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Revitalization of Heritage Language and Cultural Reconstructions

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ABSTRACT: Revitalization of heritage language and cultural reconstructions has emerged as a critical field of research for the preservation and reconstruction of cultural identities amid ongoing processes of globalization, colonization, and linguistic homogenization. This article critically examines the complex dynamics between heritage language reclamation and cultural reconstruction, situating the phenomenon within contemporary sociolinguistic and anthropological discourses. Drawing upon empirical case studies and theoretical insights, it is an attempt to highlight how revitalization initiatives serve not only to restore languages (spoken by immigrants, minority speech communities) but also to reconstruct collective memory, social practices, and cultural epistemologies integral to marginalized communities. It explores how language revival serves as a channel for reclaiming cultural knowledge, reshaping historical narratives, and empowering marginalized communities fostering pluralistic identities.

KEYWORDS: Revitalization, Language Reconstruction, Sociolinguistic studies

I. INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary era of globalization, rapid cultural transformation, and linguistic homogenization, the revitalization of heritage languages and cultural reconstruction has assumed critical importance in academic and policy discourses. Languages are not merely communicative tools but repositories of cultural knowledge, memory, and epistemology, reflecting the collective identities of communities. However, processes of colonization, forced assimilation, migration, and state-driven linguistic policies have historically marginalized minority and indigenous languages, or leading to diffusion of contact languages or rise in a new koine. Against this backdrop, the resurgence of interest in heritage language reclamation and cultural reconstruction represents both a political act of resistance and a cultural project of survival.

This field of inquiry engages with questions of identity, power, and belonging, highlighting how language revitalization is deeply intertwined with cultural reconstruction. The reclamation of heritage languages among immigrant, indigenous, and minority speech communities goes beyond linguistic restoration—it encompasses the reactivation of oral traditions, ritual practices, ecological knowledge, and intergenerational bonds that sustain community life. By critically examining empirical case studies and drawing on theoretical frameworks from several related sociolinguistics studies, this paper explores the case of Silchar Bengali Vernacular (Dey, 2014) language revitalization as a transformative process that enables marginalized groups to reframe historical narratives, challenge cultural erasures, and foster pluralistic identities in the face of dominant hegemonies.

Ultimately, the revitalization of heritage languages and cultural reconstruction emerges not merely as an academic concern but as a crucial endeavor for cultural sustainability, social justice, and the affirmation of diverse ways of knowing and being in an interconnected world.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW OF FACTORS WHICH UNDERWENT SUCH TRANSFORMATION

2.1. Globalization and Linguistic Homogenization

Globalization has intensified processes of linguistic homogenization, privileging global languages such as English, Mandarin, and Spanish at the expense of smaller indigenous and minority languages. Scholars argue that this shift reflects the commodification of language in global economies, where linguistic capital is increasingly tied to socioeconomic mobility (Phillipson, 1992; Heller, 2010). While such processes may create opportunities for global communication, they simultaneously accelerate the marginalization of heritage languages, resulting in a loss of cultural diversity and intergenerational transmission (Crystal, 2000).

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2.2. Colonial Legacies and Language Suppression

Colonialism has historically shaped language hierarchies by imposing the colonizer's language as the medium of education, administration, and cultural life. The suppression of indigenous languages was often part of broader assimilationist projects that sought to erase local identities (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). Postcolonial societies continue to grapple with these linguistic hierarchies, where the dominance of former colonial languages undermines the vitality of indigenous and minority speech communities.

III. INDIGENOUS RESISTANCE AND LANGUAGE RECLAMATION

In response to linguistic erosion, communities worldwide have initiated language reclamation projects as acts of cultural resistance. For instance, the case of Kokborok, spoken in the state of Tripura and language nests (Dey, 2009 Project on LIS India) went through restoration of the language in the recent years after years of adoption to Bengali.

IV. LANGUAGE, IDENTITY, AND CULTURAL RECONSTRUCTION

Language revitalization is not solely about linguistic survival but also about reconstructing cultural practices, collective memory, and social epistemologies. Its presence is seen in situation where literacy and orality coexist as cultural resources. This perspective aligns with research on how language revival reconnects communities to ecological knowledge, oral traditions, and rituals, thereby reshaping identity and belonging (Hinton, Huss, & Roche, 2018). Language reclamation thus serves as a cultural project that negotiates identity across local, national, and global contexts.

