



Implications of Sociolinguistic Variants in the Minority Speech Community

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Abstract

Language has been the essential source of human communication. It is a means through which humans express themselves in terms of attitude and emotions. Language is also considered to be a source of cultural communication. There is a strong relationship between language and culture. Humans communicate in various ways. The way people use their language reveals their prejudices and preferences. Even 'sociolinguistic variants' like gender issues, racial conflicts and ethnicity are reflected in the use of language. The paper attempts to explore sociolinguistic variants and their implications in the minority speech communities in the wake of globalization and urbanization.

Keywords: attitudes and emotions, prejudices and preferences, sociolinguistic variants ,gender issues, racial conflicts and ethnicity

1. Introduction

The world around us is rapidly changing in the wake of globalization and liberalization. Massive urbanization and technological advancement have resulted in huge human migration to the far flung areas in search of job, business, and for other practical purposes. As a result, people have to communicate with a group of people who do not share the same language. Compulsorily, they have to communicate in a language which is a non-native language to all the speakers in the speech act, creating a social, cultural and linguistic challenges.

The migrants usually become the minority speech community and learn the new language meant for business or some other practical reasons. They might develop a high level of proficiency in their adapted language. But these speakers often lack the deeper social and cultural connect which are the intrinsic tenets of a language. Wardhaugh (2002, p. 2) defines language to be "a knowledge of rules and principles and of the ways of saying and doing things with sounds, words, and sentences rather than just knowledge of specific sounds, words, and sentences."

Language and Culture

Language is a product of numerous cultural factors. The deeper aspects of language are embedded in the age old culture. In its natural surroundings, complex issues of language are interwoven. These issues are intangible in the day to day conversations in the majority speech community. “Those who grow up within a community may be able to participate fully in interactions because they can make the necessary ‘translations’ (Edwards, 2009:55).

However, these ‘pragmatic skills’ become more apparent in the minority communities which are always in the process of ‘adaptation and acculturation’. The minority speech communities are vulnerable. They always feel the threat of losing their language, culture and social identity. A minority speech community struggles hard to protect and preserve their language and identity. They want to be recognized and respected in a speech community which has no connect with their original language and culture.

The outsiders, who have learned a language for practical reasons, may develop a highly fluent command of a language but they may also find that certain deeper level of communication remains closed to them. Those who grow up within a community may be able to participate fully in interacting because they can make the necessary translations. (Edwards, 2009 : 55)

Given communicative and symbolic aspects of languages, the later may be of more importance in the absence of the former in minority communities, which are underlying adaptation and acculturation. So the question, “Who am I?”. “Who are we?” become important. These questions are not simply about social constructs, such as “Maithili speakers” or Bhojpuri speakers.”

Implicit is the questioning of values :“what am I?” or “How am I” or “is my language and culture valued?” Behind these questions, the need for protection and preservation as well as the desire to live a respectable life. Everybody wants to be recognized and respected. Communication depends upon “attitudes towards ‘others’ in terms of languages and cultures- individually and collectively.

Language and Society

Language is inseparable from community. The very nature of language includes and excludes. This simultaneous inclusion and exclusion function is reflected in the Maithili speakers speaking Hindi. *ki bhel* (what happened?)

In this case, language, even when minimally shared, points to a common basis for identification. There is a particular quality in the nature of language : those who share the language, or those who understand are included in the community and those who do not, are excluded.

Being a land of migrants, the United States consists of linguistic communities, and has been making efforts to preserve immigrant languages. Immigrants feel the need to maintain their cultural heritage through their children. These diverse linguistic communities, who want to maintain cultural identity and language, are the means of communicating cultures. The children of migrant parents become confused with two cultural heritages- the adapted language and culture of their parents. This is the reason, American children of two cultures constantly make efforts to define themselves. Of course, self-definitions are matters which go far beyond linguistic considerations.

Language and Thought

Thought is much larger than language. Many problems are caused due to language and limitation and the person's inability to know the language of communication fully, and to express ideas accurately.

"I said to the secretary: "Can you type this letter for me?"

The secretary replied : "Yes, I can, but I do not want to, because you didn't ask me politely."

Miscommunication occurred mostly because Hindi speakers mark politeness on the verbal ending, rather than by using separate words.

"Kya aap mere liye ye letter type kar sakte ho?"

Speakers of Hindi mark politeness on verbs, but also express the possibilities of some limitations, personal or professional. The meaning of the utterance transcends linguistic structure. This simply means that people's thoughts are much larger than their linguistic expressions.

What is Culture?

Different scholars have defined culture in different ways. According to E. B. Taylor, culture is a complex whole, which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and other capabilities or habits acquired by members of a society . O'Sullivan (2004:2) defines culture as 'the ways people agree to be'.

Over periods of time groups of people reach agreements about how they will see the world, behave, interact with each other, judge each other, and organize themselves—in other words, how they will exist. We learn the agreements—the 'rules' as part of growing up. Since language and culture are inter-related, we learn both language and culture together. However, our 'culture' is not necessarily the same as our 'nationality' and ethnicity. Labels describing people can be problematic. Terms such as 'American', 'Australian', can refer to nationality and culture, but not to ethnicity. The term 'Indian' refers to all the three. So, the issue of identity is complex. People often engage redefining themselves or reasserting their identity (O'Sullivan, 2004:2).

Language-Culture Evolution

Along with culture, language also evolves. Hence, the historical development of any language is the evolutionary history of speakers and cultural traditions. In the process of historical development, people come in contact with others. This contact leads to social interaction, socio-linguistic borrowings and creation of pidgin and creole languages. This process has produced several dialects-languages in India and also in the other parts of the world. The interaction between the Mughals and the natives of India created Hindi and Urdu. Not only these dialects differ from each other, but their representative cultures also differ in traits, food, customs, world-views and value systems. This diversity of dialects and cultures creates group clusters and the possibility of conflict. Conflicts usually arise from cultural differences, especially when the speaker and addressee do not speak the same native language.

Understanding the following socio-linguistic guidelines may lead to conflict free conversations. The guidelines may not make better individuals but they will make enhance the scope of communication. Some guidelines to avoid conflicts are given below :

- All languages are equal. No language is superior to other.
- No culture is better or superior to another.

- All cultures develop according to need in the context of time and space.
- Race, gender, ethnicity, class, caste, religion and nationality are socio-linguistic constructs.

Problems of communication occur due to subjectivity or attachment to mother tongue and culture and unawareness of other people's customs, ways, worldviews, and values. Though no one language or dialect is superior to another, everyone seems to think his or her language and culture are superior to others.

Conclusion

The paper discussed the nature of language in terms of structure, meaning, relationship to culture, communication and functions and differences from language to language. Analysis of languages and cultures clearly indicate that problems of communication leading to conflicts are embedded in diverse cultural traits, including collectivism, indirectness of the message, high-context nature of the conversation, emphasis on extra-linguistic biological and social factors, world-view, and gender roles.

Finally, the paper has provided some guidelines for successful cross-cultural communication, which will lead to the elimination of potential conflicts. Most conflicts which are perceived to be related to race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, class, caste, and religion can be minimized by becoming aware of other people's ways of living and using that knowledge in communicating.

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