

ARE WE GOING TO SPEAK A DIFFERENT TONGUE? THE CASE OF LANGUAGE CHANGE AMONG THE RAJBANSHI CHILDREN

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The paper presents the instance of the initiation of language change among the Rajbanshi speaking children at the Chapgar area of Jalpaiguri district, West Bengal. The paper describes the nature of variability in the language of the children and views language variation as a part of the mental grammar rather than an outside phenomenon by following the Combinatorial Variability theory (Adger, 2006). The paper argues that the pattern of language variation in the Rajbanshi children's language use suggests that it is a case of the initiation of change, where there is a pressure from the prestige language. The Multiple Grammar Hypothesis (Kroch, 1989) has also been introduced in the paper. But the nature of variation has been considered as an internal mechanism, which is giving birth to a language change.

Introduction

The study of language change took a turn when the synchronic analysis of languages was considered as an important factor to understand diachronic changes. The Saussurian dichotomy between synchronic and diachronic analysis started to move hand in hand to understand reasons behind language change. It also helped to understand the systematic nature of a Speech Community.

Apparent time interpretation of languages gained importance with the sociolinguistic studies conducted by Labov (1972), where generational changes in progress were studied. The classical study of Martha's Vineyard (conducted in 1961) studied the use of two diphthongs (ay) and (aw) and the index values for the height of the vowel nucleus of the diphthong used by 69 speakers were calculated. It was found that the nucleus is progressively higher in the languages of younger speakers. Whether a language change is stable or unstable also became an important question. Two different patterns were found in relation to age grading and apparent time. In one pattern, older speakers follow the direction of a change if the change is an ongoing process. In the second pattern, mid-adults can exhibit greater use of standard variants than the typical language use of oldest and youngest speakers.

The studies of language change began to consider two dimensions in order to determine the course of change. Firstly; the change can be a change from above, or a change from below. Secondly; the status of the variable needed examination within the linguistic system.

The current paper tries to present a case of the initiation of language change among the Rajbanshi children from a selected area of North Bengal.

The paper:

- (a) Describes the nature of variability in the speech of Rajbanshi children
- (b) Locate the sociolinguistic reasons of variation in terms of the mental grammar of the children
- (c) Argues that the variability pattern indicates an instance of language change among the children and
- (d) Tries to relate the language change with Multiple Grammar Theory (Kroch, 1989).

The Rajbanshi Community

Rajbanshi communities are spread from North Bengal to North Assam. The people of the community are also found in Bihar, Nepal and Bangladesh. It is popularly said that when some people from Koch tribe wanted to gain their rights as Hindus, they started to call themselves as 'Rajbanshis' - the royal race. Rajbanshi people were identified as a group till 1901. In 1912, the people from Rajbanshi community organized a thread ceremony at Rangpur (presently located in Bangladesh) and called themselves 'khatriyas'. The incident was also documented in the census.

According to 2001 census, Rajbanshi is spoken by 3,386,617 people in almost seven districts of West Bengal and four districts of Assam (also in Bihar, Nepal and Bangladesh as I have already mentioned). The Linguistic Survey of India (Grierson, 1903, Vol. 5, Part 1:163) mentions Rajbanshi as a well-marked dialect of North Bengal.

Rajbanshi is usually identified as a member of Indo-Aryan languages as it is identified as dialects of Bangla and Assamese. But the anthropological origin of the Rajbanshis show that the community is closely related to the Tibeto-Burman group of people and have been described as an offshoot of Koch tribe. 'It is said that they belong to the great Bodo family that entered India in the 10th century B.C from the East and settled on the banks of the Bramhaputra and gradually spread over Assam and the whole of North Bengal.' (Singh, 1998: 2927) As it is understood from the above mentioned information, the origin of the Rajbanshis is quite controversial. There are two distinct schools of thought regarding the origin. One group relates the Rajbanshi people directly with the Tibeto-Burman group (Sanyal, 1965). The other group tries to show a connection between Rajbanshi community and the Aryan kings. The second group also tries to establish that a Sanskritized version of old Bangla is the ancestor of Rajbanshi.

