Heritage Language Teaching: Issues Regarding Hindi-Urdu in the United States

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1. Introduction

"I am not white. I am not black. I am not yellow. I am Asian, but I am rarely classified as one. I am Indian, but barely recognized as one. I dress in jeans and t-shirts, I eat at the local McDonald's, I watch Will and Grace with a religious fervor, and I listen to Justin Timberlake on my iPod when I am walking to class. But on the flip side, I also have read the Quran in Arabic, I fast every year during Ramadan, I love watching Indian movies, and I sing songs by Junoon when I'm cleaning the house. To most this description may sound like two completely different people, a complete identity crisis. I speak both English and Urdu fluently and feel comfortable with both parts of myself", said one of my students who considered herself partly Pakistani and partly American. Unfortunately, this is not the case for most young Pakistani's living in the United States. Lack of resources, dozens of questions regarding identity, insecurity about being labeled less than a patriot, and a plethora of other issues play into the difficulties faced by children and adults alike who would like to learn heritage languages such as Hindi and Urdu, but face difficulties doing so. This discussion examines the difficulties in teaching Hindi/Urdu in the United States, immigrant identities, the spread of culture through language, and finally the future of Hindi/Urdu in America.

1.1 Defining a Heritage Language

A heritage language is the language associated with one's cultural background. Studies have long recognized that maintaining one's heritage language, in addition to English proficiency, is beneficial. More specifically, developing the heritage languages of ethnic minorities, in addition to English, has been shown to have social and cultural benefits. Research has shown that such development can be an important part of identity formation and can help one retain a strong sense of identity to one's own ethnic group.

Developing one's own language, in addition to English, has a number of socio-cultural advantages, as well as personal and societal benefits. Those who have developed their heritage language have greater understanding and knowledge of cultural values, ethics, and manners; this further enhances their interactions with other heritage language speakers. Moreover, heritage language development has been shown to contribute positively to the betterment of the society. Despite these benefits, there are consistent findings that show that heritage languages are typically not maintained and are rarely developed among ethnic minority group members. As evidence of the fact that heritage language development is difficult to maintain, many studies show that language shift to the dominant language of the country is powerful and rapid. Often the language declines over the period of a few generations, with English becoming the primary language of many third-generation ethnic

minority households. The case is no different with Hindi/Urdu in the United States. Of course, there is no single reason behind this diminishment of heritage languages. However, factors that do contribute will be discussed later.

1.2 Who is a Heritage Language Learner?

Heritage language learners can be defined as individuals born into households where a language other than English is spoken and they are to some degree bilingual i.e. speak more than one language. The proficiency of heritage learners often ranges from English-dominant students with no writing capabilities to those with some writing skills, but again these skills are limited. It is important to note that heritage language learners have some basic common characteristics. The most significant of these similarities is that they are bilingual to some degree. However, few heritage learners are equally competent in their heritage language and English. Encouraging though is the fact that heritage language learners commonly use two language systems to some point. This could be a substitution as minor as using the Urdu word for apple "*sayb*" in a sentence that is otherwise completely spoken in English. Second, heritage language learners seek out instruction usually because they perceive that their skills in the language of the host country are stronger than those in their heritage language. Their language reflects an on-going process of intergenerational language shift from the heritage language to the language of the country of immigration. Interesting to note is the fact that which skills are reduced and how, depends on a number of factors, including age and education level at immigration, family background, parent's profession, and religion. While Hindi and Urdu are similar languages, they face two entirely different futures on the basis of the above-mentioned factors.

1.3 Heritage Languages – A Delicate Entity

Without active intervention or new immigration, heritage languages are lost over time both in the individuals who speak them and in the community, and they typically die out within three generations. English has already been established as the dominant language among indigenous families in the United States. Among immigrant families, language use shifts toward English in predictable patterns: children arriving in the United States are generally English dominant by the time they reach adulthood; children born in the United States to first-generation immigrant families move quickly to English dominance with the onset of schooling if not sooner; and third generation children are not only native speakers of English but usually have lost much of their expressive ability in their heritage language. Systematic instruction in heritage languages that includes formal instruction in the written language, standard or prestige usage, and technical or professional usage is necessary to develop fluent skills in these languages.

