

Ratiocinate the Sociocultural Habits of Bengali Diaspora Residing in Kerala: A Linguistic Anthropology Study

Paromita Nandya
University of Kerala, India

Asian Linguistic Anthropology
2020, Vol. 2(1): 32-39
(c) JALA 2020
Article reuse guidelines
Jala.pub/permissions
DOI: 10.47298/jala.v2-i1-a4
Jala.pub



Abstract

The paper alludes to the study of how humans relocate themselves with cultural practice and its particular axiom, which embrace the meaning and value of how material and intellectual resource are embedded in culture. The study stimulates the cultural anthropology of the Bengali (Indo-Aryan, Eastern India) diaspora in Kerala (South India) that is dynamic and which keeps changing with the environment, keeping in mind a constant examination of group rituals, traditions, eating habits and communication. Languages are always in a state of flux, as are societies, and society contains customs and practices, beliefs, attitudes, way of life and the way people organize themselves as a group.

The study scrutinizes the relationship between language and culture of Bengali people while fraternizing with Malayalee which encapsulates cultural knowledge and locates this in the interactions among members of varied cultural groups across time and space. This is influenced by that Bengali diasporic people change across generations owing to cultural gaps and remodeling of language and culture. The study investigates how a social group, having different cultural habits, manages time and space of a new and diverse sociopolitical situation. Moreover, it also investigates the language behaviour of the Bengali diaspora in Kerala by analyzing the linguistic features of Malayalam (Dravidian) spoken, such as how they express their cultural codes in different spatiotemporal conditions and their lexical choice in those situations.

Keywords: Culture, Bengali, Diaspora, Kerala, Malayalam

Introduction

Any living language or culture changes with time, as language constitutes culture and through it, we can express beliefs and values. Language and culture are closely related to each other as language can be viewed as a verbal expression of culture. Culture is considered a central concept in anthropology, encompassing a range of phenomena that are transmitted through social learning in human societies. There are some cultural universals in every human society such as cooking, shelter, and clothing which are described as human behaviour and social practices.

In this paper, I determine ways in which the different magnitudes of culture are maintained in respective geographical regions. Society, culture and language all flourish in certain defined contexts. Mass departure or migration is common, and the spreading of cultural practice and language behavior is the result of all these phenomenon, as it is a universal element of language.

It is normal behaviour for humans to preserve their language and culture in new socio-cultural environments. I thus aim to evaluate the measures taken by Bengali communities in Kerala to maintain their language and culture.

Methodology

This paper investigates the culture and language maintained by Bengali speakers residing in Kerala. The number of informants in the study was ninety-two. Each of these informants have resided in Kerala for over four years. This study comprises two parts: First, it enquires as to the cultural maintenance by the Bengali people residing in Kerala, and secondly, it observes language change. The study is mainly based on primary data obtained through casual talk style, interview style with a structured questionnaire and observations. The audio data is recorded with a 44000 Hz sample frequency at a 16 bit rate for the acoustic analysis of speech samples collected, so as to find the difference in pronunciation by Bengali individuals speaking Malayalam.

Brief Description of Bengali and Malayalam Language

The Bengali language or Bangla is an Indo-Aryan family spoken mostly in the East Indian subcontinent. It has evolved from the Magadhi Prakrit and Sanskrit language and is the second most spoken language in India. The Malayalam language is a Dravidian family spoken mostly in the south Indian subcontinent and has its roots in the 10th century. Considered as an offshoot of old Tamil, it is believed that after the 9th century, the common stock of Tamil and Malayalam diverged, which resulted in the emergence of Malayalam, as a language distinct from Proto-Tamil.

Maintenance of Bengali Cultural Habits in Kerala

Factors influencing the diaspora of Bengali folk in Kerala are many. Mostly, diaspora was influenced through the boom in technology in the state, thus attracting youngsters across India to join the IT field in Kerala. Some others joined government offices such as VSSC and the Geoscience institute. Some considered Kerala as their second motherland, as they resided in Kerala for more than ten years.

