

CONFERENCE PAPER

Problems of Teaching Urdu in France as a Mixed Language

Summary

THIS PAPER SEEKS TO ANALYZE two complementary aspects of the study of Urdu as a foreign language: One, who studies Urdu in France and why? (France is chosen here for obvious reasons but, *mutatis mutandis*, most of our observations could just as easily apply to other European countries where Urdu is taught as a foreign language.) We shall briefly look at the general situation of Urdu in France and then proceed to examine the diverse motivations—cultural and sociological, academic, professional, etc.—of students engaged in the study of Urdu language and literature in this country.

Two, what is the exact linguistic and socio-linguistic status of Urdu? Reflecting on this aspect, one is puzzled by two facts: first, most learners of Urdu, even those among them of South Asian origin, lack a clear perception of what Urdu actually is; and second, many Urdu writers, including even some modern ones, usually describe Urdu as a mixed language, without questioning this notion, now more or less outdated in modern linguistic terms. We shall therefore attempt to redefine this notion to arrive at a clearer understanding of the linguistic status of Urdu. Socio-linguistic factors will play a considerable role in this redefinition. Finally, we shall see if the problems frequently encountered by students and teachers of Urdu could be related to its socio-linguistic status, concluding our discussion with a few possible solutions to those problems.

Introduction: The General Situation of Urdu Studies in France

The situation of Urdu in France is very different from that in the United

Kingdom. Nowhere in Europe do we find more colleges and institutions of higher studies where Urdu is taught than in the U.K. The French Urdu situation may be more akin to that in Germany or Italy, though there are also factors that are peculiar to France. This does not mean that experiences and observations made in the U.K. in this field do not apply at all to France or vice versa. Common sociological backgrounds of Urdu learners, and Urdu's very nature as a mixed language (meaning that it belongs to two different socio-linguistic fields) do apply in both cases.

Urdu studies were founded as early as 1828 by the celebrated scholar of Urdu Garçin de Tassy, at the Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales (INALCO; then École Royale & Spéciale des Langues Orientales, and located in the Royal Library). In those days it was called Hindustani studies. Hindi studies were separated from Urdu in the 1950s. Interestingly enough, we may be celebrating two bicentennials here: Garçin de Tassy was born in 1794, and our Institute of Oriental Languages was founded in 1795. Given the important contribution of Garçin de Tassy to Urdu studies in France, and the echo that his publications produced in India, the celebration of the two-hundredth anniversary of our Institute must also be an occasion to recall the life and works of this scholar.

The INALCO is the only French educational institution where Urdu is taught (nearly eighty oriental and African languages are taught in our Institute). Urdu is one of the seven languages of the South Asia Department, along with Bengali, Hindi, Tamil, Sinhalese, Telugu (unique in Europe) and Gypsy language. Urdu studies include Urdu Certificate (two academic years; seven hours a week), Urdu Diploma (three years), and a Higher Diploma (four years), which is close to our "licence" level; students may study full-time or part-time. Two full-time teachers—one associate professor and one lecturer, normally recruited from Pakistan, in the spirit of bilateral cultural cooperation—plus two part-time teachers deal with area studies and literature. The total number of students (all years included and counting full-time and part-time students) is more or less twenty. All our full-time students have to take general South Asian area-studies courses (cultural background, religions, history, and geography) in order to obtain their diplomas. Urdu is also taught in a few private Pakistani schools, but these fall outside the official French curriculum.

Who Learns Urdu in France and Why?

Cultural and sociological motivations. Indeed there are now in France many people of South Asian origin who are interested in Urdu. Still, a very small number of college students study Urdu, for several reasons. Among those of Pakistani origin, the parents are often illiterate or have had very little schooling. Moreover, most of them are actually Punjabi-speaking. Hence, it is difficult for them to motivate their children to study Urdu at the college level. Academic authorities have strict requirements for the formation of Urdu classes in colleges. Usually enrollment falls far short of the minimum required for offering a class. Besides, Urdu is still not admitted as an optional subject for the Baccalaureat examination, which makes its study practically useless at the college level.

