Why language matters

As the particular language we learn constitutes us and our world, our relationship with it has to be deep

RAJEEV BHARGAVA

The recent emotional outburst by Tamil speakers against the perceived threat of Hindi being imposed on them compels us to ask: why does language matter so much to us? Why are we deeply attached to a particular language? Why do we identify with it so strongly?

According to one theory of the nature and importance of language, it is an instrument by which we describe the world outside it. We have ideas in our heads, and language, consisting of signs – marks or sounds – is needed only to communicate these ideas to others. Our mental representations are private, but become public once words are used to designate them. We convey our thoughts to others in and through words. If this is the only function of language – to designate, describe and communicate things and thoughts that exist independently of it, in order to make them public – why would anybody be attached to a particular language? Can't this job be performed by *any* language?

So, this account fails to explain our deep attachment to a particular language, our mother tongue. It doesn't explain the emotional intensity with which people fight for their own language. Is there an account of language that can?

Objects and relations

The 'constitutive theory' by the great philosopher Charles Taylor does. According to this theory, pre-linguistic humans had already begun to express themselves, but when they became language users, they changed fundamentally. Language helped them articulate explicitly what was earlier somewhat vague and inchoate. It changed the nature of their thought. Language makes certain features of an entity more salient than others, pushes some into the background, while foregrounding others. As we fix our attention only on some features, we draw boundaries, make distinctions, no matter how rough, fluid or porous. We contrast them with other things. To take

a simple example from the English language, when we sit at a table, we use a material object with a flat top with one or more legs that serves a range of purposes such as eating, writing, meeting, and so on, and different from, say, a bench or a stool that might look similar but fulfils different purposes. These particular purposes and activities are part of the meaning of the term ' table', crucial to learning how to use it. None of this is possible without a certain kind of reflective, focussed awareness which literally brings into existing a piece of wood *as* a table. So, the word 'table' brings a new thought, a new social object and a new set of activities into being. Without that term or its equivalents, the sociocultural object, table, would not exist. It is in this sense that words, thought and the world are constitutively linked.

Just as the objects that surround us are linguistically constituted, so too are our relations with one another. For instance, learning the use of the word 'teacher' and 'student' is to learn a whole gamut of social relations crucial to the practice and institution of education. It also helps constitute how those performing these roles (teachers and students) may stand in relation to each other – formal or informal, friendly or withdrawn, casual or serious, and so on. Furthermore, language constitutes not only a web of power-laden or power-free social relationships but also new emotions. For example, anger experienced by non-linguistic animals is different from indignation which depends on a grasp of what is just and unjust. To admire someone is more than just being attracted to her; it is to see her as having exceptional virtues or achievements. We don't just desire things or are repulsed by them but also evaluate, by

a standard, which desires are worthy and which among all worthy entities are of even higher worth. This recognition of a standard, of the distinction between correct and incorrect, morally right and wrong, a specifically human characteristic, is also constituted by language. In sum, unlike the purely physical, chemical or biological world, the human world is word-laden, shot through with language. We are, as Professor Taylor puts it, language animals, living in a dimension in which other animals do not, the linguistic dimension.

The attachment to one language

Another feature of language to which the constitutive theory draws our attention is its strong communitarianism. Word-meaning is created and recreated in speech, in conversation and dialogue with others. It follows that a language would not exist or grow without a speech community, a community of language users. So, Tamil is sustained by and grows within the specific community of Tamil speakers, so also Bengali or Hindi. And it is not just the speech community which shapes and creates language, but language which constitutes and sustains the speech community. Since thousands of languages exist and are nourished by its speakers, different linguistic vocabularies imply different ways of constituting and experiencing the world; each having different feelings, concerns, sensibilities, aspirations and so on. Language makes us what we are. Specific languages make us the specific creatures that we are.

So, our own language matters to us because it constitutes us and our world, our own specific way of being in the world. Language makes us at home in the world. In a manner of speaking, we dwell comfortably only

in our own particular languages.

Because the particular language we learn constitutes us and our world, our relationship with it simply has to be very deep. And we all feel a special bond with all those who speak the same language. Just imagine the alienation of, say, a rural Tamil speaker who lands unprepared in American English-speaking Texas, and imagine equally his relief and elation if he ever finds a Tamil-speaker there! Fifty years ago, Tamilians probably felt similarly in Punjab!

So, the constitutive theory explains the deep attachment people have to particular languages. It explains why, when a particular set of language-speakers fear a threat to their language, they respond with indignation. They fight to defend it.

What does not follow, however, is that languages are self-contained entities. Instead, they are, as the sociologist Steven Lukes puts it, "clusters or assemblages of heterogeneous elements with varying origins", dynamic constellations in a moving galaxy, intermixing, borrowing from one another, being shaped and in turn shaping one another. The demand for purity is an enemy of language growth and innovation. Consider the Sanskrit term 'puja'. It has been suggested that it may have not Indo-European but Dravidian roots deriving from the Tamil word '*pu*' for flowers. How many of us know the Sanskrit word 'Veda', or 'vid', is linked to 'wit' and 'witness', the English 'daughter' to *dugdha* (milk), or 'free' linked etymologically to Sanskrit '*preeta*' (love)? Languages which now seem radically distinct from each other have evolved together over a long, interconnected global history.

