Why a speech in Hindi, Prime Minister?

This was the question that came to mind at the first glance of Prime Minister Modi’s speech in Hindi among foreigners at SCO summit. It sounded out of place. The first thoughts were- He does speak in English and he has done so many times both inside and outside India. Why did he choose to speak in Hindi? Did the medium convey more than the content?

The choice of Hindi as the medium of communication with international partners shows a confident Prime Minister who has perhaps, finally came out of the clutches of proving himself worthy of the position he has achieved. Hence one of the interpretations of Prime Minister Modi choosing to speak in Hindi at the SCO summit could be that Modi is now assertive of himself and his policies. With the unmatched popular mandate behind him it appears that Modi wants to be listened and understood as much as he, and in turn, India is obliged to listen.

Not speaking in English at an international summit is sending a strong signal to the global community that India has finally shed the baggage of colonialism reflected in the use of English. India has chosen to follow the path of other nations like China and Japan who use their own language at international forums. Although unlike China and Japan we do not have a national language, Hindi is one of the official languages along with English. Despite the claim that English is not a foreign language but a second language in India, the fact remains that it is not a native language of India. Hence, there is merit in the rationale behind the argument that a statesman from India should speak in an Indian language and not a foreign language.

In addition the Prime Minister, a skilled orator that he is, sounds less artificial and more spontaneous speaking in Hindi compared to English. Acquiring speaking skills in English is not easy. Most educated Indians are inducted into reading and writing in English but only those who could afford an English medium education perhaps get to acquire the skill to speak in English. And many among them speak with an accent which is influenced by their mother tongue. The few who form a minority and speak English without an accent are cherished in academic and journalistic circles and they were the ones who criticize the desi Indians.

However, this rare breed is not attracting many blind followers in a fast changing cultural milieu of India. Moreover, the acceptance of spoken English with a regional accent is not inviting scorn from the educated anymore. On the other hand, globalization has exposed that even when English is spoken as a native language, it has some kind of an accent; and the Queen’s English which was the gold standard of spoken English is no more aspired as the ultimate milestone even by the educated around the world. On the contrary, the educated are proud to display their national identity through their spoken English; more so, Indians, with their growing international reputation as intelligent people who can solve problems of computers and go to space.

The Prime Minister perhaps has realized that there is more glory in speaking in one’s own language rather than imitating a foreign tongue. Although on many occasions the Prime Minister is heard speaking in English, there can be no doubt that his speeches in Hindi are better with insightful questions and satirical variations in tone. However, as the second time Prime Minister attending his first international engagement at the SCO summit, the Prime Minister appears to have consciously chosen to speak in native Hindi rather than the nonnative English. This is not a simple message but rather a bold statement conveying that India is now on its own chartered path where the mantle is with a leader who takes pride in things native – be it language or the inherent culture. The speech in Hindi says it all!

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