It has been observed in many instances that re-organization of states allowed cultural mixture of people from different communities. Policy based changes were also observed among a single group of people when they became part of different political areas. Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal, which was the base area of all

three studies, observed major changes in course of time. It contributed to cultural syncretism. It also contributed to language change and language mixture.

As Mitra (1951) has pointed out, 'the district of Jalpaiguri as an administrative unit came into existence on 1st January 1869 by the amalgamation of Western Duars district with Jalpaiguri subdivision of Rangpur (now in Bangladesh. ...the so-called Western Duars district was formed in 1864 and consisted of that portion of lands taken from Bhutan at the end of the war between British government and and Bhutan which lies between Teesta and Sankosh rivers. The name Duars, divided into Western and Eastern, the term Western applying that portion which falls in Jalpaiguri district, refers to that tract of country.' Duars is the area which is termed as the gateway of the mountains. Development in Duars area in Jalpaiguri district began in the years 1874-75 when the growth of tea plantation started. According to 1981 census, 59.8 thousand hector of lands have tea plantations in this area.

The present study was conducted in Chapgar village of Jalpaiguri district. The village belongs to Amguri gram panchayat of Mainaguri block of the Jalpaiguri district. Chapgar village is located at the west of Amguri-Ramshai road. Some new tea plantations are being developed in this area. Jaldhaka river flows on the east of the village. On the west side of the village there is Teesta river and Domohani and the gram panchayat. Ramshai forest is located on the north of the village. Amguri village is located in the south.

The history of Chapgar has observed some major changes. It is said that Chapgar village was a pargana of Cooch Bihar which consisted 26 taluks. The village was under the administration of the king of Bhutan. Around the year 1779, the people wanted to be free from Bhutan rule and requested the British rulers to take control over them. Teesta river was decided to be the boundary of the Bhutan kingdom. In 1864, the Britishers took control over the Western Duars, including Chapgar. After the Bhutan war (1864), Mainaguri became the headquarter of Jalpaiguri and Chapgar village was included under Mainaguri. The Chapgar area was once a part of Cooch Bihar. It became a part of Bhutan later. Then it came under the control of British people and later included in a newly created administrative area. The history of the area contributed to the cultural mixture. For instance, there is a group called Dobhashiya (literally 'bilingual') in Chapgar, who speak Rajbanshi but have physical resemblance with Bhutanese people.

Rajbanshi Language

Rajbanshi is considered as a dialect of Bangla in Bengal. As I have already mentioned, it is listed as a part of the Indo-Aryan language family. But there are a number of different varieties of Rajbanshi spoken in West Bengal only. The different varieties of Rajbanshi can be differentiated by vocabulary and morphosyntactic features (features related to word formation and construction of sentences). The pressure of standard Bangla is prominent in most of the Rajbanshi speaking areas.

The features of Rajbanshi as spoken in the specific area of Jalpaiguri differ from Bangla in terms of a number of parameters. Bangla verbs change according to the person, Rajbanshi verbs change according to both person and number. The pronouns in all three persons are different in Rajbanshi from Bangla. Plural markers and the system of negation are also different in Rajbanshi in relation to Bangla.

It should be noted at this point that a major difference between Rajbanshi and Bangla can be marked by analyzing the verbs of both the languages. Existence of both number and person agreement in Rajbanshi makes it remarkably different from Bangla verb system.

Language use of the Rajbanshi Children in the Selected Area

As Chappgar is a remote rural area, it can be expected that raw and rural forms of the regional Rajbanshi can be found in the language use of the children. Mobile adults of the village usually use Bangla as a lingua franca. But a new kind of mixed language has also emerged in this area depending on multiple sociolinguistic factors. Like many other dialect areas of Bengal, two different sets of lingua franca are available and accessible for the children. The children use both occasionally. But it should be noted that pre-school children mostly use Rajbanshi only in order to communicate. As the children do not have mobility and never moves out of the village even during festivals, the children has access to only one set of codes, i.e. the home language Rajbanshi. A few children of the village occasionally get the opportunity to confront Bangla when they visit Mainaguri with parents to buy books or household goods.