1.4 Hindi and Urdu – Are they really different?

At the level of the colloquial language that is spoken spontaneously or is heard in Bollywood movies, Hindi and Urdu are virtually identical languages. A defining characteristic of each of these languages is that they are written in two different scripts, Urdu in the Perso-Arabic script and Hindi in the Devanagari script. In the literary or "chaste" dialect, Urdu uses many more Persian and Arabic words and grammatical forms than Hindi, whose literary dialect is more Sanskritised. However, it is invalid to assume that simply because of script discrepancies that Hindi lacks

Persian and Arabic loanwords and Urdu lacks etymologically Sanskrit words. Both languages share a common lexicon that includes native (Indian), Arabic, Persian, and English loanwords.

When expressing the elevated thoughts of science, philosophy, art and politics, the Muslims of India naturally always drew from the wealth of Arabic and Persian literary words, whereas the Hindus turned toward Sanskrit. This accounts for the differences between Hindi and Urdu (in vocabulary but almost never in grammar), but these differences exist primarily at the elite level and in abstract vocabulary. A good rule of thumb to identify differences is the following: whenever Urdu and Hindi words differ, it is often because one is using the Arabic or Persian word while the other employs a Sanskrit loanword.

Urdu and Hindi both descended from Sanskrit (or the crude Indo-Aryan tongue of which Sanskrit was an idealization); just as French and Spanish descended from crude Latin. Their common origins cannot be emphasized enough, because often people of Indian and Pakistani descent heatedly debate and stubbornly refute the true origins of Hindi and Urdu with mythological "facts". For example, it is frequently asserted that while Hindi is descended from Sanskrit, Urdu is a mongrel mutation of Persian, Arabic and Indian elements. To the surprise of many, Urdu has to some extent descended from Sanskrit and Hindi is to some extent a mutant form of Persian, Arabic and Indian elements.

Today a more common form of the two languages known as Hindustani is spoken by most Indians and Pakistanis. According to Wikipedia.com, "Hindustani is the vernacular blend of Hindi and Urdu which is in actuality the most widely spoken form of Hindi-Urdu in the Indian subcontinent. This can be seen in the popular culture of Bollywood or, more generally, the vernacular of Pakistanis and Indians which, while utilizing a good deal of Hindi verbiage, is interspersed with large amounts of Urdu, hence making the language of Bollywood movies sound as much Urdu as it is Hindi. Minor subtleties in region will also affect the 'brand' of Hindustani, sometimes pushing the Hindustani closer towards Urdu or towards Hindi. One might reasonably assume that the language spoken in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh (known for its beautiful usage of Urdu) and Varanasi (a holy city for Hindus and thus using highly sanskritized Hindi) is somewhat different. A humorous way of putting it would be that the Lucknow *lehejaa* (accent in Urdu) is of a different shade than the Varanasi *ucchaaran* (accent in Hindi)." So in essence, while two Hindi and Urdu are two different dialects many feel they are interchangeable and perhaps this may be the case. However, factors that lead to the decline of a heritage language may affect these dialects differently and lead to one dialect out-living the other here in the United States.

1.4 The Impact of Immigration

Indians and Pakistanis are two of the most rapidly growing ethnic groups in the United States. However, while most may have difficulty differentiating between the two ethnicities there is a definite difference regarding each one's approach to culture, language, community, and the importance of heritage. I will discuss the general impact of immigration on heritage languages and then go on to explore the above mentioned ethnic groups in detail.

In general terms, archetypical heritage language erosion can be observed over the course of several generations. First generation immigrants usually learn some English upon their arrival in the United States or already possess English speaking skills, but their use of it generally remains restricted to interactions outside of the home. Gradually the use of English and the heritage language overlap as the use of English expands into new domains. Following this change both the languages begin

to be used more independently of one another. Finally, the second or third generation children of immigrants use English to replaces the heritage language everywhere except the home. Ultimately, what can be observed is that the first-generational use of the heritage language in the home returns to the second or third generation, but in a far more limited scope?

Language shift to the dominant language, in this case English is evident, yet the issue of heritage languages is a complex matter with no single explanation for their decline or preservation. Hindi and Urdu still play an intricately woven role in the lives of Indian and Pakistani Americans. Research has shown that the first-generation adults tend to maintain and preserve their language and ethnic culture, while the second generation consciously succeeds in a partial assimilation into the dominant culture (Reyhner and Edward Tennant 2003). However, often due to racial differences, Indians and Pakistanis cannot be completely assimilated into American society like European immigrants. At this point, emerges an identity crisis where they may come back to search for the language of their parents as well as their lost identity.

