

Language Attrition among the Mundas in the Sundarbans

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How to cite this article:

Sahoo, Anindita, Sethiya, Husendra and Sagar, Gunti Prem. 2024. 'Language Attrition among the Mundas in the Sundarbans'. *Sampratyaya*, 1(2):99-107. DOI: 10.21276/smprt.202412.12.a8

Abstract

This study examines the socioeconomic and cultural variables influencing the Sadri language attrition that affects the Munda population in the Sundarbans. Further, it evaluates how Sadri and Bengali, the languages spoken by the local Munda population, interact in the context of migration and cultural change in the villages of Annpur, Lahiripur, and Tipligheri. Sadri, as it is observed, is now only used sometimes in rituals and household contexts, and newer generations are losing their proficiency in it since Bengali is the dominant language in schools, offices, and economic pursuits, the attrition process is intricately linked to linguistic shift. The results show that the three villages' resistance to linguistic and cultural integration varies, with Tipligheri showing the highest degree of loyalty to traditional customs, which is correlated with higher Sadri retention. On the other hand, in Lahiripur and Annpur, there is a notable degree of language and cultural converge between indigenous Munda and traditional Bengali. By connecting language attrition to the breakdown of cultural identity and traditional knowledge systems, this study highlights the wider ramifications of the phenomenon. Through an analysis of linguistic changes within the Munda community, the research advances knowledge of the socio-linguistic dynamics of language loss and the need to protect endangered languages in multicultural and multilingual settings.

Keywords: Attrition, Sundarbans, Sadri, Munda, Bengali, Language Contact

1.0 Introduction

Recent developments in contact linguistics and sociolinguistics have added to our comprehension of the complex nature of language contact situations within multilingual and

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multicultural environments. Language creation (pidgin, creole), language maintenance (borrowing, code-mixing, and switching), and language shift (attrition and language loss) are quite common in contact situations. The focus of this paper is the language attrition in Sundarbans.

Attrition refers to the gradual decline of a language as it experiences a decrease in the number of speakers, usage in different contexts, and, eventually, its structural integrity. It involves the loss of linguistic materials that are not replenished with new materials (Thomason 2001). Based on the limited number of detailed case studies available, it appears that attrition is the most prevalent linguistic pathway to language death¹.

As we know, attrition results from contact-induced language change. Determining the precise reasons for this phenomenon can be challenging. Factors contributing to language attrition are also frequently observed in situations involving language maintenance and creation. The linguistic aspect of language attrition describes the loss of grammatical and structural features, particularly phonology, morphology, syntax, and discourse structure. Schmid (2011) argues that language attrition includes loss of features and changes in grammatical and other features due to the change of linguistic environment and language habits of the speakers.

As we observe in the literature, determining the precise reasons for attrition is difficult because there are factors which are also common in language contact situations. However, what is particularly distinctive about attrition is that when a language undergoes this phenomenon, it indicates that the language is advancing towards its eventual demise.

As a dominant language spreads across generations, it gradually replaces the community's native tongue, which leads to a language shift. This process diminishes the use and vitality of the native language of the group, altering the linguistic landscape and impacting cultural identity and social dynamics.

Before discussing language attrition in more detail, it is important to understand language shift and language death. Language shift scenarios involve a transition from one language to another, with the result being that the latter becomes the dominant language in the community (Hickey 2010). It is interesting that the languages involved in shift situations have an influence on each other's grammatical structure and usage. One such example is the shift of the speakers of Dominical creoles to English after 1763 when England annexed both Dominica and St. Vincent by the Treaty of Paris (Taylor 1960). But shift variety may also become established as a legitimate form of language in which speakers have shifted. One such instance, as observed by Mesthrie (1992), is the emergence of South African Indian English which could be the possible relation between Butler English and the jargonised inter-language of a small number of elderly, isolated South African Indian English speakers.

Even though the primary motivation for the language shift varies from case to case, we can find sufficient information to form generalisations. A case of Irish spoken in Ireland shifted to English due to famine, immigration, and societal pressure. Thus, the switch to

English necessitated the need to thrive in a society where English is becoming more prevalent and to get ready for potential emigration (Hickey 2010).

Language death is caused by a language shift. Interestingly, the reasons for language death and language shift are not inherently linguistic phenomena. They are reactions to diverse types of pressures (military, economic, social, and cultural) on a community. The shift from Irish to English is one such example where the social position of Irish is precarious and the pressure of English on this language is considerable (Hickey 2010). Further Romaine (2010) also writes that language shift results in a decrease in the number of speakers and the domains where the language is used, both of which are crucial for the language's survival.

