

Language Shift in Tribal languages: A Case Study of the Gond Tribe

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Abstract

The paper presents a case study of language shift in Gond Tribe. The paper is based on the concept of restricted and elaborated code by Basil Bernstein and uses the same as a frame of reference for this particular linguistic scenario under study.

Key Words: Language Shift, Elaborate Code, inequation, Restricted Code

Introduction

India is a multilingual democracy and in order to function effectively various language policies have been devised which cater to the needs and requirements of its people including the linguistic minorities. But in spite of these enlightened policies, we have instances where many languages, both big and small, are under threat but mostly languages of linguistic minorities and the indigenous people mostly referred to as “tribals” suffer most. This results in a gradual shift in their language from a variety which is their mother tongue towards a variety which promises them better prospects in terms of communication and future opportunities. Many reasons can be attributed in this language shift few of them being because of an education system that is often not in the mother tongue, the need for the tribal youth to reach the globalised world in comparison to their elders and the fact that their variety would not given them those opportunities which could be harnessed with the more prestigious varieties.

Language Shift in these linguistic minorities in today’s world is a trend which is being observed mostly due to the globalized economy and media. The world economy in few years became more and more integrated and everywhere a common tongue has become important which places the speakers of the regional dialects and minority languages at a disadvantageous position. More or less the more standardization of the language has also pressured the local variations of

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language into a gradual shift towards a more standardized form. Language shift basically is defined as a shift from the habitual use of one language and includes both, the intergenerational and the intragenerational shift (De Vries,1994). One example of language shift that was formulated by Joshua Fishman (1972) and Calvin Veltman (1983) was the immigrant groups in North America who followed a three-generation model of Anglicization. According to this model, first generation immigrants do learn English but preferred to use their mother tongue at home; second generation immigrants grew up as bilinguals, but they eventually became more fluent in English and preferred to use English at home with their parents (Lopez, 1996). As English becomes the main language spoken at home, the result is that the third-generation immigrants only have a fragmentary knowledge of their mother tongue (Fishman, 1972; Veltman, 1983; Glenn & DeJong, 1996).

Based on this model the situation here in the case of tribal languages are more or less the same. Although it can be said that the language shift among the tribal population has exposed them to the outside world and gradually helped them in achieving the higher levels of socio-economic development, the result seems a bit more adverse as by and by this shift has led to some kind of a division in the tribal society and the formation of separate groups of the younger generation who are beginning to somewhat alienate themselves from the traditional people or the older generation. Thus, this process of linguistic shift can be accounted for the loss of tribal identity and their traditional culture.

Analysis

This paper tries to deal with the same ongoing language shift that was recorded while working on a particular important tribal community found in the parts of Madhya Pradesh and Chattisgarh, the Gond tribe. The language shift in the Gond tribe can be better explained linguistically by taking the concept of Basil Bernstein's Elaborate code and Restricted code. Basil Bernstein (1924–2000) who was a linguist and researcher at the Institute of Education, University of London put the case that the form of language use of working class (who speak a 'restricted code') contrasted with middle class students (who speak an 'elaborate code') and explained their comparative performance at school.

Here, Bernstein analyses one of the ways in which the dynamics of social class affects learner outcomes in school:

“Two general types of codes can be distinguished: elaborated and restricted. In the case of an elaborated code, the speaker will select from a relatively extensive range of alternatives. In the case of a restricted code the number of these alternatives is often severely limited. On a psychological level the codes may be distinguished by the extent to which each facilitates (elaborate code) or inhibits (restricted code) an orientation to symbolize intent in a verbally explicit form.

So according to Bernstein, in a very pure form, a restricted code was the one where all the words and the organizing structure irrespective of its degree of complexity were wholly predictable for its speakers and listeners. The speech here was refracted through a common cultural identity which reduced the need to

verbalize intent so that it becomes explicit. The speech in these social relations was most likely to be fast and fluent, articulatory clues were reduced, some meanings were likely to be dislocated, condensed and local, basically there was a low level of vocabulary and syntactic selection; the unique meaning of the individuals is likely to be implicit. Similarly an elaborate code was that where the prediction was much less possible at the syntactic level and was likely to arise in a social relationship which raises the tension in its members to select from their linguistic resources a verbal arrangement which closely fits specific referents. The preparation and delivery of relatively explicit meaning was the major function of this code. This code facilitated the verbal transmission and elaboration of the individual's unique experience.

