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Wages of Languages

A teenage nephew in Bangalore recently asked me which foreign language he should learn to augment his resume and his global employability. Like many young Indians, he knows a couple of Indian languages, so it was thoughtful of him to look beyond. We considered the world's most widely spoken languages.

In purely numerical terms, ethnologists agree Chinese Mandarin, with about one billion speakers, is the world's largest spoken language. It's hard to put a finger on which comes second. English, Hindi/Urdu, and Spanish are each spoken by 400 to 500 million, give or take a few million. French, Arabic, and Bengali are spoken by more than 200 million each. Russian and Portuguese also lay claim to the 200 million mark.

But in terms of footprint (number of countries it is spoken in), English, Spanish, Arabic and French (ESAF) are considered the most influential, each spoken in more than 20 countries. So spread-wise, it made sense to study one of the last three, since English -- or Indlish -- is now one of our national languages. In fact, if you are proficient in all four (ESAF), your job market could extend to more than 100 countries.

Around the time we had this discussion, a friend's daughter studying in an all-white neighborhood in a Washington state suburb was being upbraided by her teacher for not being 'articulate.' Since the child was born in the U.S and spoke no other language than English, or 'American' as I like to call it, we were nonplussed, particularly since the little one was quite a chatterbox. The teacher suggested that perhaps the child's 'handicap' came from being bilingual (which she, alas, wasn't). We wondered if the teacher's view was a case of you-know-what.

In any event, the episodes illustrate India's hopes of becoming more competitive in a global economy and U.S fears of a decline, although they

are not typical of what is happening in either country. In fact, the U.S has always recognized that learning foreign languages is important for global play. In India, our linguistic Taliban go into periodic paroxysms about how English will decimate our languages.

Indians are blessed in the matter of linguistic felicity. Our dazzling diversity and plethora of languages offers unique advantages. Most of us are at least bilingual or trilingual, and picking up languages comes easy to us, especially at a young age. No matter what the netas and chauvinists say, learning more languages for economic enhancement, not just cultural appreciation, is a no-brainer.

In fact, several Indian languages such as Marathi, Punjabi, Gujarati, Tamil, Telugu and Kannada, each spoken by more than 50 million people (more than many European languages), represents a big market. This is something American companies recognize, which is why Microsoft began spinning out software in Indian language versions, Yahoo introduced chat in Hindi and Tamil, and Google offers interfaces in Hindi, Bengali, Telugu, Marathi and Tamil.

Far from destroying our languages, globalization is offering ways to enrich them. We need to tip our hat -- ok, pugree or topi or whatever -- to open source pioneers such as Red Hat, who enable free sharing across countries and cultures. At a recent brainstorming on open source in New Delhi, Jim Wales, the founder of Wikipedia, told me that Bengali, Kannada, and Marathi were among the three fastest growing languages on his remarkable website.

So instead of moping about demise of Indian languages, our linguistic ayatollahs can better expend their energies promoting them using new technologies, while encouraging their awards to learn as many languages -- Indian or foreign -- as possible.