In Ireland, the decrease in the use of the Irish language is attributed to various historical and political factors, for example they lost their political autonomy, population decline, and physical-cultural displacement. Prior to the 17th-century, Irish was spoken by the majority of the population, while English was prevalent in a small eastern part near Dublin. The Irish language had nearly disappeared from the eastern part of the country by 1851 and was declining in popularity among youngsters except in the far western areas. Before the severe famine from 1845 to 1849, the Irish language was one of the top 100 languages in the world in terms of the number of speakers, out of approximately 7,000 languages (Romaine 2008). The famine resulted in the deaths of approximately one million people and caused another 1.5 million to emigrate. By 1900, these losses had decreased the population by more than 50% (Romaine 2010).

Another instance of language loss that closely resembles language attrition is the case of Sindhi, which is spoken in India. Sindhi is an Indo-Aryan language which is spoken in South Asia. Based on 1991 estimates, around eighteen million individuals in the Indian subcontinent speak Sindhi. India has nearly three million Sindhi speakers, with approximately one-third of them originating from the Rajasthan's Jaisalmer district and the Kutch-Saurashtra region in Gujarat. After partition, the remaining individuals migrated from Sindh. They are currently dispersed across urban and semi urban areas in the country, with notable populations in Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, and the Delhi-NCR (Khubchandani 2003).

The partition of India into two independent nations, India and Pakistan, in 1947 significantly impacted the Sindhis. After the partition, we observe a significant mass migration of the Sindhi Hindu population which moved to India and settled in various locations across the country. This large-scale migration has caused the dispersal and regrouping of speakers of various dialects across various parts of the region. These disruptions have significantly altered communication patterns in the region. For example, Bengali speakers in Chhattisgarh's Bastar region have settled in one place though they speak different varieties of Bangla. This settlement is now called Pakhanjur (town) and because of the migration of people who speak different dialects of this language, this town witnesses dialect levelling.

In this case, Sindhi (Hindu) speakers migrated to India, and due to the new linguistic situation, they switched to the local languages for socio-economic reasons. Daswani (1985) in his paper has showed the trend of how the domains of the Sindhi language progressively narrowed. The data he provided is from the sociolinguistic survey conducted on different Sindhi major settlements all over India during 1975-76.

In this survey, Daswani (1985) divided the Sindhi population who migrated to India into three age groups. The first group was of the adults in 1947, while the second was individuals under 15. In 1947, the third group included individuals born in or after 1947. The survey questions focused on linguistic and socio-linguistic aspects of language use, perception, maintenance, and identity.

Daswani (ibid.) showed that over a 30-year period, the Sindhi speakers and Sindhi culture in India has significantly declined as younger Indian Sindhis are rejecting them. In the process, their language skills have significantly deteriorated and undergone attrition.

Any factor that results in decreased use of a language by its speakers can lead to attrition in the linguistic skills of the speakers. If not addressed, attrition would lead to complete deterioration and demise. Typically, there is a considerable time interval between the initial constricting contact and the eventual loss. A language can persist in marginal use for centuries before it becomes extinct. Numerous factors, including the age of participants, diminished social roles associated with a language can influence the attrition rate.

Daswani (ibid.) mentioned that language attrition of a distinct nature can happen when a non-native language, learned after the first language, deteriorates due to lack of use. This can occur when an individual acquires a second language for practical purposes and uses it within specific contexts. However, if the communicative environment changes and there is no longer a need to use the second language, over time, the learner's proficiency in that may significantly diminish.

Various factors, such as social, political, and economic influences, or a combination of these, lead to notable changes in the skills of individuals who speak languages that are declining. The changes can be observed across various levels of linguistic structure, including phonological, syntactic, and semantic. Language use in various situations can be demonstrated through classical contact strategies like code-switching, pidginization, and others. The changes within the limited language are fascinating when viewed from the perspective of attrition (Daswani ibid.).

Attrition can occur both in situ and in immigration contexts, in which the language in question is still spoken in other regions. Changes in both types of settings originate from the transmission process (Hickey 2010). Migration played a significant role in contributing to attrition in both cases. A comparable situation occurred with the Sadri speakers in Sundarbans. The Munda tribes relocated from Jharkhand, where the Sadri language served as the common language. Upon settling in the Sundarbans, the language was commonly spoken. Over time, the usage domains decreased due to factors like stigma, the language of instruction in schools, economic factors, and state language policy, which contributed to the

decline in the popularity of this language among the younger generation. If we compare the Sindhi and Sadri cases, the languages are still in use in their original place. However, the migrated population is facing attrition due to various socio-economic factors.

