

A New Institution in the Hindi Teaching and Learning Field

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The 21st century world has been rapidly changing as a result of a range of forces mostly based on the exponential rate of technological advancement, due to which more sophisticated communication and exchange of information has been increasing, along with the process of globalization. We live in a world of globalized economies, a world of global connectivity through extensive real and virtual communication and travel, a world characterized by information overflow by globalized news and entertainment, a world of expanded civic life where citizens are active in physical and online communities and through social media, getting involved in local politics as well as global initiatives (Laurin Anderson and David Krathwahl, 2001; Partnership for 21st Century Learning, 2006). It is certainly expected and indeed has already started that education takes into account these new realities and introduces changes in its approaches and curricula to train students in updated content areas as well as in new 21st century skills. Stemming from such changes is the hope that the Hindi teaching and learning field will also grow in a global context, in which analysis and research focus on local as well as global issues, in which management, material and curricular production start crossing local boundaries and stakeholders connect to partners through global initiatives.

The aim of this essay is to introduce the idea that not only does the Hindi field need a stabilized structure which fundamentally supports and guides it, but also that the bottom-up and top-down processes the Hindi field has embraced to expand its baseline in the last few years are in effect helping its emergence. This stabilized structure needs to provide a platform for individuals and organizations to establish relationships, create mechanisms for the formation and stabilization of such synergies, promote a focused perspective on Hindi teaching at local and international levels and provide a cohesive approach towards the investigation of issues related to the field. Indeed, the International Hindi conference has emerged as this institutional structure. It is the result of continuous efforts to collect input and exchange ideas from the language speaking community, educational administration, policy makers, businesses and academia with the specific purpose of advancing and expanding the Hindi language teaching and learning field in a global context. This effort started with the First International Hindi Conference in 2014 at New York University, went on to Rutgers University in New Jersey in 2015 and back to the Indian Consulate in New York City in 2016. This year the International Hindi Conference is at GITAM in Vishakhapatnam, India, which will further expand the field by fostering intensive dialogues across continents – something that did not exist before.

To make sure, however, that we understand the current directions of advancement as well as the possibilities for the future, we need to understand better the Hindi language field in a global context. Furthermore, we need to envision the bigger picture and examine the existing status quo with regards to types of learners, programs and initiatives in India and abroad. Presently, the main focus is to look for and propose a unified conceptual framework with several important objectives. One major goal is to outline the parameters of the Hindi language field and to compartmentalize it in order to better analyze it. This,

in effect, leads to the second objective, which is to evaluate the field and identify areas of strength and areas needing improvement. It will allow for the facilitation of discussions with a less ad hoc and more purposeful nature, and for the involvement of practitioners, administrators, government representatives and theoreticians in the field and beyond. Consequently, a unified conceptual framework will build the context for planning efficient and appropriate strategies for the development of the field both in terms of the quality and quantity of teaching and learning. This is a laborious and time consuming task, however, that cannot be achieved by one individual or even by one institutional entity. Nevertheless, the Fourth International Hindi Conference is uniquely positioned to provide insights into the way different professionals define the Hindi teaching and learning field through their panels, key-note presentations, plenaries, round-table discussions, pre- or post-conference workshops, and last but not least during the social hours in informal but unique, personal, and insightful conversations with other attendees.

In order to set in motion the discussion of a common framework, four main paradigms should be distinguished in the Hindi language learning and teaching field in a global context. In the present essay, several variables are chosen to characterize different paradigms. Each paradigm is identified from the point of view of certain commonalities among the Hindi learners and each one includes several variables, among which the following three are proposed as the major field variables: (a) the linguistic and socio-cultural background of the learners, i.e. the extent of their previous and/or simultaneous exposure, (b) the surrounding environment, i.e. the range of existing practice and immersion opportunities outside of the classroom setting, and (c) their age, hence the stage of their cognitive development, which is considered a transitional variable between field and program. There are also programmatic variables, which also influence the teaching approach and methodology as well as the language acquisition process of the learners. They will be briefly described later in this essay. Nonetheless, our immediate focus is on the global context and how it can help the local.

