

# **“I Got the Point Across and That is What Counts”. Transcultural Versus (?) Linguistic Competence in Language Teaching**

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## **Abstract:**

This paper examines the larger inquiries into post-secondary language instruction and the recommendations for curricular reform set out by the Modern Language Association’s Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages, with a specific case study of the less-commonly-taught language Hindi-Urdu. At York University, Hindi-Urdu is taught primarily (but not exclusively) to heritage learners at three levels. In building a relatively new program, I have faced several challenges that seem to be located at the intersection of transcultural and translanguaging as well as innovative and traditional approaches to language teaching. While I certainly do not hold an instrumental view of language learning and how it may relate to graduate studies (i.e., preparing students for upper level literature, culture courses and/or archival work, etc.), I would like to discuss the practical side of an “intellectually and culturally informed” language pedagogy and its ramifications for language assessment.

As the title to my paper indicates, my experiences with students attempting to learn Hindi-Urdu have led me to believe that they may not be willing to become proficient with the language in a formal linguistic way, but rather seek a working knowledge of what they understand as colloquial variants of either Hindi or Urdu. This may lead to conflicting expectations between the student and the instructor. I therefore ask, is there a middle-of-the-road path that prepares students to use the language in familiar settings outside the classroom without neglecting the mastery of grammatical concepts? Through a number of examples, I would like to demonstrate how I sensitize students to a methodology that attempts to elicit a positive attitude toward formal linguistic study by interlinking culture and grammar and that subsequently enables students to understand lan-

guage along with its grammar as cultural concept per se and not merely as a tool to talk about culture. I would like to feed into discussions about teaching language through material that is thought to be meaningful and content-focused, rather than solely through grammar drills. At the same time, I also argue that the prerequisite for communication of culturally informed content is the mastery of culturally specific grammatical concepts and I will provide specific examples taken from the classroom.

In this paper I reflect on the recommendations for curricular reform set out by the Modern Language Association's *Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages* with a specific case study taken from a less-commonly-taught language, Hindi-Urdu. Central to the recommendations for post-secondary language teaching was the transformation of the higher education language curriculum away from a hierarchical two-tiered system in which favorably native speakers were hired in the alternative stream for language instruction and full-time tenure-track faculty was in charge of teaching higher levels of language, literature, and culture courses. The report recognizes the importance of treating language learning not solely as means for preparing students for upper level literature and culture courses; it expresses the opinion that language teaching must be linguistically and culturally informed. Also, it was recognized that *transcultural* and *translingual* components that sensitize students to "alternative ways of seeing, feeling, and understanding" (MLA ad hoc, p. 5) should be incorporated into classroom instruction. The goal is no longer to assess proficiency against the "native-speaker norm" (Kramsch, 1993, p. 9), but to establish relationships between two (or more) languages and cultures. Language departments have the potential to forge linkages with other departments or incorporate the study of culture in the language degree program, as does the Department of Languages, Literatures, and Linguistics at York University in Canada.<sup>1</sup> The Department's ap-

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<sup>1</sup> The Department of Modern Languages at York University was established in 1960 and divided into three units in 1967: the Department of French Literature (stemming from the recognition of French as one of the national languages of Canada), the Department of Foreign Literature (German, Spanish, and Russian, later also Italian) and the Division of Linguistics and Language Training. Today, languages at York University are housed in the Languages, Literatures, and Linguistics department that emerged in 1977-78 out of the Department of Foreign Literature and the Unit of Linguistics and Language Training. Lan-

proach to commonly and less-commonly taught languages is neither narrow nor outwardly two-tiered: language degree programs and certificates require that students enroll in a combination of language, literature and culture courses, all part of one curriculum and degree. Tenure-track faculty must demonstrate language-teaching background and must be able to teach language and literature at all levels, along with culture taught in English and world literature courses. In order to meet the high enrollment in first and second year language courses, many part-time instructors are also hired to support the programs.<sup>2</sup>

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guage acquisition and literature teaching were thus perceived as separate entities, but the idea of a merged department emerged precisely from debates over the relationship between language, literature, and culture. In 1971, the recognition that culture was pertinent to language studies and (“high”) Culture (in the upper case) was related to literature led to the introduction of culture courses as part of language training, while “high Culture” was taught in the Department of Foreign Literature. In 1977-78, the links of culture, Culture, literature, and language were revisited and a new, merged, Department of Languages, Literatures and Linguistics was formed. I thank Dr. Wolfgang Ahrens, founder member and long-time chair of the Department of Languages, Literatures and Linguistics, for sharing this information with me.

