Why some voices are not heard: A socio-cultural perspective on Mumbai's Rajasthani speech community

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Abstract

A young student punished for not speaking English at school in post-colonial India, a woman compelled to speak in a major language with her grandchildren, and a father who does not see any economic benefit in fostering the heritage language are the stories in this narrative of how silenced voices influence both those that are heard and those that should have been heard but were prematurely silenced. These narratives exemplify how language choices influence inter-generational language transfer and domains of language use in the context of family language planning in Mumbai's Marwari community, a minor-language speech community in urban Indian states other than Rajasthan.

Key words: Marwari, Family Language Planning, Inter-Generational Language Transfer

1. Introduction

Most of us have heard about the moribund status of the world's languages: how within the next century what will remain of half the world's current inventory of approximately 7,000 languages will only be memories! So, can anything be done to reverse this threat faced by some languages. By considering why the languages are at risk of attrition, we might be able to provide support for the speech communities that have a vested interest in balancing their language use.

My research addresses the linguistic phenomenon of language shift, especially as it relates to a family's language plan. I will briefly share the stories of three of the families who participated in my field study, followed by a discussion of why these families are not using their heritage language and offer a potential strategy for balancing heritage language use with other languages by this community; and, a potentially viable strategy for other Indic language speech communities too.

2. Heritage language shift in India

The stories are not about individuals, communities, or institutions, but about families because that is where the most important decisions regarding language use are made. Governments might have policies regarding language use and institutions might even attempt to implement those policies but it's the choices that individuals make which ultimately determine whether a language survives. Though influenced by external factors, the choices regarding which languages will be used are internal - made by parents.

So, why does a family's linguistic choices make a difference to whether their heritage language lives or dies? How can what a mother says to her child make a difference to the survival of a language? Or, why should it matter what language a child uses when he/she is playing with friends? Framing these questions in the context of family language planning I will address the issue with reference to the Indian language, Marwari, the heritage language of Mumbai's Rajasthani community.

India is one of the world's largest linguistic laboratories, where the state of Rajasthan can be found on India's western border with Pakistan. Rajasthan is the land of the Maharajahs and the ancestral home of some of India's social elite and wealthiest industrialites, India's Rockefellers. It is frequently the setting for Bollywood movies and even international movies such as The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel and the James Bond movie, Octopussy: and, it has been visited by international celebrities such as Oprah Winfrey, Will Smith, Angelina Jolie, Brad Pitt, and Nicole Kidman, a privilege that cannot be claimed by many other Indian states. Thus, acknowledging ancestral heritage from Rajasthan does not lack prestige, even among the social elite. So if Rajasthanis are not socially or culturally stigmatized, why are those who live in diasporic communities such as Mumbai's, and in other large urban areas, expressing a preference for using languages other than Marwari?

2.1 Attitudes and identity

One answer might be found in the linguistic attitudes of two businessmen in their twenties, KS and GM. KS, a fluent Marwari speaker, lives in an elite neighborhood and distinguishes himself from Rajasthanis who live in the inner city, by his ability to use English and their inability to do so. KS claimed to be more 'cosmo' than the Rajasthanis who live in Byculla. However, KS's father asserted that they speak Marwari both at home and at work and that they chose to maintain closer cultural and linguistic connections to the community by living in a building where other Rajasthanis live. As Schwartz says, they sought the ethnic homogeneity of the community (Schwartz, 2010, p. 10). KS's response is evocative of an interaction in a Tongan marketplace described by Besnier, where a seller indexed her cosmopolitan identity through her English language proficiency.

On the other hand, GM, who lives in an inter-generational household (traditionally termed a joint family), and who cannot speak Marwari, disassociates himself, ethnically and linguistically, from the Rajasthani community. His attitude towards Marwari is an example of Bucholtz & Hall's adequation tactic, where speakers identify themselves as members of a group by ignoring differences and focusing instead on the similarities between themselves and, in this case, non-Rajasthanis in general (2005).