2. Current Language Programs

In the United States, heritage language speakers have limited opportunities to develop their skills. Lack of infrastructure and trained professionals are significant contributing factors when evaluating why heritage languages face a tough future. Some opportunities are available through cultural institutions of heritage communities. Others are found in public schools, community colleges, and universities.

Some ethnic communities in the United States have well-developed weekend or evening schools that offer study of their heritage languages. However, this case is rare as far as Hindi and Urdu are concerned. The emphasis in Indian and Pakistani communities lies in mostly cultural programs with limited language instruction. Instead, religious instruction is a more common occurrence. This is not to say that heritage language schools do not exist however, they generally face substantial obstacles in supporting language learning mostly because their teachers and administrators are volunteers and not trained language teachers.

Funding, teacher training, appropriate instructional materials, and administrative infrastructure are all problematic. Moreover, students entering high school often rebel against time spent in heritage school programs, where they do not receive credit, and prefer to spend their available time on work required in their regular schooling. Also, at this point rebellion is not just limited to time, but to shrugging off forced identification with a culture they know little about and contact with which is limited to superficial cultural events. Afraid of being labeled stereotypical first-generation immigrants, most young adults are embarrassed by parental efforts to promote heritage language use.

In terms of the formal Education System, the United States has made very limited progress in developing heritage language resources. In higher education, language programming is overwhelmingly geared toward English speakers, even though enrollments in certain less commonly taught languages are dominated by heritage learners. Spanish, the most widely taught foreign language and the nation's most widely spoken heritage language, leads in the development of specialized programs and learning resources for heritage language speakers. Hindi and Urdu on the other hand barely register on the radar. With little or no formalized groups or committees for their promotion, educational curriculum development has been stagnant at best.

With educational institutions being the primary establishments for integrating second and third generation immigrants into a new society, it is no wonder that these same institutions almost develop a responsibility to foster programs to nurture the spread and preservation of heritage languages. In a country as multi-cultural as the United States, linguistic diversity is certainly an untapped resource. However, what is promising is that post-9/11, public school systems, colleges, universities, and adult education programs have become increasingly aware of the language backgrounds of their students and interested in addressing the needs of heritage language speakers. The problem still remains that, individual institutions lack the expertise that heritage language development. Despite common interests and shared resources between formal educational structures and heritage schools, models for specialized heritage language programs have a long way to go.

2.1 The Common Cause

 While it was mentioned earlier in the paper that the future of Hindi and Urdu are distinct on the basis of personal emphasis on culture etc., they share some common causes in terms of their decline. Perhaps the root of these problems lies in the following: many Indians and Pakistanis who have immigrated to United States of America have brought with them a pre-conditioned attitude that pushes for them to rise from poverty through education. Of course, education is a valuable asset, but should the cost be the loss of culture and heritage? This is particularly poignant in the case of second and third generation immigrants. With English being the primary language of learning it is no wonder that heritage languages become a distant memory or a tool used only to converse with occasionally.

There is no doubt that the effort to assimilate through the adoption of local language and customs has proven successful yet the expense seems far too great. Beautiful, lyrical and rich they may be, Hindi and Urdu have not yet developed to be a languages of science, business and technology. First generation Indian and Pakistani Americans find their heritage language convenient and a comfortable vehicle of expression with familiar and long-time friends, but not as a means for achieving their main objective of a better life in a new land. It is the language of their hearts but not of their minds.

Some other common difficulties include the age of immigrants when they arrive in the host country, the demand for the heritage language, its possible future value, and the use of the language at home.

3. Hindi –Urdu: A Brighter Future?

It may be argued that technically Hindi and Urdu are the same language however; I believe they face two separate fates because of the difference between cultural awareness and acceptance that Indians and Pakistanis possess.

The desire for Indians and Pakistanis to be proficient in Hindi-Urdu is characterized by the learners desire to be accepted into a community that is fluent in the language. In light of this argument, students tend to make an effort to communicate with the heritage language group, seek to understand their culture, and try to become familiar with or further integrated into the community where the language is used. Additionally, Indian and Pakistani American adults are actively involved in the maintenance and development of their language. This involvement stems from a concern for passing on to future generations the essence of South Asian cultural heritage. South Asian parents often have a strong desire for their children to retain their cultural traits while, at the same time, adopting American cultural traits.

