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Conversational Code Mixing among Jahangirnagar University Students: A Threat to Bengali or Not

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Abstract

The various factors of conversational code mixing in Bangladesh include the personal opinions of the respondents towards code mixing, the possibility of bilingualism and multilingualism, causes of and motivations behind code mixing and how it is a threat to the purity of Bengali. Code mixing is a very important issue in the context of Bengali language as codes from other languages have been used extensively in the linguistic behaviour of the Bengali speaking people. This paper focuses on Wardhaugh's (1992:107) definition of conversational code mixing which "involves the deliberate mixing of two languages without an associated topic change." This paper adopts interview method to collect data which have been collected by a linguistic survey conducted in two departments of a public university. Analysis of the data reveals that code mixing is not a threat to Bengali and is not exploiting the purity of Bengali rather opens up the horizon for the development of Bengali by including suitable components of other languages by proper language planning and careful handling of the situation for the enrichment and beautification of Bengali language. The paper also discovers probable causes of and motivations behind such code mixing.

Keywords: Code switching, code mixing, borrowing, bilingualism, monolingualism.

Introduction

As language bears the culture of a society, change of a language is strongly influenced and motivated by the change of cultural phenomenon of a society. Chomsky has noticed the widespread distinction between the 'linguistic competence' and 'linguistic performance' for which 'register' has been evolved to adopt the language according to the demand of situation. The people of Bangladesh who speak Bengali, register language a lot. The condition of Bengali language was remarkably different in the middle and old ages. If we compare the present Bengali with the Bengali of *Charjapada*, remark of the old age, we can mark the differences. With the spread of globalization,

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open market economy, revolutionary technological development, widespread of satellite channels, Bengali has often been contacted with other languages. Because of this language contact, constituents of one language can be found in the constituents of other languages, namely lexical borrowing, code mixing, code-switching, transferring, interference, diffusion etc. Code-mixing is one of the linguistic phenomena claimed to be the most prevalent and common modes of interaction among bilingual speakers and for this borrowing and mixing a language may lose its purity and a new type of language emerges in some cases. Because of the constant contact with English and Hindi, now Bengali tends to be in such a state.

Objectives of the study

- To detect the extent of conversational code-mixing in Bengali.
- To uncover the reasons of and motivations behind code-mixing of the Bengali speaking people.
- To find out whether conversational code-mixing is a threat to the purity or not to the existence of Bengali in our country.

Literature Review

Spolsky (1998:45) says, "..... it is very common that people develop some knowledge and ability in a second language and so they become bilingual. The simplest definition of a bilingual is a person who has some functional ability in a second language. This may vary from a limited ability in one or more domains, to very strong command of both languages."

Hudson (1996:53) defined code mixing as "a case where a fluent bilingual talking to another fluent bilingual changes language without any change at all in the situation. He also said, to get the right effect the speakers balance the two languages against each other as a kind of linguistic cocktail."

According to Haugen (1953:280), "The strongest possible motive for language learning is the need of associating with the speakers of the language."

The definition of Wardhaugh says (1992:107), "Conversational code-mixing involves the deliberate mixing of two languages without an associated topic change." He also remarks that code mixing is not a random combination of two distinct codes, rather, "it requires conversant to have a sophisticated knowledge of both languages." He says that in code switching and code mixing situations, the norms vary from group to group within a single community itself.

In code-mixing as opposed to code switching, there is a harmony that the speeches (though bilingual) belong to the structure of one language. There is also agreement among researchers that code-mixing should be distinguished from its more celebrated counterpart 'borrowing', whilst acknowledging that the boundary is very thin that separates them. This observation is justified by Muysken's (2000) typology of code-mixing. At present, researchers also focus on universal approaches to include issues

such as the bilingual context, the period of contact between languages, the status, the typology, the competency of speakers, and the motivations for activation of certain languages over others. In post-colonial countries where code-mixing with English is a relatively widespread phenomenon, fostering and nurturing it has received importance by the local governments after independence, so the attitudes towards languages need to be considered with great concern.

