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MOTHER TONGUE

Ikromova Zakhro Khasanovna

7th" D " grade student of the School of creativity named

after Muhammad Yusuf of Andijan region

INTRODUCTION: Mother tongue is not only about the language that a person learns from birth. It is also the person's dominant language and his or her home language. This means that the person learns not only to speak the language but also gain the ability to know the communicative and linguistic aspects of it by heart. Since it is the only language the person knows since birth, it's of high importance in the person's life.

In the translation industry, companies claim that their translators are all native language speakers. It is also often said that translators must only translate into their mother tongue, meaning one should translate into his or her dominant language.

The general usage of the term 'mother tongue'...denotes not only the language one learns from one's mother, but also the speaker's dominant and home language; i.e., not only the first language according to the time of acquisition, but the first with regard to its importance and the speaker's ability to master its linguistic and communicative aspects. For example, if a language school advertises that all its teachers are native speakers of English, we would most likely complain if we later learned that although the teachers do have some vague childhood memories of the time when they talked to their mothers in English, they, however, grew up in some non-English-speaking country and are fluent in a second language only. Similarly, in translation theory, the claim that one should translate only into one's mother tongue is in fact a claim that one should only translate into one's first and dominant language.

"The vagueness of this term has led some researchers to claim...that different connotative meanings of the term 'mother tongue' vary according to the intended usage of the word and that differences in understanding the term can have far-reaching and often political consequences."

Culture and Mother Tong: "It is the language community of the mother tongue, the language spoken in a region, which enables the process of enculturation, the growing of an individual into a particular system of linguistic perception of the world and participation in the centuries-old history of linguistic production."

"Cultural power can...backfire when the choices of those who embrace Americanness in language, accent, dress, or choice of entertainment stir resentment in those who do not. Every time an Indian adopts an American accent and curbs his 'mother tongue influence,' as the call centers label it, hoping to land a job, it seems more deviant, and frustrating, to have only an Indian accent."

Myth and Ideology:"The notion of 'mother tongue' is thus a mixture of myth and ideology. The family is not necessarily the place where languages are transmitted, and sometimes we observe breaks in transmission, often translated by a change of language, with children acquiring as first language the one that dominates in the milieu. This phenomenon...concerns all multilingual situations and most of the situations of migration."

Language is surely a tool we use to communicate, a means towards an end, if you will. However, one's mother tongue is way more than being merely a tool. Not knowing our mother tongue well enough could have an impact, way greater than what you might have imagined.

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Here are 5 reasons why knowing to read, write and speak your mother tongue really well is important:

1. It helps in cognitive as well as intellectual development: Research has shown time and again that when children are able to speak their mother tongue well, not only do they experience better cognitive development but also better intellectual development*.

Oftentimes, a child will have more exposure to the mother tongue than to the medium of instruction at school. Children therefore learn better in their mother tongue. In fact, research is very clear on how children with a solid foundation in their mother tongue have better educational success.+

2. It helps in second language learning: Don't most parents want their children to speak great English? What if I told you that learning English, or any other language for that matter, depends on how well the child has learnt their mother tongue?

Research points to how incomplete or inadequate skills in the first language make learning another language difficult for the child.++ Concepts and literacy skills picked up when learning the mother tongue can be extrapolated when learning other languages and are, in fact, a strong predictor of a child's overall linguistic ability.

3. It helps you connect with your culture and people: Our languages keep our cultural heritage alive. Cultural information read or heard in a foreign language can be difficult to understand or identify with, owing to a loss of meaning, impact and context.

It has also been observed that children, who have grown up abroad or in an environment where their mother tongue is hardly used, find it difficult to have a deeper and a more meaningful conversation with their grandparents or with other elders in their family, who do not speak English (that well).

Mother tongues thus become critical tools in connecting with our roots and our loved ones.

4. It is professionally and commercially beneficial: Truth be told, Indian languages are assuming greater significance in the corporate world, with businesses going more local that ever before. As such, a good command over your mother tongue, coupled with the ability to read and write (type) it, can be a great advantage and could be a USP that helps you climb the corporate ladder faster.

Translation and localisation opportunities are also growing for Indians who have excellent command over English and their mother tongue. Things get even better if such people have a science, finance or legal background. Monetising the knowledge of your mother tongue has never been easier.

5. Great command over your mother tongue is timeless class: Can anyone really deny the linguistic swag of a certain gentleman who goes by the name Amitabh Bachchan? It is really hard to decide which one he speaks better, English or then his mother tongue Hindi.

Having had the privilege to learn and speak a few foreign and Indian languages, I can tell you from personal experience too that, be it in the business context or in a social one, being able to speak your mother tongue, English and another foreign or Indian language fluently has never failed to attract attention, admiration and awe.

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