As such, parents have established ethnic schools, ethnic associations, newspapers, and professional organizations to promote culture and language. In addition, South Asian immigrants in America, being predominantly latecomers, are largely a Hindi-Urdu speaking group and the language spoken at home is Hindi and Urdu. Of course, this is not to say that the loss of their heritage language is stagnant because there is indeed a language shift to the dominant language of the host country. However, emphasis on heritage, ethnicity, and cultural identity has helped retard the disappearance of Hindi and Urdu as a heritage language. Most immigrants kept their language alive by teaching kids at home. Korean, Chinese and Hebrew are prime examples.

3.1 The Difference between Native and Non-Native Speakers

There is often debate regarding the difference in skill levels of native and non-native speakers of heritage languages. Researchers at the University of California, Los Angeles iterate the following:

"Native speakers learn a language in childhood and continue using it throughout life in the multiple interactions of a full language community. Students acquire a foreign language when their own native language is fully developed for their age, and their fundamental view of the world is in their own native language. Their full language community will continue to be in the native language. Heritage learners had age appropriate native language skills when they began learning the new language that was to become their primary language because of immigration. The native language tends to remain at the stage where it was at the time of immigration and not infrequently even atrophies because in the limited community "the opportunity for stylistic options is reduced."

Thus, native speakers function within the full range of sociolinguistic and sociocultural communicative competencies. Heritage students lack the full spectrum of competencies because of their contact with a limited community of speakers, their incomplete or absence of education in their heritage language, and dominance of English in their formal education. Foreign language learners typically have no contact with the real life language community outside the classroom and therefore unlike the two previous groups function in the narrower world of textbook language."

Therefore, it is safe to assume that children raised in India and Pakistan will develop a different competency for Hindi and Urdu than those raised in United States. Of course, it must be taken into account that non-immigrants have greater exposure to local slang, accent, varied usage of words, and appropriateness of conversational circumstances. It is important to applaud the effort of second and third generation immigrants who do seek out instruction of their heritage languages to become closer to their ethnic identities.

3.2 Motivation for Learning a Heritage Language

Language learning takes dedication, persistence, devotion, motivation and support from everyone living in the community. Culturally, elders of Indian and Pakistani families are respectable mediums of ethnic education. Elders are recognized as the primary source of language expertise and cultural knowledge. The identification of elders as culture-bearers is not simply a matter of chronological age, but a function of the respect accorded to individuals in each community who exemplify the values

and ways of life of the local culture and who possess the wisdom and willingness to pass their knowledge on to future generations. Respected Elders serve as the philosophers, professors and visionaries of a cultural community. However, adolescence and young adulthood is a volatile time, one often riddled with rebellion. Therefore, the advice of elders may not always be regarded as important as the latest fashion trends or hockey practice. Promising though is research that indicates that ultimately individuals considered to be ethnic minorities do experience a return to their roots and a deepening desire to develop a more ethnically rooted identity. A premier language journal states the following regarding the development of heritage languages:

> "The findings showed that HL development positively affects interactions and social relationships with HL speakers. Those who developed their HL had a strong ethnic identity, further enhancing their interactions with HL speakers. Those who had "strong HL competence" had a strong sense of who they were (i.e., being proud of their culture and ethnicity), were strongly connected to their ethnic group (i.e., had strong group membership, had no fear or avoidance of HL speakers), and had greater understanding and knowledge of cultural values, ethics, and manners. These factors enabled them to have better relationships with HL speakers, both in and outside the HL community" (Kondo-Brown. 2003).

Furthermore, learning one's heritage language will help alleviate the problems of inferiority complexes by promoting a positive cultural identity as well help overcome identity crises that young adults might face when trying to interact with heritage language communities.

3.3 A Lack of Resources – The Role of the Nation

For any educational program to take root and become successful appropriate funding and infrastructure are essential. In the United States the case is no different for Hindi and Urdu. While some educational institutions offer programs to teach the languages the effort on a national level is dismal. Several issues need to be addressed when determining the needs of a well-developed heritage language program.

The importance of heritage languages as a national resource cannot be stressed enough. It is essential to observe how other countries have established heritage language programs and take cue from there. Also, it is important for foster strong relationship with ethnic minority communities and to understand their social and cultural institutions. Another pertinent step is to examine the existing heritage language programs and evaluate their success in order to develop future programs.

The development of a language program, primary or heritage, is not possible without solid and well-supported research. Research in the following areas would prove extremely helpful: heritage language development as a linguistic, social, and cultural phenomenon; best practices in the design of programs and curricula; characteristics of effective teaching strategies, learning resources, and assessment instruments; and public policies in the United States and their implications for national language capacity, heritage communities, and multilingual individuals. Additionally, a national infrastructure is necessary in order to pool and share resources amongst educational establishments as well as provides collaborative tools to formulate programs and curriculum.

