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Transition in Language Use: Cause and Effect

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Abstract:

The paper explores how members of speech community participate within and outside home domain. What makes them to choose which language to use (both situational and contextual)? How do people react to other language/s spoken around them? Silchar Bengali which is spoken in southern part of Assam (Barak Valley) i.e. in Silchar is a fall out of the Tea Plantations which started in 1835. This attracted people from outside the regions - Bengali and non-Bengali speakers. Historically, the region was inhabited by Tibeto-Burman speakers, however, Bengali became an important language in Tea Plantation (along with Hindustani) and outside the Tea plantation.

The paper delves into the case of tea garden labourers in Barak Valley where the third and fourth generations are exposed to a greater variety of cultural confluences conspicuous to the place which affected their language. Though the immigrants use less of Bengali, the second generation was exposed to other cultures even before they had the opportunity to fully develop their personal and cultural identity. In subsequent generations, they got opportunity to work outside the tea-garden, and were often exposed to a second (or third, fourth) language/s while living in their host culture (new home). The 3rd and 4th generations are being physically exposed to the environment where the dominant language is used in practical aspects of life. Today, the total population of fourth generation is often bilingual, and sometimes even multilingual depending on the exposure. Presence of Bengali in Silchar only makes people bilingual and does not threaten local ethnic languages as it is event from the Bojpuri/Hindustani speakers in Silchar.

Some of the questions which arises:

i. Early inhabitants and the language in use

ii. Language maintenance and preservation of the identity of the speaker as well as the speech community

iii. In what way can we account for the extra-linguistic factors influencing performance

iv. Transition from Monolingual->Bilingual->Multilingual

v. The subsequent development and changes

1. Introduction

This paper intends to focus on the language use in Tea-gardens of southern Assam (India). People were brought to work as tea-plantation labourers from Indo-Aryan speaking regions of India at different phases. Tea plantation was set up in the year 1835 in Barak Valley which is geographically located in southern Assam. The head-quarter of Barak valley is Silchar and is embedded in a Tibeto-Burman speaking region historically. It shares an international boundary with Bangladesh and thus forms a part of the continuum of dialects spoken in the Bengal basin. Thus a large number of people from Bengali speaking regions (erstwhile east –Bengal) were also attracted to plantation areas because of the proximity it holds. Apart from working in tea plantation, Bengali speakers took up several other jobs like trade and commerce and settled in this region (Allen, B.C. 1901, 1905). They had set up educational centers and introduced Bengali (the literary variety) as the medium of instruction in schools and colleges in this region. Bengali, both western variety (for official purpose) and the local eastern variety (other than official) were used extensively (Dey 2010). In spite of the linguistically diverse situation present there, Bengali became an important language in Tea Plantation (along with Hindustani) as well outside the Tea plantation due to the conspicuous importance it received historically.

1.1. Population

Today, the population of Silchar consists of people whose ancestors came from:

(a) Bengali speaking regions,

(b) Indo-Aryan speaking regions, and

(c) The local indigenous Tibeto-Burman speakers

1.2. Variable

The variable of my study is the use of spirantization, a process which involves obstruents becoming spirants under certain phonological conditions. This process which was absent in Indo-Aryan languages (Grierson 1903 Vol. V. Part I.) is being noticed in the present day Bengali vernaculars spoken in this region. Since a lot of changes occurred with respect to languages use by the immigrant speakers after their arrival in a new land and the subsequent generations, I would like to introduce the variety of Bengali spoken in Silchar as Silchar Bengali Vernacular (SBV) (Dey 2010). In SBV both labial and velar plosives undergo a process of spirantization under certain conditions. Though spirants are conspicuously absent in Indo Aryan languages including Bengali outside Assam and Tripura (both located in the Tibeto-Burman region in north-eastern part of India), it is however attested in some of the Eastern Bengali dialects with varying degrees of frequencies (Dey, 2010). As mentioned, there is no evidence of spirantization in Indo-Aryan languages (historical texts), the non-Bengali Indo-Aryan speakers in Silchar acquired it in the subsequent generations.

2. Linguistic ethnicity and spirantization in Silchar

In this section, I provide a picture of the presence of spirantization in Bengali dialects, Tibeto Burman languages spoken in this region and Bhojpuri/Hindustani (Indo-Aryan) languages.

