A Bottom up Approach to Language Revitalisation: Focus on the Sindhi Community

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Abstract

As I have been reviewing grants for revitalisation for a number of years for an international NGO I have noticed that applicants often ask for funds for collecting data and for documentation, for running classes and creating handbooks and for travelling to hold interviews with the remaining speakers and for also purchasing technological inputs. Such application for grants generally tend to focus on the documentation of the languages which are deemed endangered and where there is a fear that with the death of the last speaker of the community the language will die. One must however examine the socio political, economic reasons why a community has shifted away from habitual use of its ethnic language. Understanding these reasons will help in the running of appropriate revitalisation programmes.

In this study I will focus on the diasporic Sindhi Hindu community in a number of research sites who have shifted away from the dominant use of their ethnic language. We will describe and examine the extensive work of a Sindhi language activist and argue that the many strategies to revitalise a language must first focus on determining the reasons for such a shift. In short, depending on the reasons for language shift the focus of a revitalisation strategy must be aligned with such reasons. A revitalisation programme taking a bottom up approach that is, determining the cause of the shift will be more fruitful compared to one that merely focusses on documenting a language.

Keywords: Revitalisation, Sindhis, Bottom-up approach, Documentation

Introduction

Much work has gone to collecting data, documenting data and archiving data of endangered languages. There are many worldwide famous academic institutions which have made it their goal to provide finance to scholars to collect data and digitalise it before the last speaker of a language dies. The director of such a programme in SOAS called the Endangered Language Documentation Programme in the University of London, Mandana Seyfeddinipur in a recent webinar (12-13 August, 2020) categorically stated that the onus of the revitalisation of a dying language is the work of the speech community, and or a member or members of the community who is/are a language activist/s. She said and I quote "Our work is not on maintenance or revitalisation. For that we

need to see strong community involvement....we are restricted to documentation. "When asked "How do we encourage people to use their own language?" Her response was "I don't know". She reiterated that the job of SOAS was to collect, preserve and archive the languages, in short to document the language and not to revitalise the language.

Therefore, in this paper I would like to focus on the work of language activists who are attempting to promote active use of the heritage language. I will focus on the Sindhi Hindu community. The majority of the Sindhi Hindus, about 800,000 fled their one-time homeland, Sind when the Indian subcontinent was partitioned into India and Pakistan in 1947. Today they have no homeland of their own and live in imagined communities not only in India but in most parts of the world

Studies of the community in India some 30 years after partition found that the community had shifted away from habitual use of the Sindhi language (Daswani and Parchani 1978, see also Daswani, 1989). In fact, as early as 1963, Khubchandani in his doctorate thesis for the University of Pennsylvania discussed the acculturation of Indian Sindhi to Hindi. More recent studies in different parts of the world of the Sindhi community show a trend to language shift. The Sindhis in Metro Manila, Philippines in a study by Dewan in 1997. Had not only shifted away from Sindhi but had also converted to Christianity. David in her studies of the Sindhis in Malaysia, (1996) Singapore and London finds shift occurring. A comparative study of the Sindhi and Punjabi communities in Hong Kong by Detramani and Lock 2003 also show that there is a shift but that the shift among the Sindhis is more extensive and rapid as compared to the Hong Kong Punjabi community. In Jakarta, Indonesia too, there has been a shift (Thapan, 2002). Many of these studies showed that language shift was occurring but a recent study by Iyengar in 2013 on perceptions of young Sindhis on heritage language shift in the city of Pune, India focussed on reasons for such a shift. Such an emphasis on the perceptions and attitude of community members towards their heritage language provide vital knowledge which may help language activists to focus on appropriate ways to revitalise the language. In a more recent paper Iyengar 2014 suggests that perhaps it is the use of two scripts – Devanagari and Perso-Arabic script should be replaced by a Roman script to facilitate literary acquisition. This, he believes could consequently promote a positive attitude towards the Sindhi language. Garret et al as early as 2003 had stated that attitudes are a major instrument to either support or reject a language.

This shift among community members in different sites has not gone unnoticed by the Sindhi community. Leading members of the community like Dada Vaswani, a spiritual leader of the Sindhi Hindu community often made appeals to the community to use their mother tongue. However, in his sermons and or lectures he tended to use both Sindhi and English to accommodate younger community members. In his video

recordings of his discourse we note Vaswani linguistically accommodating to the audience at his talks. In Malaysia we note that the President of the Sindhi Association of Malaysia gives his speeches in English and notices of births and deaths and weddings and other rites of passage announced in social media are all in English.

