

RALPH RUSSELL

Some Notes on Hindi and Urdu

I READ WITH INTEREST the two pieces in *AUS* #10 on Hindi and Urdu—Sushil Srivastava’s review article on Christopher King’s *One Language, Two Scripts*, and David Lelyveld’s review of the same book. King’s is the second full-length book in recent years—the other being Amrit Rai’s—which deals with the emergence of modern Hindi and modern Urdu. I must confess that I can’t summon up the interest to make a close study of either of them, because it seems to me that there are much more important issues to investigate and discuss than the polemics of past generations about the development and relationship between the two languages. (Yes, languages, as I shall argue below.)

It’s not the historical survey that I object to; only the feeling I got that the writers feel a sort of continuing resentment of what people long dead once did. Present day users, whether of Hindi or of Urdu, aren’t to blame for whatever sins their ancestors committed, and the sustained recital of these real and/or imagined sins on either side serves no very useful purpose, to say the least of it. The sensible thing to do is to come to terms with the present situation, and the first step towards this, obviously, is to describe correctly what the present situation is.

It is remarkable how little serious attention seems to have been devoted to this obvious task and how much traditional mythology about it is being peddled.

Let us begin with Hindi. Lelyveld is right to describe the *One Language, Two Scripts* of King’s title as an “unfortunate over-simplification.” King’s description is valid only for one level of the language, the language of everyday conversation on mundane themes, and even there the correspondence is not quite a hundred percent. The vocabulary used in Snell and Weightman’s *Teach Yourself Hindi* (1989) illustrates this very well. Pages 252 and 253—the first two pages of their Hindi-English vocabulary—have a total of 73 entries (counting such entries as *akelā*, *akele*

and *akelāpan* as a single entry). Of these, 54 can equally well be called Urdu, and one, *amerikā*, would certainly be understood by Urdu speakers though they, in my experience, always say *amrika*. Another 18 are Hindi, and not Urdu, but one finds elsewhere in the vocabulary synonyms for some of them which are as current in Urdu as they are in Hindi. For example *adhik* on p. 252 is matched by *zyāda* on p. 270 and *ākāś* on p. 253 by *āsmān* on p. 255. And on the pattern of *amerikā* / *amrika* are *intazār* / *intizār*, and other words whose pronunciation is not the same in Hindi as it is in Urdu but which would nevertheless be immediately intelligible to Urdu speakers. Substantial random sampling of other pages suggests that a complete analysis of the whole vocabulary would yield similar results.

But to equate Hindi with just this range of Hindi would be absurd, and to do the same sort of thing with the comparable range of Urdu would be equally absurd. It is true that the Hindi equivalent of “How far is the station from here?” is identical with the Urdu equivalent. And it is equally true that the Urdu for “The eighteenth century was a period of social, economic and political decline” is “*athāravīn śadī samājī, iqtisādī aur siyāsī zavāl kā daur thī*,” while the Hindi equivalent is “*athāravīn sadī samājik, arthik, aur rājnītik girāv kī sadī thī*” (and in the Hindi version, Rupert Snell tells me, one could say “*śatābdī*” instead of “*sadī*” and “*tathā*” instead of “*aur*”). He also tells me that instead of the second “*sadī*” (which simply repeats the word for “century”) one could say “*samay*” (which means simply “time”).

This is very far from being a “one language, two scripts” situation. Urdu speakers would not understand the Hindi version, and vice versa; and to find a version which could equally well be called Urdu and Hindi would be quite impossible. For all practical purposes, therefore, Urdu and Hindi are two separate languages and should be described as such, despite their almost completely common structure and less completely common stock of everyday words.