Several frameworks guide contemporary research in this field. Fishman's (1991) model of Reversing Language Shift provides a foundational framework for understanding stages of language loss and strategies for revitalization. More recent approaches emphasize critical ethnography (McCarty, 2018), and decolonial perspectives that situate language reclamation as a broader struggle for social justice and epistemic plurality (Walsh, 2018). Together, these frameworks highlight the complex interplay of language, culture, and power in heritage language revitalization.

The revitalization of heritage languages cannot be understood in isolation from the cultural systems in which they are embedded. Language functions not only as a medium of communication but also as a symbolic resource that encodes collective memory, traditional knowledge, and cultural worldviews (Fishman, 1991). This conceptual framework situates heritage language revitalization as a multidimensional process that simultaneously **encompasses** linguistic, cultural, and epistemological reconstruction**.**

As a student during the early years of my life, I was privileged to be exposed to a number of languages spoken around me. Spending a considerable number of years in Nagaland, Shillong, Assam and now Delhi, I am fascinated by how one acclimatize oneself as use of language is concerned. Sociolinguistics as one of my interests pulled me to look at how members of speech community participate within and outside home domain. What makes them to choose which language to use (both situational and contextual)? How do people react to other language/s spoken around them?

Some of the questions which arises:

1. Early inhabitants and the language in use
2. How to take into account the anthropological, social and cultural changes of a place in question
3. Language maintenance and preservation of the identity of the speaker as well as the speech community
4. In what way can we account for the extra-linguistic factors influencing performance
5. Transition from Monolingual->Bilingual->Multilingual
6. The role of contact and diffusion
7. The subsequent development and changes

My doctoral dissertation focused on the diachrony and synchrony of variation and change in spirantization in Silchar Bengali vernacular (SBV). Silchar Bengali developed in this southern part of Assam i.e. in Silchar as a result of the Tea Plantations which started coming in 1835 and attracted people from outside the region. The present population of Silchar comprises of speakers whose ancestors are from:

i. Bengali speaking regions,
ii. Non-Bengali Indo-Aryan regions and
iii. The local Tibeto-Burman speakers.

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iv. Local eastern Bengali dialect in Silchar coexists with standard western Bengali which is the literary variety. In spite of the linguistically diverse situation, Bengali became an important language in Tea Plantation (along with Hindustani) as well outside the Tea plantation due to the conspicuous importance it received historically.

The available historical texts and the real time data on Silchar Bengali suggest that spirantization was brought to Assam by the immigrants from Eastern Bengali dialect regions. The study was conducted by considerating the diachrony of spirantization both within Silchar Bengali and across relevant Bengali dialects (a span of 100 years: 1902-2002). Though spirantization diffused from the numerous Bengali dialects into Silchar Bengali Vernacular, it has undergone significant changes after its arrival in this region. The Bengalis are far ahead in the use of spirantization, the other ethnic groups are lagging behind (Dey, 2014).

V. OBSERVATION AS A FIELD RESEARCHER IN NORTHEAST INDIA

As a student during the early years of my life, I was privileged to be exposed to a number of languages spoken around me. Spending a considerable number of years in Nagaland, Shillong, Assam and now Delhi, I am fascinated by how one acclimatize oneself as use of language is concerned. The question arises - what makes people to choose which language to use (both situational and contextual)? And how do people react to other language/s spoken around them?

Being exposed and being able to stay at different places in Nagaland for 22 years of my initial days of my life, I was always encountered by my Naga friends whether –
1.tui laga ma sema ase na tui laga baba sema ase?
Your my Mother is Sema or my Dad is Sema

as my name ends in –li. In Sema language (spoken in the state of Nagaland), almost all female names ends in –li such as Kalitoli, Nishili, Vitoli, Akatoli, Irali, etc. I used to get annoyed at that time, but as a Linguist now I can see how one connects to another through some commonality.

Sociolinguistics as one of my interests pulled me to look at how members of speech community participate within and outside home domain. Reports from 2005 study, I had the privilege to work with LIS-India Project (CIIL). My field was to work on the language Kokborok spoken in Tripura. Before going to the field I got to see a few data taken from Agartala-the state capital. The language seems to me that it was more inclined towards Bengali. I was little taken back as it was different from what Grierson (LSI 2003) projected. I then left for my field trip. I figured out two places where speakers of Kokborok are concentrated far from the capital near jampui Hills.