2.0 Brief Profile of the Study Area

The Sundarbans mangrove forest is situated on the southern coast of Bangladesh and India. Bangladesh encompasses approximately 6000 square km of the Sundarbans, while the remaining 4000 square km is in India (Uddin et al. 2013). This entire area has been designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site and is the largest known stretch of mangrove forest globally (Sarkar 2022). This study was conducted in the Indian section of the Sundarbans, specifically in three purposely selected villages: Annpur, Lahiripur, and Tipligheri. The population of the study area primarily belongs to Bengali and Munda communities, who are considered migrants. The Munda community migrated from undivided Bihar to this region for jungle clearing by Britishers for agricultural purposes. The tribals were the first choice for migrant workers for Britishers because they were more loyal, productive, hardworking, and sincere. In addition, their wages were considered cheaper than other local labour populations in the state. The migration of these people increased over time, leading to the establishment of Satellite Villages by the migrated tribals in various locations, which became permanent settlements (Bhowmick 1985). The primary means of living in Sundarbans include farming, forestry, fishing, crab hunting, and honey collection. Many families prefer migrating to different states of India in search of better opportunities. The Bengalis mostly migrated from present-day Bangladesh, belong to the *Pundro* caste. They are agriculturists in profession and belong to the one of scheduled castes in India.

3.0 Discussion on the language contact situation

Among many contact situations, those that involve language shift (attrition) usually have one language that ceases to be spoken due to gradual attrition. In such instances, there are two languages: one is the majority language, and the other is the language that is experiencing a shift (Hickey 2010).

The dominant language here in these three villages is Bengali, and the language that is experiencing the shift is Sadri. Bangla is an Indo-Aryan language, and over 210 million people speak Bengali as either their L1 or L2 language. There are approximately 100 million Bengali speakers in Bangladesh, around 85 million in India (Assam, West Bengal, and Tripura), and significant Bengali-speaking immigrants in the United Kingdom, the United States, and the Middle East. Bengali is the official language of Bangladesh and is a constitutionally recognised language in India. Bengali is a member of the Maghadhan language group, specifically the eastern Maghadhan group (Masica 1991).

Sadri is an Indo-Aryan language, also known as Sadani, which is natively spoken by the Sadan people (Nawrang 1956). The non-tribal Indo-Aryan language speaking ethnic group of Jharkhand is believed to have introduced Indo-Aryan languages to this area initially (Paudyal and Peterson 2020). Sadani comprises of four closely related Indo-Aryan

languages. They are Kurmali, Panchparganiya, Khortha, and Sadri/Nagpuri. These languages are spoken in Jharkhand and nearby states. Sadri is also part of the Maghadhan group (Masica 1991), which belongs to the eastern outer sub-group of Indo-Aryan language. Linguists have varying opinions on the classification of Sadani languages within the Indo-Aryan group. Sadani and Nagpuri are two distinct registers of this language. Sadri typically denotes the spoken and non-literary form of the language, mainly used by tribals in rural areas, whereas Nagpuri signifies the refined, literary language commonly employed by Hindus and urban dwellers (Paudyal and Peterson 2020). According to the census of India 2011, 4345677 people speak the Sadri/Sadani language in India.

Sadri-Nagpuri is the lingua-franca among various tribes, including both Dravidian and Munda, in western and central Jharkhand. These ethnic groups consist of speakers of various languages such as Bhumij, Kharia (South Munda), Mundari, Asur, Turi, Birhor, Koduku, Bijori (North Munda), Korwa, Gondi (Central Dravidian), and Kurukh (North Dravidian). Many individuals from these groups adopted Sadri as their primary language by abandoning their native languages (Peterson and Baraik 2022). Munda immigrants introduced the Sadri language to this region when they arrived to clear the jungle for the British from present-day Jharkhand. They were brought as indentured labourers to reclaim the forest as an economical service (Jalais 2010; Sen 2017).

3.1 The Munda population in the Sundarbans and their language(s)

It is interesting to note that the Munda population in the three villages speak Bangla and Sadri with no trace of any Munda language. However, they associate themselves with the Munda identity. Sadri is spoken in these communities, mainly among the elderly people in the domestic domain and often in Bangla while interacting with the younger ones. Outside the home, they speak Bangla and intimacy with any stranger in their community results in a conversation in Sadri. It is noted that the Munda languages are not spoken by anyone though the Munda practices are firmly retained in their social, cultural, and religious rituals. Further, we observe that the local languages, i.e. Sadri and Bengali manifest the influences of Munda languages in the grammatical patterns². The linguistic survey in the three villages, Annpur, Satjelia, and Tipligheri exhibits a clear pattern of retention of indigenous Munda structural features and strong adherence to indigenous socio-cultural practices.