It seems to me that what I have written so far about the two languages is indisputable. But there is, of course, more to the question than this, and what I am about to say will be more controversial. There is no doubt that modern Hindi came into existence as the result of a widespread feeling amongst Hindus that Urdu was the product of centuries of Muslim domination and that Hindu self-respect demanded that “Muslim” words should be expelled from their *kharī bolī* base and replaced by words of pure Indian origin. (The first part of this assessment was entirely warranted, and the second part entirely *unwarranted*. Words that come into general use in a language become part of that language and

cease to be foreign, no matter where they have come from and why.) That this *was* the motive behind the creation of modern Hindi is clear from the common classification of Insha's *Rānī Ketkī kī Kahānī* as a pioneering work of Hindi literature or, if you prefer, a milestone in the development of the language. Despite what the historians of Hindi literature may feel, this somewhat extraordinary view of it is the product of hindsight on the part of those who put it forward and has nothing to do with the actual genesis of the book. Insha wrote it as a *tour de force*, to demonstrate that he could do it, and for no other reason. If one can imagine a movement among modern Iranians to "purify" Persian by expelling all words that came into it from Arabic one might find them discovering Ghalib's *Dastambū*, written in 1857, as a pioneering work of pure Persian. (*Dastambū* is Ghalib's journal of his experience of the momentous days of 1857, the occupation of Delhi by the rebel sepoys in May and its recapture by the British in September, days in which he was in Delhi throughout.) There is no reason to doubt that his reasons for writing it were what he said they were—to produce a work of "pure" Persian free of all Arabic-derived words and by engaging in this difficult task to keep his mind off his troubles. There is no suggestion either in Insha or in Ghalib that the "pure" languages they were writing should become standard languages.

So modern Hindi was, so to speak, invented—a statement to which I should at once add that "invented" should not be regarded as a nasty word. All living languages experience a process of "invention" all the time, in which not only are new words for new concepts coined but new words for concepts for which perfectly adequate words already exist. (This latter process is much beloved by modern academia.) What one has to see is whether these new words become generally current, and if they do it is pointless to raise objections to them. The new element in modern Hindi was perhaps an exceptionally large one, but that is neither here nor there. It took root with millions of people, and from that point onwards to deny it the status of a fully-fledged language was absurd. I do not know enough to date its achievement of this status, but it is certain that this was the position by the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. And here it becomes relevant to say something about Prem Chand, who at about this time decided that he should, without abandoning Urdu, start to write in Hindi. The fact that he took this decision is in itself conclusive proof that Hindi was now a living, flourishing language. And if at this point anyone jumps in to say, "Oh, but Prem Chand's Hindi is simply Urdu in Devanagari script," let me say at once, "No, it isn't." Prem Chand's Urdu is standard literary Urdu and his Hindi standard literary Hindi. I shall

return to this point later. R.S. McGregor in his *Outline of Hindi Grammar* (1972) was right to distinguish between the colloquial and literary forms of Hindi. He described modern Hindi clearly and generally accurately when he said, in effect, that there were words (many of them common to Hindi and Urdu) which you may speak but not write and others which you may write but not speak, and adopted the useful device of marking the former with a dagger and the latter with a star. To which one should add that the gap between colloquial and literary naturally tends to narrow in the case of speakers who have had a Hindi-medium education.

It is ironic that Prem Chand himself should have contributed to the myth that his Hindi is simply Urdu in Devanagari script, and conversely that his Urdu is simply Hindi in Urdu script. There is an easily discernible historical background to this. In the thirties, with the approach of independence, the most influential leaders of the freedom movement, Gandhi and Nehru, saw that a major task before them was that of attempting to achieve Hindu-Muslim unity, and that another important task was to create a “national language” spoken all over India and drawing its peoples into a closer national unity. Prem Chand took the same stand. Both of these aims influenced the language policies they advocated, but I think it is fair to say that at that stage the former one predominated. The policy which both Gandhi and Nehru advocated was to extend the common area between Hindi and Urdu (which they called Hindustani), to make this the basis of a national language, and to recognize both the Urdu and Devanagari scripts as acceptable forms in which to write it. Prem Chand wrote an essay in Hindi expressing this view—and wrote it in a Hindi which in no way exemplifies the language it is advocating! It is about as remote as it could be from “Hindustani.” A key paragraph would read in English translation,

Everyone is agreed on the point that to make a *state firm and strong* it is very *necessary* that the country should have *cultural unity*; and the *language and script* of any state is a *special part* of this cultural unity. Miss Khalida Adib Khanam said in one of her speeches that the unity of the Turkish *nation* and state had come about *because of* the Turkish language alone. And it is an *undoubted* fact that without a national language the *existence* of a state cannot even be *imagined*. Until India has a language it cannot lay claim to *statehood*.

