

CONVERGENCE AND DIVERGENCE IN EVERYDAY LIFE: VERNACULARISATION OF LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND RELIGION*

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Abstract

In the modern world, the language domain has wider relationship and applicability in various other fields. The language is used as a tool by the politicians, academics, translators, literary personae, various oral and visual media including the web media. Thus the concept of language and its functions have a very vast expansion from our earlier orthodox notions. The present work is intended to invite the attention of the language experts and researchers on the changing role and functions of language in this 21st century, with special emphasis on the language situation in India. The attitude towards language variation is shifting very fast across modern languages. The introduction of popular culture and media technology is accelerating this process. According to this perspective the meanings emanate from the producers as well as from the agency of the consumers. It is to be emphasized here that instead of seeing them in a confronting style we must develop a methodology that accounts for mutual intelligibility and transformation in linguistic domain and real world.

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Let me state at the very outset that this is not a strict academic presentation based on well-defined database or a well-drawn scientific research. I do not pretend to make it to be systematic or objective findings. I feel rather free in this atmosphere of the DLA annual conference with which I have been closely associating for long, to speak from my heart rather than from my head. Moreover, as I stand here to address you in the middle of 2019, my thoughts inescapably go back in history of my personal making as an academic. In this August, I am completing 50 years of teaching of language, literature and culture. This also prompts me to reflect up on what I have been doing all these years as an academic. Of course, I am not the right person to evaluate whatever little work I have done so far. But, may be, I can explain why and how I did it. Let me tell you this - whatever I have done has not been an outcome of any preplanned and a well thought-out academic design. It was just through a historical accident encounter that I came across the Hermann Gundert collections in the Tuebingn University; again it was by a chance accident that an American anthropologist Barbara Johnson somehow got the impression that I would be a competent partner in a translation project for Jewish Malayalam. While looking back, I also had the privilege of working with a young and enthusiastic team of teachers at the Sree Sankara University of Sanskrit, where I have the fortune of jointly building the department of Malayalam in its formative stage. The atmosphere of mutuality and sharing of knowledge that we shared enabled me to get connected with emerging issues and paradigms apart from having a fruitful academic life.

Among such formative factors is my rewarding association with the Dravidian Linguistic Association (DLA). I remember with special gratitude Dr. V.I. Subramoniam, Dr. G.K. Panikkar, Dr. A.P. Andrews Kutty and Dr. P. Somasekharan Nair who persuaded me to join DLA and remain an active member since its

inception. Now DLA has honoured me by kindly inviting to deliver the Lachhmi Jessaram Gidwani memorial lecture this year. I thank the present Dean of the DLA Professor Naduvattom Gopalakrishnan and the Council of Direction of ISDL for this generous gesture extended to me.

Now let me venture into the formal part of the presentation. I am not going to read out the full text which may be printed or digitalized after the Conference. I have titled this short presentation as 'Convergence and Divergence in Everyday Life: Vernacularisation of Language, Literature and Religion'.

The history of linguistics in India can be understood only in the linguistic and political backgrounds of postcolonial India. Among other things, the newly born independent India was hounded by a fear of disruption, through a linguistic revolution for language based identities. Many political leaders found the relevance of the issue of linguistic nationalism and used it for their political maneuvering and for remaining politically significant. The linguistic politics in India over the years kept the language issue alive in India and produced arguments in favour of diversities and pluralities. The three language formula was maintained in principle all through these years. Institutions like state sponsored Sahitya Academies symbolize the involvement of the states in linguistic affairs and promote their respective linguistic culture. However, critical questions like convergence or divergence has not been seriously discussed. There are reasons for apprehension- Majoritarianism advocates discussions about official language and national language. So there was a growing feeling that language area is prone to violence and division. Many nationalists wanted to have a common language to maintain India's unity. Only a very few leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru could see through this and formulate the three-language policy in India to counter this. As part of this project, India had several official languages and several language based provinces called linguistic