The spatial and cultural differences of Bengal and Kerala are significant. These divergences are evident in almost all cultural practices, including in language behavior. However, similarities also exist. Through these divergences and similarities, the Bengali folk in Kerala maintain their culture and language. For example, a ritual known as *annaprasan* is conducted for babies at the age of five or seven-year months old. This welcomes the baby into eating normal home-made food, a ritual practiced by both Bengali and Malayali people. Eventually, Bengalis living in Kerala also began to practice the traditional custom by feeding rice pudding (*kheer* or *pay cash*), but not with traditional rice (*Gobindobhog*), as this is not available in Kerala.

Bengalis living in Kerala perform marriage ceremonies but without traditional ceremonial elements such as the Turmeric ceremony (*gaye holud*), the wedding ceremony (*bibaho/bie*), *Bou Bhaat*, *Phul Shojja* (flower bed), *Oshto Mongola*, and *Shubhochuni Satyanarayana Puja*, as all the essential elements are not available for Bengalis in Kerala. Here, Bengalis are bound to follow certain Malayali customs for these ceremonies.

In this study, cultural and geographical differences and their varying magnitudes are considered as the plot for identifying cultural maintenance. Both states are situated in a different areas. Kerala is an extreme south part of India, allowing for the easy identification of differences in cultural practices such as in food, marriage, and in worship. Due to these divergences, Bengalis are tasked with maintaining their culture in Kerala without considering the cultural norms of the land. In such a cultural context, the culture and language of Kerala is influenced in many ways in Bengali communities. Social environments, nature of work, and cultural spaces all thus influence change.

Use of Language as a Cultural Product

Social media, television, and the Internet all play a major role in preserving culture and other social practices, including language behaviour. These reduce differences and provide virtual socio-cultural spaces. These communities maintain constant contact with political and social situations of their homeland by reading Bengali newspaper such as *Anandabazar Patrika*, *Bartaman Patrika*, not available in Kerala. Viewing Bengali TV programmes and Bengali movies also constitutes cultural practice for building heritage/homeland socio-cultural context within different geographical areas.

Spreading art and musical forms become another way of maintaining cultural behaviour, as the rich tradition of their community is signified through these art forms. *Boul* music and the *Rabindra sangeet*

of Bengal are widely acknowledged art forms, yet have no base in the cultural context of Kerala. Musicians relating with these forms in the Bengali diaspora attempt to establish these musical forms in Kerala. Many Bengalis, including children, practice these musical forms in Kerala. In the case of language maintenance, Bengali diasporic people living more than ten years in Kerala now lay claim to the region as their own land. These factors contribute towards their attitude to the languages.

From the study, it is observed that informants use Bengali along with Malayalam in certain cultural contexts, by using the codes of the Malayalam language. In home domains, they use only Bengali. In telling jokes within the same community, they code mix between Bengali and English; in mingling with other community, they use only one language at one time. In making declarations of love, or in praying to a deity, they use Bengali only. However, children mix languages (English, Hindi, Bengali and Malayalam) intrasententially, evidencing the multilingual characteristics of Bengali diaspora. It is observed that informants use Bengali language only at home by code mixing with English. The other languages used at home vary between various classes or categories. The second generation of Bengalis use the English language in their home domain, whereas older generations use only the Bengali language. The languages such as English, Malayalam and Hindi are taught in the schools of Kerala. As there is no Bengali language in the school, learning of the Bengali language in Kerala cannot be possible.

An overview of the result regarding language use indicates that next to the Bengali language, English is the dominant language, followed by Hindi and then Malayalam. If generation is taken as one of the variables, it is seen that the second generation will have most likely shift to English and Hindi for writing and somehow Malayalam for reading and speaking. The first generation- Bengali can read, write and speak Bangla. Whereas, the second generation can only speak the mother tongue; generally, neither can read nor can write properly. However, the older generation generally uses Bengali at home and in social meetings, only Bangla is used. Bengali children speak Malayalam and English with friends, yet uses English most often in domestic contexts. It is also observed that older people show a keen interest in Malayalam literature which makes them desire to learn the Malayalam language. One old age informant informed that she somehow manages to read "Balarama." Again, it is also observed that maintenance of native language and local culture by the migrant Bengalis in Kerala, has occurred the Trivandrum Bengali Association (TBA), Trivandrum, for last forty-six years. In Kerala, there are many Bengali associations. By means of regular meetings, cultural programmes', and social and economic endeavours, these social organizations attempt to bring together all their members under their community customs and to integrate into its mainstream. All festivals of Bengali in West Bengal, such as Durga puja, Kali puja, and Lakshmi puja, and art forms such as Dhunochi nach, Gita paat etc., are celebrated by the Bengali Diaspora in Kerala. The majority of Bengalis living in Kerala feel that their children should be proficient in Hindi and English. The negative attitude toward one's mother tongue and a high positive attitude towards English, Malayalam and Hindi, suggests that migrants visualize the practical utility of the language studied and the opportunities available for employment.

