CASE STUDY

PATTERNS OF LANGUAGE USE IN TRIBAL STUDENTS
(A Case Study of NIT, Rourkela)

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ABSTRACT

India is a multilingual nation with speakers of every speech community being well versed in two or more different languages. This paper deals with the patterns of language use among the tribal students at the National Institute of Technology, Rourkela, a town in western Odisha, situated in the eastern part of India. The reason for choosing tribal students as the target group is that they come from marginalized communities and, in some cases, are the first in their families to study at such a prestigious institution. Hence, it would be interesting to note how that affects their choice of language. Being a central institute, NIT is a melting pot of languages in the country. This study aims to investigate how studying at a premier institute has affected the attitudes of the tribal students towards their mother tongue and if English has become the lingua franca.

The method of data collection was a questionnaire designed to elicit responses related to sociolinguistic variables such as age, community, tribe, languages known, language usage on campus, and language preferences in general. Fishman's (1972) domain analysis technique is the theoretical framework applied in this study. Descriptive analysis was implemented to measure and illustrate the data mined from the questionnaire. The patterns of language use will be established through the domains of family, friendship (on campus and back home), and the educational institution.

Keywords: tribals, language use, attitudes, sociolinguistics, lingua franca

1. Introduction

India is a multilingual nation with about 458 languages including tribal and non- tribal languages. Out of twenty-eight states and eight union territories present in India, no state is completely monolingual and multiple languages and varieties simultaneously co-exist. Unlike speakers of Western countries who are monolingual, most Indians are bilingual or multilingual. The Government of India in order to promote harmony between languages also implemented the three-language policy which when applied to schools expected the students from Hindi speaking states to learn a modern Indian language along with Hindi and English and students from non-Hindi speaking states to learn Hindi along with the dominant language of the region and English (National Policy on Education 1968). This policy was later revoked due to retaliation from the non-Hindi speaking states

on being forced to learn Hindi. The New Education Policy (NEP) implemented in 2020 states that as long as two of the languages that the students learn are Indian languages, they are free to choose which three languages they want to learn. The students until grade 5 and if possible, till grade 8 will be taught in their mother tongue or regional language. While these policies are commendable, the enforcement of these rules are inadequate, and speakers of a linguistic minority bear the brunt of it. They are expected to learn their tribal mother tongue, the dominant language of the region, English and sometimes even Hindi to be able to communicate with people outside their state.

One might assume that with so many languages co-existing, the languages might be in a state of constant conflict with each other but that is not the case. The multilingualism that exists in India is of a non-conflicting and non-competing type where each language is assigned a particular role and function in society (Srivastava 1977). Different languages are used in and belong to different domains, and they are used only in those domains. This reinforces the idea that acquiring a new language does not lead to the eradication of previously learnt languages and we observe a trend of language maintenance rather than language shift. Bilingualism in India is not an unstable or transient phenomenon; it is the norm rather than an exception. It can be unidirectional in linguistic communities that are socially unequal, and this might be due to unequal power and prestige associated with one language or unequal population (Srivastava 1990). Bilingualism is acquired either through education or socialization. If a language is learnt through education, it is due to that language being the language of power and if it is learnt through socialization, the language learnt depends on the social norms of a group.

2. Tribal Bilingualism

'Tribe' also called 'scheduled tribe' is a legal and administrative term to label certain ethnic communities due to their cultural or religious beliefs and economic status. There are 613 tribal communities in India who speak 101 distinct languages (Annamalai 1990). They also have a non-tribal mother tongue which is the dominant language of the region they belong to. In certain cases, this non-tribal mother tongue can also differ within a particular tribal community due to the tribal community sharing its geographical boundary with more than one state or due to the tribal community being scattered and living in different regions which have different dominant languages. Tribals become bilinguals through socialization; to communicate with the members of a group they learn their language. The domains of socialization are home, village, educational institution, and workplace. Speakers of a tribal language are also forced to learn non-tribal languages for social mobility and efficiency in communication.

In most cases the non-tribal language that they learn is the dominant language of the region or the majority mother tongue. It is considered the standard language in all sectors and hence the minority languages of that state must conform to it.