However, some private Pakistani schools in the Paris area (where most of the Pakistani émigré population is concentrated) do provide Urdu classes at the school level. But such classes are conducted during leisure hours and are not included in the French curriculum. Urdu is both an important cultural identity mark for these students and a practical necessity for maintaining their links with Pakistan. One should remember here a basic sociological fact, viz., Pakistani immigration in France is relatively recent, starting in the seventies and reaching its peak perhaps in the eighties.

Some young people of South Asian origin (Urdu- or Punjabi-speaking), who also happen somehow to have a richer sociological background, do manage to go on to higher studies and, thus, choose Urdu as an additional or an optional subject. They come to Urdu with some prior facility in the language. However, this should not be taken to mean that they have nothing to learn. Very often their Urdu is not refined; it is a way of completing other academic studies, and sometimes also a way of keeping contact with their origins. But the number of such students is infinitesimally small—only one or two in any given year. All the same, their numbers will inevitably increase over time, as more young people gain access to higher studies.

Academic motivations. Mostly our students are of French or European origin, for whom Urdu—just as Hindi or any other South Asian language—is an additional subject in their concentration on South Asian studies or, alternatively, on Arabic or Persian studies.

An interesting feature is that some people of North African origin

(mostly French-speaking but with a good knowledge of Arabic) are now becoming interested in Urdu language and literature for religious and cultural reasons. Unfortunately, their perception of Urdu is limited by a general lack of information and by the fact that our Institute is the only French educational institution where Urdu is taught. Moreover, for the moment at least, our South Asia Department is located far from the Arabic and Middle East Departments; the latter are several kilometers outside Paris.

Professional motivations. Lastly, approximately half of our students study Urdu because of a specific professional project involving Pakistan or Muslim minorities in India. They may want to become anthropologists, historians, or diplomats, or work for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Unfortunately, because relatively less weight is given to Oriental languages in competitive examinations, the number of students who appear in them with Hindi or Urdu has decreased considerably. Sometimes, we also come across social workers who deal with Pakistani communities and feel they need to know Urdu for translation purposes. But because their size is much smaller than, for example, the Arabic-speaking communities, plus the fact that Urdu is still not included in the French educational curriculum except in our Institute, the teaching of Urdu doesn't yet offer much of a career.

Other motivations. Some senior people of South Asian origin also take Urdu, not because it may suit their academic needs, but simply because they wish to keep in contact with Urdu literature or with Muslim literature of South Asia. They may come from Mauritius (generally fluent in French), or from Indian minorities in former French colonies. They may be Gujarati- or Tamil-speaking, but they are French nationals, and French is their learned language. They are seriously motivated no doubt, but obviously Urdu does not play a role in their careers. This category also includes those young people who have married, or plan to marry, an Urdu-speaking person or a Pakistani and feel that they need to know Urdu to communicate with their in-laws or to feel more at ease in the urban areas of Pakistan.

Some Consequences of the Nature of Urdu as a Mixed Language in Teaching

Urdu as a mixed language. In this paper, the concept of a mixed language

will be developed theoretically, in a more precise and modern way than has hitherto been the case. Instead of using a vague cliché, which had been the former practice, we shall attempt a new definition, after the manner of the comparatist school.

Synchronically, a mixed language is defined by a systematic and permanent use of phonological, lexical, and morpho-syntactical elements borrowed from a language that belongs to another linguistic group (this being the fundamental linguistic factor). Such a systematic borrowing and use of foreign elements (effected according to fixed rules and norms peculiar to the borrowing language) is more or less important according to the respective levels of a language, written or oral, popular or literary speech. The very fact that language A may also borrow the alphabet and graphic system of language B is an important factor both for the constitution of a new norm and for the consciousness of the specificity of the new language (language C) by its own speakers. The borrowed graphic system may also command prestige for cultural, political, and religious reasons and may open the way for a systematic adoption of the literary and stylistic models from language B.