Some informants believe that they have no use of learning Bengali because they can communicate in Malayalam with Malayalis and English or Hindi with other people. Central Government employees use Hindi in almost all contexts, even though their mother tongue is Bengali. So they are not bothered about their mother tongue and their children are learning Hindi or foreign languages. IT sector people use only Hindi or English. The following are sentences uttered by Bengalis. The influence of Malayalam is evident.

ami cor k^hai

I rice eat.1sg.PRS “I eat rice”.

thik ace feri feri

correct present correct correct “It’s ok”.

ambalam-e jabo

temple-LOC. go. 1sg.FUT “I will go to the temple”.

kōfi kaico

coffee drink.PST.

“Did you have coffee?”.

ma amake ekṭu cuḍ vellam debe?

mother me.DAT. little hot water give.2H “Mother, will you give me some hot water?”.

bijon ma:ṭa: hoece heavy rain happen.PST “It rained heavily”.

5. tumi nona: bolo-na

you.2H lie tell.2H.FUT.-NEG. “Do not tell a lie”.

Aj jolikor afeni

today servant come.PST.NEG. “Today servant didn’t come”.

dj: edik-e aje.

you.FEM. this side-LOC. Come.1sg.FUT. “You(f) come here”.

ami aj vaikitṭe big bazar jabo.

I today evening big bazaar go.1sg.FUT. “Today evening I will go to Big Bazaar”.

amra notun vanḍi kineci. we new car buy.1sg.PST “we purchased a new car”.

ami judu mati: k^haj.

I only mati: eat.1sg.PRS.

“I eat only matti(fish name)”.

ami pa:l hōrliks dije k^hai

I milk Horlicks with eat.1sg.PRS “I drink milk along with Horlicks”.

ami vendā:kija: dije dupur-e b^hat k^hej ci.

I okra with the afternoon.LOC. rice eat.1sg.PRS.PRF. “I have eaten rice with okra (a kind of vegetable)”.

ami sku:l theke eḥe veḥakku:nnu hoec^hilam

I school from come.PST. hungry become.1sg.PST. “I was hungry after coming from school”.

mo:l-e taratari aje

child(fem) -VOC. fast come.1S “kid come fast”.

amar ækdin meṭro-te k^hub peri hoec^hilo

GEN. one day metro-LOC. Very fear happen.PST. “One day I became afraid in metro”.

amra durga pujoe nalla enjoy koreci
 we durga puja. LOC. good enjoy do.1P.PERF “We have enjoyed the Durga Puja nicely”.
 amar ækdin meṭro-te k^hub peri hoec^hilo I.GEN. one day metro-LOC. Very fear happen. PST. “One day I became afraid in metro”.

Attitudes Towards Language

Certain class differences are prominent in the Bengali diaspora in Kerala. The people mentioned above belong to the educated class. The other group of Bengali folks are those who migrated from Bengal to Kerala as labours. This is owing to the static nature of the gulf economy that functions as the backbone of the state’s per capita income. As the class difference is high in all respects, it is a high task to consider both classes within a common platform for analysing cultural habits and language behaviour. But the common feature is that the labour class acquires language quickly and many factors of communication like code-mixing and code-switching function more efficiently, in bilingual or multilingual environments, due to interaction with the common Malayali folk. An example is the geminated /t/ [t̪t̪], the geminated /ŋ/ [ŋ̪ŋ̪] and the cluster [ŋ̪t̪]. All these consonants possess common phonological characteristics in Malayalam. Moreover, these consonant combinations are not present in Bengali phonology. It is thus very difficult to a Bengali speaker to pronounce Malayalam words having these sounds combinations. They exhibit the tendency to substitute corresponding single retroflex consonants in these contexts. Mother tongue influences are more prominent in all these contexts. Since all these consonants are absent in Bengali phonology, variations at the suprasegmental level are very evident. The Bengali speaker applies more energy while pronouncing these consonants. So the intensity, pitch and duration of these sound combinations vary accordingly.