Access to television is now affecting the linguistic map of the area as a few privileged children are watching T.V programmes in Bangla. This is a new situation for the village. It can be assumed that television access has a major contribution in modification of the linguistic behaviour of certain children. Children who do not have access to television either at home or at the house of the next door neighbour are not getting any exposure in Bangla. Those children are remaining monolingual for a longer time.

A major change in the children's linguistic behaviour is being marked when they are moving to the high school, or they are admitted to standard 6th. The village has a free government primary school and also a paid private primary school. So, the children at primary school level are not moving out of the village at all. But the village does not have any elementary or secondary level school. So, the children mandatorily have to migrate to either Amguri or Mainaguri for higher studies. At the higher school, a number of major changes affect them. Teachers from non-Rajbanshi communities teach at school who consider Rajbanshi as a 'bad' and 'inferior' tongue. So, use of Rajbanshi (also referred to as the language of lower caste people by upper caste teachers) is prohibited in classroom. In some cases, the Bengali children laugh at the Rajbanshi children as they use a 'bad' tongue.

These prohibitions and laughs affect the language use of the children. In some instances, the children stop talking to other people, they even stop coming to school. The children in some cases develop an inferiority complex based on the behaviour of teachers and non-Rajbanshi children in schools. It affects the identity of the child in many cases.

Exclusion on the basis of language has been experienced by Rajbanshi children of the previous generations too. As a result, some parents no longer speak in Rajbanshi with their children at home. Instead, they try to speak using only Bangla. But many of these parents do not have fluency in Bangla as well. So, they speak a broken Bangla (which is the second lingua franca of the area or close to it). As the children listens to the new mixed lingua franca, the children also tend to use it most of the times.

Variability in the Speech of Rajbanshi Children

In traditional linguistic literature, language variation is defined as 'alternate ways of saying the same thing' (Labov, 1972: 118) or 'when the speakers use different forms to express the same meaning.' (Labov, 1995: 115).

In case of language variation among the Rajbanshi children, three linguistic variants (one Bangla, one Rajbanshi and one newly created variant) can be used at a same linguistic environment. It was important for me to find about the frequency distribution of the variants and to find out reasons of the occurrence of different variants in different situations.

I tried to understand the overall pattern of variability among the children of Chapgar village. For this purpose, I gathered data from thirty children's language use, to be more specific the use of different verbs. A number of factors were kept in mind. For example, the children's choice of verbs in different contexts, frequency distribution of the variants, nature of switching in terms of grammar etc. Picture story descriptions, designed worksheet based tests and verbal grammaticality tests were employed as primary methods for this enquiry. Picture story descriptions were considered as a major tool as it can get a picture of the natural use of language by the children. It was important to find out that how much Rajbanshi the child is using while narrating the story. It was also tried to understand whether the child is behaving like a monolingual or not.

I considered the amount of home language use, discrimination issue and age factor. I also considered the frequency of variants and code avoidance strategies by the children. Switching of forms and coinage of new forms were also taken into account.

It was observed that the amount of Bangla, Rajbanshi and new form use were different in different children. The younger children used more Rajbanshi than the older children. There was a deliberate effort to avoid Rajbanshi by a number of children. This discrimination factors were prevalent among the older children. It

was inferred that the younger children has not developed the idea of linguistic discrimination.

I divided the thirty children into three age groups in order to have an understanding of the differences in frequency distribution. It was observed that the children from age group 6 to 9 years used 74.67% Rajbanshi, 16.67% Bangla and 4.92% new forms. The children from age group 10 to 12 years used 22.43% Rajbanshi, 51.98% Bangla and 25.27% new forms. The older children from age group 13 to 14 years used only 17.02% Rajbanshi, 38.04% Bangla and 45.46% new forms.