The aim of this study is to analyze the language use patterns of tribal students in a national institute in the country. It endeavors to unearth which languages are tribal students inclined to use in a particular domain and the rationale behind it. The study also tries to understand how language functions in a particular domain and how it reinforces social structures. Finally, the study aims to examine the attitudes of the students towards their mother tongue and the majority language of the region they belong to.

3. Research Questions

1. Which language do tribal students use in a particular domain and why?

2. What is their attitude towards their mother tongue and the majority language?

3. Is tribal bilingualism a stable phenomenon?

4. Background of NIT, Rourkela

The National Institute of Technology is one of the institutes of national importance under the Government of India. It is a premier national institute which specializes in technical education. It is situated in the eastern state of Odisha in India and lies in the western city of Rourkela. Being a central government funded

institute, it admits students from all parts of the country and is a melting pot of cultures and languages; both tribal and non-tribal. As is the norm in all government funded institutes and universities there is a reservation of seats for students belonging to OBC (other backward castes), SC (scheduled castes), EWS (economically weaker section) and ST (scheduled tribes) categories. The students from ST communities who are the focus of this study are allocated 7.5% of the total number of seats.

5. Theoretical Framework

According to Fishman (1965), the choice of language used by an individual is controlled by three major factors.

1. Group membership: The first factor in choosing the use of language in a particular domain is group membership. This implies that an individual might choose a different language depending on where s/he is and with whom s/he is interacting. This is done with the purpose of identifying or assimilating with the group with which one is communicating. Speakers seek to gain acceptance and wish to belong to a group and their choice of language in a particular domain helps them in achieving this goal.

2. Situation: The second factor influencing language choice is situation. Situation encapsulates variables such as intimacy-distance, status, formality-informality, equality-inequality, solidarity- non-solidarity etc. In multilingual settings speakers often associate one of the languages in their speech repertoire as being more informal, sub-standard, more dialectal, and more appropriate for intimate settings such as among friends and families.

3. Topic: The third factor controlling choice of language is topic. The topic being discussed by speakers also contributes to the choice of language. In multilingual societies certain topics are discussed in language X because speakers feel more comfortable discussing topic X in language X. This might be because they have previously been exposed to that topic in language X or because they do not have the correct vocabulary to discuss topic X in language Y.

The theoretical framework used for this study is Fishman's Domain Analysis (1972). He defines domains as "institutional contexts or socioecological co-occurrences that attempt to designate the major cluster of interactions that occur in a multilingual setting."

Schmidt-Rohr (1933) was the first to suggest the importance of domains in understanding language choice. According to him there were nine domains: family, playground and street, church, school, press, courts, literature, military, and governmental administrations. Domains shed light on the sociocultural norms and expectations of a society by analyzing language choice and topic. They also help us precisely figure out which language is dominant in a particular setting for a specific topic. This in turn represents the stable patterns of language choices that exist in larger multilingual societies.

6. Methodology

6.1 Participants

The data was collected from twenty tribal students who were in their first year of B. Tech (Bachelor of Technology) at NIT, Rourkela. They belonged to different tribes from different states in the country. The tribal languages they spoke belonged to the Indo-Aryan language family, the Dravidian language family, and the Sino Tibetan language family. Some of the tribal languages are Kui, Oraon, Kokborok, Sadri, Ao etc. The data was elicited and collected through questionnaires which were administered via Google forms.

6.2 Questionnaire

The data was collected from primary sources only and the tool that was used to elicit and collect the data for this sociolinguistic study is a questionnaire. The questionnaire (Appendix I) is modeled on the questionnaire prescribed in Mohan's (2007) work titled *Patterns of Language Use among Tribal Communities of Jharkhand* but has been adapted to evoke pertinent information from the students relevant to this study. The questionnaire consists of twenty-five questions out of which most are yes or no questions. The other questions require the students to give one-word answers, mostly the name of language they use in a specific context.

