Shubho shondha! Thank you very much for this invitation! When I was invited to celebrate International Mother Tongue Day with you, I knew of course about the history of the term, going back to the students’ uprising in Dhaka in 1952, spurred by their love for their mother tongue, that eventually led, almost 20 years later, to independence for Bangladesh. But I couldn’t help wondering about this term, mother tongue, matri bhasha. Why mother tongue and not father tongue, pitri bhasha? After all, the common term for one’s country of origin is ‘fatherland’ or ‘land of my fathers’. So why not ‘father tongue’ as well? Curious, I set off to do some research using ‘reliable sources’. Here is what I found.

The term ‘father tongue’ appears on the internet 26,500 times. By contrast, the term ‘mother tongue’ is almost 250 times more frequent, turning up a total of 6,450,000 times. Moreover, when ‘father tongue’ is used, it seems to have one of two specialized meanings. According to www.urbandictionary.com, a father tongue is “a language other than the mother tongue that is spoken just as fluently in a family, community, or nation” — and people seem to use it that way when mother and father speak different languages at home. So father tongue is defined with reference to mother tongue, it presupposes ‘mother tongue’ as the unmarked, neutral term. Another use of father tongue is to mean “male language, alias power words, alias standard public discourse in America.” This is the meaning that ‘father tongue’ has come to have in feminist discourse. None of these two meanings correspond to the much more basic meaning of the mother tongue as the language we learn to speak natively as we grow up. Everyone has a mother tongue but not everyone has a father tongue.

This doesn’t just happen in English. It is quite a generalized phenomenon across the languages of the world. When I asked my colleagues at the Linguistics Department if they knew of any languages that use the term ‘father tongue’ but do not have a corresponding term ‘mother tongue’, the results were revealing. Even in languages that do not use a collocation with the word ‘mother’ in it, such as Polish, Russian, Ukrainian or Klingon, the term used instead is something like ‘ancestral tongue’ or ‘birth tongue’ — not ‘father tongue.’ On the other hand, ‘mother tongue’ is the official term even when strictly speaking this refers to the language spoken by one’s father in bilingual families — as in Singapore, where the father’s language determines the language of primary schooling for the child; or when the language referred to as a ‘mother tongue’ cannot have been literally spoken by one’s mother — because it has not been orally transmitted for a very long time, as with Sanskrit, which is declared by several people in India as their ‘mother tongue’.

So, why is that? What is the condensed wisdom that has fossilized into this expression ‘mother tongue’ that makes it appear in such related languages as Greek and Bengali (both Indo-European languages), or unrelated ones (such as Arabic and Chinese)?

It turns out there is a very good linguistic explanation why ‘mother tongue’ is the preferred term, even if this means using it non-literally, as in Singapore or in India. The explanation has to do with what
countless linguistic studies have shown time and over again, to the dismay of policy-makers and language-rights activists alike: the best guarantee that a language will be fully learnt and productively used, and so the best guarantee of a language’s survival and vitality, is oral transmission. No formal education, no studying the language from books can substitute the active use of the language, back and forth, to communicate with people, to act in the world and to express one’s individuality and unique point of view. It is this personal investment, this stake one has into becoming a competent and full member of the community one is born in, that creates one’s attachment and identification with the ‘mother tongue.’ And this investment starts early on in life and can only be fully realized through oral transmission. This has been a painful lesson to learn for speakers and activists of minority languages such as Breton in France, the Cypriot variety of Greek in Cyprus, Basque in Spain, Kurdish in Iraq and Turkey, or Tibetan in China. When noble attempts at standardizing the language and teaching it through formal education in order to ensure its survival through time and space also end up manipulating and changing it into something that did not exist before, the game for smaller, minority, or simply immigrant languages, seems to be unavoidably and incontrovertibly lost.

However, before we reach such a grim conclusion, let us be clear about the alternatives. These alternatives are not new, fictional, or as yet untested. They are very real for the millions of people in the world today, and those during previous periods of human history, when lacking fixed boundaries between nation-states meant that linguistic boundaries were also much more fluid and easily transgressed: they are the alternatives of being bilingual or even multilingual, that is, fluent in several languages, and using them to different communicative ends every day. Of the more than 300 million people living in the US, 82% report speaking English. If there are over 300 languages spoken in the US today, this means that, either the other 299 languages are spoken by just 18% of the population, or — more likely — that a substantial number of people in the US speak more than one language; that is, they are bilingual. Bilingualism has great cognitive advantages. People that are fluent in more than one language generally do better in IQ tests and go on to work in higher-paid jobs. It does not matter specifically what languages a bilingual speaker speaks. It is the knowledge of several different languages and the ability to move comfortably between them and between the alternative modes of existence that they connote, that improves and enriches one’s life.

So, let us all be proud of our mother tongues, whether standard or non-standard, powerful or small. Let us all cherish them and celebrate them. Let us all remember the poems, the ancestral tales, the lullabies, the recipes and the insults that can only be as powerful and as sweet when spoken in our mother tongue. And let us use our languages with our children and allow our languages to evolve. Celebrating Mother Tongue day is not about putting up borders of incomprehension between people. It’s about coming out of stilted conceptions about good and bad grammar, about rich or poor languages, and feeling like we all have something to contribute to this colorful mosaic, something unique, beautiful, and priceless, not only to ourselves but to the entire world.

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