(a) Bengali Dialects

Diachronically, there is inconspicuous presence of spirantization in majority of the Bengali dialects except the eastern Bengali and the south-Eastern Bengali dialects (see figure 1).
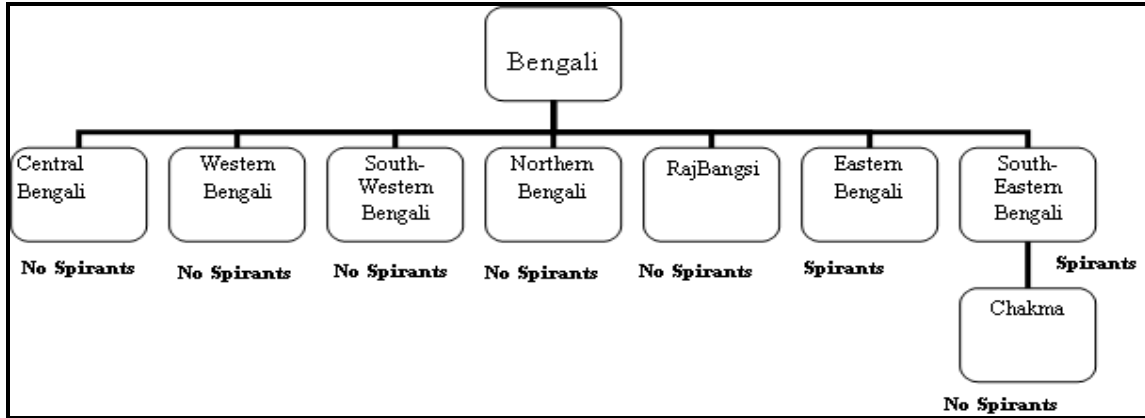
Figure 1 Spirantization across Bengali Dialects (Grierson 1903)

A tendency to spirantize the labial plosives, though not wide spread, in various eastern, east-central and south-eastern speech varieties has been observed by Grierson (1903) across East Bengali dialects.

Grierson's texts though not representative of a speech community, a comparison of the overall frequency of spirantization across various relevant Bengali dialects with present day Silchar (Cachar) suggests that there is a slight increase in the overall frequency of spirantization in Silchar and Cachar in general.
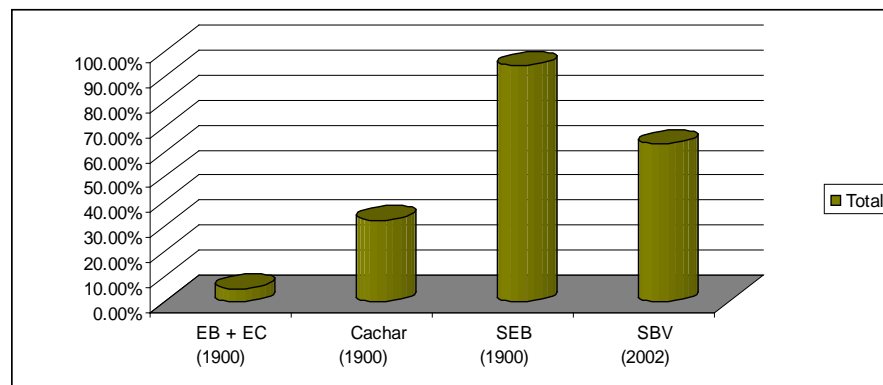

Figure 2 Overall distribution of spirantization of labials across Eastern Bengali dialects

Note: EB-Eastern-Bengali, EC- East-Central, SEB- South-Eastern Bengali, SBV- Silchar Bengali Vernacular

In comparison with both Cachar in 1900 and the south eastern dialects in 1900, which contributed maximally to spirantization in Silchar as in figure 2, there is definitely an increase in the overall frequency of spirantization as suggested by my current data from Silchar.

(b) Tibeto Burman Dialects

Though, a quantitative analysis is not carried out on these texts, the texts of the Tibeto-Burman languages spoken in Assam (as in Grierson 1903 Vol. III Part. II and 1909) show some traces of spirantization of labial plosives (see table 1).