We can expect to find the elaborate code and the restricted code within the present contact situation of the people of the Gond tribe with the outside world. In the tribal families we could expect to find a high proportion of families limited to a restricted code which has retained some form of Gondi language that was spoken but now is more a form of the standard language.

Gondi language earlier belonged to the Dravidian language family but due to the process of convergence over the years as mentioned above, it is now more of a form of those Indo-Aryan languages which dominate the regions where the Gondi tribes belong. Still this form or if we term it as a 'restricted code' in the form of present day Gondi contains a vast potential of meanings. It is a form of speech which symbolizes a communally based culture. It carries its own aesthetic and it should not be devalued. The elaborate code is the standard language which is Chhattisgarhi or Hindi spoken in those parts by the non-tribal people. This elaborate code can easily be found to be in the frequent use in the education setups while the restricted code is not or very less used. Thus the youth who comes out from this education system finds it easier to prosper and elevate himself in the society by further shifting towards the elaborate code rather than clinging on to his restricted code which is his present form of Gondi language.

This particular finding was evident in this study that was done in the 4 major districts of Chhattisgarh where the Gond tribes are mostly concentrated. The informants were comprised of two groups where 'Group A' had 10 people from the age group of 20-40 while 'Group B' had 10 people who were in the age group of 40-60. The study was covered in the districts of Kanker, Keshkal, Antagarh and Narayanpur with the change studied at the morphological level. A word list was prepared for this purpose which comprised of 5 words each from the basic vocabulary categories like Nature, Mankind, Sex And Kinship, Fauna, Organs Of Human Body, Food, Drinks And Cooking, Clothing, Ornaments And Care, Parts Of House, Flora, Farming And Agriculture, Professions, Transport, Sense Perception, Emotions, Temperamental, Moral And Aesthetics, Education, Government, Religion, Regional Fauna, Adjectives And Abstract Nouns, Adverbs, Time

Thus a total of 100 words were selected from the daily vocabulary for both the groups. The responses for the common equivalents in both the groups for each these words in their code, is given in the Table 1.

