

# LANGUAGE, LEXICON AND CULTURE

## The Case of Dogri Dictionaries

Dr S P Shrivatsa

Language, culture and lexicon are very closely related to one another. They are inseparable from and are, in fact, contributory to one another. Moreover, while possessing their own separate identities, they are part and parcel<sup>trah</sup> of each other. In other words, all the three are interdependent on one another.

Language being one of the most sacred possessions of the human being, it plays a dominant role amongst the three. Without this important faculty, man can never be called a perfect human being. It is the language which makes a man unique amongst all the species of the creation. Prof Leonard Bloomfield appreciably describes the importance of the language - "Language plays a great part in our life. Perhaps because of its familiarity, we rarely observe it, taking it rather for granted, as we do breathing or walking. The effects of language are remarkable and include much of what distinguishes man from animals."<sup>1</sup>

Interestingly, it is only human beings who have been endowed with the ability of learning a language or languages. Not that much only, he has been blessed with a power to pass it on to others too. In other words he has the power to teach a language or languages to others even, as it is a very important vehicle of thought and thereby is also a very powerful means of communication. Obviously, the language plays a very significant role to be a communicative link. In short we cannot convey our thoughts clearly to others without the help of a language.<sup>2</sup>

Appreciating the role of languages the European Sanskrit Professor W.D. Whitney rightly observes - "Language may be briefly and comprehensively defined as the means of expression of human thoughts, in a wider and freer sense, everything that bodies forth thought and makes apprehensible in whatever way, is called language."<sup>3</sup>

Being a social institution a language always takes shelter in the society for its development or evaluation. In other words a language is the product of the social conditions and conventions. These means are devised by different social groups, which are separated by the geographical and cultural barriers of two different societies. The different languages of the world and the varieties of the same languages are conventional means of communication. Moreover, a language being the vehicle of culture plays more vital role in the society. Without the help of a language no culture lasts long in the society. Even the history cannot survive

without languages or languages.

Again, it is also true on the part of man who being a social animal deals in the society either through his mother tongue or dialect or a common link language. If he needs a society, his language too cannot live without society or the social environment. Both man and his language cannot develop in a vacuum or isolation. So it is clear that the language though is developed by human beings, it still needs a social environment to grow further smoothly and culturally. It is the language only which has acquired the capacity to enshrine in the whole history of mankind, its thoughts, its actions and its culture and so on. Clarifying the role of language Chambers 20th century dictionary records - 'Language is ever changing. It is after all, the very substance of communication. As people develop and widen their interests and capabilities, the language develops with them. Dictionaries, which should be faithfully records of the language must follow suit.'<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, it is also only the language, which reflects the activities of its speaker's community. Generally, it is said that the development and growth of any community can be calculated from the development and growth of its language, we learn a language or languages in order to use them in the society to meet with day-to-day needs and also to enable ourselves to convey our messages to the target person without any delay. A standard form of a particular dialect when attains the status of the literary language gets approval from the society in

which it is used. Further when a linguist studies and analyses a language scientifically that is called a linguistic study. And, a linguistic study always involves at least two things i.e., an analysis of the already collected data and then the formulation of a theory. The data which is to be analysed by a linguist generally consists of some samples of a written or spoken language. These samples are called Corpus. Then a linguist first has to scrutinize these corpus and then make a number of generalized statements. If the true corpus is a representative sample of a language or languages we should even expect from a linguist a number of generalizations about the given languages. If a linguist takes up to do a comparative study of two languages or dialects he has accordingly to prepare two corpus for his study before hand.

The vocabulary of a language shows its richness. A rich vocabulary of a language can be the best credential for the same. Thus, we can say that the rich vocabulary of a language is a certificate of its greatness. Actually, it is only the vocabulary which is the soul of a language. Dr S Agasthilingam is right to say in this context - "If the structure of a language is the skeleton, the vocabulary is the flesh and soul".<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the importance of the vocabulary can never be overlooked. As the vocabulary forms an important part of the language, it should not be considered periphery but as a central or focal point of the language concerned. Viewing the importance of the vocabulary in any language it will not be wrong if we venture to say that man thinks with words (Oronke 1972, P. 13).

Actually, words help in man's thinking and his thinking is always reflected in his words itself. In a way it is reciprocated process. It is a known fact that in any language its structure plays a very significant role. But at the same time we have to agree that the vitality of any language does not depend upon its structure only. Actually, its vitality lies in an ever-expanding nature of its vocabulary which plays a significant role to help to establish the legitimacy and supremacy of the concerned language and the vocabulary mainly depends upon its creative literature.