2.2 Language Shift

Decisions by speakers of a language to stop using it, whether it is only with certain people or altogether, whether it is only at home, or in all domains, and whether it is only in formal conversations or in any type of conversation constitutes language shift. Dorian states that language shift is "the gradual displacement of one language by another in the lives of the community members." (1982, p. 44). That is, language shift results from changes in the language practices of the speech community with respect to where, when, and with whom speakers use the language.

In modern times, the causes of language attrition can be subtle and local. Urbanization, institutional policies, individual ideologies, communal identities, and globalization, some of the factors identified by Mufwene (to appear), were also evidenced in my fieldwork.

Minor languages are particularly susceptible to pressure that causes attrition. A language garners a minor status due to socio-cultural and/or linguistic reasons: socio-culturally, the subordination can be due to the status of the community; linguistically, subordination can be due to the status of the language. Though Marwari is the dominant language in Rajasthan, it is a minor language in diasporic communities of Marwari speakers elsewhere in India, making it more susceptible to pressures that cause attrition.

2.3 Family language planning

However, language shift is not a dilemma that is unique to Marwari, or even to the larger Indo-European language family. Language communities around the world are faced with this conundrum and the need to address it. Pioneering research in endangered languages such as Scottish Gaelic (Dorian, 1981), Paraguayan Guarani (Rubin, 1968), American immigrant Norwegian (Haugen, 1953), and American Yiddish (Fishman, 1965), offered various scenarios for probable causes of linguistic attrition. However, Fishman was the first to observe the significance of a family's language practices to the survival of endangered languages (1991). The current state of Irish-Gaelic is a testament to this observation. Despite its status as the official language of Ireland, the vitality of Gaelic is tenuous. Gaeltacht parents are "unwilling to make inordinate sacrifices, as it seems to them, in depriving their children of a knowledge of English" (Watson, 1989, p. 44). Irish parents believe that proficiency in English will give their children the advantage that Irish-Gaelic will not, and that not being fluent in English will handicap their children.

2.4 Inter-generational language transfer?

Children are the next generation of speakers and the languages they use are the ones that will survive. Therefore, the languages that parents choose to use with their children are the ones that thrive. When parents choose to speak to their children in a language other than their heritage language, then at least in that relationship, the heritage language becomes invisible because it is ignored. That is, the speed with which a language disappears, is directly proportional to the rate at which the size of a speech community decreases, which in turn is influenced by the number of people who choose to ignore their heritage language.

As Mufwene states, a language "lives in the practice of its speakers not in the

knowledge people have of it" (to appear, p. 32). Thus, an individual's linguistic choices, as an essential component of the "family-home-neighborhood-community intragroup(s)" (Fishman, 1991) practice, significantly influence the ultimate vitality of a language. These individual choices, such as the ones made by parents when interacting with their children, are like drops of water in an ocean. Though individually each may seem inconsequential, collectively they affect the status of the language and influence language use by the next generation of speakers. When the number of speakers diminishes, intergenerational language transmission, the transfer of the language to future generations, is adversely affected.

3. Language planning in Mumbai's Rajasthani families

This is an observable trend in Mumbai's Rajasthani community, where parents' current linguistic choices are exhibiting a preference for dominant languages, such as Hindi, and regional lingua francas, such as Indian-English. Being monolingual in India a couple of decades previously was anomalous and not practical. Today, individuals who only use Hindi, and/or primarily Indian-English in most urban environments are not at a disadvantage. Why? What changes in recent decades are prompting these individual decisions and facilitating their execution?

To answer these questions and understand why parents might choose not to speak to their children in their heritage language, last August, I spent ten days with twenty-seven members of Mumbai's Rajasthani community. Notably, though some of the participants' families had left Rajasthan four or five generations earlier, and a large proportion of them do not speak the language any more, ninety-nine percent of them continue to identify themselves as Rajasthanis. So why are some of them disconnecting from their language? To answer this question I evaluated their ethno-linguistic identity, their socioeconomic aspirations, institutional influences on their linguistic preferences, and their family structure. Here are some of their stories.