Revitalization Activities by Sindhi language Activists

There are number of language activists who are working hard to revitalize the Sindhi language through various means. The famous language revitalization means are social, and electronic media. There are different web sites, telefilms, TV shows, magazines, folk music and literature to revitalize and preserve the language. Ms Asha Chand is a famous Sindhi language activist and some of her strategies and websites to revitalize the Sindhi language are now discussed.

www.learnsindhi.com The learn Sindhi is a web site created to teach the Sindhi language from basic to an advanced level. Asha Chand introduces the sites for teaching and learning the Sindhi language starting from basic sounds and letters, to the advanced level - sentence structure. According to her, the Sindhi language in India and in other parts of the world is at risk as it does not have a huge number of speakers, and its speakers are scattered. She is worried about the loss of their mother tongue. Therefore, she requests Sindhis to learn and speak Sindhi in their homes. In other words, she is trying to revitalize the Sindhi language among the Sindhis both in and outside of India. In her introduction to the site, she urges Sindhi parents to learn and use Sindhi in their homes and in their daily lives. This web site has online lectures as well as a complete CD which contains the material from basic sounds and letters to an advanced level. The site uses the Arabic-Sindhi and Roman scripts to teach Sindhi.

Asha Chand tries to vitalize and revitalize the Sindhi language among Hindu Sindhis in India, Dubai, US, UK, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and Philippines. She teaches basic to advance Sindhi through web resources. She conducts seminars, workshops and conferences to revitalize the Sindhi language among Sindhis so that they can preserve their language, literature and culture.

Another website is www.sindhigulab.com Sindhi gulab is another site aimed at revitalizing the Sindhi language. It is the first Sindhi internet magazine since 2001 in the service of Sindhyat. This web magazine is classified into five different sections of Sindhi language, literature and culture namely; Sindhi sahitya, Sindhi info, Sindhi media, and the religion of the Sindhi Hindus. These sections are further classified into sub-sections giving information about various aspects of the Sindhi language. It is a complete Arabic-Sindhi web magazine. It is India's first magazine publishing monthly in Sindhi; but some articles are also published in English.

There are ten patrons of this web magazine namely Jetho Lalwani, Asha Chand, Dada Murij, Manghnani (Dubai), Bahu Chetan Ramchandani, Shri Chandru, Manghnani (Mumbai), Shri Dilip Bulchandani and Shri Ram Jawharani. These are not just patrons on this electronic magazine but are leading Sindhi language activists who are trying their best to maintain and revitalize the Sindhi language. These language activists can be seen at different workshops, seminars, TV shows, programs, web sites and gatherings of Sindhis in India, Pakistan, Dubai, US, Malaysia, etc.

Yet another website is www.Sindhisanghat.com Sindhisanghat is another web site to teach and learn the Sindhi language. This web page produces many things related to Sindhi language, literature and culture. The literal meaning of the phrase 'Sindhi sanghat' is 'Sindhi friendship', 'Sindhi brotherhood' and 'Sindhi people'.

Sindhisanghat has various modes and sub-means to revitalize the Sindhi language among Sindhis especially in India, Dubai, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, UK and US where Sindhi language use is either declining or has declined. One of the means of revitalizing Sindhi is 'Read & write' sections in the site. This section is further classified into Sindhi articles, English articles, learn Sindhi, stories, folk literature and music in Sindhi and English, Sindhi reflection, Sindhi books and short stories. These are attempts targeted at children and intermediate and advanced level learners to learn the Sindhi language.

Sindhisanghat also produces Sindhi telefilms, Sindhi music, folk music, Sindhi poetry, Sindhi movies and Sindhi TV to promote use of the Sindhi language. Sometimes this page produces some funny video clips in Sindhi to interest Sindhis to learn the language. It also produces video and audio clips to teach Sindhi proverbs and idioms.

The final website that will be described is www.Sindhisaathi Sindhi Saathi is another web site to revitalize the Sindhi language. The word 'saathi' means 'a friend', 'a comrade', 'a companion' and 'a brother'. The Sindhi Saathi web site brings a platform for Sindhis wherever they live to join, to gather and to unite on one platform so that they can preserve their language, literature and culture. Ms Asha Chand in the introductory page of the site urges all Sindhis to be united and to revitalize and preserve their language.

On her website Sindhi sathi.org the entries are mostly in English or in English with an Arabic script. A few entries like wish you a Happy New Year and Sindhi video contest for youngsters are written in English and in Sindhi in an Arabic script. This is logical as the wider audience appear to be English dominant

Evaluation of these programmes

Speech communities shift to other languages for a number of reasons, both internal and external. War and genocide, natural disasters- famine

and disease, migration, urbanisation, global changes, educational policies etc can result in language shift. The new language may indicate socio economic status, they may want to adopt another identity (e.g. in Malaysia speaking the Malay language is integral to the cultural identity of a Malay and as Malays receive a range of preferential rights marriages of non-Malays with Malays would result in a shift to being or entering the Malay world). There are therefore political, educational and socioeconomic motivations for language shift. In short, both internal and external factors within a speech community can cause language shift

Language attitude plays a vital role for the maintenance and shift of any language The attitude and use or non-use of a heritage language can be determined by many factors including if the community is a minority community living in a multilingual setting, if the community does not see any social capital in its heritage language, if the language policy in the country they are living in affects the medium of instruction in schools and universities and if all these and many other factors cause intra-generational or inter-generational language shift. The former is a shift within the same generation and the latter involves a shift between one generation and the other. When there is no intergenerational transmission of the ethnic or heritage language there will be language death. If parents do not use the ethnic language in the home domain with their children there will be language shift. If a language can be lost in some functions and some domains there is a possibility of salvaging it or reviving it. However, before rushing into activities to revitalise a language it is vital to determine reasons for the shift, extent of the shift and only then carefully think and activate appropriate strategies to revitalise the language.