The field paradigms are listed below regardless of their size or volume. A size ranking would have been the most appropriate way to outline them, however, unfortunately, it is an impossible endeavor at present, because concrete numbers and statistics on Hindi learners are not readily available. Yet, undoubtedly, collecting such global data will provide important information for administrative and planning purposes at government and institutional levels, therefore it is a recommended project for the future.

The first paradigm is the Indian learner paradigm, a consequence of the unique and complex socio-linguistic situation in India. This is the Hindi language field from the perspective of those learners who are Speakers of another Indian Language (SIL). The main variable among this group of learners is their linguistic background: (a) SIL which is a cognate language, in other words they might speak one or more languages from the Indo-Aryan family; (b) SIL which is a non-cognate language, or those, who might speak one or more languages from the Dravidian, Munda, Sino-Tibetan and other language families; and (c) SILs, which are mixed – a group of speakers of two or more Indian languages from different families, which can be considered as their first languages, and Hindi then can be considered as their second one in relative terms or their third, fourth or

fifth language. The commonality among all these learners is that they are taught the Hindi language in India – in public schools, state or government supported institutions (such as the Central Hindi Institute), universities and in other private and public educational settings. However, along with their linguistic background, another major variable is the outside environment vis-à-vis whether Hindi is spoken by the community around them. The third large variable is their age – it varies from school, to college students, to adults.

The second is the heritage learner paradigm. It is defined by the learners from the heritage communities of the South Asian Diaspora in Mauritius, Fiji, Suriname, Guyana, Trinidad, the U.S. and Canada, Australia, etc. These are the so-called Hindi Heritage Language Learners (HLLS). Their linguistic profile is complex and diverse, it is not monolithic and in many respects mirrors the case of the learners identified as SIL. Here too the main variable is the type of linguistic and socio-cultural background they come from, however with added emphasis on the family not just the individual learner. At home they might be exposed to cultural products, practices and perspectives but to almost no Hindi except for some limited vocabulary. On the other side of the spectrum are learners who are exposed not only to Hindi, but also to one or more South Asian languages, which may be a cognate Indo-Aryan or a non-cognate language Dravidian. In order to capture this complexity, four subgroups have been identified according to the specifics of their background: (a) ancestral HLLs - Hindi is spoken in the family; (b) associate cognate HLLs - the family speaks another Indo-Aryan language, such as Gujarati, Bengali, Punjabi, Marathi, etc.; (c) associate non-cognate HLLs - Dravidian or other language is spoken in the family; and (d) culture associated HLLs - parents are from the South Asian Diaspora and have weak or no Hindi language skills but stronger socio-cultural competence (Gambhir, 2008; Ilieva, 2008; Ilieva, 2012). Thus, these groups represent a wide range of competencies that includes those who understand the culture and often know body language and some limited vocabulary related to festivals and celebrations, foods and spices, clothes, etc., but do not understand or speak the language. The range is expanded further by “those who understand but do not speak the language, those who can effectively carry out an assortment of basic daily tasks, and those who can use the language accurately and appropriately across a range of sophisticated professional and personal tasks and contexts” (Swenson et. Al. 2014, p. 424). The second variable is the outside environment: although the vast majority learns the language outside of India, many have access to the language speaking community whereas some do not. Small exceptions are HLLs who visit their or their parents’ home country temporarily and study the language in India. In addition, the vast majority of these learners tend to be younger students of school or college age.

Clearly, these two paradigms have a lot in common. Existing and future research and practice in each one can inform the other about needs and achievements, best practices, curricula, resources and teacher training opportunities. The learners’ groups are quite diverse, which poses a challenge to assessment, in particular, which informs the process of diagnosing, evaluating and planning for learning. Those learners often need macro top-down instructional strategies, which would rely on certain strengths while filling in gaps. In order for this to be done, assessment is crucial to identify what bricks are missing in the wall of proficiency. Their learning curves as well as their socio-cultural and linguistic

competencies are less foreseeable and measurable because of the impact of their background and of how they use their environment.

