COLUMNS

Linguistic Colonialism: Learning English at the Expense of Our Own Languages

I RECENTLY came across an article about a man who defiantly ran an English-speaking course in a small town in Afghanistan despite constant threats from the Taliban who ruled there. He was gunned down in cold blood by those hard-line "Islamists" in their attempts to destroy every and any thing associated with the infidel West—The Big Bad West. As you dig deeper and deeper into Third World mentality, you discover an interesting contradiction: we hate and love the West, and all its associations, with the same intensity.

It is understandable, and I guess even acceptable, considering the situation. Most, if not all, Third World countries (the politically correct term would be "developing nations") have been colonies of one or more Western countries at sometime in their past.

These countries, including Pakistan, are postcolonial—a sensitive label which seems to have lost any clear-cut definition. And when the debate turns to language, the perplexity grows. Here arises the issue of imperialism and the postcolonial mindset. When generations of a country are subjected to oppression at the hands of a "superior" race, they are bound to become awestruck by those who regard themselves as superior. It is only natural that we admire those in power, and it is only natural that this admiration mutates into imitation. Postcolonial discussions always lead to talk of control.

Our former colonial masters, the British, have managed to retain control over us without actually being present among us because they control our institutions of education. Let's talk about the prevailing educational systems in the country today. There are two. Both of them are British, but one is modern and hip. An increasing number of students opt to do the GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education, O and A levels) rather than matriculation. Why? The answer is simple. The GCSE is foreign, taught the British way, and at the end you give a British exam and get a British score sheet. And we all know that anything with a foreign stamp is better than something Pakistani-made.

In the majority of Pakistan's private school systems, students are dis-

couraged from conversing in Urdu, in some cases they are even penalized. Yes, English should be spoken and practiced to ensure solid marks in examinations, but is it really that simple? I believe there is something more to it. We speak English because the language has become representative of education, modernity and etiquette. It is what separates us from the illiterate. Just as our colonial masters used the language to differentiate their educational standards from ours decades ago, we do the same today. The difference? The colonists subjugated us —we are subjugating our own kind. And in the middle of all this Urdu-English drama, the native tongue in at least one province, Punjab, has been completely disregarded. Anyone who publicly speaks Punjabi is a social embarrassment. Those of us who come from this province are guilty of thinking that Punjabi will automatically label us as uncivilized, uneducated goofs who just do not know any better. I honestly believe that for future generations the Punjabi language will be a distant memory, an emblem of the past.

Nor can we ignore the Western cultural domination. So, is this a new kind of colonialism where we let the former masters rule over us through cultural and linguistic domination? Renowned Kenyan novelist Ngugi Wa Thiong'o refused to write in the English language as a protest against the atrocities committed in his country by colonists. With this symbolic step he became a champion for those who oppose Western domination and cultural breakdown. We should let this be a lesson to us. Instead, we laugh at those who do not speak English fluently. How many times have we ridiculed our cricket players when they stammer through an interview?

I remember watching Thierry Henry, renowned footballer, go through an entire interview on ESPN (a globally syndicated American sports channel) in French with English subtitles running along the bottom of the screen translating his words. He did not feel compelled to prove his aptitude through a knowledge of English, but then again, he does not come from a postcolonial country torn with complexities and identity crises.

The postcolonial debate is exhausted in literary circles the world over, especially in former colonies such as ours. But this is more than just an issue of language, it has become a discourse on identity. Is it not somewhat disconcerting that Cambridge and Oxford have included Ghālib and Faiẓ in their literature syllabi, yet we are not taught these great poets in our own country's top literature programs? We study Irish, British, Russian, French, African, even Indian, writers. So much for heritage and pride. How many young people do you know who actually

read Urdu poetry and novels? I know two, and I have a deep-rooted respect for both of their literary abilities.

Take us back to the time when Urdu was the language of intellectuals. Bring us another Ḥalqa-e Arbāb-e-Ẕauq. Revive the beauty hidden under the layers of heavily-accented English. Bring us back our identity.

Language is one of the crucial factors when it comes to differentiating cultures and heritage. It is what makes you unique. English has established itself as the universal language, it is the language spoken by two major superpowers in the world: America and Britain. It is true that in order to progress and grow, one must be able to communicate fluently with the rest of the world, but we cannot do so at the expense of our own language. English is the language that brings the world together, our language is what sets us apart. ❑

—Amara Javed

[Gratefully reproduced from *The News International* (Karachi) (Internet Edition, Literati Section) 27 January 2008. Edited for the *AUS*.]