3.1 AD's story

As on most afternoons, when eight-year old AD, who lives in a joint family, comes home from school, his mother greets him at the door and while his great-grandmother sits in the living room crocheting, his grandmother prepares his snack. AD tells his mother about his day in school and they discuss when he can go play with his friends in the park. His grandmother calls out to him in Hindi that his snack is ready and AD switches from English to Hindi as he responds that he will be out in a few minutes. He washes his hands and sits down to eat his snack. While he is eating he hears his great-grandmother conversing with his mother in Marwari about the dinner menu. He turns to his great-grandmother telling her in Hindi that he does not want cabbage for dinner before he runs out to play with his friends.

The first thing I observed was that AD was fluent in both Hindi and Indian-English. Second, though he could not speak Marwari he understood the language since he heard it every day. When AD was admitted to Mumbai's most prestigious private school his parents felt compelled to ensure his ability to communicate effortlessly in English. To that end, they spoke to him primarily in English, with the intention that by speaking the language even at home, "fluency in it (would) keep him competitive outside the home" (Mufwene, to appear, p. 34). Though he heard his parents use Marwari, with his

grandparents, great-grandmother, and other older relatives, AD himself was never compelled to speak it. Additionally, AD's great-grandmother is losing fluency in Marwari, since she interacts infrequently with people outside the home now; exemplifying Mufwene's observation that "languages die, gradually, as speakers practice them less and less, because they have fewer opportunities to use them" (to appear. p. 32).

Figure 1.
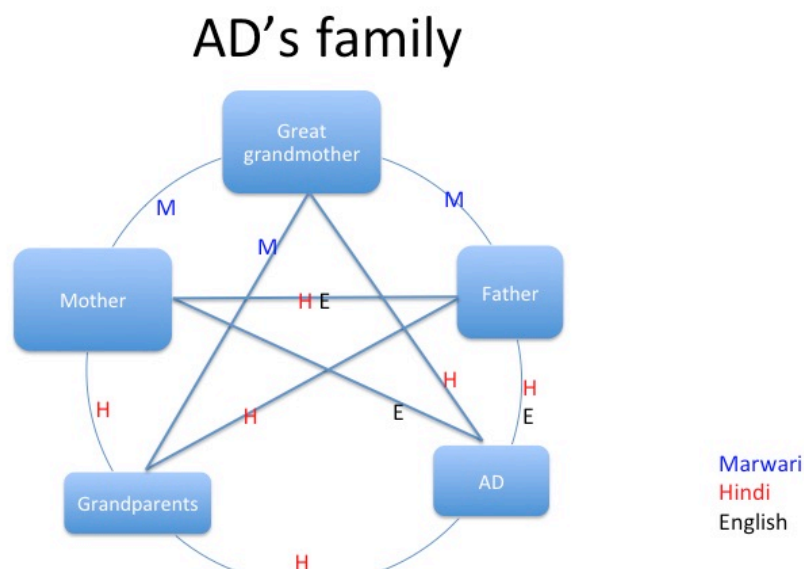
AD's parents' language plan anticipated providing their son with better academic, and ultimately socio-economic opportunities. However, their plan did not anticipate his socio-cultural needs. By not speaking in Marwari, AD's voice is one more voice that is not heard in the Marwari speech community. It is one more silenced voice that is contributing to the shrinking pool of speakers in this urban diaspora for Marwari.