The children from the first group used primarily Rajbanshi and rarely used Bangla or new variants. One child in this group was found who used Bangla 66% of the total language use measured. The second group showed a rise in the new forms. For the second group the use of Rajbanshi and Bangla were mediated by the use of new forms. The third group used the new forms more frequently.

It was observed the overall use of Rajbanshi is less than the other two forms. It was also observed that more Bangla is used by the children who have moved to higher schools. Children who do not have enough mobility tend to use Rajbanshi and sometimes the new forms. The children used different forms in a same sentence, switched frequently from one form to another form. Some children have used ungrammatical forms, exhibited errors, termed grammatical forms as ungrammatical. Children showed indeterminacy while choosing or selecting a verb form which has been considered as a result of incomplete acquisition at times. In some cases, the home language has become a weaker language. When parents forced them to use Bangla, the children's linguistic behaviour has also been affected.

The increasing use of the new forms posited a question naturally: Is the Chapgar area observing a language change? The children are using the new forms more and the forms are also gaining a steady state. Does it mean that the children in future will replace the new forms and not use Rajbanshi at all?

Two questions can be asked at this point. Are the children using the new forms because they are targeting to use the prestige language Bangla but due to lack of exposure in the language resulting in the use of a new set of forms? It can also be asked if the children are using the new forms in order to avoid use of Rajbanshi which is a stigmatized language.

Whatever the reason is, it is not possible to get a complete picture in terms of language change. A re-analysis of the language of the children of Chapgar in future can confirm if a language change is taking place that is also replacing Rajbanshi. Rajbanshi is not in an endangered state, but the language is in a defeated state, which is a ground of language attrition. But if the language becomes totally replaced by the new form, the language change situation will co-occur with a language endangerment situation.

Linguistic identity of the Rajbanshi children is in a difficult situation now for the older children. It is now to observe whether the future generation decide to use it in public domain in future and fight with the stigma associated with the non prestigious language.

The Sociolinguistic Reasons behind the Variability: Can Variability be a part of Internal Grammar?

Previously, it was thought the sociolinguistic variations do not have anything to do with the internal grammar of a speaker. In other words, the Universal Grammar cannot accommodate the sources of variation. Language variation is an external factor influenced phenomenon. Following Adger (2006) I had argued that (Piplai, 2013) three sociolinguistic features are contributing to the variability in the language of the Rajbanshi children concerned.

Adger has proposed an external system which constantly interacts with the Universal Grammar and which decides the choice of forms at the time of use, where the speaker choose a form from a pool of variants. We can observe that variation is Context-dependent. E.g

x- a_C1

A_C2

N_C3

This external system has been said to have the relevant sociolinguistic information related to the speaker and language use. In case of Rajbanshi-Bangla speaking children of North Bengal , who use three different forms alternatively in their speech and also trying to understand various sociolinguistic factors relevant to their 'choice' of verbal forms. The sociolinguistic factors related to the external system are supposedly interacting with the Universal Grammar.

I have listed three factors which operate in the linguistic system of the Rajbanshi children. These are,

- a) Formality with addressee
- b) Notion of stereotype
- c) Level of education

These three factors can be connected with the choice of language, which of the forms finally emerge in a language conflict situation becomes important. Whether a child is interacting with a known person or a stranger decides the language choice. While there is a conflict between three forms, the Rajbanshi form wins if the addressee is a family member or a playmate. When the education level of the child reaches the level of high school, the prestigious form wins after the language conflict. Similarly, when the child develops the idea of stereotype associated with different sets of linguistic forms, the children selects the prestigious forms in a public domain of language use and the home language loses its battle.

Language Change: Indication from the New Forms Used

Language variation often leads to language change. It is observed in certain cases that the speakers are gradually shifting to one form and not using the earlier form at all, marking the onset of a linguistic change. In other cases, it is observed that the speakers are using one form in a specific domain and another form in a different domain. Our understanding from the children's language use in different domains can also help us to comment whether the situation of language variation among the Rajbanshi children is leading to language change or not.