The third is the study-abroad learner paradigm, which is defined in reference to the foreigners who travel and study in India and who have no background in the language and culture, but wish to learn it and have the chance to practice it in the target Hindi speaking environment. Many such programs exist across India, especially throughout the Hindi speaking states. To name a few, such programs are: the American Institute of Indian Studies, where foreign students are the majority (fewer are heritage learners), the Language Landour School in Mussoorie, several programs in Varanasi, Hindi Guru Language Institute in Delhi, HindiHour.Com in Jaipur, etc. Most of these learners are adults, college age and up. This paradigm has the least fluctuating variables.

The fourth is the foreign language paradigm. It encompasses those Hindi learners who have not had any exposure to Hindi or other Indian languages, and speak a non-Indian language as a first language. They learn the language as a foreign language. Programs for such learners exist in universities and other educational settings all over the world from North Korea and Japan, to Russia, the European countries, North America, Australia, etc. These learners are usually of college age. They study the language outside of India, mostly among a Hindi speaking community and more seldom outside of the Hindi speaking states.

The last two paradigms are delineated by learners who need bottom up micro strategies, or segmenting language brick by brick, hence their progress is more measurable and predictable. Both paradigms are interrelated. Many study abroad learners would have first been foreign language learners. As such the strategies for teaching are necessarily interrelated and merely take on a more environmental /experiential dimension once the fourth transitions into the third. They can benefit from each other in terms of methodologies, curricula and resources in very particular ways. The third paradigm however, along with the first two ones, can benefit and provide insights as to how to design and develop targeted experiential strategies in using the target language community and environment.

Hence, the term proposed here "Hindi for Speakers of Other Languages" (HSOL) applies to learners speaking another language, regardless of whether they acquire the language during the course of study, with or without prior or simultaneous exposure to the target language, culture and environment. In spite of our effort to find a cohesive framework, which essentially excludes only the case of teaching Hindi to those who learn it as a first language/teaching Hindi to native speakers, it is important to underscore how challenging it is to accomplish this task, having in mind the wide ranging diversity of all the kinds of learners. Therefore, the field variables demonstrated above help us identify certain patterns, which are useful to avoid repetition or redundancy in one direction and insufficient work in another. Many professionals work in isolation, hence to avoid re-inventing the wheel when planning projects, being aware of what is useful across paradigms allows for clearer intention and hence more efficiency.

In addition, as mentioned above, important programmatic variables play a role in a local context in relation to curricula and learning plans, such as learners' proficiencies, interests, goals and needs as well as instructors, resources and training. Moreover, the educational structures built and designed for such learners are also as diverse as we can imagine. There are three main models of programming and instruction: traditional (or face-to-face), online and hybrid models. The traditional ones are the teacher-led, tutorial and self-study types, on the one hand, and on the other hand the online models are the synchronous and asynchronous, or alternatively the hybrid model with both face-to-face and online components. What is important is that each model employs specific instructional strategies, which need further examination and improvement. It is apparent that there are serious implications when such global and local factors are kept in mind. They inform decision-making about when to employ macro-teaching or micro-teaching, emphasize academic knowledge or popular culture, design research-based or experience-based learning, map out interpretive, interpersonal or presentational tasks and so forth (Kagan and Dillon, 2001; Valdes & Geoffrion-Vinci, 1998; Thompson, 2000).

Indeed, the International Hindi conference is evolving as an institutional body, which anchors all these global and local ideas, efforts and synergies. With this in mind, we need to urge the government authorities in India, in particular, and all the professionals directly or indirectly related to Hindi to implement and support new initiatives which will bring the Hindi teaching and learning field up to par with the three other most spoken languages in the world: Spanish, English and Chinese.

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