Killing Urdu on State Channel

To err is human the saying goes. But sometimes one has to pay heavily for the error, as I did recently. Switching on the television set was an error, and being agonized and tortured was the penalty I paid for it. It was our beloved PTV [Pakistan TV], of all channels under the sun, that I regret having tuned in to.

In addition to the usual nonsense, they had made special arrangements to show how to kill a national language on a state channel. It was not that I happened to watch the "stately" channel for the first time and was, therefore, dumbstruck to hear the "modernistic" (read mimic) and "creative" (read ridiculous) use of the Urdu language, but the deviant dialect of the standard language that they were broadcasting was an ugly hybrid of Urdu and English that I had never heard before, at least not on PTV.

I have been watching PTV since its good old days when viewers were called "*nāẓerīn*" in Urdu. Now it has been replaced by "viewers" in the new and ugly "Urdu" that PTV is promoting. I am sure that in those cracking-good times our national language must have had a word for weather, and, if my memory does not fail me, that word used to be "*mausam*" (or "*mausim*," for those who prefer the original Arabic pro-

nunciation). I am not too old to recall that there used to be a "*mausam kā ḥāl*" on PTV that has now been consigned to oblivion by the modern (read funny) "Urdu" phrase "weather report."

It had dawned on me long ago that a "break" was "*vaqfa*" in Urdu. I knew in primary school that in Urdu the English word temperature meant "*darja-e ḥarārat*." But never did I realize that the editors at PTV did not know as much Urdu as a fifth grader does. Or, perhaps, they have decided to anglicize Urdu for and on behalf of the masses that, due to their lack of being literate, are unable to do so.

The anglicization of Urdu at PTV and other Urdu channels has gone to such an extent that virtually every newsreader and anchorperson speaks an alien lingo that is purportedly Urdu. Some compeers or speakers do not utter Urdu in Urdu programs unless they are at a loss for words. Some time back I had to go through the agony of watching a few documentaries on PTV promoting tourism. Those were a real mess. The young man doing the commentary was ever so careful not to utter a single word of Urdu, except when it was necessitated by Urdu's "poor" grammatical structure, which needs words like *kā* (of), *hai* (is), *thā* (was), and *hōgā* (will be), etc. to complete a sentence. While introducing a place, for example, he would say, "Viewers! *ye ēk* splendidly beautiful place *hai aur* big tourist attraction *bhī hai*."

Maybe the big bosses at PTV view this as something that helps increase the channel's viewership? But a layman like me would dare to inform the sages enjoying positions in the ivory towers of PTV, and other Urdu channels for that matter, that poor, illiterate people do not understand the "Anglo-Pakistani" Urdu you are trying to pour into their ears.

It has now become the norm at PTV and other Urdu channels to give their programs English names, and if they are in Urdu at all, it is written mostly in roman script. The credits shown after the programs are in English. The commercials are in half-baked, half-bred Urdu. Even the tickers showing the days and times of programs to be telecast are in English. What a humble student like me fails to understand is how the common people are going to understand these messages? The majority of our teaming masses cannot read English.

The approach of polluting the national language is based on the assumption that the channel's viewership will increase internationally if the vocabulary used has an appeal for the foreign users; hence, use a version of Urdu that is sprinkled with English words and use a script for the tickers that is not local. One wonders why the top brass at the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) and other truly international channels did not come up with this brilliant idea? The BBC would have saved a lot

of money and effort over the decades by broadcasting programs in English tainted with Urdu words instead of running a special Urdu service.

All over the world we find cultural centers, special language programs, and special telecasts and broadcasts to introduce and popularize a specific language or culture. If all it took to capture an international audience was using a hybrid language, theories of education and learning a second language would have undergone a sea change. But, as every sane, educated person knows, teaching a foreign language or capturing a global audience or spreading a culture takes much more than a polluted vocabulary and a pseudo-intellectual approach. As a result of this faulty assumption, locals cannot fully understand what is being telecast, and capturing an international audience remains a fantasy as well.

It is easy to arrive at the conclusion that there is a big communication gap and only a tiny percentage of viewers fully understand what is being said on vernacular television channels in Pakistan. Slaughtering the national language cannot be allowed even if this assumption were true. In fact, this kind of mixture borders dangerously on pidgins and creoles. Hopefully, after anglicizing Urdu, PTV will not develop a desire to take part in the pidginization and creolization of Urdu, because Urdu as a language is too beautiful to be left at the mercy of the idiosyncrasies of those who know nothing about it.