Table 1

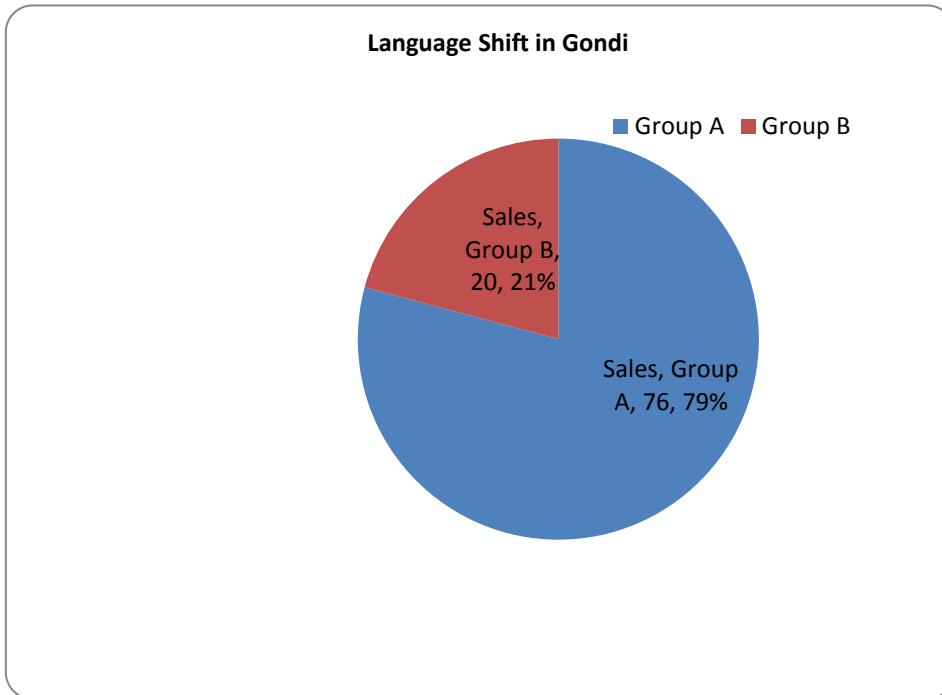
Words asked in standard language of the region	Equivalent in the standard language of the region	Equivalent given by Group A	Equivalent given by Group B
Air	həva	həva	vəɟɪ
Water	pɑ:nɪ	pɑ:nɪ	e:r
Soil	məttɪ	məttɪ	b ^h um
River	nəɟɪ	nəɟɪ	doda:
Hill	doŋər	doŋər	ma:ɟa
Family	pəriɤa:r	pəriɤa:r	maoɟ
Husband	pəɟɪ	pəɟɪ	mudɪa
Wife	bɪvɪ	korta:ɟ	korta:ɟ
Child	bəçça	pəka	pəka
Brother	b ^h ɑɪ	b ^h ɑɪ	ɟəmur
Parrot	ɟoɟa	hɪr	hɪr
Hen	murgɪ	kor	kor
Cow	gæe	t ^h a:lɪ	t ^h a:lɪ
Bull	bəl	buda:l	buda:l
Buffalo	b ^h əɪs	b ^h əɪs	ərm
Ear	ka:n	ka:n	kəvɪ
Nose	na:k	na:k	məsɤ:r
Eye	ɑ:k ^h	ɑ:k ^h	konda
Mouth	Muh	muh	ɟoɟɪ
Teeth	ɟɑ:ɟ	ɟɑ:ɟ	pəl
Milk	ɟu:ɟ ^h	ɟu:ɟ ^h	pɑ:l
Rice	çavəl	nukɑ:	nukɑ:
Wheat	gehũ	gehũ	gehũ
Liquor	ɟərab	ɟɑ:ɟgo	ɟɑ:ɟgo
Oil	ɟel	nɪ	nɪ
Blouse	polka	polka	polka
Cloth	kəpɟa	kəpɟa	gəɟɪl
Dhoti	ɟ ^h oɟɪ	ɟ ^h oɟɪ	gəɟɪl
Nose ring	p ^h u:lɪ	p ^h u:lɪ	pu:lɪ
Sandals	çəppəl	çəppəl	hərpɤ

Language Shift in Tribal Languages

Door	kəpɑt̪	kəpɑt̪	hərɪ
Hut	ɖʒʰopɖɪ	lon	keɽul
Lock	ɽala	ɽala	ɽara/ ɽala
Lamp	ɖija	ɖija	ɖija
Rope	ɖorɪ	ɖorɪ	moɖos
Mango	a:m	mərka	mərka
Bamboo	bā:s	vəɖur	vəɖur
Coconut	narjəl	na:rijr	na:rijr
Banana	kela	kera	kera
Tamarind	imlɪ	hit̪ta:	hit̪ta:
Canal	nəhər	nəhər	ha:ɽa
Crop	pʰasal	pʰasal	No equivalent
Dry	sukʰa	sukʰa	vət̪ta
Wet	gr:la	gr:la	nənd̪ta
Grain	gehū	gehū	No equivalent
Farmer	kɪsa:n	kɪsa:n	kɪsa:n
Teacher	mastər	mastər	gurdʒɪ
Carpenter	bəɖʰar:	bəɖʰar:	bəɖʰar:
Hunter	sɪkarɪ	sɪkarɪ	sɪkarɪ
Blacksmith	ka:riɖɪr	ka:riɖɪr	va:de
Bullock Cart	ga:da	ga:da	buda:l gada
Driver	dravəl	ost̪ɑɖ	No equivalent
Street	gəlɪ	gəlɪ	pɑ:ɖɪ
Way	raɽta	raɽta	hərɪ
Path	səɖek	səɖek	meɖ
Black	ka:la	ka:la	karɪjal
Blind	ənɖʰa	ənɖʰa	konda:ŋ
Deep	gehra	gehra	ɖɪg
White	səpʰeɖ	səpʰeɖ	pɑɖrɪ
Hunger	bʰukʰ	bʰukʰ	kər vəɽta
Anxiety	pʰɪkər	pʰɪkər	surta
Arrogance	a:pɑ	rɪs	hoŋ
Happiness	kʰusɪ	kʰusɪ	hərɪk
Love	pɪjar	pɪjar	pɪjar
Wonder	čəkɪɽ	čəkɪɽ	vərhiɽur
Blackboard	Bord	bord	ɽəkʰta
Chalk	ča:k	ča:k	ča:k məttɪ
Ink	sɪhar:	sɪhar:	sɪhar:

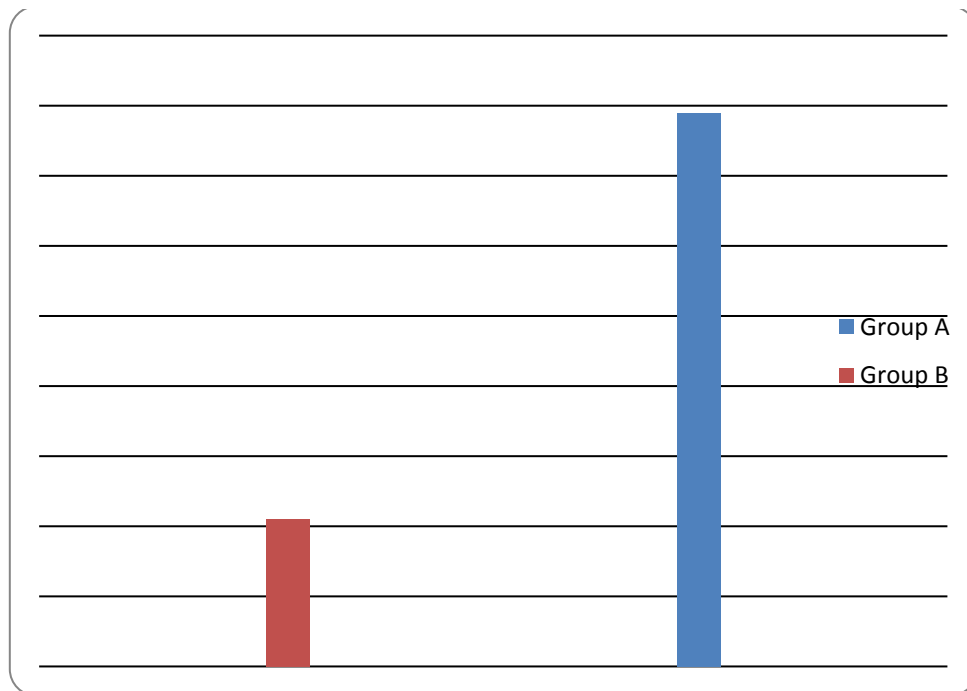
Slate	silet	silet	pətti
Student	vidjart ^h ɪ	vidjart ^h ɪ	No equivalent
Panchayat	pəncɑ:jət̪	pəncɑ:jət̪	pəncɑjɪt̪
Village	gaõ	na:r	va:da
Tribe	a:ɖɪvasɪ	a:ɖɪvasɪ	koɪtor
Villager	gaõ va:la	na:te	na:tor
Queen	ra:ni	ra:ni	ra:ni
Goddess	ɖevi	ɖevi	ɖevi
God	b ^h əgvan	b ^h əgvan	pɛin
Festival	t̪əohar	t̪əohar	pandum
Ghost	b ^h u:t̪	b ^h u:t̪	b ^h u:t̪
Giant	rakč ^h əs	rakč ^h əs	rakč ^h əs
Moss	məhua	ɪdum	ɪdum
Salfi	səlfi	gorga	gorga
East Indian Ebony	t̪əndu	t̪umdi	t̪umdi
Indian Gooseberry	āvla	ləlli	ləlli
Char	čɑ:r	reka	reka
All	səb ^h	səb ^h	uɖɪtor
Alone	əkele	əkele	vəroɖ
Bad	k ^h əra:b	k ^h əra:b	k ^h əra:b
Badness	k ^h əra:bɪ	k ^h əra:bɪ	k ^h əra:bɪ
Big	bəɖɑ	bəɖɑ	hodzor
Near	pɑ:s	pɑ:s	heɖe
South	dəkʃɪn	dəkʃɪn	rəksel
North	uɖt̪ər	uɖt̪ər	b ^h ənda:r
East	Purv	purv	uɖt̪ɪ
West	pəʃčɪn	pəʃčɪn	bud ^h t̪ɪ
Morning	sub ^h a	sub ^h a	nərkɪ
Evening	ʃɑ:m	ʃɑ:m	nulan hok
Night	ra:t̪	ra:t̪	nulpe
Afternoon	ɖo pəhər	ɖo pəhər	nulpe par
Age	sɑ:l	vərs	vərs