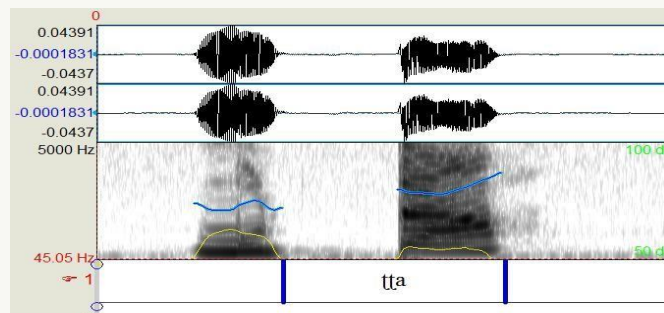


Fig.1. Spectrogram of [t̪t̪] sound pronounced by a Bangla speaker

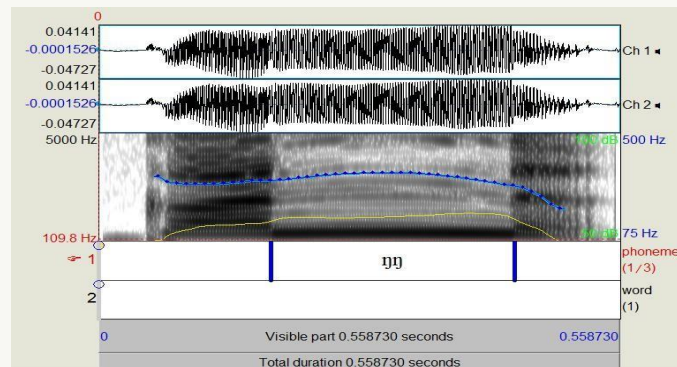


Fig.2. Spectrogram of [ŋŋ] sound pronounced by a Bangla speaker

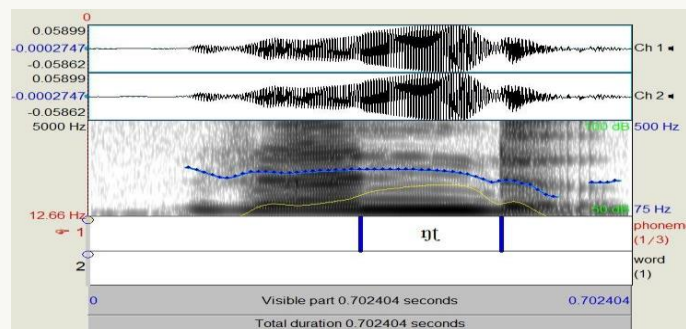


Fig.3. Spectrogram of [ŋt] sound pronounced by a Bangla speaker

Conclusion

Language is the most important ingredient in any speech community. It is not a mere means for communication and interaction but also for establishing and maintaining human relationships. This study present certain observations regarding language maintenance and language attitudes of the migrant Bengalis in Kerala. The migrant Bengalis in Kerala consider English and Hindi as the languages for better social mobility, power and prestige. The second generation Bengali immigrant has strong convergence to English and Hindi for all basic needs. However, their mother tongue is only restricted to the home domain at the oral level. But some people learn Malayalam to take their potential interest in Malayalam literature.

Bibliography

Adlam, D. and Salfield, A. (1980) Sociolinguistics and linguistic diversity. New York: Screen Educatione.
 Akmajian, A. (2001) Linguistics: An introduction to language and communication. Cambridge: Cambridge,

MA: MIT press.

- Cecco, J. P. (1961) *The psychology of Language, Thought and Instruction*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Crystal, D. (2004) *The Language Revolution*. Oxford: Polity.
- Edwards, A. D. (1976) *Language in Culture and Class*. London: Heinemann.
- Fiske, J. (1982) *An Introduction to Communication Studies*. London: Methuen.
- Giglioli, P. P. (1972) *Language and Social Context*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Hymes, D. (1964) *Language and Culture in Society*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Ryan, E. and Giles, H. (1982) *Attitudes towards Language Variation*. London: Edward Arnold. Sudnow, D. (1972) *Studies in Social Interaction*, New York: Free Press.
- Whorf, B. L. (1956) *Language, Thought and Reality*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Yule, G. (2006) *The study of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University