Standard and Non-Standard Language: the Teacher's Stance

We often hear comments like, "Ignorant people speak *ashuddh* [impure] language," "That person can't even pronounce the retroflex *n*, and says *pani-loni*.," "These days there's no point in sending children to Marathi medium schools—leave alone the children's, even the teachers' language is *ashuddh*."

The statement "So and so speaks *ashuddh* Marathi makes sense only if that person is not a native Marathi speaker. One can use the word *ashuddh* to refer to the Marathi speech of a foreigner like myself. But how can we use it in regard to the speech of a genuine native speaker, who has been using the language since childhood? So sentences like "*mya kam kel* '" "*tyo manus tit gelta*," "*tye lok l i gvad boltyati*" are not *ashuddh;* they are non-standard.[1]

Now the question arises: how did the standard and non-standard varieties of a language develop? Even experts in linguistics cannot give a definitive answer to this question, but roughly we can say something on the following lines. First of all, a language is always changing. Pronunciation changes, new words come into the language, old words fall out of use; sentences structures, prefixes and suffixes change. After some time the language changes so much that out of a single language several languages develop. In this way, Marathi, Hindi, Gujarati and most other North Indian languages all dev eloped out of Sanskrit. After Marathi came into existence it too underwent changes. Today we cannot easily read the *Jnanesvari*, a thirteenth century text. We need to make a special study of it, or read it along with a modern translation. In comparison, the abhangas of Tukaram from the seventeenth century are much easier to read, but there too we sometimes have difficulty understanding the words or the grammar.

Just as language changes over time it also changes over space. That is, it varies from place to place. There is a saying in Marathi, *bara kosav r bhasha b d lte* {"a language changes every twenty-four miles.") Today although the saying is no longer literally true, its general point is still valid. If someone says, *mi k run rahilo*, we immediately recognize that he is from Vidarbha. Similarly, we can often recognize someone from Malwan or Kolhapur.

Just as language varies according to place it also varies according to social group within a single area. It is often thought that in Indian languages speech varies according to caste, but in a study I did twenty years ago I discovered that for Marathi, at least, this is not the case. What I found in the survey was that in Marathi speech varies mainly according to education rather than caste. This means that no matter what caste a person is from, if he is educated he will use the standard variety of the language. The most interesting thing is that the speech of a person of limited education will be a mixture of

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[1] The standard variants would be *mi kam kel . to manus tithe gela hota. te lok phar god boltat.*

standard ands non-standard forms. For instance, he might sometimes say *lok boltat*, sometimes l*ok boltyat* {but never *lok boltyati*.)

Now we have to ask ourselves an important question: how does a particular variety of a language come toibe recognized as the standard? The answer is that in the political and cultural life of a linguistic area, a particular region becomes dominant, and within that region a particular class becomes dominant. Thus the speech of that class gains cultural prestige—that is, it becomes the standard. In the case of Marathi , in the eighteenth century, during the rule of the Peshwas, Pune became the political and cultural center of Maharashtra. So the language of the educated class of Pune came to be recognized as the standard. In this process, some words and forms that once were considered standard came to be recognized as non-standard. For instance, today if anyone giving a speech used the word *l i* instead of *pusk l* {both mean 'very'}, people would laugh; but in the thirteenth century Jnanesvar himself used *l i*.

Thus it is clear that if it is only a matter of historical accident that a particular variety of a language becomes the standard, it makes no sense to refer to that variety as *shuddh* and all others as *ashuddh* . Actually, these so-called *ashuddh* varieties are as logical and rule-governed as the standard variety. Let us look more closely at the speech of the majority of the people in Western Maharashtra—a variety that we could describe as the 'standard non-standard'. First of all, let us consider the example given above: *mya kam kel* ['I did the work.'] In standard Marathi we say *ti kam k rte* ['she does the work'].But in the past tense we require the *k rmani pr yog:*, so we say *tini*, or *tin* instead of *ti*: *tini kam kel* . But with the first person pronoun *mi*, this change does not take place: *mi kam k rte,, mi kam kel* . In rural speech, on the other hand, this change in case is signaled by the use of *mya* instead of *mi*., as *mya* indicates that the instrumental postposition *ni* is understood to follow. That is, the form *mya* is, if anything, logical and is actually closer to the old literary language.