Based on the data the approximate level of language shift in percentage is evident from the graph below:



Group A which consisted of the informants from the age group of 20-40 showed 79 percent inclination whereas the Group B which consisted of the informants from the age group of 40-60 showed 21 percent inclination towards the standard language or the elaborate code of the region where this data was collected.

Language shift is not unavoidable and can be buffered by a number of factors in the environment. The language behaviour of people can be placed on a scale from exclusive use of the mother tongue to an exclusive use of the prestigious variety, where most people actually lie in between (Stoessel, 2002).



Such staggering result of the Gondi language shows the way, most of tribal languages in our country are facing the language shift towards the more prestigious variety. Along with the globalized economics, language attitude in policy makers is also the basic reason for such a rapid language shift just observed. Language attitude is basically the feelings that people have about their own language variety or the language varieties of the others. It is for a fact, that the policies are often made in way that the tribals are neither a party to the planning for change nor have they any role in its implementation. Therefore, the education system which engenders such planning, pulverises their social status and self-respect and converts them into masses, is actually regarded by the tribals as irrelevant.

So does it actually calls for a system where the present education system needs to put importance to the restricted codes too for the sake of a tribal culture and avoid the situation which was just witnessed in the present case of Gondi language? A question is normally raised about the practicability of primary education through so many tribal mother tongues with all their local variations. In this connection it must be remembered that the actual number of tribal languages in the country is less than 100. Indigenous/tribal and minority education could be organised so as to promote high levels of multilingualism and also saving the tribal cultures and languages.

Basically there are two factors where these things revolve. First is the factor within a person which became evident after this study as the Group A which consisted of the youth from the Gond tribe showed more inclination towards the prestigious variety rather than the Group B which showed less inclination towards the prestigious variety, this is actually what is known as language attitude which was discussed earlier.

The second is societal pressure which forces the tribal youth towards a more prestigious variety or the elaborate code which was related in the present language shift situation of the Gond tribe. The societal pressure in this globalised economy motivates the tribal youth to shift more and more away from his mother tongue which eventually becomes an endangered minority language variety.

Conclusion

It is known that UNESCO, has always argued that for a people centred development the respect for the culture and identity of the people is an important factor and language is a tool to protect that culture and identity. Motivational steps are indeed the need of the hour for the much needed Language maintenance with respect to these minority language forms which are the tribal languages of India. Gondi alongwith many other tribal languages can work towards few steps like speaking in their variety to their children at home, having access to media in their language (Flege, Yeni-Komshain & Liu, 1999), providing access to institutions that use their variety and enrolling children in the mother tongue programs can prevent the language shift to a more prestigious variety (Kondo, 1998; Portes & Hao, 1998; Tse, 2001). Community organizations like religious institutions, clubs, and other tribal group associations also play a significant role in language maintenance by motivating people to use their language variety in various contexts (Hinton, 1999; Pak, 2003).

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