<sup>2</sup> Today, York University houses one of the widest range of language courses and language degree programs offered at Canadian universities, including American Sign Language, Arabic, Chinese (Mandarin), German, Classical and Modern Greek, Hebrew, Hindi-Urdu, Italian, Jamaican Creole, Japanese, Korean, Latin, Portuguese, Russian, Swahili, Tamil, and Yiddish. Most of the languages are taught at four levels, placing different emphases on language acquisition (as tool) and translingual and transcultural proficiency: language is taught at the introductory, intermediate, and advanced levels, with innovative teaching materials and a widely disseminated technology-enhanced learning pedagogy. In many courses, literature is taught in both English and the respective languages in different proportions. Culture courses on specific topics are taught in English: they encompass overview courses (German through the ages, South Asian Literature and Culture) and specialty courses (migration literature in German, feminist writing in South Asia and the diaspora), or canonical literature in particular genres (detective fiction, poetry, novel, theatre, film). Courses offer the option that advanced students read literature in the original languages even if the course is taught in English and the literature is read in English translation. The department advertises itself by pairing language and literature with transcultural competency:

The study of languages and literatures contributes to expanding horizons, to connecting with other cultures, and to building a distinctive personal profile. Your ability to talk to native speakers of other world communities and gather information beyond the world of English will contribute to your uniqueness and help you to stand out among your peers (<http://dlll.yorku.ca/> accessed on January 18, 2011).

Language promises excellence and distinction. The knowledge of language makes a student “stand out”.

The MLA report elucidates a perceptual problematic, which I would like to investigate against the background of language teaching:

At one end, language is considered to be principally instrumental, a skill to use for communicating thought and information. At the opposite end, language is understood as an essential element of a human being's thought processes, perceptions, and self-expressions; and as such it is considered to be at the core of translanguing and transcultural competence. While we use language to communicate our needs to others, language simultaneously reveals us to others and to ourselves. Language is a complex multifunctional phenomenon that links an individual to other individuals, to communities, and to national culture.<sup>3</sup>

If multilingualism is considered to be essential for cross-cultural and transnational communication, the stakes for language teaching are set rather high. How would one implement the learning outcome, "translanguing and transcultural competency", in a language degree program? While I understand the viability of these learning objectives especially from a degree-granting institution's perspective, the challenges become apparent when it comes to assessing the extent to which a student was able to accomplish the goal in a formal language instruction setting. How to create a curriculum in which language ceases to be "the tool", or "the skill", and instead manifests as culture and content?<sup>4</sup> I approach these challenging questions by considering linguistic competence and meta-linguistic exchange, the talk *about* language (MLA ad hoc, 2006, p. 2).

### The "Knowledge" of Grammar

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<sup>3</sup> Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World. Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages (2006). Accessible via <http://www.mla.org/flreport>

<sup>4</sup> Kramsch (1993, p. 3) formulates the supposed dichotomy of skill versus content very precisely: "Language is viewed as a skill, a tool that is in itself devoid of any intellectual value. As an academic subject, it becomes intellectually respectable only when learners are able to use it to express and discuss abstract ideas."

As the pamphlet of the Modern Language Association “Language Study in the Age of Globalization” suggests, languages, literatures, and cultures must be studied as a discipline along with distinct analytical skills.<sup>5</sup> I am in strong support of the way the organization promotes the study of language. Some key assumptions that inform my own teaching practices include the following:

- languages must be studied in historical, political, and cultural contexts
- the study of languages makes informed local, national, and global citizens
- the study of language not only improves career prospects, but is a life-enriching experience
- languages are embedded within their own cultures and possess their own bodies of literature

At the beginning of the academic year, I distributed the MLA pamphlet to my first year Hindi-Urdu class and asked that the 35 students indicate: 1) what they considered to be most important to them in the language pamphlet and 2) what would convince them personally to learn a new language. Students most commonly identified *sensitivity and awareness to linguistic and cultural difference* as an important element in their decisions to learn Hindi-Urdu. They also found appealing the idea of learning language with authentic materials, and the improved career prospects and professional opportunities were also highlighted by them. In addition, students of South Asian descent pointed to the idea of “going back to their roots”, suggesting that while they were familiar with cultural aspects of their heritage, they lacked the language of their origin.

Certain statements in the pamphlet were of concern to me, such as those that discuss languages as bearers of ideas, customs, habits, and values, indicating that languages give access from the inside to learn “culturally rooted attitudes and behaviors”. Here, language teaching is at risk of essentializing culture (in the case of Hindi-Urdu

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<sup>5</sup> Language Study in the Age of Globalization:  
[http://www.mla.org/pdf/adfl\\_brochcollege.pdf](http://www.mla.org/pdf/adfl_brochcollege.pdf) (accessed July 29, 2008)

these would be Hindu and Muslim cultures and even religions), *while* creating cultural competency and openness towards cultural diversity.