Methodology

1. Participants

   70 students along with 3 teachers have been selected from English and Bangla departments of the university. 40 students of 20-24 age range and 30 students of 25-26 age range have been the target group.

2. Interview method

   Informal and semi-structured interviews were taken regarding four different parts to elicit the opinion of the target group by using tape recorder. Formal and well organized interviews of the teachers were taken as well to have some precious opinion and statistical data about Bengali language usage.

3. Observation method

   In order to overcome the shortcomings of interview method, close observation of the target group has contributed a lot to explain the phenomenon. Different sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic theories have been used according to the need of the analysis of the paper.

Findings and discussion

1. Discussion and findings of the first part of the interview

   1.1. Personal attitude toward code-mixing regarding age:

   From the observation of the respondents, the paper finds that about eighty percent (80%) students of 20-22 ages are in the process unconsciously. Some of them have internalized certain words and phrases of other languages and apply them in their everyday conversation. The paper tries to analyze this kind of language behaviour from theoretical perspective of psycholinguistics**.** According to the behaviourist theory, effective language behaviour is the production of correct responses to stimuli. If a particular response is reinforced then it becomes habitual or conditioned in the urban society and also in rural areas. The language behaviour of the people ageing 24-26 is very much conscious while using code mixing. About or more than ninety percent are consciously involved in the process.

   1.2. Personal attitude towards code-mixing regarding educational background:

   It shows that about seventy percent (70%) of the English medium students make code-mixing consciously. They have justified their position by saying

that they are not clear about some specific Bengali objects or ideas and hence they borrow from other languages. For example; an M.A respondent of English doesn't know the proper Bengali meaning of the words chair, table, internet etc and this happens with almost everyone. However, the rest thirty percent (30%) use code mixing unconsciously. One of the professors of Bangla department expressed that English medium students, and more specifically students of English department of the university are very much conscious about the facts and they use code mixing as a sign of pride and prestige.

2. Discussion and findings of the second part of the interview

This shows that almost all the respondents use code mixing in both formal and informal setting. Only a small number of respondents, the students of Bengali department avoid it in formal setting like classroom and seminars/workshops. The respondents who use code mixing asserted that they do it for showing off or to prove their competencies in English mostly though some other provided different opinion. One respondent replied that; "…when I find problem in expressing something specific in Bengali I use code mixing". Some respondents said that they use code mixing in arguments and some use in different formal settings.

3. Discussion and findings of the third part of the interview

This part deals with two questions; one is about the respondent's personal opinion and attitude towards code mixing and another is their observation of the existence of bilingualism/monoligualism in Bangladesh.

The respondents have given mixed opinions to answer the first part of the question about conversational code-mixing and it includes the following ideas:

1. We should take new words from other languages to enrich our own language. (a teacher, department of Bangla)
2. A language can't be confined to a nation. So code-mixing in Bangladesh can run smoothly. (student, department of English)
3. It's dangerous. Code-mixing corrupts the purity of Bengali language. (student, department of Bangla)
4. Code-mixing should be confined in certain places and situation. Its excessive use should be avoided. (student, department of Bangla)
5. Code-mixing can make our language more beautiful, it will help language develop rather corrupting it. (student, department of English)
6. Code-mixing develops smartness. But we should not neglect our own language as it deserves special honor. (student, department of English)
7. One student quotes "I like code-mixing. As English is an international language and due to globalization we must use code mixing to express us to the world. But we should keep in mind the status of Bengali as mother tongue as well". (student of English)
8. Mixing language is mainly done to promote communication and to have better expression. So we should practise it. It will not harm the purity of Bengali. (student, department of English)

From the observation of the respondents, this paper finds that despite some negative opinions, almost all respondents consider code-mixing as a means of enhancing communication to express frequently in a better way. The observation of the Bangla department teacher is worth mentioning who focuses on the fact that as long as a language is alive it would be changing its form. It will definitely take new words in its vocabulary when it comes into contact with other languages and it is not a threat to the mother tongue.