Diachronically, we may say that the speakers of a given language are actually conscious of using and evolving a new speech, a dialectal variant of their original language, which has been dominated by a foreign language. They make a compromise between their (dominated) language and the dominating one by adopting prestigious sub-systems (technical terminology, learned neology, new phonemes, orthography, literary models, onomastics, etc.). The cultural or socio-linguistic factor is important here. All these borrowings are successive, and become irreversible. And when this new speech is given an official norm, through a new literature or its adoption by a socially or ethnically constituted group as a standard means of communication (both oral and written) or as an official language, then, for socio-linguistic reasons, it comes to be given the status of a new language, with a new name, here language C, called a mixed language.

It should be noted here that under sociological or political pressures the reverse linguistic historical process may also happen, whereby a mixed language could die, or the original language, language A, could be revived and given a preferential and new status as an official language.

This new definition may apply to such languages as Maltese, Osmanli or Ottoman Turkish (as different from modern Turkish), Yiddish, etc. In the case of Urdu, language A was a particular Hindi dialect and language B was Persian as it came to be spoken and written in India, deeply

influenced by Arabic, with some Turkish borrowings and other influences; the result of the interaction between the borrowing Hindi dialect (language A) and the dominating Indian Persian (language B) accrued to language C: Urdu. These precise origins of Urdu as well as its status as a mixed language have to be kept in mind by teachers as well as learners.

Some Current Problems for Learners of Urdu as a Foreign Language

Let us now try to identify some current—or, rather, recurrent—problems encountered by students of Urdu as a foreign language—problems resulting from its nature as a mixed language.

Lexicologic features. Choosing the right word, according to the person being talked to, may be a problem for a learner of Urdu, for example, in the case of terms of address, of kinship and polite phrases. Urdu has a very rich variety of terms of address, mostly of Persian origin, some of them now obsolete, others confusing for somebody who knows Persian. As for terms of kinship, they offer special complexity for a learner with a social background characterized by the nuclear family system, because these terms are grounded in the extended family system of South Asia. Additionally, the complexity is proliferated by the presence of regional differences in the use of these terms. Then there is the further consideration that some of the kinship terms are also marked as “Urdu style,” as opposed to “Hindi style.”

Teaching modern Urdu literature to students familiar with Persian literature. Teaching classical Urdu literature to students who already command a knowledge of Persian literature may be relatively easy because the Urdu poetic language is closer to what they already know of poetry in Persian. But the case becomes appreciably more complex with modern Urdu prose fiction, as it is generally linked with contemporary South Asian life, with few parallels, if any, in contemporary Iranian life.

Some Suggestions

While Urdu may be taught, especially at the beginning level, as any other modern foreign language, one should keep in mind that its nature as a

“mixed language” implies several practical and theoretical considerations relative to the different cultural or linguistic background of the students.

1. Developing linguistic awareness. There appear to be quite a few misunderstandings and preconceptions regarding the real status of Urdu. For some students, Urdu is nothing more than Hindi written with an adapted Persian alphabet. Some others feel that just about any Arabic or Persian word with its original meaning and pronunciation could be introduced freely into Urdu syntactic structure and pass as Urdu. Such an attitude is rather frequent, given the peculiar status of Urdu, but it prevents a proper study of the Urdu norm and is a constant source of error in lexical values and in pronunciation. The real problem is a lack of perception of the north Indian nature of Urdu mixed with the Indian Persian element (and not only Persian or Arabo-Persian).

It is important to appraise the students of the nature of Urdu, by a simple demonstration of what the Indian linguistic base and the Arabo-Persian influence and superstructure are. This can be accomplished by providing the student with a short historical explanation, a definition, as the one given above, and even a diagram. Even if the students originally come from Urdu-speaking background, they may not be aware of the specific nature of Urdu, or, if they have been taught in the Hindi fashion, they may have a tendency to reduce Urdu to its literature. Awareness of the nature of Urdu as a mixed language may help in clearing misunderstandings and preconceptions which, if allowed to persist, may seriously prevent a student from learning the correct Urdu norm. In those instances where students may be learning both Urdu and Hindi at the same time, it becomes even more urgent to give them general principles in socio-linguistics so that they may be able to identify differences and feel more at ease with native speakers. Later on, some linguistic clues may be given to help recognize the origin of a Persian or Arabic word. Generally speaking, the more advanced the students, the more acute will be their perception of Urdu in its specificity, but for that they must be informed and properly motivated.