states. At that time, it was considered as a necessary evil. Now in 2019, when we look back the linguistic scenario, we are proud to see that modern Indian language are networking beautifully and illuminate each other. As a result, the translated novels from Bengali or Kannada or Punjabi are part of the curriculum of Malayalam studies and vice versa. There are several institutions and individuals who made definitive contributions to the linguistic health of India. Yes, multiplicity of languages is treated today as a blessing rather than a curse. The tower of Babel is no more a bane, but a blessing and multiple-language curriculum has become acceptable. Most developed and developing nations are promoting translation technology to move across boundaries of nationalities and knowledge systems. The term *translational* if properly discerned, it can speak of the dynamics involved in translation. Translation is not the art of finding the most equivalent replacement. It is the transformation of the concept to the new environment and in the new environment it has rather different network to display the meaning.¹

¹ Such an idea of translation has been transplanted into multi-disciplinary knowledge. Different knowledge systems and culture, in this understanding, do not stand apart, but converge to form a new world. We are familiar with translational medicine today, which is defined by the European Society for Translational Medicine (EUSTM) as follows:

"an interdisciplinary branch of the biomedical field supported by three main pillars: benchside, bedside and community. The goal of TM is to combine disciplines, resources, expertise, and techniques within these pillars to promote enhancements in prevention, diagnosis, and therapies. Accordingly, TM is a highly interdisciplinary field, the primary goal of which is to coalesce assets of various natures within the individual pillars in order to improve the global healthcare system significantly."

[<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2307502314000782>]

The contemporary lives of modern languages will speak of tremendous changes that have taken place in knowledge network, and many theories like the faithfulness to the original have become obsolete. Earlier, translation was limited to literary and linguistic conversion, but now it has been transplanted to multiple knowledge worlds including medicine.

In this understanding of translation, what Girish Karnad did can be described as translation par excellence. He moved from medium to medium with imagination and creativity. So for intellectuals of today translation is a major skill to be acquired. This is not the narrow path of literature or advertisement, but it has become an area bordering on creativity, imagination and aesthetic. Looking back at what has been happening in our universities and centres of knowledge, I can state with confidence that time is changing and this understanding of translation has started working and gaining ground in all forms of communication.

Department of humanities and social sciences along with sciences are interacting with each other to produce new knowledge through diverse translations. Naturally a historian of linguistic study can claim this as the identity of his/her discipline. There may be diverse ways of interpreting the linguistic codes and alternative interpretations/translations produce imaginative afterlives. We members of the society or language community have to learn to relish and respond to the ever-growing and changing language codes and innumerable possibilities of meaning production.

Translation Medicine thus presupposes a mode of transferring knowledge across boundaries of knowledge. Measurement and medication of critical illness are entrusted today not to human persons, but also to robots. Robots learn new knowledge, respond to technology and execute the procedures for the desired outcomes. This transfer of knowledge is called translational technology.

The Saussurian view of language held the language as not just a collection of linguistic objects, but a highly structured system in which each element is largely defined by the way it is related to other elements. But this led to a fundamental question – that is, every language is constantly changing and if every language is constantly changing, how can language continue to be a structured system of linguistic objects like speech sounds, words, grammatical structures and sentence structures since all of these are constantly evolving? Resolution to the ‘Saussurian paradox’ is subsequently found in the concept of variation. It is well recognized today that variation is neither peripheral nor insignificant in language, but forms a large part of the very structure of any language. Variation refers to an essential condition of any language which is used in heterogeneous manner even within a single community. Even the speech of a single person is not homogeneous across situations. There are several other determinants that play role in the variant enunciation of the language. The real task is to comprehend the system of enunciation, which is often described today as a cultural circuit. Culturalists foreground critical points like production, consumption, regulation, representation, etc in an attempt to demonstrate the cultural embedded-ness of language. This takes language beyond the questions of grammar. Variation thus becomes a central object of investigation today, and the investigations are going into the correlations with social variables like social class, caste, sex, etc. Questions of power thus become inseparable from the poetics and politics of language.

