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Representations of the Self and the Others in a Multilingual City: Hindi Speakers in Kolkata

Aditi Ghosh

Department of Linguistics Calcutta University, India

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Aditi Ghosh[a]

[a]*Department of Linguistics Calcutta University, India*

Abstract

This study examines the attitudes and representations of a select group of Hindi mother tongue speakers residing in Kolkata. Hindi is one of the two official languages of India and Hindi mother tongue speakers are the numerically dominant language community in India, as per census. Further, due to historical, political and socio-cultural reasons, enormous importance is attached to the language, to the extent that there is a wide spread misrepresentation of the language as the national language of India.

In this way, speakers of Hindi by no means form a minority in Indian contexts. However, as India is an extremely multilingual and diverse country, in many areas of the country other language speakers outnumber Hindi speakers, and in different states other languages have prestige, greater functional value and locally official status as well. Kolkata is one of such places, as the capital of West Bengal, a state where Bengali is the official language, and where Bengali is the most widely spoken mother tongue. Hindi mother tongue speakers, therefore, are not the dominant majority here, however, their language still carries the symbolic load of a representative language of India. In this context, this study examines the opinions and attitudes of a section of long term residents of Kolkata whose mother tongue is Hindi.

The data used in this paper is derived from a large scale survey conducted in Kolkata which included 153 Hindi speakers. The objective of the study is to elicit, through a structured interview, their attitudes towards their own language and community, and towards the other languages and communities in Kolkata, and to examine how they represent and construct the various communities in their responses. The study adopts qualitative methods of analysis. The analysis shows that though there is largely an overt representation of harmony, there are indications of how the socio-cultural symbolic values attached to different languages are also extended to its speakers creating subtle social distances among language communities.

Keywords: Kolkata, Hindi, West Bengal, Language Communities, Bengali

Introduction

This study examines the attitudes and representations by a select group of Hindi mother tongue speakers residing in Kolkata. Hindi is one of the two official languages of India – a country where according to a census 122 languages are spoken. Hindi mother tongue speakers are the most numerically dominant language community in India, as per an Indian census.

Due to historical, political and socio-cultural reasons, enormous importance is attached to the language, to the extent that there is a wide spread misrepresentation of the language as the national language of India.

Therefore, speakers of Hindi are by no means a minority in Indian contexts. However, as India is an extremely multilingual and diverse country, in many areas of the country other language speakers outnumber Hindi speakers, and in different states of India other languages have prestige, greater functional value as well as official status. The city of Kolkata (erstwhile Calcutta), is one such place, where Bengali is the most widely spoken mother tongue. It is also the capital of West Bengal – a state where Bengali is the official language. Hindi mother tongue speakers, therefore, are not the dominant majority here. However, their language still carries the symbolic load of a representative language of India. In this context, this study examines the opinions and attitudes of a section of long-term residents of Kolkata whose mother tongue is Hindi.

Aims and objectives

The data used in this paper is derived from a large-scale survey conducted in Kolkata which included 153 Hindi speakers and a total of 495 speakers of different linguistic backgrounds. The objective of the study is to elicit their attitudes towards their own language and community, towards the other languages and communities in Kolkata, and to examine how they represent and construct the various linguistic communities including their own in their responses.

Methodology

The responses analysed in this paper were collected from interviews taken during a larger project which interviewed non-Bengali Kolkata residents between 2009 to 2013. The total number of Hindi speakers in the survey were 153 with age ranging from 16 to 80 years old with a mean of 28.37 and a standard deviation of 14.280. The total sample consisted of 30 (19.6%) male and 123 female (80.4%) respondents. Their average length of stay in Kolkata is 26.20 (mean) and 139 of the respondents (90.8%) were born in Kolkata.

By and large, the respondents displayed an overwhelming amount of attachment to the city. 62.7% and 74.8% stated that they would prefer Kolkata as their workplace and place of future settlement respectively. It was also found that Hindi speakers in this sample prefer a monolingual India in larger number than overall average (Ghosh 2018).

The aim of the paper is to see how the different linguistic communities are represented in the interviews. Therefore, instead of providing a general trend of language attitude as found in the community I would concentrate on responses of a few selected respondents, and analyse their responses regarding different language and linguistic communities, so as to determine –
- what are the common stereotypical representations of these languages and communities?
- how such representations are constructed in the responses and
- what are the unique individual responses for each respondent regarding those questions and their representations?

The respondents selected for this paper are
- a 56-year-old male office goer (Respondent no. 127)

- a 35-year-old housewife (Respondent no. 59)
- a 23-year-old male student (Respondent no. 143) and
- a 41-year-old lady professor (Respondent no. 105)

It may be relevant here to mention that the formation of a Hindi speaking community is not beyond controversy (for a detailed discussion on the topic see Ghosh 2012). Various "mother tongue" speakers from diverse language families have been grouped under Hindi in the Indian census. Three of the respondents selected for this study are Marwaris, a linguistic-ethnic group that originates from western part of India, mainly the state of Rajasthan, and traditionally the speakers of the Marwari language, which belongs to the Western Branch or Rajasthani group and which is grouped under Hindi in an Indian census. Marwaris are also one of the most prominent communities who settle outside their place of origin, all over India, and especially in Kolkata.

Literature survey

Tendencies of categorisation and generalised representation of such categories based on various social cues as a common human tendency have been studied by scholars throughout the ages (Allport 1979; Hall 1997; Bhaba 1994). Though in some cases, there may be a scientific or logical basis behind such categorisation, the tendency of stereotyping goes far beyond that. Small cues are sometimes marked and enhanced to apply to the entire community and large trends are ignored (Fishman 1956). Among the social cues that are most prevalent in a multilingual country like India, the races are named after languages and states and are primarily organised based on language.

