

Degrading Meaning of the Commonly Used Words of Minority Language in Multilingual Context

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Abstract

This small piece of writing is an observation-based text highlighting the fact that minority language speakers are indirectly compelled to switch on to the dominant language. This study exclusively highlights how a dialect of Maithili called THETH is losing its ground, and the meaning of some common words is degrading, hence replaced by borrowed terms from the dominant dialect or language of the society. It has attempted to illuminate the fact that upward mobility is reflected in the use of language in everyday life. When the marginalized mass step onto a ladder of success or on the way of upward mobility, they fabricate their personality with different components, of which one is language I.e. dominant language in a general case. This piece of the text aims at exploring the reasons behind opting for the dominant/ influencing language to maintain personality. This is often the case that dominated language betrays the personality of the speakers. So this paper has made a case study at a micro-level along with indirect observation of the related phenomenon. And further, some cases of language use-related events have been analyzed minutely.

Keywords: *Globalization in Language, Minority speakers, code-switching, and Language death*

1. Introduction

This article begins with slight information about the dominant/ influential languages at the global level in the present context followed by a tiny portion of the literature review. Then my observation along with some striking events in terms of code-switching is presented. At last, the conclusion has been brought out based on case study and observation.

Status of Languages on the Planet

Numerically there is no uniformity in the counting of the numbers of languages existing on this planet; however, it is generally agreed for 3000 to 10000 languages. Crystal (2003) mentions that most reference books published since the 1980s give a figure of between 6,000 and 7,000, but estimates have varied

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in recent decades between 3,000 and 10,000. Wang & Minnet (2005) also support the claim made by Crystal by mentioning that there are 6000 languages now spoken in the world. Schmidt (2008) as stated in Freeland and Parrick (2004) mentions that 70% of the world population speak only 11 languages.

Anna Klappebach in his blog under *Most Spoken Languages in the World 2020* presents twelve most spoken languages as:

With over 1,130 million native speakers, English is the most spoken language in the world. In terms of native speakers alone, Mandarin Chinese is by far the second most spoken language in the world. It is an official language of mainland China, Taiwan, and Singapore and one of the six official languages of the United Nations. So it's not surprising that there are approximately 1.09 million native speakers worldwide.

Further, there are about 615 million native Hindi speakers, which makes it the third most spoken language in the world. It's the official language of India and is also spoken in countries such as Nepal, Fiji, Mauritius, and Guyana. Hindi is highly influenced by Sanskrit and named after the Persian word *hind*, which means— quite literally – “Land of the Indus River”.

Twenty-two countries over four

continents have Spanish as 534 million speakers or one of the official languages, and it's already the second most studied language in the world. French has 280 million speakers that make it the fourth largest language on the planet. In the same way, With 295 million native speakers, Arabic is the sixth most spoken language in the world and the only one in our top twelve that is written from right to left.

Bengali with 265 million speakers known to many English speakers around the world as Bangla, is mostly spoken in Bangladesh and India and is considered by some to be the second most beautiful language after French. One of the most spread out languages (with around 155 million native speakers living across the world), the eighth most spoken language in the world is Russian. Portuguese is rooted in the region of Medieval Galicia (which was partly in the north of Portugal and partly in the northwest of Spain), but only five percent of the 215 million native Portuguese speakers live in Portugal.

A standardized variation of Malay, an Austronesian language that's the official language of Malaysia, Indonesian is a great example of a widely spoken language that encompasses several distinct dialects across Indonesia. Urdu (170 million speakers), the *lingua franca* of Pakistan, and which is very close to Hindi, is often referred to as the language of writers

and thinkers, Germany has just over 100 million native – and just under 32 non-native – speakers worldwide, and is the most spoken language in the European Union.

Beginning with the largest totals: it is evident that a very small number of languages account for a vast proportion of the world's population. The eight languages over 100 million (Mandarin, Spanish, English, Bengali, Hindi, Portuguese, Russian, Japanese) have nearly 2.4 billion speakers between them; and if we extend this count to include just the top 20 languages, we find a total of 3.2 billion – over half the world's population. If we continue the analysis downwards, we will eventually find that just 4% of the world's languages is spoken by 96% of the population.

The paper has not made any concern about the influence of the world's major languages on remaining speakers; rather it has tried to focus the influence of a dominant language at the local level.

