tongue Chakma, when you want to say it’s raining, the literal English translation would be ‘it is bringing rain’. The funny part is there is no identification of the word ‘it’ and it could mean a lot of things – the sky or God or anything you want it to be. That is when it struck me that if I repeated the same thing in English to someone, they would be confused. But in Chakma, it is very apparent and obvious what the person means when they say ‘it’ – it is almost an unspoken understanding.

What exactly happens in this case is that we seem to be connected by a network of mutual understanding where a lot of things are implied even if they aren’t said. It is almost like we understand each other not because of how well we use words but mostly because we have been a part of the same experience. I realised how even though we feel some languages are insufficient, we can still use most of them to convey meaning to each other because a lot of communication also happens just through gestures and expressions.

However, if we looked at words like representation, individualism, sustainability, oppression – how would we use such words in our mother tongue? Is it that easy to convey what the word oppression means or is it easier to convey what it feels like to be oppressed? I think it is the latter. If I had to act out what oppression is – my grandparents would get it. But imagine me sitting there trying to find the right words to explain oppression – it would take ages. Also, even if they get what I mean, there isn’t any word translating to ‘oppression’ in my language, but there is a translation of ‘unjust treatment’. Somewhere, I feel we are all force-fitting experiences into this theoretical framework and model.

Individualism in my mother tongue is attributed to the act of being selfish. In social theory, individualism emphasizes the moral worth and individual actions of a person. It is a moral stance and a political philosophy that has layers to its meaning; but in Chakma, it is merely reduced to an experience or a feeling. The real meaning of what the word is in English gets lost because of translation. Also, words aren’t sufficient to convey what it really means, unless the person knows what the experience is like.

So, there is a huge gap between the theory of the word and how it is used in real life in my mother tongue. I am starting to wonder whether as a society, we are really a function of the knowledge-gap hypothesis – the theory that knowledge is not distributed equally throughout society – when it comes to even translations and communication. If my grandmother was exposed to the same critical theories and issues and was as informed about public affairs, would she find it easier to understand words like individualism, representation and oppression? Or is it just a function of meaning lost in translation?

Similarly, if my father were to have a conversation with my children, would he find it easier to explain the theory of the word individualism to his grand-children in Chakma, only because he has been exposed to these texts and understands their deeper connotations?

Now that I introspect, this is one reason why in my village in Arunachal, films and theatre do much better as communication tools during elections than speeches and rallies. I have noticed that people respond faster to theatre and films because they give them some sort of consolation of having the same experience. So in Chakma, ‘representation’ is a word that would refer to a leader. But how would you explain representation of the arts, or of mathematics, law or politics?

Language is a powerful tool to express one’s opinions and emotions but sometimes even too much of a tool can be a hindrance is getting meaning conveyed. New words, associations and phrases are formed in the English language every day – there were 500 words added to the Oxford dictionary in 2016. We see that the words are becoming more “politically correct” with words like “blind” being replaced by “visually impaired”. Is it because ‘blind’ is too harsh to use? Or have we as a society conditioned ourselves to make blind sound harsh? Similarly, the reason the word “breasts” is more socially acceptable than a four letter word rhyming with “noob” is because it is used in educating young students in biology textbooks. The latter, however, makes it seem derogatory. The problem is not with the word itself; it is in the meaning given to the word by us. If I were to translate the two words to my mother tongue, I would have the same translated word meaning.

Hence, languages are not sufficient to express meaning – in fact, sometimes they inhibit our general understanding of the meaning of a word due to added layers of social construction that give words a new meaning.