Questions 1-5 focus on the background of the student such as name, age, gender, the tribe they belong to etc. Questions 6-7 aim to find out if the language spoken by the tribe the student belongs to and his/her mother tongue is the same. This is done with the intention of finding out if the students still speak their tribal mother tongue or if they have switched to another language. Questions 8-9 aim to find out the level of competence the student has in his/her mother tongue. Questions 10-16 aim to find out which language is preferred in a particular domain. This is done to ascertain which languages are used by the students to talk to their parents, grandparents, friends, and professors in different domains. Questions 17-18 focus on finding out the frequency of English usage in the domain of the educational institution. Question 19 aims to find out the attitude of the students towards the dominant language of the region their tribe belongs to and question 20 aims to give a clearer picture of the social background of a student. Finally questions 20-25 focus on the attitude of the students towards their tribal mother tongue and to gauge if they feel a sense of pride towards their mother tongue or if they prefer to shun it altogether.

7.   Results and Discussion

After careful analysis of the data extracted from the questionnaire the researcher summed up the results that were obtained in three bar graphs. The first bar graph examines the languages used in the family domain, the second discusses the use of English in the educational institution domain and finally, the third discusses the attitude of the students towards their mother tongue and the dominant language.
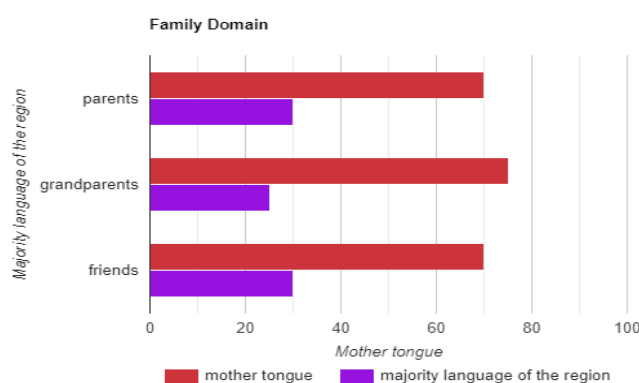

Figure 1: The percentage of students using the majority language and the mother tongue in the family domain and intra tribe friendships

Linguistic minorities are mostly always bi- or multilingual and the use of the tribal mother tongue is restricted to the domain of home and intra tribe friendships while the dominant language is used in other domains such as the domain of education and to communicate with people from non-tribal communities (Bayer 1990). But unfortunately, the data from Figure 1 clearly depicts how the dominant non-tribal language of the region has infiltrated the home domain.

The mother tongue is the primary linguistic identity of a person, and they are associated to a cultural, religious, and ethnic group because of their mother tongue. Pattanayak (1990) believes that the "early socialization function, identity function, and psychic function are rooted in the mother tongue." The mother tongue is responsible for grounding the child to his ethnic identity and culture and the loss of it results in emotional and intellectual bareness.

The data clearly shows that while the mother tongue is still predominantly used with parents, grandparents, and in intra tribe friendships, the majority language/ dominant non-tribal language of the region has pervaded throughout. Some students also revealed that while they comprehend their mother tongue, they have made no effort to learn their mother tongue as their family members and friends are bilinguals and understand the majority language and even their school education occurs in the majority language or English.
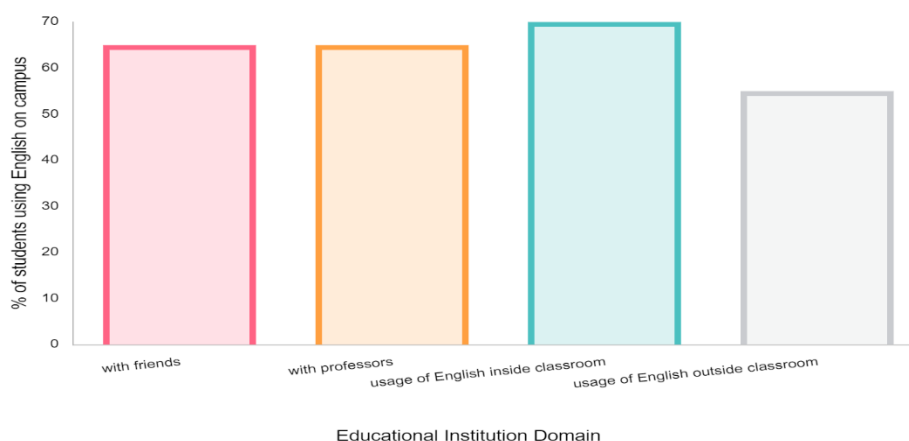
Figure 2: Percentage of students speaking English on campus in the domain of the educational institution.