Concern about Minority Language: Now and Then

Before the establishment of the UNO, neither minority communities nor their languages had ever been in the concern, rather national policy and language policies talked otherwise. In Nepal,

before the restoration of democracy in 1990, there was a single slogan i.e. one language; one dress. The slogan was mandatorily learned by the school graduates. After the political change in 1990 A.D., all the minority languages were duly acknowledged by the state mentioning all languages spoken within the boundary as national languages in the constitution itself; however, no action was taken for the protection and promotion of them. The language policy was designed in such a way that all minor languages turned out to be the prey of Nepali, the killer language which has been the language of the state. The Nepali language was unduly given full-scale privileges creating numerous opportunities. Nepali is the language of hill elite people who have controlled all mechanisms of the nation. With the eruption of the 2007 A.D. Madhesh movement, the movement of a mass of brown-skinned marginalized people living in the southern plain of the nation compelled the state to promulgate the new constitution restructuring the whole nation into a federal state. With the spirit of federalism, all provincial and local governments were supposed to make plans and policies for the promotion and protection of minority languages which still seem to be a Pandora's box.

2. Literature review

Minority language speakers and their recognition

For minority speakers, language is not only related to their identity but also a lifeline. It is a variable that gives recognition in the society. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) identifies more than 6,000 languages spoken globally, most of which can be considered minority languages. For minorities, language is a central element and expression of their identity and key importance in the preservation of group identity. Language is often particularly important to non-dominant communities seeking to maintain their distinct group and cultural identity, sometimes under conditions of marginalization, exclusion, and discrimination.

Romaine (2007), for instance, assumes that around half of the world languages have expired in the past five hundred years and also cites “as many as 60% to 90% of the world’s approximately 6,900 languages may be at the risk of extinction within next 100 years” (p. 115)

2.3 State’s perception towards minority language

Countries with one civilization and one language can be counted on fingers, such as Korea, Taiwan, Japan, and a few

others. The rest of the world, on the other hand, is multilingual. Positively talking, multilingualism itself is the beauty of the society/ state; however, this has been the bone of contention. The speakers of the dominant language are often found to be hostile towards minority speakers. They do not seem to accept the existence of minority speakers. And what’s more, they are in power in the state. They circulate their power through various national policies, one of which is a language policy. Members of the dominant culture shape the ideological environment, propagating a value system in which their language is seen as a positive asset, and believed to be a unifying symbol for the region or state. When several larger linguistic communities compete for the same political or social space, they may each have their conflicting linguistic attitudes. This leads to the general perception that multiple languages cause divisiveness and are a threat to national unity. The fostering of a single dominant language is one attempt to deal with this *real* or *merely perceived* threat. In doing so, the governing body may legalize the use of the elite class language as a nation’s language. Accordingly, the policies may discourage or even prohibit the use of other languages.

3. The study

Upon the encounter with some striking incidents related to the use/unuse of

mother tongue, I started working on some of the cases which were why minority language speakers give due emphasis (which is 'undue' for me). I myself am one of the cases. While addressing my father, I try to switch my mother tongue (which we assume to be a dialect of Maithili language) to the standard Maithili, the variety spoken by elite and so-called upper caste people, especially Brahmin.

The first case is a milk boy of 16 or 17 studying in the upper secondary level. He sells me buffalo milk every day with a delivery facility at home. In the social hierarchy, he doesn't belong to upper-class people, which is why I expected him to speak a non-standard variety of Maithili. He always tried to sound different from what he was in reality. Once at the time of payment, I asked him to give all his money to his parents using the typical *THETH* Maithili word -*MAAI BAAP*. He was dismayed and reacted instantly. He requested me to use the term MOMMY PAPA which is what *MAAI BAAP* means exactly.

My eight-year-old son once looked at me with a complete wonder on his face. I didn't understand why. I asked him the reason for his unwanted gesture. He told me in his mocking tone 'You really sound like an illiterate guy from a peasant community'. The reason was - I had used the term KATTU for underwear pants. *KATTU* is a typical *theth* word

widely used in a rural area where the majority of speakers are from non-standard Maithili. I was expected to use underpants which I didn't. In this regard, Dorian (1982) claims that the massive lexical borrowing is a precondition for language decay, but it is in itself not sufficient to initiate language decay or to indicate it to the beholder.

I have observed a high school head teacher treating the students unfairly based on the variety of Maithili language spoken to him. Even teaching and non-teaching staff whose tongue was different from their head teacher often experienced unfair treatment. It was highly expected that they use a standard variety of Maithili.

My mother once corrected me for the term of 'marriage' for which I had used the word '*biyaah*'. In standard Maithili, the meaning of marriage is conveyed via '*bibaah*' or '*saadi*' which is what '*biyaah*' means exactly. To her, an educated person like me must use a standard variety of Maithili. The opposite is okay for uneducated people. The use of a non-standard form of language betrays the personality of the speakers.

