IML Discourse I

‘Learning’ the Mother Tongue

**On the eve of the *International Mother Language Day* (February 21, 2014), NSU had the distinct honor of having the poet Quazi Md. Munzur-i-Mowla, once the Director General of the Bangla Academy, who made a presentation, entitled ‘*Learning* the Mother Tongue’ on Wednesday, February 19 at the NSU Campus in Bashundhara.**

**The presentation was an event of *IML Discourse I* – a high-profile and prestigious lecture series at NSU organized by the University’s Institute of Modern Languages under the School of Humanities and Social Sciences.**

**An internationally renowned literary critic, writer, and poet, who won the Bangla Academy Award for Poetry in 2007, Mr. Quazi Munzur-i-Mowla earned his MA in Public Administration at the University of Harvard, USA, after he had completed his BA and MA degrees in English from the University of Dhaka in the 1950s – the decade in which ‘language’ played a crucial role in the politics of the would-be Bangladesh.**

**Mr. Munzur-i-Mowla, who was one of the Regional Governors in Bangladesh in 1975, is a retired**

**civil servant who served the Government of Bangladesh as Secretary (Defense), Secretary**

**(Information), and also as Senior Secretary (Parliament) at different times of his checkered career.**

**Bengali, the language of our identity, must be nurtured by all Bengali students as they are the future of our nation and they will defend our identity in this age of cultural globalization**

**Prof. Amin Sarkar**

**Vice Chancellor**

**North South University**

The presentation was directed to students and participants of North South University and other frontline public and private universities in Bangladesh.

The discourse *Learning the Mother Tongue* was initiated by Mr. Mohammed Shahedul Haque, Director of the Institute of Modern Languages (and Chair, DEML) at NSU, who explained what language acquisition, especially in the contexts of first language application, would implicate and described how Bengali, with its exquisite morpho-syntactic systems, appears to be linguistically more sophisticated than English and many other important languages of the world. He said that the enhancement of capability in Bengali for the majority of students would mean a conscious revitalized and elevated competence especially in the phonemic and lexical planes of Bengali since there are literally hundreds of free morphs, phrases, and figures of speech out there that could be come across, acquired, and incorporated into the forms of Bengali we use in formal and informal modes of communication.

**Socio-psychological Aspects of Competence Enhancement**

The literary critic and former Director General of the Bangla Academy expressed his view that when we

show respect for our mother tongue *Bangla*, we have to understand that there is no reason to think that we

underrate English. He said while not learning English in today’s world is tantamount to intellectual

**Excellence in Bengali language and literature may help our students excel in English and other language skills as well. All languages are somehow linked to each other.**

**Prof. ANM Meshquat Uddin**

**Pro-Vice Chancellor**

**North South University**

suicide, being negligent of one’s mother tongue is equivalent to severing off one’s ties to one’s history, culture, people and heritage which are deleterious to one’s growth as a citizen of a country. Before elaborating on these matters, Mr. Mowla explained that the necessity of learning the mother tongue lay in the fact that a language, even one’s mother tongue, just cannot be acquired like many other phenomena we come across and internalize. This is because, the IML Director pointed out in the initiation of the discourse, even if, as Noam Chomsky (American linguist and philosopher) suggests that linguistic competence is primarily psychological, in order to acquire and develop full-scale *pragmatic strength* in our mother tongue, we still need to ‘learn’ it to gain competence in it in the true sense.

For adult learners, such as, college and university students, the IML Director said that research indicates that success in the acquisition of foreign languages is correlated with the increased proficiency in the substrate or the mother tongue. If we want to hone our skills in other languages, we must be first hone our skills in our first language as *subconscious translation* is one of the ways in which thoughts are expressed in a foreign language (such as, English). One can improve their first language competence by means of reading and also writing, the former BA Director General added. Therefore, students need to invest more time in meaningful reading and writing.

**Our national language should be introduced and used in all activities at all levels of the society**

**Mohammed Zillur Rahman**

**Former President**

**People’s Republic of Bangladesh**

**Respect for the Bengali Language**

The poet and former Defense Secretary of the Bangladesh Government emphasized that it is the love for one’s mother tongue that inspires him to defend and protect his language against oppressions of any type.