The data in Figure 2 reveals the percentage of tribal students using English within the domain of the educational institution. 65% of tribal students use or at least actively try to use English while speaking to their friends and professors. This is because tribal students from the southern states in India do not speak in Hindi and do not have knowledge of the dominant regional language which in this case is Odia. The reverse can also be true where they might know Hindi and Odia, but their friends and professors do not. The only link language in such cases is English. English even after 76 years of independence, is still one of the official languages of the country and is held in great reverence. It is the lingua franca and is used in education, administrative purposes, in workplaces and occasionally in the domain of home.

70% tribal students use English inside the classroom and 55% use it outside the classroom too. Tribal students in government institutions where a certain percentage of seats are reserved for them face discrimination in India. The general category students ridicule and criticize them as the cutoff percentage is less for tribal students and they do not have to face the high level of competition that general category students face. In order to tackle this discrimination one of the strategies that tribal students use is to speak in English as it is still the language of power and prestige in our country. Being able to communicate in English well is a marker of education and sophistication in India and tribal students who have been educated in English medium schools do it consciously in order to be respected among their peers.
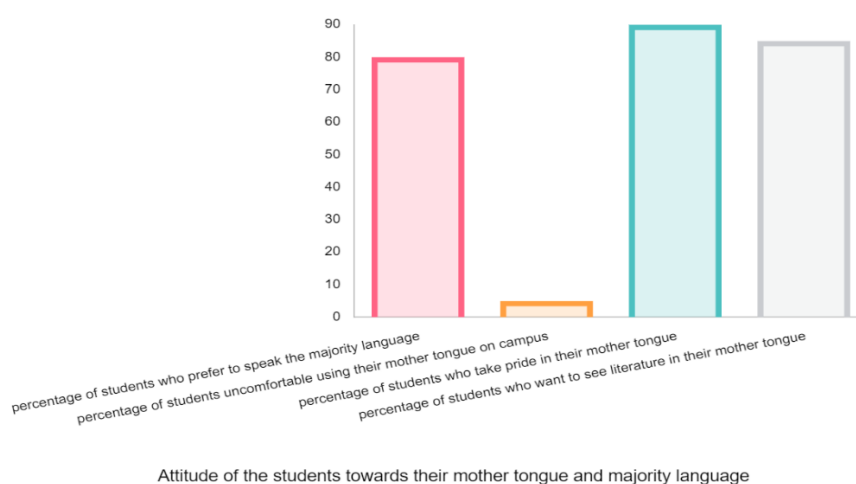

Figure 3: A bar graph denoting the attitude of the students towards their mother tongue and the majority language.

The data in Figure 3 through various questions shows the attitude of the tribal students both towards their mother tongue and the majority language. The first bar deals with the percentage of students who prefer using the dominant regional language over their tribal mother tongue as the dominant language provides social mobility, group membership outside of the tribe, is the language of economic development, is used as a medium

of instruction in government schools and is a marker of social integration within the state. The majority language is also the identity marker of the people of that state. If one can speak the majority language, they are part of the group, if they cannot they are relegated to the fringes of society and seen as outsiders. Being able to communicate effectively in the majority language enables the process of acculturation. Berry (1997) defines acculturation as the process that occurs when individuals in multicultural and multilingual societies interact and adapt to different cultures and languages. He states four possible strategies that multilingual societies adopt when faced with a dominant language/culture that is infringing upon their tribal mother tongue. 1. Assimilation where individuals adopt the language, beliefs, and customs of the dominant culture. 2. Separation where individuals retain their mother tongue and avoid encountering the dominant language. 3. Integrating where individuals retain their mother tongue while simultaneously speaking the dominant language outside of their tribal group. Finally, 4. Marginalization where individuals neither retain their mother tongue nor learn the dominant language.