One must remember the ease and dedication with which people born in one linguistic community embrace languages different from their own. Indeed, we can be attached to more than one language. Just think of the Hebrew/English-speaking Indologist David Shulman's love for Tamil and Telugu. Not to speak of the passionate bilinguality of good translators. So, while deep attachment to one's language is understandable, the pathological obsession with which people defend its purity, uniqueness and superiority is unwarranted, pathetic and unforgivable.

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Artificial Intelligence, the law and the future

AI-driven tech will become counterproductive if a legal framework is not devised to regulate it

G.S. BAJPAI & MOHSINA IRSHAD

In February, the Kerala police inducted a robot for police work. The same month, Chennai got its second robot-themed restaurant, where robots not only serve as waiters but also interact with customers in English and Tamil. In Ahmedabad, in December 2018, a cardiologist performed the world's first in-human telerobotic coronary intervention on a patient nearly 32 km away. All these examples symbolise the arrival of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in our everyday lives. AI has several positive applications, as seen in these examples. But the capability of AI systems to learn from experience and to perform autonomously for humans makes AI the most disruptive and self-transformative technology of the 21st century.

If AI is not regulated properly, it is bound to have unmanageable implications. Imagine, for instance, that electricity supply suddenly stops while a robot is performing a surgery, and access to a doctor is lost? And what if a drone hits a human being? These questions have already confronted courts in the U.S. and Germany. All countries, including India, need to be legally prepared to face such kind of disruptive technology.

Challenges of AI

Predicting and analysing legal issues and their solutions, however, is not that simple. For instance, criminal law is going to face drastic challenges. What if an AI-based driverless car gets into an accident that causes harm to humans or damages property? Who should the courts hold liable for the same? Can AI be thought to have knowingly or carelessly caused bodily injury to another? Can robots act as a witness or as a tool for committing various crimes?

Except for Isaac Asimov's 'three laws of robotics' discussed in his short story, 'Runaround', published in 1942, only recently has there been interest across the world to develop a law on smart technologies. In the U.S., there is a lot of discussion about regulation of AI. Germany has come up with ethical rules for autonomous vehicles stipulating that human life should always have priority over property or animal life. China, Japan and Korea are following Germany in deve-

loping a law on self-driven cars.

In India, NITI Aayog released a policy paper, 'National Strategy for Artificial Intelligence', in June 2018, which considered the importance of AI in different sectors. The Budget 2019 also proposed to launch a national programme on AI. While all these developments are taking place on the technological front, no comprehensive legislation to regulate this growing industry has been formulated in the country till date.

Legal personality of AI

First we need a legal definition of AI. Also, given the importance of intention in India's criminal law jurisprudence, it is essential to establish the legal personality of AI (which means AI will have a bundle of rights and obligations), and whether any sort of intention can be attributed to it. To answer the

question on liability, since AI is considered to be inanimate, a strict liability scheme that holds the producer or manufacturer of the product liable for harm, regardless of the fault, might be an approach to consider. Since privacy is a fundamental right, certain rules to regulate the usage of data possessed by an AI entity should be framed as part of the Personal Data Protection Bill, 2018.

Traffic accidents lead to about 400 deaths a day in India, 90% of which are caused by preventable human errors. Autonomous vehicles that rely on AI can reduce this significantly, through smart warnings and preventive and defensive techniques. Patients sometimes die due to non-availability of specialised doctors. AI can reduce the distance between patients and doctors. But as futurist Gray Scott says, "The real question is, when will we draft an artificial intelligence bill of rights? What will that consist of? And who will get to decide that?"

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SINGLE FILE

The merits of a free ride

The Delhi government's proposal encourages the use of public transport and is gender-inclusive

AKRITI BHATIA

The Delhi government's proposal to make metro and bus travel free for women not only encourages women to use public transport more, but also allows them to occupy public spaces more and exercise their right to work and commute much more freely.

According to various studies, women's choices (and often those of their spouses and families) about work are determined by their commuting experience, including the availability of modes of transport, distance of the workplace from their residence, presence of other women during commute, and safety of the overall route. For many families, it is the cost of commute that determines their choice of work.

A recent report by Deloitte revealed that female labour force participation fell to 26% in 2018 from 36.7% in 2005 amidst the larger unemployment crisis. A move like this could therefore increase productivity and women's participation in the economy.

More importantly, this move could make the Delhi metro (a state-of-the-art, air-conditioned public mode of transport) accessible to working-class women for whom the metro has always been an aspirational vehicle. Given that the principal logic of any public service is that it should be inclusive, free (or at least inexpensive) access to metro trains and buses must also necessarily extend to the urban working poor, students, the differently abled, and senior citizens – albeit with an option of self-exclusion for those who can afford it. Post metro fare hikes in 2017, ridership dropped by over three lakh passengers per day, owing to increased unaffordability.