### Culture

The Random House Dictionary defines culture as "the quality in a person or society that arises an interest in and acquaintance with what is generally scholarly pursuits etc".<sup>6</sup>

The culture of a community is the soul of the community's dialect as the language is a most important means to help the culture to survive and also grow. Prof. W. D. Whitney nicely records his observation in this respect "We regard every language, then an institution, one of those which in each community, make up its culture".<sup>7</sup>

The culture and civilization having a great tradition of that community enriches its languages also. When recorded in the vocabulary or Lexicon that increases the importance and value of the dictionary. Though it is not a hard and fast rule, it is however said that only the language is the basis of a

culture. But as the language plays a significant role as a vehicle for the preservation of culture and the language contributes to beautify the culture, obviously both of them are contributory to each other. Even then we give more importance to language as compared to culture. Thus, we cannot think of any culture without a language. At the same time it is rather language only which keeps the culture growing smoothly to be a part of history.

Now, let us discuss as how a culture of any society can be defined. We have to survey the vocabulary of that society's language and also its all other activities. Actually, culture does not develop in a specific point of time in the history of a country. However, culture is a total development of a unique pattern of the intelligence, behaviour and the developed thoughts. It is an established fact that the development of a culture is a continuous process, which takes centuries together to develop. It is only a rich culture of any community by which it feels proud of.

A language does not help a man only to learn about the experiences of others but it also helps to experience deeply the experiences of the concerned community and its culture. It is obvious that without language it is not possible at all to build up a culture of the concerned community. That is why it has been rightly said that language is a true index of its associated culture. In other words, it is an exact mirror of culture.

The Encyclopaedia of Britannica rightly records language in relation to culture "Man's power to learn the language of his group and to pass it on to others to transmit expression vigorously, is the basis for the development of all that array of behaviour patterns known as culture". Further -" Anthropologists speak of the relations between language and culture. It is, indeed, more in accordance with reality to consider language as a part of culture."<sup>8</sup>

Whatever cultural tradition whether great or little that our ancestors have nurtured, has been handed down from generation to generation through language only. It is, therefore, obvious that the role played by a language of any society or community for the development of its culture is always considered to be very significant.

### Lexicon Or Lexicography

Now let us turn to another important area that is lexicon. Actually, the lexicon or lexicography means the recording a vocabulary in a dictionary. Among all the three i.e. language, culture and dictionary, the last one plays even more important role as far as systematic development of a language is concerned. Actually, the lexicon of a language is a true mirror of the culture though the language is also equally important in this respect. It is therefore, excepted that a good dictionary should not be considered merely a collection of the words of a particular language but it is supposed to be an epitome of the development and growth of the culture of the community concerned. It records a systematic

development of languages and also helps to preserve its words if possible, alongwith all their shades. Not this much only, it also records the loaned words which have already been adjusted in the given language. But at the same time a lexicographer has to take the compilation work of a dictionary very seriously as it is not so easy a task as it seems to be. Sir M Monier Williams says, "It is not more aggregation of words and meanings, but the method of dealing with them and arranging them, which gives a dictionary the least right to be called an original production".<sup>9</sup>

The compilers of Chambers 20th century dictionary also expresses almost the similar opinion with regard to the compilation of a good dictionary. "The selection of entries for a dictionary has never been an easy task, for space in Dictionaries has always been at premium. Lexicographers may have linguistic pet hates or loves but to them no word is ever totally unimportant. Deciding which words to include and which to exclude presents great difficulty. With so many additions to the languages occurring so rapidly the choice has become even more difficult and the skill required in making the choice much more important.

The chief concern of the modern lexicographer in compiling or updating a dictionary is to record the changes taking place in contemporary language to include new words and new meanings of old words".<sup>10</sup>

Now let us think as what Encyclopaedia

Britannica says - "Dictionaries list words and in one way or another state their meanings. It is regarded as sensible question to ask of any word in a language "what does it means?" This question, like many others about language, is easier to ask than to answer".<sup>11</sup>

Genuinely, the development of Dogri language and also the advancement of Dogra culture and tradition require to be reflected in the dictionaries of this language being compiled from time to time.

Since a dictionary records the vocabulary of a language in a disciplinary manner, its role is very appreciable. It has rightly been said that richer the vocabulary of a language, the more is the greatness of it justified.