A good presentation of the different domains of learning and research where knowledge of Urdu is relevant must go hand in hand with basic notions of socio-linguistics: for example, in addition to Indo-Persian literary genres (e.g. the *ghazal*, *qavvālī*, etc.), such other areas as the Pakistani press and media, the Urdu press in India, nineteenth-century Indian historiography and history of the Indian and Pakistani freedom movements, Islamic schools of thought in India and Pakistan, the study

of certain South Asian Muslim societies, etc.—simply cannot be sufficiently understood without a working knowledge of Urdu.

2. *Specific phonological features of Urdu and frequent confusions.* Often difficulties are experienced in teaching Urdu pronunciation to students who have previously studied either Arabic, Persian, or Hindi; confusions come from common features of the graphic systems of Urdu and Persian, or from the fact that some Arabo-Persian phonemes that are peculiar to Urdu pronunciation (and came into Urdu through Indian Persian) are no longer considered distinctive features in modern Hindi pronunciation.

Naturally, when the student is a complete beginner and has (in our case) a French phonological reference, a contrastive acquisition of Urdu phonology is not necessary. But specific phonological features of Urdu, as opposed to modern Hindi, should be stressed to students who come with a background in Hindi and are used to the Devanagari system. A graphic illustration or chart would prove useful to show these phonological differences. On the other hand, students who come from Persian or Arabic studies have to be constantly reminded of the Indian value of some Urdu graphic conventions that prove deceptive to them (long or short vowels are not properly identified or retroflex consonants are neglected). Some Urdu phonemes, peculiar to Urdu pronunciation as opposed to Hindi or Persian, must be precisely articulated and rigorously drilled, according to the background of the learners.

3. *Urdu lexical signals in day-to-day conversation.* From the lexical point of view, it may not always be easy to differentiate clearly spoken Urdu from spoken Hindi, the differences being more obvious at a more learned level of the language. However, a student must be made aware of some basic and frequently used Urdu coined words, as opposed to their Hindi equivalents. Such words or expressions, as well as some very restricted morphological usages, work as “Urdu signals” in day-to-day conversation. Hindi speakers generally avoid them, or use them only infrequently. All the same, care should be taken not to stress this point too much, for this might result in discouraging the student. What is important at the beginning level is that one should be able to communicate. But sooner or later the student should be taught to differentiate clearly between Hindi and Urdu lexical signals. Where students are learning spoken Urdu and spoken Hindi at the same time but in separate classes, to the exclusion of writing, Urdu lexical and phonological signals should be clearly pointed out to them.

An inventory of such kinship terms as are peculiar to Urdu—for which Hindi uses different ones—should be provided to the student, because, although few in number, such terms nevertheless play an important socio-linguistic role. For the rest of them, one must choose a norm, taking care to teach only the closest kinship terms at the beginning level. As for Persian terms of address and polite phrases, some situations should be illustrated through dialogues constructed to teach only the most common ones.

4. Teaching Urdu literature to students familiar with Persian literature.

While it is true that Persian and Arabic literary models are still very much in use in Urdu, particularly in poetry, and, hence, a student possessing knowledge of Arabic or Persian poetry can be instructed in Urdu poetic literature with relative ease, it would be wrong to neglect the Pakistani and Indian aspects of Urdu literature, especially in modern Urdu fiction and drama—these narrative genres which, though borrowed from the West, nevertheless portray the social reality of India and Pakistan. Even if this social reality may prove difficult for a beginning student to apprehend fully, neglecting it would result in missing out on some important aspects of literary creativity in modern Urdu. The danger lies in placing rather too much stress on classical literature. On the other hand, it is classical poetry which some students of Urdu literature with a background in Hindi studies may feel more inclined and strongly motivated to learn.

These, then, are some examples of a differentiated or contrastive approach to Urdu language and literature according to the different backgrounds of learners—examples clarified for me both by experience and theoretical research.

—ALAIN DÉSOULIÈRES
Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales, Paris