Tibeto-Burman Dialects	Spoken in Assam	Examples	Source
Plain Kachari (Bodo)	Darrang Dt.	*a-fa* 'my father' *fafu* 'sin'	Grierson (1903: 18-19)
Mech (Bodo)	Goalpara Dt.	*a-fa* 'my father' *faf* 'sin'	Grierson (1903: 38-40)
Lalung (Bodo)	Nowgaon Dt.	*faf* 'sin' *fathar* 'field'	Grierson (1903: 53-55)
Dimasa Kachari (Bodo)	North Cachar Dt.	*bufa* 'father' *fadain* 'field'	Grierson (1903: 60-61)
Hojai (Bodo)	Nowgaon Dt.	*pafa* 'father' *pap* 'sin'	Grierson (1903: 65-67)
Tipura (Bodo)	State Hill Tipperah	*bu-fa-no* 'his-father-to' *bufang* 'tree' *pap* 'sin'	Grierson (1903: 114-116)
Aka / Hrusso (Siamese-Chinese)	North hills of Assam valley (Darrang)	*ph um ~ pf umn* 'five' *ph u-gra ~ f ugra* 'horse'	Grierson (1909: 582-583)

Kokborok (Bodo)	Kumarghat (Tripura)	*buphang ~ bufang* 'tree' *buphuru ~ bufuru* 'when' *phaklai ~ faklai* 'roof beem'	Data (Dey and Satyanath, 2003)

Table 1 Spirantization of labials across Tibeto-Burman languages

There is no widespread spirantization in the relevant Tibeto-Burman languages. Bodo sub-group of languages such as Dimasa found in Cachar, Assam and Kokborok speakers in the neighbouring Tripura state are the local indigenous groups are generally bilingual and speak Bengali apart from their mother tongue.

(c) Non-Bengali Indo-Aryan speakers

Indo-Aryan speakers who came from Hindi dialect areas maintained a non-Bengali identity, 'Hindustani'. However, the subsequent generations after migration are exposed to variety of languages such as: (i) mother tongue (spoken by the elders of the family), (ii) Silchar Bengali, (iii) Literary Bengali variety in primary school, (iv) Hindi (through Television), (v) Bishnupriya, and (vi) other Bodo group of languages.

What marks them separate is that many of the so called 'Hindustani' households are bilingual. The families continue to maintain 'Hindustani' dialects at home. The two groups: Bengalis and Hindustanis are not segregated in terms of residential localities. The two live together in the same neighbourhood. However the two groups marry within their own groups.

Informants	Gender	Birth Year	Age	Generation	Spirantization	
					[f] %	[kh/x] %
Ram	Male	1895	107	2nd Gen	*2.4*	*2.0*
Saki	Fem	1922	80	2nd Gen	*18.4*	*6.9*
Ansari	Male	1958	45	4th Gen	0	16.7
Alam	Male	1973	30	4th Gen	0	6.2
Rohit	Male	1988	15	4th Gen	26.2	5.9
Deep	Male	1991	12	4th Gen	93.1	28.6

Table 2   Descendents of immigrants from Non-Bengali Indo-Aryan areas

Table 2 suggests that the use of spirantization is very less as compared to the Bengali speakers. It is very interesting that the 4th generations speakers are pick up and have more of spirantization (Dey, 2010).

It is important to know the fact that, though Silchar is the district headquarter and a center of education, is still not as much urbanized and stratified as one would expect. Therefore, it is not surprising that there are no strong dividing lines defining socio-economic classes but weak socio-economic stratification (Dey 2010). On the whole the differences across socio-economic strata are not huge, nevertheless those lower in the socio-economic hierarchy participate in spirantization much more. Women centered jobs like housemaids, nurses and home makers and those involved in male centered jobs like drivers, clerical positions has more of spirantization. On the other hand, officers, students and business men have less of spirants. Non-Bengali Indo-Aryan speakers who work as labours or in plantation have less or no spirants.

Though spirantization diffused from the numerous Bengali dialects into SBV, it has undergone significant changes after its arrival in this region. The Bengalis are far ahead in the use of spirantization, the other ethnic groups are lagging behind.