Amongst the three villages, Annpur, Lahiripur, and Tipligheri, Annpur seems to be most influenced by Bengali culture. Although it is observed that socio-cultural practices are retained across the Munda communities of the three villages, the villagers of Annpur observe the rituals with a strange mix of Bengali traditions. For some families of Annpur, religious practices like Karam Puja, the practice of sacrificing birds like hens and ducks³ on pujas (rituals), etc., does not exist. It is also seen that the families of Annpur are the most educated, with graduates and postgraduates working in Kolkata as school teachers and professors. Their livelihood is not dependent on traditional modes of livelihood like fishing, honey collection, etc. Only a very few families are dependent on farming and fishing.

However, Tipligheri, which is only 10 kilometers away from Annpur, seems to be most resilient to such changes. The intense contact with the Bengali community seems to

have left minimal impact on the indigenous Munda culture and tradition. The people of Tipligheri are observed to adhere to their indigenous cultural practices with the least interference of Bengali tradition, exhibiting a correlation between language change and retention of socio-cultural practices. The more adherence to such practices leads to significant retention of indigenous grammatical patterns in the language of the native speakers of this village. This could be linked to the educational status of the locals of this village. Since Tipligheri population is the least educated they have very little exposure to other outward experiences that would potentially influence their indigenous linguistic and cultural practices.

4.0 Conclusion

In many contact situations, government-supported languages are replacing minority languages. Bengali is the official language of West Bengal, while Sadri is primarily used in domestic settings. Due to socio-economic factors such as better education, employment opportunities, and globalization effects, the younger generation is transitioning to Bengali. Munda communities are embracing Bengali culture because their language is falling out of use. Since the language of instruction is Bengali, Sadri's usage domains are limited, leading to the attrition of the language.

As the dominant language extends across multiple generations, passing from younger to older generations, the first language of the community gradually diminishes in importance, eventually resulting in a language shift. This phenomenon occurs when speakers of a language increasingly adopt the dominant language for communication, leading to a decline in the use and vitality of their native tongue. Over time, this shift can significantly alter the linguistic landscape of a community or region, impacting cultural identity and social dynamics. In the rural enclave of Annpur village, a linguistic shift is observed across generations. The younger cohort, predominantly represented by school-aged individuals, exhibits proficiency solely in the Bengali language. Contrastingly, the parental generation, encompassing middle-aged adults, maintains bilingual capabilities and is proficient in Bengali and Sadri. Notably, the elder segment, comprising grandparents, demonstrates a greater fluency in Sadri than their offspring, reflecting a decreasing generational continuum in language competency.

These linguistic dynamic highlights a noteworthy trend in all the Munda community's villages towards language specialization, which is illustrated by the increasing prevalence of Bengali among the younger population. Meanwhile, the older generations retain multilingual abilities, with a pronounced aptitude for Sadri observed particularly among the grandparents. Such differential linguistic proficiencies among generational cohort hint at evolving sociolinguistic patterns within the community, potentially influenced by factors such as education, societal norms, and intergenerational communication practices. This can draw a parallel between the attrition of Irish and Munda as well as between Sindhi and Sadri. Much like Irish in English dominated areas, Munda community in the Sunderbans has lost its indigenous linguistic practices. Another parallel between Sindhi and Sadri can also be established since both the languages are facing rapid attrition due to the shift of the linguistic practices of the younger generation speakers.

In addition to its cultural significance, language plays a pivotal role in communal rituals and festivities, as evidenced by practices in all the Munda community's villages in Sundarbans, where the Sadri language is utilized during morning pujas and festivals for prayers and chants. This underscores the enduring connection between language and cultural heritage. However, amidst the linguistic landscape, a concerning trend emerges: the proliferation of the dominant language poses a threat to minority or indigenous languages. As the dominant language gains prominence and spreads across various spheres of daily life, the native tongue faces an increased risk of endangerment and eventual extinction.

Notes

1. The precise term, the loss of a language that is not due to brain injury or a pathological condition like aphasia or dementia in a healthy individual is known as language attrition. This term permits a more gradual and flexible understanding of the process of forgetting, which can be compared to the dichotomous concept of language loss (Schmid 2011).
2. Munda languages do not exhibit any distinction between the mid- and the non-honorific forms in second person pronominal. A similar pattern is observed in the varieties of Bangla spoken in the districts of Birbhum, Purulia, and Bankura (the districts of West Bengal which are in close contact with Munda languages spoken in the adjacent areas) as well as Sadri spoken in the Sunderbans.
3. Bird sacrifice in religious rituals is found in many other tribal communities. For example, the community of Kokborok speakers (a Tibeto-Burman language) in Tripura, one of the Northeastern states of India observes such rituals while worshipping the Lord.

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