Among the various constituents of the study of *language* is linguistic competence. As a language instructor receiving many student complaints about the tediousness and - in their view - irrelevance of grammar, I have had to constantly revise my curriculum in order to create a learning environment that offers sufficient, but not overwhelming, linguistic and meta-linguistic training. Certainly, other forms of cultural correspondence, such as nonverbal communication—which includes prosodic and kinetic factors (Southworth, 1995), and develops a sensitivity of students towards non-verbal semantics (van Olphen, 1995)—are *as* formative to developing cross-cultural competence as is the “mastery” of grammar. In a time at which intuition is en vogue in language teaching, the location of grammar and grammar drills in particular have come under attack as being an “unreal” way of language acquisition. The “natural” way would be to somehow simulate the method by which a child acquires linguistic proficiency (Krashen in Jagannathan, 1995, p. 25). Certainly, learning a language requires communication and interaction inside the classroom and even beyond.<sup>6</sup> Language cannot solely be learned with a grammar book and an instructor; the use of innovative and (semi)-authentic teaching materials is required. I firmly believe, however, that this must begin with sound grammatical training. While I am certainly not dismissive of innovative language pedagogy (I myself experiment with project-based learning at the introductory, intermediate and advanced levels), I attempt to teach culture through grammar, consciously, and not inconspicuously. Four examples from Hindi-Urdu grammar are useful to discuss linguistic particularities as well as cultural concepts in which these grammatical concepts may be rooted:

(1) Certain verbs in Hindi-Urdu require that the English subject of a sentence become the object through the postposition *keao* (in indirect

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<sup>6</sup> Ilieva (2008) describes an example of project-based learning that reaches out to community settings. Pandharipande (1995) and S. Gambhir (1995) also give examples decoding meaning and being interactive in the classroom.

verb constructions, such as in verbs *psand haonaa* and *maalaUma haonaa*);

(2) The *ker*-conjunctive participle is a popular way to avoid the conjunction "and" when the subject of both phrases is the same;

(3) *nao*-constructions are particular to the perfect tenses of transitive verbs and have no equivalent in English;

(4) Hindi-Urdu operates with three second-person pronouns (*tU*, *tu-ma*, *Aap*);

Alerting students to these linguistic particularities by discussing concepts such as caste, age and gender hierarchies as they are promulgated (and also contested) through popular media, allows students to consider language in alternative ways including, but not limited to, social issues as they pertain to, for example, style, proverb specificity, etc. To briefly comment on each example:

- (1) Students become aware that languages and cultures are unique and cannot easily be captured with electronic translation devices. Together, we may speculate over *social* reasons as to *why* indirect verb constructions exist the way they do, even though we might not come to a definite conclusion as to why Hindi and Urdu avoid the "I" as grammatical agent. Why, for example, are objects/people "pleasing *to* subjects" (as opposed to subjects *being* pleased—that is, the individual is herself/himself pleased *by* someone/thing external to himself/herself).
- (2) Using a conjunctive participle that does not exist per se in the English language as a stylistic device introduces students to a grammatical concept specific to Hindi-Urdu and teaches them to let go of one-dimensional English to Hindi-Urdu translation. They are also alerted that they have advanced over a period of several months and able to use Hindi-Urdu specific linguistic tools for expression (also see example below). (3) The perfect tense of transitive verbs, to me, is the

pinnacle of basic Hindi-Urdu grammar, and I introduce this grammatical concept as a very difficult, but also as a very special one. I see this approach through grammar as embedded in both translingual and transcultural goals. Making inquiries as to *why* grammatical concepts differ between languages might actually attune and sensitize students, in particular heritage learners, to cultural phenomena. (4) This becomes particularly acute when comparing the one English second person pronoun to the three Hindi-Urdu second person pronouns, where students are asked to critically reflect over their 'choice' of pronoun (how would they address their pet, for example, and how would the Southasian cultural context challenge their choice of pronoun)?

While trying to reshuffle the relationship between linguistic and cultural knowledge to make language acquisition as appealing and useful as possible, I have come to reaffirm my conviction that students approach language through the operation of grammar. In a classroom that consists of heritage learners and (graduate and undergraduate) students with no language background, I consider this the most appropriate approach. In the following I will lay out how I have come to this conviction.

#### *Heritage learners of Hindi-Urdu*

On average, 90% of my students at York University may be categorized as heritage learners. The category itself, though, requires qualification: not every student hails from families in which Hindi and/or Urdu is spoken.<sup>7</sup> Yet, the students are described as heritage learners because of their South Asian background.<sup>8</sup> A common denominator may be their interest in Hindi-Urdu films and songs com-

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<sup>7</sup> York University teaches Hindi-Urdu as a language that shares grammar and vocabulary in the introductory and intermediate levels, but that is written in two different scripts. The Hindi Nagari script is taught at the introductory level, and the Urdu Nastaliq script is taught at the intermediate level.

