CAN THE MASTERY OVER 'MOTHER TONGUE' FACILITATE EASY ACQUISITION OF 'OTHER TONGUE'?

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses a claim that if one has mastery over one's mother tongue, one can acquire any foreign language easily. The premise behind such statement appears to be grounded in the translation and finding out of quick equivalents of mother tongue's linguistic substance in the foreign tongue or second language. A theoretical attempt has been made to translate a sentence of Urdu in English, and discuss, in the light of it, whether it is easy to learn one language fromthe mastery of another language.

KEYWORDS: Analytic, English, Inflection, Morphological Typology, Mother Tongue, Other Tongue, Synthetic, Urdu, Word Order

INTRODUCTION

Recently a Professor of linguistics made a statement in his keynote address that 'if you have mastery over your mother tongue, you may easily acquire the other tongue' (in the 4th English National Conference, organised by the Department of English, Maulana Azad National Urdu University on 17th February in MANUU Hyderabad).Ever since I listened to this statement I wanted to examine it and see whether it stands in the theoretical argument let alone in experimental verification. I believe that the statement requires some evidence for substantiation. I do not know if he made the statement on the basis of some experiments or it is just an assumption which sometimes gets solidified in our own beliefs.

If we accept that the complete acquisition of mother tongue helps in easy acquisition of foreign tongue,then let us dissect the assumption behind it. The premise seems to be groundedin the translation of mother tongue's words, expressions and sentences in foreign tongue (or other tongue, second language etc.) while learningit. Indeed, it is observable at the lexical level, that is, equivalent words or cognates in foreign tongue of mother tongue can be found out easily, unless there are no cognates for certain words, because of cultural, social, religious, scientific and technological reasons. However, the process of finding similar expressions in meaning for idioms and phrases become somewhat laborious and difficult. Least is left to surmise, if one language does not possess some sounds and the other has those sounds, then the acquisition of sound system itself poses problems, since it is the sounds that we learn first even if we learn a foreign language. For example, if /z/ or /zha/, /b/or /bh/, /g/or /gh/ and so on, do not or any one of these does not exist in any language, then the learner of the foreign tongue requires learning them necessarily, which is not that easy.

However, here, I would like to draw attention to the sentence conversion aspect from mother tongue to other tongue or foreign tongue.

For example, the word order in sentences is free in some languages and it is fixed in some other languages. In other words, in some languages the change in the order of words does not bring any change in the meaning of a sentence, whereas the change in the order of words brings change in the meaning in some languages.

If we accept the hypothesis proposed that the one who hasmastery over their mother tongue can easily acquire the other tongue, then it must be found out, whether this will stand in case of the acquisition of foreign tongue, the word order of which is fixed, from the help of mother tongue, the word order of which is free, or vice versa. Can oneacquire theforeign tongue or other tongue easily?

Since we know we speak in sentences whether complete or broken; then, is it easy to translate the free word order to fixed word order sentences? Suppose, the mother tongue of a person has a free word order, and he/she is used to shifting the word order according to his/her will; can he/she do the same in the other tongue? Or, conversely, aperson who is used to fixed word order, will he/she be able to easily acquire the word order of the foreign tongue which is free? Will he/she not get confused? Hence the argument that the 'complete acquisition of the mother tongue can guarantee the easy acquisition of the other tongue'raises some serious linguistic questions. Nevertheless, unless it isempirically studied, one cannot put forth any proposal or assumption.

According to Robert McColl Millar, linguists categorize languages not only according to genetic relationship, but also according to *type*: unrelated languages can be similar in their phonological, morphological, and syntactic structures (43).

In terms of categorisation according to type, the languages are said to be synthetic, analytic, polysynthetic, isolating, fusional, agglutinative, and so on. The categorisation according to the type often takes into account the morphology of the languages.

William Croft quoting Sapir discusses morphological typology of the languages, in the words, 'Sapir distinguished three language types in terms of the numbers of morphemes: **analytic** (one morpheme per word); **synthetic** (a small number of morphemes per word); and**polysynthetic** (a large number of morphemes particularly roots, per word' (46).

Rochelle Lieber discussing various types of languages according to morphological typology observes that an isolating or analytic language is one in which each word consists of one and only one morpheme; an agglutinative language is one which has complex words, and in which words are easily segmented into separate morphemes and each morpheme carries a single chunk of meaning;afusional language is one which allows complex words, but its morphemes are not necessarily easily segmentable; and a polysynthetic language is one in which words are frequently extremely complex, consisting of many morphemes, some of which have meanings that are typically expressed by separate lexemes in other languages. Vietnamese is as an example of an isolating language, Turkish is a close example of agglutinative language, Latin is an example of fusional language, and Nishnaabemwin is a language that can be characterized as polysynthetic(132-134).

The language categorisation according to type has often taken into account the morphological typology as discussed and quoted above. However, the phonological and syntactic aspects are also taken into consideration to categorize languages.