3. The case of non-Bengali Indo-Aryan speakers

Even several generations after the two groups: Bengali and Hindustani arrived on Tea plantations in Assam, it is interesting that the two groups do not behave alike with respect to spirantization. From figure 3, it is evident that the 'Bengalis' are far ahead in the use of spirants. The 'Hindustanis' lags behind.
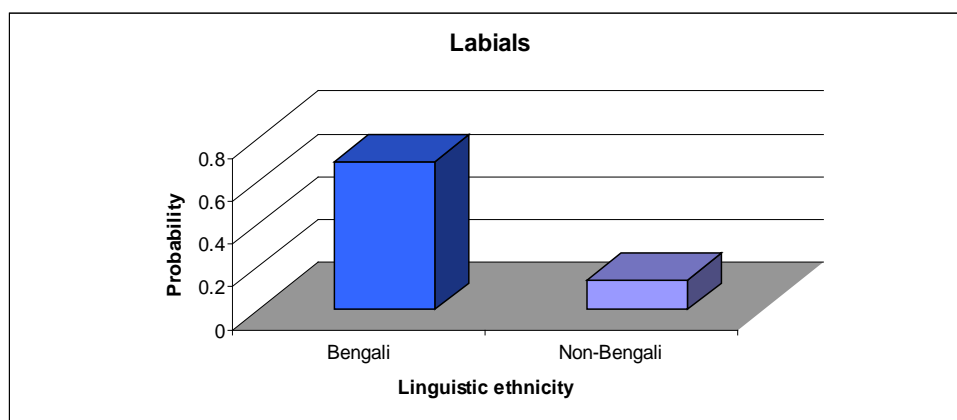

Figure 3   Linguistic ethnicity and spirantization

The wide gap between the two groups is indicative of social-psychological separation of these two groups. It can be said that the non-Bengalis hardly participate in spirantization.

Language attitudes play an important role in understanding issues relating to language variation and change. Trudgill (1972) in his study of Norwich used attitudes to demonstrate covert prestige associated with the use of non-standard variants among men in Norwich. Linguistic features can be studied on the basis of a speaker's or a group of speaker's perception and evaluation of the language in a given speech community. Various sociolinguistic studies (Labov 1963, 1994, 2001) have demonstrated that almost any phonological or phonetic sound change (or any linguistic change) can be initiated and continuously influenced by a range of social factors, such age, sex, and social class of speakers.

The prestige that Sylheti or for that matter, dialect of East Bengal must have enjoyed until twentieth century, weakened over a period of time. With the partition of India in 1947 which separated East Bengal from India eventually stigmatized speech varieties of Eastern Bengal and accorded a new prestige to the dialect of Calcutta (Kolkatti), West Bengal. West-Bengali speech varieties do not have spirantization.

It is evident from the above findings that immigrants and the subsequent generations are exposed to three cultures:

i.   The first culture are those speakers who are referred to the culture of the regions from which the parents originated

ii.   The second culture refers to the culture in which the family currently resides, and

iii.   The third culture refers to the amalgamation of these two above cultures

Third culture generation refer to children raised in a culture other than their parents' for a significant part of their early development years. The case of tea garden labourers in Barak Valley (Assam) where the third and fourth generations are exposed to a greater variety of cultural confluences such as:

(i)   Mother tongue (spoken by the elders of the family)
(ii)   Silchar Bengali
(iii)   Literary Bengali variety in primary school
(iv)   Hindi (through Television)
(v)   Bishnupriya
(vi)   other Bodo group of languages
(vii)   English (School, media/public & administrative affair and common usage)

Though the immigrants use less of Bengali, the second generation was exposed to other cultures even before they had the opportunity to fully develop their personal and

cultural identity. In subsequent generations, they got opportunity to work outside the tea-garden, and were often exposed to a second (or third, fourth) language/s while living in their host culture (new home). The 3rd and 4th generations are being physically exposed to the environment where the dominant language is used in practical aspects of life. Today, the total population of fourth generation is often bilingual, and sometimes even multilingual depending on the exposure. Presence of Bengali in Silchar only makes people bilingual and does not threaten local ethnic languages as it is event from the Bojpuri/Hindustani speakers in Silchar.

Thus despite the coexistence of a standard Bengali alongside the local vernacular (SBV), there is little evidence of style shift. The reasons for this may be multilinguality which includes use of other languages such as English and Hindi along with SVB and standard Bengali. Not that style shift is completely absent; it does not constitute a very conspicuous practice. Style shift may take place in the presence of an outsider, one who is not a member of the local speech community but not necessarily with the members of the speech community.

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