<sup>8</sup> Gambhir (2008, p. 17) also speaks of the heritage-land connection, which excludes students from Hindi-Urdu-speaking areas other than the South Asian "mainland", such as the Caribbean, Mauritius, East Africa (Uganda, Kenya), South America (Guyana, Suriname), and Europe. Ilieva (2008, p. 2) offers another useful sub-category of "heritage students whose parents are from the South Asian diaspora".



ing out of the Bollywood film industry, and very often their interest in South Asian (diasporic) culture. Even though it is the case that in their homes a diversity of South Asian languages (or English) may be spoken, heritage learners share a certain familiarity with Hindi and/or Urdu. Vijay Gambhir gives the following pedagogically useful definition of a heritage learner:

A heritage learner of Hindi is a student whose family may speak Hindi or another Indian language at home. The student may or not be able to speak or understand Hindi but is familiar with Hindi language and its culture through his or her connection with the heritage land” (Gambhir, 2008, p. 2).<sup>9</sup>

Being a heritage learner does not imply certain proficiency levels in Hindi-Urdu. However, heritage learners have a good right to assume that they already know something about the language and culture they have set out to learn. They don’t claim that they are coming without any prior exposure to Hindi-Urdu, as the traditional learners of Hindi-Urdu would, who came from non-South Asian backgrounds and constituted the bulk of (American) university language courses until the 1980s (Gambhir, 2008, p. 1). However, when encountering difficulties with grammatical concepts, they will often point out that even though Hindi-Urdu is spoken around them, it is not *their* language of communication.<sup>10</sup> “I know Hindi, but I don’t know the grammar and script”, a student seeking to enroll in introductory Hindi explained to me. The challenge is to convey to heritage learners that such a statement is a naive fallacy and I try to have them rethink such a statement by challenging them linguistically and culturally, by alerting them to the fact that even the most familiar literary expression is rule-governed. The challenge, then, revolves around clearing out what seems inaccessible, intangible, and sometimes also

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<sup>9</sup> Gambhir (2008, p. 6) also distinguishes ancestral and associate heritage learners, the former being those who speak Hindi at home and the latter being divided into cognate and non-cognate learners (see definition in footnote 10).

<sup>10</sup> I share Vijay Gambhir’s (2008, p. 2) experience: students with South Asian language background (including Dravidian languages) possess a knowledge of cultural and linguistic thought patterns that positively impact their communicative skills in Hindi and that is better developed compared to traditional learners (i.e. students without any South Asian background).

unnecessary to students by capturing them through pedagogically innovative thoughts and tools.

Most of the heritage learners initially try to approach the language with intuition. This is not surprising since many want to understand the content of their favorite songs, which they hum and listen to prior to the beginning of class, and not what may be defined as grammar. They display a genuine cultural interest that is paired with a lingual/linguistic one and it is on this wave that grammar may ride as well. It would be presumptuous to call all heritage learners semi-native speakers, though, but those students with Indo-Aryan language background (most commonly Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, Gujarati, Marathi, Bengali) have some “good” reasons to opt for the intuition approach. To these cognate learners,<sup>11</sup> the classroom is not the traditionally known “foreign language classroom” of the “foreign language department”. And nevertheless, I argue that they require a linguistic introduction to language. The point I wish to emphasize is that a linguistic approach to language in a university setting is a useful starting point *especially* for students from near-native contexts who may possess some of the genetic language acquisition device that Noam Chomsky (1968) describes.

*Diverging “Grammars” of Student and Book*

In a good sense, the grammar proposed by the linguist is an explanatory theory; it suggests an explanation for the fact that (under the idealization mentioned) a speaker of the language in question will perceive, interpret, form, or use an utterance in certain ways and not in other ways (Chomsky, 1968, p. 23).

**Case study: “Grammar” and the fallacy of grammar from a student perspective**

The majority of students enrolled in Hindi-Urdu courses have South Asian diasporic backgrounds. They, along with graduate students as well as non-South Asian students, bring diverse interests in South Asian culture and transcultural practices into the classroom.

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<sup>11</sup> Gambhir (2008, p. 5) defines cognate learners as associate heritage learners whose language spoken at home is linguistically related to Hindi.

What better conditions could there be to *link* linguistic and cultural approaches to language? In my experience, non-heritage speakers and approximately 1/3 of heritage speakers approach the language primarily academically. 1/3 of the heritage learners are reluctant and unwilling to let go of their intuition and, thus, reject a grammatical approach. The remaining third opts for a “healthy” combination of linguistic and intuitive approaches.