From the above data, we can conclude that the tribal students desire to or have majorly assimilated as they prefer speaking the majority language and the majority language has infiltrated the domain of home as is evident from the data.

While the data from the other three bars suggest that the tribal students still want to retain their mother tongue and have no qualms about using it on campus with their intra tribe friends, they also realize the fact that there are no social or economic benefits to retaining their mother tongue. They want to see literature and bilingual dictionaries in their tribal mother tongue, but at the same time they are acutely aware of the fact that tribal languages in India are still considered as 'fringe languages' and learning their tribal mother tongue will provide them with no opportunities and in fact expose them to face ridicule and criticism from their non-tribal friends and batchmates.

8. Conclusion

When tribal minorities face linguistic oppression by the majority language, they only have two choices left: (1) they either surrender to the dominant language wherein the tribal mother tongue is relegated to the home domain and even that space is now getting corrupted as is evident from the data or (2) they must sustain both languages by using them in two separate domains. Option 1 leads to language shift and option 2 leads to language maintenance (Mohanty,1990).

In the beginning of this paper, we stated how bilingualism and multilingualism is a stable phenomenon where languages can co-exist with each other in a non-conflicting manner but that does not hold true for tribal bilingualism and multilingualism. There are no distinct divisions when it comes to domains. Ideally, one particular language should be spoken in a particular domain but that is not what has been observed in this study. There is a penetration of the dominant regional language in the home domain and in certain cases tribals have completely discarded their tribal mother tongue in favor of the majority language.

Thus, we can state that tribal bilingualism and multilingualism is an unstable phenomenon where tribal and non-tribal languages 'conflict' with each other, and we see a slow rising trend to language shift as opposed to language maintenance which is the norm in non-tribal bilingualism.

9. Shortcomings and future scope

It was observed that most tribal students refused to accept their identity as tribals and fill up the questionnaire as they were worried about being judged differently amongst their peers. Caste based reservation is a sensitive topic in IITs (Indian Institute of Technology) and NITs (National Institute of Technology) as there is rampant discrimination against students with reservation. These students attempt to blend it and distance themselves from their caste-based identity by using different languages in different domains. A sort of identity erasure was seen where tribal students in these institutions constantly try to assimilate by using the majority language of the region or Hindi which is seen as a language of national integration or if possible, even English.

A part of the data collected was also unusable as there is flawed understanding among students as to who the STs are, and which tribes or communities are encompassed under this term. Certain non-tribal students had also filled up the questionnaire unintentionally without knowing if their mother tongues are tribal languages or not.

This study could be replicated on a larger scale in other government institutions or central universities to see if they yield the same result or not.

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APPENDIX I

QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Name:
2. Age:
3. Gender:
4. Tribe:
5. Which state do you belong to:
6. What is the language of your tribe?
7. What is your mother tongue?
8. Can you speak it?   Yes   No
9. If not, can you understand it?   Yes   No
10. Which language do you use to talk to your parents?
11. Which language do you use to talk to your grandparents?
12. Which language do you use to talk to your friends who belong to the same tribe?
13. Would you be comfortable using the same language with friends from the same tribe on campus?
14. Which language do you use to talk to your friends on campus if all of them (including you) are Odissa?   English   Hindi   Odia
15. Which language do you use to talk to your friends on campus if all of them speak a different mother tongue?   English   Hindi
16. Which language do you use to talk to your professors?
17. Do you use English outside the classroom?   Yes   No   Occasionally
18. Do you use English inside the classroom?   Yes   No   Occasionally
19. Do you prefer speaking the dominant language of the region (Hindi, Odia etc.) your tribe belongs to?
20. Are you the first in your family to study in a national institute? Yes   No
21. Do you avoid speaking in your mother tongue on campus (even when you can speak it)?   Yes   No
22. Do you avoid speaking in your mother tongue at home?   Yes   No
23. Do you take pride in your mother tongue?   Yes   No   Neutral
24. Do you think that being able to speak and understand your mother tongue is a matter of pride?   Yes   No   I don't really care.
25. Do you want to see books and bilingual dictionaries in your mother tongue?   Yes   No