I asked my never-school-goer uncle to say '*aanga*' and '*aangi*' which means 'shirt' and 'blouse' respectively in English. He frowned his face uncomfortable to utter. Upon my question for his discomfort,

he claimed that these words are not the standard ones, rather much below the acceptable level. These terms were commonly used till two decades back; however, they are used in a limited area. Their meaning is degraded now. Though they are not taken as taboo, people have

different perceptions about those terms. Simply they are taken as low-class words.

Several words have not been in use any longer; what's more, they are taken as the low class of words. Some of them are as follow:

S.N.	Word	English counterpart	Replaced by standard Maithili
1.	anga	shirt	kamij
2.	aangi	blouse	blouse
3	gor	leg	pair
4.	jalkhai	breakfast	naasta
5.	bhor	dawn	subah
6.	chaah	tea	chai
7.	gharbalaa	husband	dulhaa
8.	gharbaali	wife	kaniya/ dulhin
9.	bauh	wife	kaniya
10	baau	father	babu
11.	maai	mother	mommy
12.	bhansiya	wife	kaniya
	karchhul	spatula	karachh
	chhipa	plate	thariya/ thaaree
	paira	road	rasta

4. Interpretation

To my understanding, language expresses identity, Language plays a leading role in defining people's identity, and the loss of

language may impact people in negative ways. If the language dies, as some predict, what do we have left to us? Then, I ask our people who are we?" (Nettle & Romaine 2000, p. 23). Supporting the

very issue, Hoffmann (2009, p.21) writes:

Languages play a vital role in defining people's cultures; in other words, language ties closely with culture, and when communities lose their language; they lose a number of aspects of its culture. As an illustration, there are a considerable number of practices that depend on language. For instance, losing language is likely to lead to the loss of many verbal art forms such as poetry, and traditional songs. Even if the language was written, it may lose some aspects such as its tales unless they are translated into other languages.

Generally, the minority speakers have a deep-rooted assumption that their tongue is much inferior to other languages/varieties of language. Several studies have highlighted that minority speakers are unaware of the significance of their tongue. Kunnas (2003, p.11) writes:

If a significant proportion of the speakers of a minority language underestimate the significance of their language, the language may become extinct quite soon and the consequences may be dramatic. Loss of a language will result in a loss of continuity between generations, national identity, and human creative potential. The death of a language will cause alienation, physical and psychic ill health, social dispersion, and increased criminal tendencies. In other words, it

will engender a general deterioration of the quality of life. Ultimately, this will result in the loss of a unique and valuable cultural heritage, such as songs, stories, myths, and artifacts.

In a certain course of time, some words lose their meaning culminating in a complete disappearance from the language a long way. This even leads to the death of the language. Campbell & Muntzel (1989) say that the typical accompanying properties are that borrowing does not simply enrich the lexicon of the minority language but replaces indigenous words and has structural effects, i.e. there is lexical replacement or relexification.

In the case of the Maithili language, the elite class variety is assumed to be far more superior to others. That variety is used in education, paper, and different media. The young generation who are a school or college goer always tries to maintain personalities while speaking their language. The urban society seems to acknowledge the standard variety of their language. The use of the standard variety for them remains the surest weapon to save their personality. Hence, they jump to the standard variety of Maithili to maintain its tone, diction, and others. Fishman (1991) believes that the language shift paradigm is presented as a voluntary choice by the speech community as a response to the changing

conditions in the entire environment.

The problem is with the speakers themselves too. There are a marked number of speakers who haven't realized what will happen with the disappearance of the minority language. For the sake of their survival, it seems worth being considerate about the protection and preservation of the minority language. If mirrored the scenario. It appears that language disappears before their own death. Hence, different studies on language loss and language death seem to indicate that the speakers themselves be more serious and sensitive towards their language.

5. Conclusion

Change and progression are inevitable. They are natural phenomena. Knowingly and unknowingly, they are there. They are everywhere. It is not only the use of language that has been in a state of flux; rather all most all walks of life. Minority languages are in the danger zone. Many languages are failing out of use and being replaced by others that are more widely used in the region or nation, such as English in the U.S. or Spanish in Mexico. (Gnanwali, 2019) They are under threat because of the language policy of the state on the one hand, and the interest and attitude of its speakers on the other hand. There are layers of complexities

in maintaining the language policy. The nation's mainstream language is rapidly devouring other languages, whereas the dialectical level of conflicts within minority languages is also inviting a bigger challenge. One variety of dialects showing supremacy over others is slowly weakening its position in society. Thus, I recommend for the further research of minority language and so called non-standard dialect.

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