Results

Almost all the respondents readily constructed stereotypical social identities of themselves and others in terms of their linguistic identity. There were no hesitations or attempts of being cautious or being vague especially in assigning languages with attributes. Some of the themes' stereotypical categorisation emerging from the conversations from the selected interviews are given below.

Bengali is a sweet language; Bengalis are erudite, lazy and conceited

The most recurrent positive representation for the Bengali language is that it is "sweet" – a very common rubric in India. Along with that another very common association about the language is its literary heritage, often associated with a mention of Nobel laureate poet Rabindranath Tagore. The most common positive representation for the community is that it is an "educated community".

The following excerpts show how the respondents are conforming to the established stereotypes.

1. It's very easy. It's very sweet. Very easy, very sweet and I admire this language. (R59, F,35)

2. … It is a very sweet language, to speak and to listen ... I like it since my subject is

literature … I think in Bengali literature there is a lot of influence of kaviguru1Tagore, it can be called international literature, special literature….2 (R105, F, 41)

3. Bengalis are very nice, very cultured, of helping nature, educated, most importantly they respect the elders … there is a lot of respect in their language as well ... they talk respectfully and of helping nature, very good. (R 59, F, 35)

In excerpt 4, Respondent no 127 also tried to establish that he has some proficiency in reading the Bengali script and interest in reading the literature

4. Listen to their poems ... read the stories … like those ... sometimes I think I should write it down, only today I saw something by Rabindranath Tagore on the Metro (rail) … I can read it slowly … I can understand it as well … I don't have anything against any language (R127, M,56)

As mentioned earlier, since the interviewers in all these interviews were Bengali, it is expected this may cause the respondents to hold back negative generalisations. As expected, the respondents overwhelmingly represented the Bengali community in positive light as educated, professionally qualified and respectful.

However, there were also a consistent categorisation of the Bengali community as lazy, conceited, projecting a sense of superiority and being self-absorbed.

5. Sometimes they are so ROUGH that even within themselves they talk in such a way … you can talk anyway you want with people of your own status, but should one do so with people of lower status? (R 127, M, 56)

6. Among the Bengali community there is one thing that flows like a current that they think they are always superior … they need to introspect … the bangaliwana need to change a little …. They may not be self-centred, but they are centred. They do not care who stays next to them, they do not think they just carry on by themselves, with their books etc, they want to listen to the world news but they prefer not to open the windows to see who is there …(R105 , F, 41)

7. About Bengali people my biggest opinion is that they want to become everyone's head (wants to rule people)- first thing. And secondly, the Bengalis are full of intelligence, they have so much talent, there is no one in the world that has that much, according to me. But they are VERY lazy (R143, M 23)

Hindi is the language for India, because India is poor

It is often seen that though India does not have a national language, Hindi is often mistakenly understood or misrepresented as the national language (Ghosh 2018; Chand 2011). During these interviews, Hindi was often represented as the emblem for India. The most common among arguments in support of this statement are based on national ideology. The second most common argument is that it is a link language for multilingual India, especially for the poorer uneducated mass of Indians, who cannot access formal training to learn English.

8. Whether it is Delhi or Bombay, even if I cannot speak in English to them, I can express my thoughts … in this India, if I go outside Kolkata, I will need Hindi language. If I go to another country, be it America, be it London, then Australia, I could use English, but if I want to travel in India if I know English, it is a different thing but Hindi is a necessity. (R143, M, 23)

9. Because in the entire country … all people cannot be educated … if today some people are not qualified, not educated, they will prioritise Hindi, okay? ... if you check the rate of educated people in India, it is quite backward, okay?.... (R143, M, 23)

10. …. since in India, I think, I mean (even) non-Hindi speaking leader, most of them for quite some time keep saying that Hindi is one language that can tie up all the people of India. (R105, F, 41)

English is necessary, but it is the necessary evil

There was almost a unanimous representation of dislike for English language in the interviews. Though almost everyone accepted its functional relevance, they disapprove the language on the grounds that it is non-Indian, and gets more importance than it should in an independent country.

11. Look I feel for Bengali, I also feel for Hindi, but for English I don't feel anything (R127, M, 56)

12. It is, it is just [a] necessary into today's world … and it is just a (necessity), but it is not our life. + There is a difference between necessity and like we have to live, we have to eat, but food is ok (we) require (it) for the life, but for the life food is only not required. Eating is not the only requirement for living, food, it's just a part … same thing, English is just a part of a language which is spoken only as a necessity. That it is required for the children … Hindi or Bengali these are the languages which automatically come … from the heart … (R 59, F,35)

13. It is very important to learn and to read English. And I mean … in Indian society the way by knowing the language English you can become a member of the elite class, that cannot happen if you do not know English … if somebody speaks only their mother tongue, Bengali or English, if they do not have English in their style ... they are looked upon as illiterates. I do not like this at all (R105, F 41)

Discussion

In the excerpts above the following trends are visible

• Firstly, generalisations based on language background comes easily for the respondents.
• Secondly, there are overt displays of harmony in the opinion about different language communities.

- Thirdly, though there is a tendency to conform to the positive stereotypes, the respondents also talked candidly of negative generalisation for linguistic groups.
- The readiness of the respondents in constructing as well as conforming to existing stereotypes show a deep-rooted tendency in society in treating linguistic communities as social categories. These are indications of how, in a multilingual society, language becomes an important marker in attaching different socio-cultural values to its speakers and constructs social distances among language communities.

Acknowledgements:

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