In short, what is being recommended is a psycho-social dimension to the study of language shift and language revitalisation. Determine the reason and state of the shift. If the shift has already taken place in the first generation of migrants and if the second generation learn another language in school and hear yet another language in the home domain there has occurred not only intergenerational shift but intragenerational shift. The language activist must be aware of this situation then think of appropriate strategies to revitalise the language.

If the shift has started in the home domain activists must be able to change the negative attitude of the speech community to its own language. The focus could be on parents and parental agency. Parents can be encouraged to be language activists in the home domain and influence their children's language choices. Parents have a vital role in prestige planning on a minority language and can influence the language ideology within the family domain (see Nandi, 2018 who discusses how the linguistic practices of parents influence their children's language learning).

Let me provide specific examples. I am a Malaysian Sindhi of the second generation. My parents tended to speak to each other generally in English as my mother had attended an English medium school in Singapore and my father was an English proficient merchant having to deal with English customers in the then colonial Malaya. During my youth English was the medium of instruction in the schools I attended, as was the case with my Sindhi friends. My parents spoke Sindhi with their Sindhi peers so I did have a dormant knowledge of Sindhi. In many Sindhi homes the second-generation mothers having attended English medium schools in colonial Malaya tended to use English with their children. English then became the language of the home domain unless there were non-English speaking grandparents. Many grandparents tended to accommodate to their grandchildren by using a mixed code of the pidgin Malay and Sindhi. Today English has become the dominant language of my generation of fellow Sindhis in Kuala Lumpur. We understand it but do not use it with our peers. As is the case with many of our children. To revitalise the use of the Sindhi language my Sindhi friends and I must be motivated to do so.

There is no lack of books or dictionaries in the Sindhi language. There is no need to document the language. What needs to be done is to revitalise the language. But to do that we have to understand why the speech community has shifted from its ethnic language. They must be given solid and understandable reasons why they should use their language. Asha Chand is motivating young children by organising song, dance and poetry and story competitions and providing gift tokens. Using social media she is encouraging mothers to use the language in the home domain with their children. Telling people to move away from long used habits does not mean this will occur overnight. She is also encouraging principals in schools in certain parts of India to have Sindhi as a subject in the formative years of a child's education. However, if these minority language students hear Hindi and other regional languages both in the home and outside the home domains then the Sindhi language merely becomes a class learnt language.

Language activists are doing their best. But as a sociolinguist and having also taught social psychology what is being suggested is that the work of the activist must start with the community. The language activist/s must determine reasons for the shift and Involve the community in the revitalisation programme by providing solid reasons why the heritage language should be used. The speech community can be informed that they can remain bi or multilingual and in fact there are a number of cognitive advantages in being multilingual. Language activists must make connections between reasons for shift and provide viable suggestions and solutions to revitalise the language. In the process they must get many community members involved.

There may be a lowering of the nature of the revitalisation programme. Some members of the community who are trying to encourage members of the speech community to use the language have argued that perhaps using/speaking the language is more important than focusing on written literacy as the Sindhi script can be written in both Devanagari or the Persio-Arabic script. Consequently, community leaders are being realistic and dropping their expectations of a return to both spoken and written language. Some activists may be content with a receptive knowledge of the mother tongue. In short, language activists may have to lower their expectations of how much and what type of revitalisation of the mother tongue they want to focus on.

In conclusion, while language documentation of endangered languages focusses on collecting, recording, transcribing and archiving a language revitalisation of Linguistic communities can create new perspectives on documentation argue sociolinguists Farfán and Ranallo. They state "Instead of creating more museum pieces for the future ... it is necessary to revitalise or reactivate the **actual use** (my emphasis) of endangered Lang in the present time..." (2010)

Language revitalisation activists must try and involve many members of the speech community, perhaps even lowering expectations of the extent to which they want to revitalise the language. Spoken or written literacy? The activists must determine not only the reasons for the shift but also the extent of the shift. Then the language activist can use appropriate strategies to assist in a revitalisation programme. For instance, in a community which sees social capital in another language a more viable approach to revitalisation is to use persuasive discourse strategies to encourage and persuade specific members of the speech community to see value in using their language, but still maintaining their multilingual repertoire. Multilingualism does not automatically result in a complete shift away from the mother tongue. A classic example of what I deem a fairly successful revitalisation programme is one that is conducted by activists Z Torwali (2018) and his co-activists in the Swat Valley, Pakistan. The focus is on the young, the parents and the elderly to use their languages and story tellers go round telling fables and folklore in Torwali.

Members of a speech community have different reasons when and why they return to the use of their mother tongue, provided they have a dormant knowledge of the language. Language activists must also be aware of this. It is hoped that linguists will not only want to spend their years just documenting Languages and collecting data from members of a speech community but also to determine reasons and extent of a shift and work together with community members to entuse them In a number of ways to use their language.

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