So, popularizing Urdu and introducing PTV overseas is in for some serious brainstorming, and so is the policymaking that is aimed at ruining the national language. ❑

—Rauf Parekh

[Gratefully reproduced from the monthly *Akhbār-e Urdū* (Islamabad). March 2008. Edited for the *AUS*.]

Brahmans at Karbala

With the arrival of Muharram this year, I was reminded of an encounter I had with an unusual, intelligent young woman in Delhi who asserted that she was a Husaini Brahman. I recall referring in one of my addresses to Prem Chand's play *Karbalā*, which was based on a legend. The legend was about a group of eight Hindu brothers who had somehow reached Karbala determined to die fighting for the cause that Imām Ḥusain stood for. They fought bravely and sacrificed their lives in devotion to Imām Ḥusain. It was in this context that I was talking about Husaini Brahmans,

who seemed to have vanished from the social scene in India.

All of a sudden, a young woman in the audience stood up and challenged my statement. She said, "Here I am before you. My name is Nonica Dutt. I belong to a Husaini Brahman family." It was clearly a pleasant surprise for me, something like discovering a rare bird while walking through a jungle.

The young woman promised an exclusive meeting to enlighten me by providing interesting information about the Husaini Brahman background of her family, but the proposed meeting kept on being postponed for one reason or another. Finally, on my last day in Delhi, I received a call from her.

"Let's meet now," she said

"But I have no evening to spare for you. Today is the last day of my stay in your city," I informed her.

"But I'm already in the lounge and I must meet you," she said.

So we finally had a meeting. She entered my room with two large volumes under her arm. I proposed an in-depth discussion on my next visit, which I expected to make in a month or so. "But in the coming months I will not be in Delhi. I'm moving to Germany and will spend four months at Humboldt University." (Nonica Dutt taught history at Jawahar Lal University and had received a fellowship from Humboldt University. Hence she was on her way to Germany.)

"I told my mother about your comments regarding the Husaini Brahmans," she said, "and how I introduced myself as one. My mother inquired, 'Did you tell him that we don't perform the rituals Brahmans are obliged to perform. That we don't go to the temples?'"

"Should I presume from this," I asked, "that you've become Muslims."

"No, we're not Muslims," she exclaimed.

"Then what are you?" I inquired.

"We are Husaini Brahmans," she said with a certain sense of pride and added, "Now, I'll tell you about a sign each and every Husaini Brahman carries. On his or her throat there is a slash mark, which is indicative of the fact that he or she is a descendant of those Brahmans whose throats were cut in the Battle of Karbala." Then she told me about a ritual carried out on the birth of every child in her family. She said, "Among Brahmans, after childbirth, the ritual of *Moondan* is performed. In our family this ritual is performed in the name of Imām Ḥusain."

She then went on to tell me the historical facts. "I'll tell you about the history of our martyred forefathers." Pointing to the two books placed on the table she said, "Our entire history is preserved in these two books. When needed, I will quote from them." Considering their pale, worn-out

pages, the books, which were written in English, seemed to be centuries old.

The history of the Husaini Brahmans, as told by Nonica Dutt, begins with ten Brahmans setting out for Karbala determined to die fighting for Imām Ḥusain. Among them were Rahib Dutt and his seven sons who fought bravely and resolutely. With the blessings of Imām Ḥusain, they met their death in a heroic way. Rahib Dutt was the lone survivor of the battle. From Karbala he escaped to Kufa, where he stayed for some time. It is said that Rahib had the privilege of meeting the members of the Imām's family after the massacre. He introduced himself by saying, "I am a Brahman from Hindustan." The reply came, "Now you are Husaini Brahman. We will always remember you."

"Rahib went from Kufa to Afghanistan and from there came back to India where he stayed for a few days in Nankana." Nonica paused for a while and then spoke, "In the Sialkot district there is a town known as Viran Vatan. That place is our ancestral home. We are the descendants of Rahib Dutt. He had brought with him a hair of Imām Ḥusain, which is ensconced in the Hazratbal shrine in Kashmir." She then recited a few couplets from the books she had brought along with her, in which these incidents have been recorded. "These couplets," she said, "are very popular among the Husaini Brahmans."

Nonica shut the book and said, "Let me tell you that Sunil Dutt was also a Husaini Brahman. And the father of Nargis too was a Husaini Brahman."

She got up saying, "Now I must go."

"I think," I said, "after you return from Germany, I should make a point to come to Delhi so that you can introduce me to your father. I will perhaps be able to learn much more about your ancestors from him.