Bengali was state official language after independence and recently Kokborok was added as the state official languages of Tripura. Among the informants I interacted, the first informant (who is 80 yrs) I had a discourse with and the subsequent speakers from different age groups, it is noticed that, speakers who goes out of home for livelihood had a greater influence of Bengali otherwise not.

I was informed that the educated speakers who are into language revival and to bring back their Identity lost to Hindusization historically, reconstructed a form known as common form comprising of all the major languages spoken there such as kokborok, jamatia etc. They printed primary school books and were implemented in primary schools. I collected few books and had asked the elder speakers who are less mobile to explain me the content. Instead of explaining me, they got annoyed and said 'this bookish language is not our language as we do not understand it.

Similar situation, I had encountered in another Project work 2010, a CIIL, Mysore project on 'Lesser known languages of north east India'. One of the field studies given to me was to document Konyak language. So I went to Mon, a district in Nagaland, in fact one can say it was a kind of No man's land. The same picture I had again encountered is that present young educated people are trying to bring out a common language. When asked about the name of the new language is, they said common language. In Mon district there are 108 villages and they have distinct varieties which are mutually not intelligible.

Encountering such situations, where much of mobilization or migration is uncommon, I would like to bring here a pertinent query on three cultures which exist in majority of the regions within India where immigration and influx took place:

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1. The first culture are those speakers who are referred to the culture of the regions from which the parents originated
2. The second culture refers to the culture in which the family currently resides, and
3. The third culture refers to the amalgamation of these two cultures

Third culture generation refer to children raised in a culture other than their parents' for a significant part of their early development years. The case of tea garden labourers in Barak Valley (Assam) where the third and fourth generations are exposed to a greater variety of cultural influences such as to:

i. Mother tongue (spoken by the elders of the family
ii. Silchar Bengali
iii. Literary Bengali variety in primary school
iv. Hindi (through Television)
v. Bishnupriya, and
vi. Other Bodo group of languages.

In this case (Dey 2010), the second generation was exposed to other cultures even before they had the opportunity to fully develop their personal and cultural identity. In subsequent generations, they got opportunity to work outside the tea-garden, and were often exposed to a second (or third, fourth) language/s while living in their host culture (new home). The 3rd and 4th generations are being physically exposed to the environment where the dominant language is used in practical aspects of life. Today, the total population of fourth generation is often bilingual, and sometimes even multilingual depending on the exposure. Presence of Bengali in Silchar only makes people bilingual and does not threaten local ethnic languages as it is event from the Bojpuri/Hindustani speakers in Silchar.

VI. WAY FORWARD

To understand such situation I would like to highlight to consider exhaustive data collection with respect to 1st generation speakers (if any) and language transition of the subsequent generations. Due to paucity of the work, Factors need to be taken for such studies:

1. History of the first generation
2. Place of stay
3. Whether displaced or continuing
4. Nature and mode of livelihood
5. Language in use
6. Language exposure: proportions of speakers among the total population; community member's attitude towards their language; response to new domain and media; shifts in domain of language use; Government attitude and policies on the language in use including official language and use; language documentation.
7. Language choice of the speakers and why? Some of the field experience working on the above discussed conditions, I would like to share what I encountered. Dearth of written documents lead to many problems in configuring the people in question, their lifestyle, culture, practices and of course language. I would also like to mention here my observation in India today that speaking 'good English' is a must with no code switching or code mixing whatsoever, but then no one bothers when it comes to their first language.

VII.CONCLUSION

Languages serve as repositories of indigenous epistemologies, oral histories, ecological knowledge, and ritual practices. Thus, to preserve the knowledge of such speech communities, one needs to be sensitive in the recovery of cultural meanings and practices leading to a particular cultural continuity, reconnecting communities with ancestral worldviews. Revitalization of a language should provide a narrative framework through which a community resonates to remember, reinterpret, and transmit their histories which becomes a process of cultural healing and identity reconstruction.

By reclaiming their languages, marginalized communities assert cultural sovereignty and challenge dominant ideologies that devalue their identities. I wish to propose here to take into consideration the above points and we must not only focus on the language people speak, but also other aspects of their life and livelihood must be taken to understand the exact nature of the use of language. Not only language die, but with it a whole plethora of indigenous practices gets washed off.

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Thus, revitalization emerges as a dynamic process of cultural reconstruction that not only safeguards linguistic diversity but also reconfigures epistemological and social landscapes in marginalized communities.

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