The Random House Dictionary of English language explains the word lexicography as - "The writing or compiling of dictionaries. The root 'Lexicon' denotes the vocabulary of a particular language, field, social class, person etc."<sup>12</sup>

Actually, the process of compiling the dictionaries basically rests with the richness of the language or languages concerned. S.M.Katre, the well known linguist and ex-chief editor of the mighty project of compilation of Sanskrit-English dictionary on historical principles, says, "Lexicon making and its problems are of much interest. Language is a notoriously flexible instrument which registers cultural changes perhaps more sensitively than does any other phase of culture. Such changes may affect

phonetics, vocabulary and grammar of a language. It is primarily in vocabulary that they can be traced readily, whether they be conceived as due either to developments within the culture or the effect of external stimuli. Most common things omitted in literary documents can be got from the old words entered in the dictionaries.<sup>13</sup>

In the light of this observation of a learned linguist and an expert on lexicography in the context of language and its relation with culture, we have to be very much aware while compiling Dogri dictionaries of various categories. He rightly points out that the common things (words and their meanings etc), which are omitted in literary documents can be got from the old words entered in the dictionaries, Exactly the same type of observation we find in the preface of the Chamber's 20th century dictionary - " To include new words and new meanings of old words, it has certainly been one of the major concerns of the editors of dictionaries. However, we must give due status and importance towards that have been with us for sometime. We cannot simply sweep away the old and established, the tired and the true words, so to speak to accommodate the new. That would give a very unbalanced impression of the language.<sup>14</sup>

However, Dell Hymes gives somewhat a different observation regarding Lexicography and culture. According to him language is a selective index to culture. True that cultural categories are lexically expressed not automatically but selectivel.<sup>15</sup>

It is not necessary that the people speaking one language must be having the same culture. Giving his observation in this context S.V.Subramaniam says - " Because of the wide spread area in which they live and because of the variation in geographical condition people may practice different vocations and may have changed in ways of livings. Here, the same language might have the dialectical variations and jargon particular to a place and people, but that too is retained in language and it helps to assessing the cultural differences.<sup>16</sup>

Again, it may also be pointed out that the culture-bound words should be tackled very carefully in the dictionaries especially in the bilingual dictionaries. Such words really need a great attention as sometimes the <sup>Source</sup> languages and target language belong to altogether different cultures. Actually, when we adopt such methods only then a bilingual dictionary deserves to be called as bicultural dictionary. Otherwise the very purpose to bring two cultures on juxtaposition through a bilingual dictionary will be defeated. When it is very much obvious that the lexicon is closely related with culture, we have to include all the cultural items in any type of dictionary without losing their semantic aspect.

Furthermore, the kinship terms should also reflect the social functions and folk traditions etc. and also denote the culture of the society. Therefore, they ought to be tackled in the lexicon with utmost care. The different social and regional variations

should be included by the lexicographer in the dictionary very carefully.

While compiling a bilingual dictionary a lexicographer has to act like a judge so that no injustice is done to any item or word of the two languages. As every word in any language is supposed to be very sensitive, a lexicographer has no right to play with that. He has just to adjust all the words systematically at their proper places and also explain accordingly. Moreover, he has no right to coin new words etc. Panini, the great Sanskrit grammarian whose *Aṣṭadhāyāyī* has been recognised as one of the greatest monuments of human intelligence by the renowned American linguist like L. Bloomfield, <sup>17</sup> clearly justifies the traditional convention as - 'Svamrupam Śabdasya' (P.I.I.68), that the words stand for their own forms. Clarifying this statement of his predecessors further Katyayana the great commentator of him says - *Sidhe Shabdārtha Sambandhe*'. The words and their meanings are established by people. The writers, grammarians and lexicographers etc. have no control over them.

In view of the above a lexicographer has to be aware of the identification and characteristics of the both the given languages i.e. source language and the target language. And, while compiling a trilingual dictionary, the compilers are supposed to be even more careful on this account so that none of the language's identity and characteristics is tampered with. No doubt while compiling such a dictionary, a lexicographer <sup>has to face</sup> various problems, but when he has

made up his mind to undertake such a gigantic task it is only he who has to do justice with his profession so as to deliver the goods properly.

One more aspect is very important to be taken into account i.e. proper explanation of the homonymous and polycentric words. Really, such words expect a fair justification from a lexicographer. Both Zgusta and Geogrey Leech strongly recommend to explain words in the dictionary in their proper perspective.<sup>18</sup>

In view of the above discussion a lexicographer is expected to be very sincere, dedicated and also unprejudiced towards his dictionary compiling job so that nobody dares to raise his finger towards the dictionary / dictionaries compiled by him or his associates. In short a dictionary compiled by him should withstand all tests.<sup>19</sup> Dr. Bal Krishnan, the Ex-Director of the Lexicon Department of University of Kerala Tiruanantpuram is right to say - "A dictionary once made is for ever".