But grammar remains not only a challenge, but often a problem for students. I am particularly reminded of a student who approached me requesting that I re-evaluate an assignment of his that he had not passed. He had not been able to differentiate between transitive and intransitive verbs – an exercise crucial and very particular to sentence formation in the perfect tenses of Hindi-Urdu - and he had neglected to use the participle construction ‘*kr*’, another very particular and popular linguistic asset of Hindi-Urdu (see example two in the previous section). His oversight (the second ‘error’) was more an issue of failing to follow instructions as opposed to committing a grammatical blunder (he had used the postposition *ko baad* instead of the participle *kr*). His first mistake was a major grammatical error. The student had difficulty comprehending that he had not demonstrated his ability to correctly employ two grammar concepts learned in class and thus not passed the assignment. Yet, he insisted that his sentences were *getting the point across*, insinuating that this was not a failed assignment (he suggested that he receive a C rather than an E). I would like to take this example to further think about transcultural and translingual competence, this time as it is in conflict with linguistic competence. Was it ‘right’ to have him fail the assignment? From the perspective of a degree-granting institution, and as an instructor, “getting the point across” is not the right basis for evaluation.<sup>12</sup> The conflicting views on the knowledge of language and its use (‘knowing’ [the student thinks he occupies the moral high ground] and ‘not knowing’ [the language instructor asserts her au-

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<sup>12</sup> I am reminded of language syllabi pointing out to heritage learners that they are not evaluated on the basis of what they bring to the class, but on their ability to apply concepts learned in class (such as Afroz Taj at University of North Carolina, or my own). Though very viable to guarantee fairness, such statements require very careful phrasing in order to not discourage students from being creative and using language in the transcultural and translingual manner suggested by project-based learning.

thority and penalizes on the basis that the instructions of the assignment were not followed and thus knowledge was not demonstrated]) are linked to a participatory attitude that I have often encountered and of which I am skeptical.<sup>13</sup> If we redirect our attention from grammar to a project-based intuitive approach, do we not risk denying grammar itself as a cultural concept?

*Examples from the Classroom*

I would like to give three examples from the classroom that describe some of the methods I have adopted in the “culture as language” approach. In each case, I have had to contemplate certain questions regarding pedagogy, culture and grammar and I come to different conclusions. The examples discuss (1) traditional and culturally attuned versus innovative pedagogically assessed and approved approaches to teaching the Nagari and Urdu scripts; (2) the way I use “culture” to discuss second person pronouns in Hindi-Urdu and (3) some strategies for attuning heritage learners to technical linguistic terms while also appealing to their creative abilities.

In all of the examples I make use of either authentic or semi-authentic audio-visual teaching materials, thus attending to the importance of exposing students to the target culture with sources other than textbooks, as argued by Bedi (1995) and van Olphen (1995).

- (1) The first example concerns a decision I was required to make with regard to introducing the Hindi Nagari and Urdu Nastaliq scripts in first-year and second-year Hindi-Urdu respectively. In the case of Hindi, I opted against new pedagogical recommendations from educationists in India that arrange the characters of the Nagari script around shape similarity (Gupta, 2008, p. 2). This method has proven to be psycholinguistically effective in India and abroad and is implemented at the University of Pennsylvania and by the Central Institute of Indian Languages in India for adult learners (Gupta 2008, p. 5). I, however, chose the traditional grouping of the con-

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<sup>13</sup> If not alerted from the very beginning, heritage learners at the introductory and intermediate levels might, for an entire academic year, ignore every linguistic term introduced in class. In grammar quizzes, then, they'd be unable to understand instructions and fail badly.

sonants and vowels so that students could understand the systematic pattern according to which the Nagari alphabet is arranged: the Nagari script groups its consonants into groups (velar, palatal, retroflex, dental, labial, sibilant, glottal), which are pronounced in different places of the mouth (images 1 and 2). Learning the five characters of "one row" at a time is also very useful to enhance correct pronunciation of Hindi sounds from the onset. I point out to the students that visually similar characters in Hindi do not have similar sounds (such as p and ya or D, D, and [or ma and Ba). This can nicely been shown with the "traditional" Hindi alphabet chart (ihndI vaNa-maalaa caaT-) that connects sounds to images (image 3).