Millar observes, 'A purely *synthetic* language describes the function of a phrase within a clause only according to form…. In highly synthetic languages, element order is flexible because denotative meaning is represented by word form rather than position in the clause. At the other end of the scale, context alone reveals the relationship between clause elements in a purely analytic language. A language of this type must employ a rigid element order system' (43-44).

Now I feel that it is very difficult to categorise languages strictly as any one of the above. The features, with which these types are made up, may overlap among the languages which we have categorised as one or the other. However, there is no denying the fact that the dominant features or characteristics of one type in a given language may determine its categorisation.

Let us examine whether the statement that'mastery of mother tongue ensures easy acquisition of the other tongue' stands in case of Urdu and English.

Though English happened to be traced also as the synthetic language in its old form, it is now considered as analytic type of language.

Languages change, and English possesses a very distinct history in its change across and over a period of time. The changes in English like any other living language could be traced in all its systems: phonetic, phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic. Every aspect of English went through change. However, one of the obvious changes that any student of the history of the development and evolution of the English language would tell is the change in English becoming a language which comes to heavily rely on the order of the words in a sentence than the word form. That is, English had been an inflectional language earlier and it had a free word order. However, today, it has done away with most of its inflectional characteristics and has come to mostly rely on word order in communicating message and meaning.

Dennis Freeborn observes, 'English has become a much more analytic language since the OE period, that is, its structures depend upon strings of separate words, and not on the inflection of words. An inflecting language is called synthetic.'(420).

In the light of the above observations Urdu can be called a synthetic language, whereas English is an analytic language. Nevertheless, one cannot claim that English is purely an analytic language for English still has features of inflection in its different word classes.

However, here we are concerned with the concept of how English has come to heavily rely on fixed word order; whereas Urdu is flexible in respect of its word order.

Let us consider the following example from Urdu and see ifUrdu's mastery can ensure easy acquisition of English. Or the example in reality can be used for native English speaker, whether the mastery of English can ensure his/her easy learning of Urdu? It needs to be practically studied to be realised, but the theoretical example below suffices to highlight the point that I wish to present to contend the claim. Please note how Urdu which has free word order can behave and how we can juggle with the words, yet convey the same meaning.

For example,

- *Maene Usko Roti Diya* (I him bread gave)

- *Maene Roti Usko Diya*(I bread him gave)

- *MaeneDiya Roti Usko* (I gave bread him)

- **Maene Diya Usko Roti** (*I gave him bread*)

- *Usko Roti DiyaMaene* (him bread gave I)

- *Usko Maene Roti Diya*(him I bread gave)

- *Usko Diya Roti Maene*(him gave bread I)

- *Usko Roti Maene Diya* (him bread I gave)

- *Roti Usko Maene Diya*(Bread him I gave)

- *Roti Maene Usko Diya* (Bread I him gave)

- *Roti Usko Diya Maene*(Bread him gave I)

- *Roti Diya Usko Maene*(Bread gave him I)

- *Diya Maene Usko Roti* (Gave I him bread)

- *DiyaUskoMaene Roti*(Gave him I bread)

- *Diya Roti Usko Maene*(Gave bread him I)

- *Diya Usko Roti Maene*(Gave him bread I)

Any one of the above Urdu sentences, rendered in sixteen ways, through changingthe order of the words, using the same words, conveys the same meaning. Now this is a classic example of how an inflectional language or synthetic language behaves. If the translation of the above sentences is done in English, can they all convey the same meaning, 'I gave him bread'? Naturally, in English because of the fixed word order, this sentence cannot be conveyed in sixteen acceptable grammatical constructions and probabilities, using the same set of words and expressing the same meaning.

Another important point is that the above sentence of Urdu can be translated as 'I gave bread to him'. I deliberately avoided the preposition 'to' for the Urdu word '*ko*' in order to keep the expression simple. Without this preposition also the sentence can be conveyed in Urdu carrying the same meaning. For example instead of writing *Usko* (to him), it could have been rendered as *Usae*. The sentence in that case in Urdu would *be Maene Usae Roti Diya*. Another ending from the word Maene could also be dropped and sentence could be framed conveying the same meaning, for example, *Mae Usae Roti Diya*.

Additionally, I did not use any article with the word 'bread', in the translated sentence.

Another way in which this sentence can be rendered in Urdu is *Maene Usae Roti Di* or *Mae Use Roti Di*. The first example here can be used by both genders, however, the second example(i.e. *Me Use Roti Di*) is often used by females. I avoided any of these sentences for simplicity. Even if they are used instead of the one that I presented with sixteen changes in word order, the meaning remains the same. One important aspect here is the attachment of the suffix '*ne*' to *mae*. It can be used or it can be dropped. However, the examples above suggest (*Maene Usae Roti Di* or *Mae Use Roti Di.)* a subtle

difference.

CONCLUSIONS

It is also obvious from the above examples that out of sixteen sentences that convey the same meaning in Urdu only one sentence of Urdu, sentence number 4, corresponds grammatically to the acceptable English sentence. And in order to teach the other tongue, if somebody uses the mother tongueone has to locate the right sentence in mother tongue, out of so many possibilities, and translate it to the other tongue.

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