In this context, he made reference to the martyrs of the 1952 Language Movement. He compared the peril of our language, *Bangla*, during the then East Pakistan period with the peril portrayed in Harold Pinter’s novel, *The Mountain Language*. He praised the martyrs of 1952 as heroes who stood up against such peril. The only reason that the martyrs did not hesitate to shed their own blood is their enormous love and respect for our mother tongue. He argued that had the martyrs not resisted openly against the state-oppression that day, we could have lost our language forever. Only through love, the language was protected.

If a nation does not love its mother tongue, the way Bernard Shaw accuses the English for not caring about English in his famous play *Pygmalion*, then that nation will fail to defend the honor of the mother tongue if adversity presents itself.

**Native Tongue as a Means of Expressing a Native Reality**

Throughout Mr. Mowla’s stimulating discussion regarding the growing necessity of the native language competence, an important indication was the fact that experiences, expressions, and indeed realities are reflected differently in different languages. Mr. Mowla illustrated why and how a *native experience* can, or rather should, be expressed in the native language. To that end, Mr. Mowla brought in several literary

**I think that if we contemplate the classical problem of psychology, that of accounting for human knowledge, we cannot avoid being struck by the enormous disparity between knowledge and experience in the case of language**

**Noam Chomsky**

**American Linguist and Philosopher**

references and allusions to underpin his points and arguments. He said that our experiences and realities are primarily communicated through verbal expressions. However, this linguistic expression is often thought to be in the form of prose rather than of verse or poetry.

The poet explained how in the French writer Moliere’s *le bourgeois gentilhomme* (The Middle-Class Gentleman) we see a prime example of how competence in one’s language is related to his social status. In *le bourgeois gentilhomme*, the protagonist is a man of poor education who seeks to elevate himself to a different and higher social stratum and has a dilemma in writing a love-letter; he is unable to do so and in his desire to become a gentleman, who can express his love poetically, asks a friend for assistance. The friend inquires if it should be prose or poetry. He is baffled: *Is there a difference?* The friend explains to him how he had been *speaking prose for the past 30 years*. The exchange points at the inevitable interface between reality and language - the man’s bafflement in realizing that he had learnt and been exploiting his mother tongue in a way he was not aware of creates panic in him.

The Harvard alumnus Munzur-i-Mowla also made several references to the American poet T.S. Eliot in this regard to underpin the claim that reality is expressed neither in prose nor in verse but due to the subtlety of pauses, gestures, and eccentricities of expression, it encompasses a distinctive third that is not complete prose nor definitive verse. For this third aspect of expression Mowla referred to Rabindranath Tagore’s treatment of John Keats’ poem *Hyperion*. In Tagore’s rendition, the poet changes the opening

**Language, never forget, is more fashion than science, and matters of usage, spelling and pronunciation tend to wander around like hemlines**

**Bill Bryson**

**British Linguist and Former University Chancellor**

four lines of the poem and substitutes key English words representing Keats’ mother tongue for Farsi terms and expressions, and through that highlights how the poem’s gravity and meaning changes drastically. Tagore did this, to showcase how the expression of one reality cannot be expressed by using the language of another without significant sacrifices in meaning. It means that many aspects of a mother tongue expression can never be translated into an expression in another language.

Mr. Mowla maintained that competence in our own language would not only enable us to appreciate literature and works of art, but would allow us to express our own experiences in our own language: ‘Bengalis are not raised in snow but in rain and dirt and pollution’, he said. Our experiences can only be properly expressed through our own native language.

The poet related another tale to make the same point. It was a reference to *The Mountain Language* by Harold Pinter. In the play, there is a character of an old mountain woman whose son was imprisoned by the men of the king of the region. For some reason the king strictly prohibited the use of a mountain language spoken in the society. But the old woman knew only one language which was the mountain language - her mother tongue. Since she could not speak in the king’s preferred language, the guard did not let her enter the prison to visit and speak to her son. The guards kept the frail woman outside in the mountain waiting indefinitely. When the guards had been away for some time, a mountain beast bites and injures her badly. The guards return and out of pity tell her that she could speak to her son in the native language. When she finally gets a chance to see her son in the prison, she succumbs to her injuries.