### Image 1: Characters "in order"

(source: [www.avashy.com/hindiscripttutor.htm](http://www.avashy.com/hindiscripttutor.htm))



**Image 2: Places of articulation of Hindi characters**

(source:

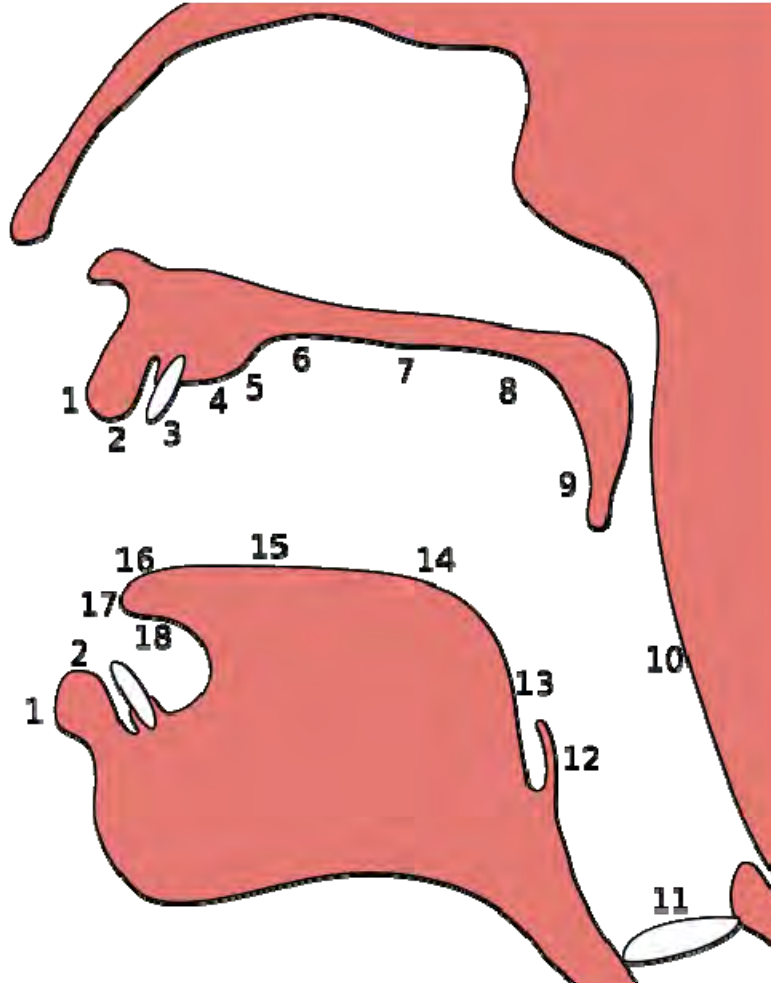
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Places\\_of\\_articulation.svg#file](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Places_of_articulation.svg#file))

Image 3: Traditional *var&m@l@*-chart

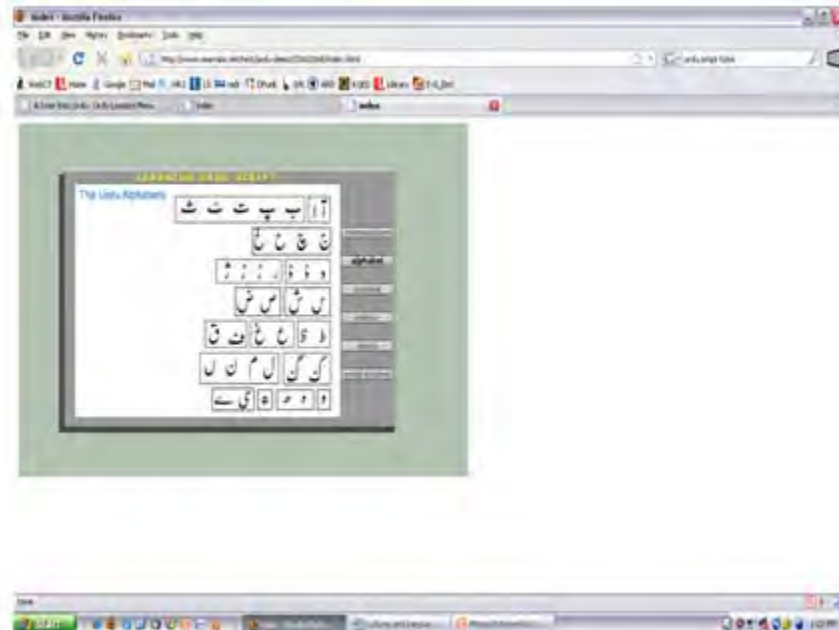
For the Urdu case, however, I chose Richard Delacy's (2001) textbook, in which characters that do not resemble each other are arranged and presented together, rather "unconventionally". This approach allows students to engage with entire words in script exercises from the very first chapter onward. This would not be possible if the traditional alphabet order of characters sorted by similar shapes with different "distinguishers", i.e. numbers and placement of dots or other symbols that distinguish for example be (ب) from pe (پ), Ye (ی), and se (س), where followed (image 4). Students coming from introductory Hindi-Urdu immediately see the results of learning this relatively difficult script as they are immediately capable of reading/writing proper words. So, while for Hindi, I am able to point to

the scientific and systematic placement of characters in Hindi, for Urdu, I “sacrifice culture” in the form of the traditional arrangement of the alphabet for pedagogic reasons.