In the beginning part of the paper I tried to point out some issues which are to be considered in a language change situation. Following the Labovian analysis of language change, I mentioned that it is important to consider whether a change is stable or unstable. It is important to understand whether older speakers follow the direction of the change. We also need to understand whether a change is a change from above or a change from below.

The present paper discusses the patterns of the use of different variants in the language use of the children from Chapgar. The patterns of language use in three different age groups suggested that there is a correlation with age and the changing pattern of variants. It was found that the older children are following the direction of the change by using more new forms instead of Rajbanshi.

Change from above is a kind of language change that is initiated by the social pressure as a part of social hierarchy. It can be found from the attitudes of school teachers and reactions of middle class speakers (Labov, 1972). Change from below, on the other hand is a gradual shift of linguistic behaviour by the successive generations. In this case, the change generally begins from the speech of the community members with low status. Otherwise, it is a change from above.

The case of the language change by Rajbanshi children of Chapgar is clearly an instance of a change from above. The new set of forms is being created in order to exclude oneself from a stigmatized linguistic community, which depicts that pressure of the regional standard which forces the change. The pressure of the regional standard was understood as I initiated case studies of five selected children from the community. It was found that the pressure of the standard is exposed at a later level. Young children, who do not move out of the village and play with only the family kids or neighbourhood playmates, do not feel the pressure of using a standard language. A major change occurs when the children move to a higher school. In case of Chapgar, the village does not have any high school. So, the children have to mandatorily move out of the village. At the high school, the children on one hand feel the pressure of the standard language as outsiders laugh at them for speaking an inferior language. On the other hand, the teachers scold them for using a 'bad' language.

The pressure from above compels the children to modify their linguistic behaviour. As a result, the children avoid Rajbanshi and use of the new forms increase which mark the initiation of language change.

Multiple Grammar Theory and Language Change

Kroch's theory of 'multiple grammar' talked about the possibility of co-existing multiple grammars inside the UG of a single speaker, where the speaker can have access to grammar A, B or C and choose forms from the grammar-slot. In this view, the language undergoing change make possible the use of more than one forms at a point of time, the old and the changed for can occur together synchronically rather than diachronically and the 'Constant Rate Hypothesis' (Kroch,1989) assures that all surface linguistic contexts observe usage frequencies of the change at a same rate.

Language variation can also be viewed in terms of a multiple grammar theory of linguistic analysis. In this case, the child has multiple grammars. The child uses different forms from different forms, it changes according to time. A new form is used more than the other forms after a certain point of time. It reflects an incident of language change and one grammar becomes dominant at that time. It also becomes important to find about how the children are beginning to talk in a language change situation where more than one language are used by the community members.

The multiple grammar hypotheses explain language change in a different manner. Th present paper does not posit the view that the existence of multiple forms in a Rajbanshi child's internal grammar changes according to time. Rather, the paper posits the view that the sources of variability are the external system which interacts with the Universal Grammar, resulting variation.

Conclusion

The paper argued that the case of new form use among the Rajbanshi children of North Bengal is an instance of language change. The change is occurring as a result of pressure from above, i.e. the regional standard (Bangla) is the prestige language and children are forced to shift to Bangla.

It was discussed that the transition point of the changes can be tracked by considering the fact that changes begin to occur as children from to the high school. The children's linguistic behaviour is moulded after moving to the high school as the pressure of prestige language is felt strongly.

The teachers are instrumental in the shift and change is language. The school space is also the major premise of the change where the language use in day to day life takes a major turn. A close analysis of the Rajbanshi children's language us in schools actually gives an account of the language change. A longitudinal study in future can confirm the fact that a language change was initiated among this particular group of children. If the future analysis show that the children's language use have more Bangla than the new forms attested, then the case will be considered as an incidence of language endangerment. At that time, we need to re-examine the role of the new forms.

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