The death of the old woman is highly symbolic in the play. If a person’s mother tongue is suppressed forcibly, its speaker’s soul will die from the want of it. In 1952, if we had not protested the forceful administration of a different language on us, then who knows, our condition could have been somewhat like the one that the old woman symbolizes.

**Humor is the first of the gifts to perish in a foreign tongue**

**Virginia Wolf**

**American Author of Children’s Literature**

## Vocabulary: How much do we really use?

In his presentation, the literary critic illustrated the meaning and usage of a number of words and expressions in Bengali that are very useful but nobody in the audience seemed to have prior knowledge about them. The lexis, he said, is the area where most of the Bengali users have deficiency.

The Bengali lexis is composed of about 100,000 separate free morphs or words. Among them about 50,000 are direct borrowings from the extinct Sanskrit language, about 20,000 are words with Sanskrit cognates, and the rest being purely foreign borrowings and [*Austro-Asiatic*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Austroasiatic_languages) words. It is not untrue that a large proportion of these words are archaic or highly technical, making them unusable for communicative purposes.

The vocabulary in contemporary literary works is made up mostly of Sanskrit loan words (about 65%), as against Sanskrit cognates making up 25% of the total.The other types make up about 10% of the lexis used in modern Bengali literature. Research shows that our students have unfamiliarity with a very high percentage of the lexis used in Bengali literature and this is one of the areas where they can concentrate order to develop stronger competence in the language.

**Switching to the Pragmatics**

The discourse made some reference to the issue of semantic transformation of lexical resources in our mother tongue. In all languages, some words get their meanings changed over time. The poet gave a humorous example of this phenomenon. A student critic once praised a famous Bengali novelist as *niret*.

**If you do not master your mother tongue, you do not respect yourself and you belong nowhere in the world**

**Munzur-i-Mowla**

**Poet and Literary Critic**

*Niret* in Bengali originally meant *stupid*, but the meaning gradually changed to *genuine*. When the young critic went to his professor to have his review checked, there was a misreading and he was penalized for ridiculing the literary figure. In order to deal with such a problem, the dictionaries should give both old and new meanings of such words. The presenter pointed out that Bengali is important in all types of discourse and communication. Even though, in the job market, people are easily absorbed if they are good at English, once they get into an organization, they use Bengali more than English. It was pointed out in the discourse that insufficient competence in Bengali usually instigates such switches to English. Therefore, unnecessary code mixing is pretty common in our educated society. Many people consider it a sociolinguistic problem. Learning a language is greatly related with one’s own culture. Competency in mother tongue shows the respect or one’s competency in mother tongue as it represents his or her nation to others. The honorable speaker pointed it out a number of times that learning a language requires true love for that language.

**Getting Rid of the Synthetic *Babu Bangla***

There are some speakers who are conservative and hypercorrect about our mother tongue. Their attitude

poses another kind of problem in communication. For example, in one of Rabindranath Tagore’s short story, a character says ‘It is easy to get changes for *hajar taka* than *shahasra taka*. The words *shahasra* and *hajar* both mean the same - thousand, the former being more formal and in some situations merely meaningless. This kind of archaic term is often seen as *babu* *language*, which, the presenter says, should be evaded in all situations. We should stick to a balanced version of the language to promote communication everywhere including the media.

**Last Words**

The discourse *Learning the Mother Tongue* aptly underlined the fact that despite the effects of globalization that has influenced our society profoundly, contrary to popular belief, competency in English is only required on a surface level, and for the day-to-day encounters and exchanges at work, young workers in Bangladesh must rely primarily on a strong command of the Bengali language. While official letters and documents are indeed mostly made in English, the greater synergic aspects of interacting with co-workers, which is indeed one of the most important aspects of succeeding professionally, requires, foremost, a strong competence in ‘Bangla’ – our mother tongue.

*Written by the RIT*