Sometimes this rural speech clearly reflects social customs ad mores. For instance in rural speech the words *mavl n* [aunt—maternal or paternal] or *atya [paternal aunt*] are used for 'mother-in-law instead of the word *sasu* which is used among Brahmans. This reflects the practice among the bahujansamaj [the non-Brahman castes], of a girl marrying her father's sister's son (so her father's sister becomes her mother-in-law. For the same reason, among these castes a girl's father's sister's son is called her *mehuna* [from *m ithun*—someone she can marry] and a man's mother's brother's daughter is called *mehuni*.

Now let us see how pronunciation in rural dialects is rule-governed. We cannot look at all the rules of the'standard non-standard,' but will confine ourselves to three examples.

1. At the beginning of a word and in the middle of a word *ye* is used instead of *e*. For example: *yek* instead of *ek*. *dyev* instead of *dev*.

2. At the beginning of a word or in the middle of a word *v* or *v* is used instead of *o*. For example: *v l* instead of *ol* , *gv d* instead of *god.*

3. The vowel or *i* is inserted in a conjunct consonant occurring at the beginning of a word. For example: *p rtap* instead of *pr tap*, *gir th* instead of *gr nth.*

Rural speech is not only logical and rule-governed, it has strong emotional connotations for its users. In fact, the speech of childhood —be it non-standard or standard—has indissoluble links with the experience of childhood. Sometimes hearing even a single word of one's childhood speech will bring back happy –or bitter— memories. A Marathi man once gave me a very vivid example of this from his own experience. He had left India and settled in London. Occasionally he had an opportunity to talk Marathi but for the most part he used English. Then one day he met a woman relative who had come from India. In the course of the conversation she used the word *ishsh*—a word impossible to translate, but one expressing a kind of feminine shyness. "Say it again, say it again," he told her. That is to say, hearing the word brought to mind tender memories of the womenfolk in his childhood home.

Similarly, those speakers who spoke a rural dialect in childhood and later switched to the standard often feel pleasure or a sense of affinity when they hear their childhood dialect. The famous rural writer Anand Yadav once told me that just hearing *ay* instead *ai* [mother] touches his heart. But on the other hand, if a person's childhood experience has been one of hardship, suffering or humiliation, he may not want to hear his own dialect, and if he does hear it, he is likely to feel sorrow, shame or anger.

On the whole, there is no question that rural dialect is a powerful form of language, fully deserving our respect. Then you might well ask: if rural dialect has so many virtues, what is the need for a standard variety of a language? In answering this questions we must keep in mind that there are two kinds of standard language—spoken and written. For a particular spoken variety of a language to become recognized as the standard there is no need for any committee to sit down and make a decision. In the course of linguistic interaction that variety comes to have the status of the standard. Just as people copy the dress of the elite class of society, so they also copy the speech of the elite. Tat means that even if tomorrow the government declared that from such and such a date the rural dialect of Marathi would be recognized as the standard, such a declaration would be unlikely to have much effect on the way people speak. Without a fundamental social change there is not going to be any change in the matter of which class will set the norms of speech prestige.

However, in the matter of written language the situation is somewhat different. In Maharashtra the Board of Literature and Culture determines the rules for the written standard. Of course, these *anusvar* rules are based on the spoken standard, but the details of orthography—the use of the, the rules governing vowel length, etc. are determined by

the Board. Moreover, once the rules are announced, prestigious institutions and individuals make an attempt to follow them.

Now let us look again at the question we asked earlier: what is the need for the standard? If an individual wishes to move in elite society, it is advantageous for him to use standard speech—or to be able to use it when required. For one thing, if he doesn't use the standard there may be times when he is misunderstood. Moreover, if he uses a rural dialect people's attention will be drawn to the dialect rather than to the content of his speech. If he does not want that to happen it is more convenient for him to use the standard variety.

In personal interaction which language variety one wants to use is a matter for that person to decide. However, in the case of written language the question is not confined to the individual but concerns the whole society, and there is a real need for written language to be standardized. In newspapers, non-fiction writing, in courts, business and technology it is important that language be unambiguous. It is important that all persons working in a particular field use the language of that field in the same way. This facilitates communication among themselves. This means that the variety of language to be used, the meanings of words and the style of writing should be fixed. In law a change of a word, or the presence or absence of a comma can have serious consequences. In computer technology there is absolutely no tolerance for ambiguity in the use of terminology or symbols. This unambiguous language ius, of course, the standard.