She said goodbye and left hurriedly. I had been under the impression that the story of the eight Brahmins was just a legend. But Nonica firmly believes that it is historical fact. And it is the belief of Nonica and her community that really matters. For them the event is a reality. ❑

—Intizar Husain

[Gratefully reproduced from *Dawn* (Karachi) (Internet Edition, Books & Authors Section) 20 January 2008. Edited for the *AUS*.]

Fact or Fiction?

Shad Azimabadi, who died in 1927, is counted among the unanimously

acknowledged masters of the Urdu ghazal. He has to his credit a number of oft-quoted couplets that speak to the popularity of his ghazals. For example:

tamannā'ōñ mēñ uljhāyā gayā hūñ
kẖilaunē dē kē bahlayā gayā hūñ

I have been entangled in desires
What toys to keep me calm!

sunī ḥikāyat-e hasti tō darmiyāñ sē sunī
na abtidā kī khabr hai na intehā maʿlūm

The story of life we heard from the middle
How it began, where it ended we know not.

Now the Khuda Bakhsh Library in Patna, India, has chosen to introduce him as a novelist as well. It has brought out a short novel entitled *Pīr ʿAlī* in which the compiler, Naqī Aḥmad Irshād, has claimed that Shād ʿAẓīmābādī is the author of the first novel in Urdu, published in 1876 under the title *Ṣūratu'l-Khayāl*. So, let us brace ourselves for a new controversy in Urdu. We already have a number of controversies, none of which have come to a decisive end. Who wrote the first short story in Urdu? Who was the first to write free verse? Who wrote the first prose poem? Who deserves to be called the first essayist? And above all, who was the first ghazal writer in the history of Urdu? Now we have to deal with the question of who the first novelist was. We cannot easily dismiss the claim made in favor of Shād ʿAẓīmābādī. It enjoys the backing of the Khuda Bakhsh Library, and the man who has made this claim is none other than the grandson of Shād ʿAẓīmābādī. The grandson is advocating the case of his grandfather.

In the preface of *Pīr ʿAlī*, Naqī Aḥmad Irshād says that Shād ʿAẓīmābādī had, in addition to the novel that is supposed to be the first written in Urdu, also written two others: *Badẖā Badẖāvā* in 1876 and *Afyūnī* in 1890–91. Both remained unpublished. As for the novel now published under the title *Pīr ʿAlī*, its genesis is a bit dubious. On the basis of the explanation advanced by Irshād, a person might well say that this novel is the result of the combined efforts of the grandfather and grandson.

Irshād explains that in Shād ʿAẓīmābādī's various prose writings he has recorded much about the events of 1857. That is understandable. Navāb Saiyad ʿAlī Muḥammad, now known as Shād ʿAẓīmābādī, was born in 1846. This means that at the time of the Rebellion of 1857 he was nearly eleven years old. At that impressionable age, the catastrophic events of 1857 must have cast deep shadows over him. Hence, his compulsion to

record what he had seen and what he had heard from his elders in this respect.

Irshād tells us that every time Shād wrote about the events of 1857 he talked about a mysterious man called Pīr ʿAlī who was deeply involved in the struggle against the Raj. Irshād selected from these writings the portions depicting this man and arranged them to create a novel. He says that he has only made some additions and deletions here and there according to the requirements of particular situations.

We can conclude from this statement that Shād ʿAẓīmābādī did not mean to write a novel. He merely wrote down what he knew and what he had heard about the events of 1857 with particular reference to Bihar. The credit for carving out a novel from these descriptions goes to Irshād. He saw in his grandfather's accounts the possibilities for forming a novel and constructing a personality that acted as the central character. He selected appropriate segments, rearranged them, made additions and deletions, and gave them a form. So here is a novel with two authors who happen to be grandfather and grandson.

The central character of this novel is a dealer in old books named Pīr ʿAlī. The book business acts as a cover for the more serious political business the character is trying to organize, namely, a revolt in Bihar against the British, in coordination with the fierce battle raging in other parts of India. He is successful in keeping the scheme secret until it matures enough to be launched as an overt enterprise. After some time he launches a revolt against the Raj, but by then the balance has already tilted in favor of the English. In Bihar, too, the revolt is soon crushed. Pīr ʿAlī is captured alive, tried and eventually hanged.

This book may be regarded as a fairly successful attempt to convert historical events into fictional form. We already have enough poetry inspired by the fateful events of 1857. A few short stories can also be traced. But here is a bold attempt to carve out a novel. It may be taken as a valuable contribution to the literature inspired by 1857. ❑

—Intizar Husain

[Gratefully reproduced from *Dawn* (Karachi) (Internet Edition, Books & Authors Section) 16 December 2007. Edited for the *AUS*.]