Ecologically too, in a polluted city like Delhi, universalising cheap access to public transport and disincentivising private vehicles as much as possible is the need of the hour.

Finally, those arguing that this move would reinforce the idea that women are the 'weaker sex' often turn a blind eye to the notion of equality when it comes to acknowledging large gender pay gaps, how women rampantly indulge in unpaid labour, or how public spaces are visibly gendered (there is a near absence of women on the streets of Delhi after a particular time).

This is not to say that the government's proposal will automatically lead to safer environments for women. It must be supplemented with efforts towards greater capacity building, increased frequency of metros and buses, provision of all-women's coaches and buses, street lighting, stepping up last-mile connectivity, deployment of women guards, and so on. And most important is the need for radical attitudinal shifts. Discussing the merits of a proposal like this and learning from examples around the world is important rather than attacking it the minute it is announced.

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DATA POINT

The toss factor

Tosses are considered important in cricket, as captains decide whether to bat or bowl first depending on the condition of the pitch. Overall, only 46% of the teams that won the toss went on to win the game across World Cups. While the toss did not always play a pivotal role in the outcome, it could have been a factor when the nature of the wicket changed during the course of the game

Host	Year	Matches *	Chose to bat first (%)	Chose to chase (%)	Won toss & match (%)	Chose to bat, won match (%)	Chose to chase, won match
England	1975	15	40	60	46.7	50	44.4
England	1979	15	13.3	80	33.3	0	41.7
England	1983	27	51.9	48.1	51.9	57.1	46.2
India, Pakistan	1987	27	40.7	59.3	40.7	63.6	25
Australia, New Zealand	1992	39	41	53.8	59	62.5	61.9
India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka	1996	38	52.6	39.5	34.2	40	33.3
England	1999	42	33.3	61.9	40.5	35.7	46.2
South Africa	2003	54	48.1	42.6	42.6	57.7	34.8
Carribean	2007	51	33.3	64.7	47.1	47.1	48.5
India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh	2011	49	71.4	24.5	44.9	48.6	41.7
Australia	2015	49	51	46.9	53.1	52	52.2
England	2019	13#	23	77	46.15	33	30.76

*Includes abandoned matches | #Up to the India vs Australia match on June 9

■ In the first two editions of the World Cup in England, bowling first was the popular choice. Choosing to chase a target was also popular in the 1987, 1992, 1999 and 2007 editions	■ Batting first was a popular choice in 1996, but it was in 2011 that taking first strike was almost the norm. Both these editions were played in Asian conditions	■ Winning the toss isn't always a good thing. But in the 1983 and 2015 editions, winning the toss paid off a little more than 50% of the time. In 1979 and 1996, teams that won the toss went on to win barely one third of those games	■ The 1992 edition, held in Australia and New Zealand, saw 59% of the games won by teams that won the toss. This is the highest of the 12 editions	■ In 2019 so far, chasing has been the preferred choice. But teams have lost a higher percentage of games trying to chase a target

Compiled by Richie Lionell, Gramener Inc.

FIFTY YEARS AGO JUNE 11, 1969

Secret of P.M.'s freshness

Mrs. Indira Gandhi told Afghan journalists here [Kabul] to-day [June 10] that she derived her strength to carry the heavy burdens of office as Prime Minister from two sources, the mountains and the people. The Prime Minister had been asked by a correspondent here about the secret of her "astounding freshness" despite the fact that she had to carry the heavy burdens of a vast country like India. Mrs. Gandhi replied: "I have known no other life. I have been involved from the earliest stage in the freedom struggle. I think what we are doing in India is a continuation of that struggle because we have to safeguard that freedom against both external and internal dangers. When one wants to do something and feels very strongly about it, one always derives strength to do it." After a pause she said she was a "child of the mountains" and derived strength from them. She also drew energy from the people.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JUNE 11, 1919.

Bengal Jails.

To-day [June 11] the Calcutta 'Gazette' contains the resolution on Bengal Jail Administration for last year. 83,207 prisoners were admitted to the Bengal jails during last year, being less by 1,500 admitted the previous year. The general health conditions were unfavourable, 3,426 cases of influenza having occurred. The manufacture of quinine tablets continued to be the important industry in jail and [Rupees] 3 ½ lakhs worth of quinine was sold. Juvenile jail at Alipore continues to do excellent work. Further improvements have been made in the school where reading, writing arithmetic and freehand drawing are now taught by a complete staff, while the physical training has produced an excellent effect on the health and spirits of the boys.

CONCEPTUAL

Vote trading

POLITICS

This refers to any manner of voting where people agree to vote in certain ways in which they would not have voted otherwise in exchange for immediate or future benefits. A certain political party that is in Opposition, for instance, may decide to support a certain legislation that it would not have supported otherwise in exchange for favours it expects to receive from the ruling party. Vote trading is considered to be unethical by some political observers who have a problem with the purely transactional nature of such voting. While common in the political arena, vote trading is also present in other places like big businesses and other large organisations.

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