Language pedagogy is another discipline where linguistics has made wonderful progress. Language learning has become a technology and systematic knowledge industry. It has definite target, well defined methods of learning and evaluation systems. The context of learning has acquired greater importance today and

conventional hierarchies of language are irrelevant in contemporary world. Basic principles of democracy are influencing the mode of language learning and its pragmatic uses. Correctness of language has been determined by its acceptability. Interestingly, this is also a major area of anthropological studies. The praiseworthy anthropological investigations on human encounters with language, however, often see such encounters in isolation rather than in the context. Modern linguistic assertions on pragmatics, on the other hand, reiterate the value of connection. Connectivity is the key word, which makes it different from the historical method adopted by the early philologists. Connectivity replaces hierarchies with context bound variations. And variations are the prime drivers of language change.

I shall cite a classical example of Vaikom Muhammad Basheer, the widely admired Malayalam writer. His famous novel has its title as '*Ent'uppāppākkorāneyoṇṭārundu*'. This is one short sentence compressed into one word colloquially. For a regular student of Malayalam rewriting this into a sentence is a trouble. But for an ordinary speaker of this variety, it is the easiest thing to do. He/she may not identify sandhi changes and name them. For the students of this generation, linguistic technique is not the typology of sandhi; what matters for them is the function it performs. The capacity of language to produce unending variations is connected with the varied locations of its production like caste, class, gender, status, region and so on – and it is in an eternal state of unfolding. Linguistics in collaboration with social science has gone into this question and produced very valuable knowledge. One criticism often leveled against this approach is that it politicizes linguistic knowledge. But the question is, is it possible to envision linguistics and language pedagogy as a neutral and apolitical terrain in contemporary times? After all what is left out of the political? Look

at the importance that the language question gained in the new education policy of India. There are reasons to be optimistic in the light of the discussions on the recent Kasturirangan report. During the colonial times, for ordinary Indians, education was the tool of employment. Colonial masters taught a forward looking Indian to learn English at the cost of their Mother tongue. This renunciation of the native language rather produced an ideal Indian citizen. This idea of education remained in India even after gaining political independence. Even today, Indians learn new languages not out of their quest for knowledge but for the compulsions of getting decently employed. This can be seen very clearly in the mad rush for English medium schools. We cannot certainly overlook the value of English language. It connects us with the rest of the world, apart from providing new jobs and enabling access to wider sources of knowledge. I am not pessimistic about such a future. In spite of the aforesaid compulsions of education, our youngsters seem to be seriously caring for the indigeneity of their culture. The educative system and the language pedagogy must help them with methods, practices and theories to develop such a path of progress – remaining open to the wider world while firmly rooted in the native. Modern Indian languages too should remain open to the changes and prospects beyond their linguistic confines. Modern Indian languages (recognized official languages) should also remain conversant with the undeniable influences within including tribal languages for equality, inclusiveness and sustainability. This is possible through the principles of convergence and divergence across languages and across variations.

I hope you would agree with me that major linguistic innovations through variations are now taking place in the media, particularly in the digital media. It has become the third variety of human language, after the spoken and the written. In media

language, there is synergy of different sensibilities like sight, sound, smell, taste and touch. How they converge to form a new magical language and constructs reality can be seen in digital products. The digitally created reality in the films like Avatar or even our Bahubali or Pulimurugan was experienced as real by the viewers even when they are aware that they are digital constructions.

Similarly, religion as a social institution has always used effective interaction for its survival. The use of metaphors is central to religious communications of all kinds. In the Jewish tradition mystical experiences are conveyed through figures involving face-to-face posture – a mode of communication that affects both the parties. Through this mode of religious interaction humans are divinized and divinity is humanized. And we can see this across different religious traditions. This also reveals the fluid and mutually informing relationship between religion and popular culture. The language of popular culture thus resists and maintains religion; inversely religion resists and maintains popular culture. The meanings emanates from the producers as well as from the agency of the consumers. While shaping the world, they are as much as being shaped by the world. Such a connection could be seen in even what are categorized and separated as secular and religious. Rather than seeing them as radically and mutually-rejecting opposites, the secular is seen shaping religious in significant ways today, the religious inversely fashions the secular in varied forms. Both are entangled in a life of simultaneity with significant convergences as much as divergences in their language.²

² I am thankful to Dr. V.J. Varghese for initiating constructive suggestion on this subject.

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