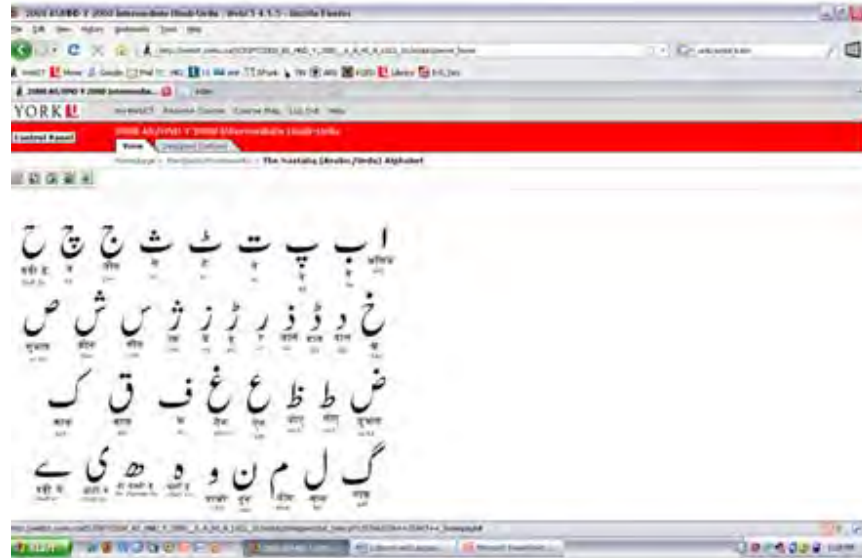
In both cases, I also work with multimedia language materials, such as interactive Hindi and Urdu script tutors (<http://www.avashy.com/hindiscripttutor.htm> and <http://www.marriala.net/test/urdu-demo/03062006/index.html>). I strictly work without Romanized characters and instead give English words indicating the pronunciation (k as in skit, Aa as in father, and A as in again). While learning the Urdu script, students are mostly asked to convert the Nagari into the Nastaliq script and vice versa. From the onset of the intermediate level course, the Nagari spelling is used to name the Nastaliq characters (image 5).

#### Image 4: Nastaliq characters "in order"

(source: [www.marriala.net/test/urdu-demo/03062006/index.html](http://www.marriala.net/test/urdu-demo/03062006/index.html))





**Image 5: The names of Urdu characters spelled in Hindi**

- (2) Second person pronouns are useful to illustrate the interlinkages of culture and language, as different second person pronouns (tU, tuma, and Aap) are used depending on the relationship between the speakers. Here, stanzas from movie songs, or even particular scenes from dialogues in movies, are useful to demonstrate how modes of address manifest in dialogic settings. Awareness of the use of pronouns depending on the relationship to the addressee sensitizes students towards cultural and communicative linguistic competence. It is a “classic” example of the relationship between translanguaging and transcultural linguistic competence as well: when it comes to addressing and/or referencing others, it is not sufficient to simply choose any pronoun and use it in a grammatically correct manner. Besides the grammatical component, the discourse function and cultural meaning of second person pronouns needs to be taken into consideration (Pandharipande, 1995, p. 47). It is from such questions of decoding meaning that Pandharipande (1995, p. 48) has concluded: “Second

language teaching (in theory and practice) that does not include discourse strategies as one of the major components of teaching fails to acknowledge the dynamic dimension of social meaning. Analogically speaking, the process seems to be like teaching the learner how to build a car without teaching her/him how to drive it.”

At the same time it is very important to recognize the flexibility of grammatical rules outside the classroom: movies and songs are once again useful to show how grammar is deployed to convey new modes of address that range between *tU*, *Aap*, and *tuma* => *tuma hOM*). But to do all of this, the grammatical concept first needs to be understood and applied in both imagined and real cultural settings. Students proficient in spoken Hindi-Urdu, for example, fail to differentiate between the singular (*hO*) and plural (*hOM*) usage of the verb *haonaa* (to be) which, in terms of script, is differentiated by a single dot indicating nasalization on top of the character's horizontal line. The student is asked to consider the construction in linguistic terms, and understand that while the two second person plural pronouns may be used for just one person, there nevertheless exists a requirement for a plural verb agreement.