The second part of the question also gets ambiguous observation regarding the possibility of multilingualism in Bangladesh. Many observations have opined that Bangladeshi people don't use only English but also Hindi and some other languages besides Bengali. So there is a possibility to evolve multilingualism like India, Singapore in near future. Another male professor of Bangla does not agree with such observation of the respondents. He opines that it is true that people use English or Hindi in their everyday conversation frequently these days but we have to keep in mind that they are a minor group only. Moreover, people who speak English in office do not use English in their personal life. Additionally he said that, bilingualism does not exist in Bangladesh in that sense. People speak English for their habitual obedience. In this regard, only the Pakistani refugees in our country can be considered to be bilingual as they use both Bengali and Urdu appropriately.

4. Discussion and findings of the fourth part of the interview

This part deals with the key factors whether each code mixing is contaminating the purity of Bengali or not. From the respondents' opinion regarding the first part, we get a positive idea about the conversational code mixing which is enriching Bengali language rather than harming it. Only a small number of respondents have responded negatively in this regard. The opinion of one of the Bengali teacher is worthy enough to justify the opinion of the respondents; "As a nation we are hybrid, mixed like our language", she said further; "Bengali has been polluted long ago, nothing to be exploited again but we must try to preserve our standard form of language. Her observation echoes the history of exploitation of Bengali language. From the perspective of sociolinguistics, change of a language comes with the change of its socio-cultural condition. Change of a language is a natural process which happens very slowly and consistently. Sometimes changes become radical with the changes of political condition and of globalization, and hence the changes are evident in word, syllable and meaning as well. But the basic grammatical structure may not change. It means that the main structure remains the same, only the elements may change or abolish. Accordingly, code mixing is changing some elements of Bengali language. It is not changing its basic structure."

To talk about the purity of Bengali language and its future, a professor of the Bengali department has given a statistic report of the Bengali languages. Statistically there are only around twenty pure Bengali languages. It has enriched its vocabulary by borrowing words from Sanskrit, Arabic, Persian, Portuguese, Dutch, French, English, Turkish, Japanese and many other languages. As Bengali is a mixed language, code mixing would not do any harm to its purity rather it will enrich its

vocabulary likewise. Moreover, question of losing purity would occur when the basic of our language along with its grammar would be changed. From the close observation and analysis of the participants the paper reveals that this conversational code mixing is not a threat and the purity of it would not be hampered by such consequences.

5. Discussion and findings of the observation

   After observing the comments and interviews, the following reasons are found to be the most important reasons of such code mixing in this regard:

   1. Habitual obedience: People use code-mixing because of their habitual obedience. Environment plays the most vital role here. For example, they usually mix English code "May I come in?" which is the result of their habitual obedience.
   2. Easy to express thoughts: Sometimes people find it easy to express them in a particular situation and hence code mixing occurs from other languages.
   3. Emotion: Code mixing happens sometimes because of the sudden outburst of some particular emotions. For example, when people become angry they often switch to another code.
   4. Status: Using codes from English is a matter of status in the context of Bangladesh as it is considered as a prestigious language in Bangladesh. From that sense, people often mix English in their conversation to align them in the royalty.
   5. To show off: From the research it has been found that the ability to use English is a proof of good background regarding education and social status. Using English gives them an opportunity to let others know about their qualifications.
   6. Euphemism: As Bengali is a mixed language, appropriate meaning of some expressions and words are not found all the time and may sometimes sound ridiculous as well, for example, Bengali of some words like mobile, internet, email, and telephone etc. would hear ridiculous and even may evoke laughter.

Conclusion

Language is the witness of the socio-cultural changes of a nation or a civilization. The language-change of a society occurs with the change of its culture, political condition, geographical change, etc. By adopting proper language planning and careful practice of the language, the purity of a language can be preserved. Code-mixing in every day conversation in formal and informal places has become a part of our linguistic behaviour. The penetration of one language into another cannot be stopped as it is the time of satellite, globalization and open market economy. The nature of language is that it changes its shape by the passing of time. We have to adopt with the situation by proper language planning and policy and through proper education and awareness. We should not abhor other languages rather accept the positive vibe to enrich our culture. We have to colour our language by using the power and potentiality that it holds.

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