The words I have put in italics are, in the original Hindi, words which

would probably not be understood by Urdu speakers, and I have (sparingly!) bolded words (including, believe it or not, his Hindi equivalent of English “and”) which exemplify totally unnecessary departures from the common Hindi-Urdu stock of words which are entirely acceptable even in written Hindi.

But let us for the moment put aside this remarkable contrast between Prem Chand’s theories and his failure to put them into practice. The true relationship between his Hindi and his Urdu has not, to my knowledge, been adequately investigated in any published work; and I guess that the primary reason for this is that most of those who have written about his language have been fluent readers either of Hindi or of Urdu, but not of both. However, nearly twenty years ago Alison Barnsby (now Safadi), who graduated with first class honors in Urdu, with Hindi as her subsidiary subject, produced a valuable study in the form of her dissertation for her finals. (This in my opinion would be well worth publishing.) In it she made a detailed study of both the Hindi and the Urdu versions of ten of Prem Chand’s short stories, representative of the whole period from 1910 to 1936. Her dissertation covers ninety handwritten pages and provides conclusive proof of the truth of my earlier assertion that Prem Chand’s Urdu was standard literary Urdu and his Hindi standard literary Hindi, and that by and large he made no attempt to write in the “Hindustani” he advocated. (It is, I imagine, possible that the Hindi and Urdu versions of the stories are not all Prem Chand’s own work, but even if that were the case it seems, to say the least of it, unlikely that either version would have been published without his approval.) Barnsby’s study quotes numerous examples of sentences which could equally well be described as Hindi or Urdu but which are *not* used in both versions.

Prem Chand’s example is clearly one of the greatest interest, but its main importance is that it proves that Hindi and Urdu already were by around 1915 two separate literary languages and should long ago have been classified as such.

The myth that they are not is only the most important of equally untenable ones that keep cropping up in Hindi-Urdu controversies. For example, those who advocate the view that the common stock of Hindi and Urdu vocabulary should be used as far as possible in the literary versions of both languages and attack the use of excessively Sanskritized Hindi, like to demonstrate their fairness by attacking with equal vigor an alleged form of Urdu so highly Persianized and Arabicized as to be the counterpart of the most highly Sanskritized form of Hindi. They generally add that a form of this kind is especially evident in Pakistan. This

would be a very convenient argument if it had any basis in fact, but it hasn't. People who would like to think that Prem Chand wrote Hindustani therefore assume that he did; and he didn't. In the same way "fair-minded" opponents of excessively Sanskritized Hindi assume that there is a parallel excessively Persianized/Arabicized form of Urdu; and there isn't. Urdu as written both in India and Pakistan is no more Persianized/Arabicized today than it ever was. Its Persianization, if one wants to use that term, was already accomplished when modern Hindi came into existence, and there is virtually no further scope for it. There has never been, is not now, and never can be any effective "Muslim" movement to "Muslimize" Urdu in the way that the creators of modern Hindi "Indianized" it. To use the terminology of many of the advocates of Hindi, Urdu is language with a large "foreign," "Muslim" element imposed upon its "purely Indian" base, and the most "Muslim" of Urdu speakers can't get away from the fact that Urdu is a partly "Indian" and partly "foreign" language. Hindi on the other hand can be to a great extent "purely Indian" through and through.¹

A good many other totally unsound propositions bandied about in controversy could (and should!) be examined. For instance, one could look at some of the nonsense said about the scripts of the two languages, with some Hindi enthusiasts (and even some Urdu writers) demanding, or at least urging, that Urdu "must" henceforth be written only in the Devanagari script, while others at the other end of the spectrum resent the publication of Urdu classics in Devanagari. (One such person wrote to me a year or two ago saying that to publish the verse of Ghalib in Devanagari was "an insult to Ghalib.") But the basic questions are those which I have tried to discuss in these notes, and I hope (though well aware that I am not entitled to expect!) that the picture I have drawn will be widely recognized as being in all essentials an accurate one. □

¹In these last sentences I have used quotation marks to indicate that though I understand what those who use these terms mean by them I do not accept them as valid descriptions of the phenomena they purport to describe. For example, "foreign" and "Muslim" are considerable over-simplifications. Neither can even the most Sanskritized Hindi be accurately described as "purely Indian."