Educational agencies can play an important role in helping establish new programs and curriculum. Some steps they can take include providing ample opportunities for personnel associated with heritage language education to participate in regional and statewide conferences, workshops and other events in which Native

educators share their insights and practices around language learning issues. Moreover, they can provide administrative and funding support for local education initiatives as well as support for curriculum materials development in any area where heritage language programs are being implemented. They may also possess the power to provide the necessary waivers from existing regulatory requirements to insure that students being taught in their heritage language are not disadvantaged in any way, nor are they discouraged from continuing in a heritage language program of instruction through the highest grade-level available. Additionally, providing support for training heritage language and ESL teachers for all schools, as well as appropriate orientation to language issues for existing teachers, administrators and others associated with the schools would be a significant step. Finally, provide current resources and relevant research data to assist schools and districts in developing effective heritage language programs that also contribute to the overall educational achievement of the students would be an invaluable asset.

3.4 Is this our Responsibility too?

As parents, teachers, siblings, elders, religious leaders, and members of a community we all bear responsibility for the spread and preservation of our culture, heritage, and ethnic identities. There are many ways that we can personally contribute to the effort to have our languages become an active part of our lives as well as those of future generations. As parents, the primary tools to keep your heritage language include using the language as much as possible as a part of everyday life. Assist younger speakers of the heritage language in expanding their fluency to deeper levels and enlist their support in passing the language on to other members of the community. Utilize traditional ways of knowing, teaching, listening and learning in passing on the language and help others come to understand how the language is integrated with culture, especially spiritual traditions and the rules for living a proper life. Be a role model for all generations by practicing and reinforcing traditional values and using the heritage language to maintain spiritual traditions and convey the history of the community. Assist all members of the community especially new parents in providing opportunities for young children to grow up hearing their heritage language spoken in the home and community. Assist others to acquire the heritage language by using it on an everyday basis and serve as a mentor to those wishing to learn the language. Be tolerant and patient with language learners when they make mistakes in speaking the language and be encouraging of their efforts by telling them you are proud of them. Finally, make traditional cultural values explicit and incorporate them in all aspects of life in the community, especially those involving the heritage language.

Additional steps include providing a loving, healthy and supportive environment for each child to learn their heritage language as a natural part of growing up, making sure they hear and speak the language as much as possible from prenatal through to adulthood. Request the support of fluent language speakers in the community who can serve as mentors for learning and using the heritage language on an everyday basis. Help children understand their family history and the heritage that shape who they are and form their identity. Be an active and full participant in all aspects of a child's upbringing, including joint learning of the heritage language as a way of demonstrating the importance of the effort. Provide opportunities for children to participate in purposeful conversation with others under supportive, non-threatening circumstances.

On a more personal level those aspiring to learn their heritage language should keep the following in mind:

1. Take the initiative and create opportunities to listen to and speak the heritage language.
2. Take advantage of special times and places where people come and practice their language skills, particularly in an immersion environment.
3. Seek out a fluent language speaker who is willing to serve as a mentor and make arrangements to work with that person on a continuing basis engaged in language-intensive activities.
4. Recognize the complexity of language learning and use as a way to help sustain the level of commitment needed to gain speaking fluency and the associated literacy skills.
5. Use available media to record and listen to stories in the heritage language and practice re-telling the stories to others.
6. Ask other speakers to participate in the respectful use of the heritage language in all appropriate situations.
7. Be persistent in the practice of the heritage language, even when embarrassed to speak in the presence of fluent speakers.

Ultimately, the power to connect with one's heritage lies in one's own hands. Letting the opportunity slip through your fingers should not be an option.

4. Conclusion

It is clear that the issue of heritage languages and their future is a complex and delicate one requiring much research and contemplation. With so many factors affecting their spread and preservation it is no wonder that more heritage language programs do not exist. Inferiority complexes, identity crises, confusion about culture, generational erosion etc. all play a role however, the responsibility for preserving Hindi and Urdu in the United States falls onto the shoulders of parents, elders, and existing educators until a more definite solution is formulated. Of utmost importance presently is the need for existing Indian and Pakistani communities to actively promote their culture and heritage in addition to expressing the pertinence of a well-balanced ethnic identity for their families and children. It is our responsibility to educate the world about our social systems and help them realize the valuable asset that is our heritage languages.

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