- (3) A third example illustrates my insistence on using grammar as an entry point to language and culture in order to prevent recurring grammatical mistakes that are often taken to be spelling mistakes by students.<sup>14</sup> Here, written skill is targeted as opposed to communicative competence because, in an oral setting, the difference between the correct and incorrect usage of grammar is often scarcely audible.<sup>15</sup> Encountering the inability of near-native speakers to spell the four different plural forms in Hindi-Urdu correctly, I place particular emphasis on plural formation of masculine and feminine nouns in introductory Hindi. I would like to demonstrate how I go

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<sup>14</sup> Such as not using the *bindu*, a dot that indicates the plural of the verb *haonaa* (to be), or not shortening the vowel *-i-* of a feminine noun in the plural, or adding a *bindu* to *all* adjectives in the plural rather than just to the feminine plural ones.

<sup>15</sup> See Jagannathan's (1995, pp. 26, 35) concerns and experiments with projects that teach language mainly through practice of speech.

about this assignment, which is also the first group assignment in class with a very clear task in the form of a table (part 1).

While the entry point into grammar takes place through an immensely popular Bollywood song, the component I am most interested in is the identification of the grammatical rules in the song's lyrics. Students claiming to know Hindi are somewhat baffled because of their unfamiliarity with the grammatical terms "marked" and "unmarked", which form the basic vocabulary of the instructor's language. So it almost seems as if I am interested in teaching them *my* language first, before asking them to use *theirs*. In all likelihood, intuition will provide them with little direction in this particular exercise. This exercise can only be completed successfully when the grammatical rules of the first chapters of the textbook are applied.

*Group work: "Bazigar song with grammar exercises"*

Exercise: Listen to the song and try to translate it. With your group, fill out the table by following the instructions given below.

1. Determine the gender (masculine or feminine) and number (singular or plural) of the word by looking at the word endings.
2. Try to draw conclusions on why the word is and has to be an adjective or noun.
3. Determine whether the words are marked or unmarked nouns and adjectives.

Word	Masculine or feminine?	Marked or unmarked?	Singular or plural?	Adjective or noun?
kalaI				
Aa^MK oM				
gaaoro				
gaala				
tIKI				
na- ja,roM				
ihrnaI				
caala				

This part of the exercise focuses on learning grammatical forms of language. As Kramersch (1993, p. 76) would phrase it, “the context [is constrained] to its linguistic dimensions.” Discussing the content of the song as well as using the new vocabulary are part of consecutive exercises. In this first part, the instructor sets the terms of the assignment in the interest in getting grammar correct, but also with the intention to have students discuss and explain to each other the rules of grammar. At this stage of the exercise, all communication takes place in English. However, there is a second part to this assignment that places content at its heart:

4. With the help of your vocabulary lists of nouns and adjectives, write a stanza about someone/something using the tune of *Baazigaar*.

This component asks students in their groups to replace the adjectives and nouns of the song with new words. It allows students to communicate with each other in more creative ways and reduces the linguistic factor by placing emphasis on the imaginative and creative abilities of students (see also Kramersch, 1993, p. 74).

## Conclusion

I conclude with a quote from Claire Kramersch, who appropriately captures the relationship between cultural and language skill: "Culture in language learning is not an expendable fifth skill, merely tagged on, so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. It is always in the background, right from day one, ready to unsettle the good language learners when they expect it least, making evident the limitations of their hard won communicative competence, challenging their ability to make sense of the world around them. If language is seen as social practice, culture becomes the very core of language teaching. Cultural awareness must then be viewed both as enabling language proficiency *and* as being the outcome of reflection on language proficiency" (Kramersch, 1993, p. 1).

In providing examples from a specific case study of the less-commonly-taught language Hindi-Urdu as it is taught at York University, I wished to point to the intersections of transcultural and translingual as well as innovative and traditional approaches to language teaching. Far from holding an instrumental view of language learning, I raised some practical questions revolving around "intellectually and culturally informed" language pedagogy and its ramifications for language assessment.

As not all students may be willing to become proficient in Hindi-Urdu in a formal linguistic way, the language instructor needs to take into consideration possible conflicting expectations between the student and the instructor. I wish to have shown in this paper that there do exist middle-on-the-road paths for both, instructor and student: paths that prepare students to use the language outside the classroom without neglecting the mastery of grammatical concepts. It is important, though, that students be introduced to this methodology that attempts to elicit a positive attitude toward formal linguistic study by interlinking culture and grammar. Such an approach enables students to understand language along with its grammar as cultural concept *per se* and not merely as a tool to talk about culture. While my case study drew on Hindi-Urdu, the questions I raised are certainly not unique to this language. Less-commonly taught languages as well as

commonly taught languages face decisions that need to be taken with regards to meaningful and content-focused language acquisition.

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