3.2 AM, GM, and PM's family

AD's older cousins, AM, GM, and PM also live in a traditional joint family with their parents and paternal grandparents. His cousins also do not speak Marwari. Their mother was punished and humiliated by her teachers if she spoke in any language other than English, and she did not want her children to suffer the same privations. However, their father, can only speak to them in Hindi, because he is not comfortable using English. Once again, though the children hear their parents speaking to their grandparents in Marwari, because their family language plan does not compel them to speak the language, they cannot … these are three more Marwari voices that are muted. Ironically, these children are multilingual, just not in Marwari. They are conversant in a couple of other Indo-Aryan languages: Marathi, which they use with the domestic help and Gujarati, with friends.
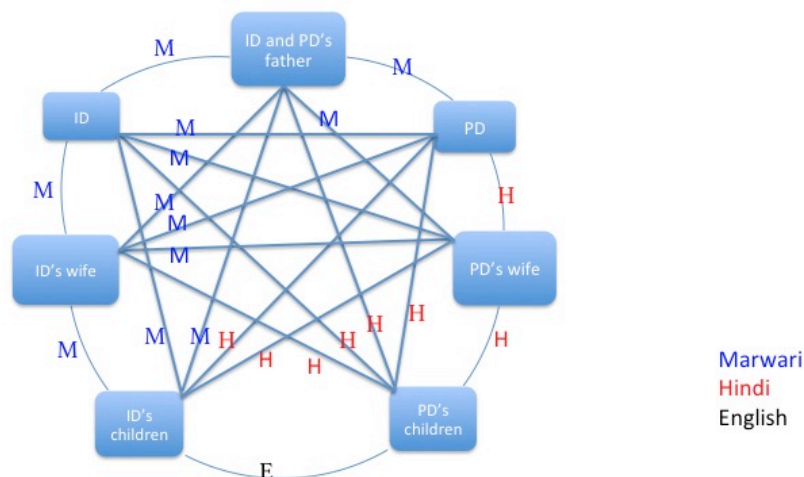
Figure 2.

AM, GM, and PM's family
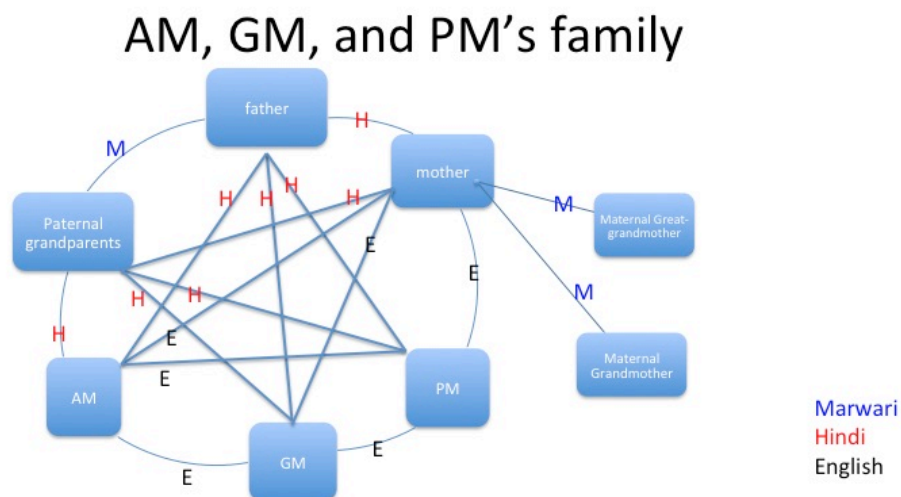
3.3 ID's and PD's household

The significance of family language planning is further highlighted by the story of a third household. Two brothers, ID and PD, lived with their wives and children under the same roof, as a traditional Indian joint family. However, each nuclear family had a different language policy. While ID and his wife spoke to each other and their children in Marwari, PD and his wife communicated with each other and their children in Hindi. So, ID's children used Marwari with their parents and grandfather and Hindi with PD and his wife; while PD's children used Hindi with all the adults.

As Schwartz observed, "Children are brought up to become members of their cultural group in part by the way in which their parents interact and use (their) heritage language with them" (2010, p. 6). Although PD and ID's children lived in the same home their language preference and proficiency was influenced and determined by 1) their interaction with their birth parents and 2) the language established within each relationship. The significance of direct parent-child interaction in maintaining a minor heritage language is exemplified by the language policies in this household, where the practices of two different sets of parents in the same household resulted in different types of language proficiency. ID's family's practices fostered language maintenance and intergenerational language transfer, while PD's caused language shift: that is, ID's children used Marwari, whereas PD's children did not.

Figure 3.

ID's and PD's Household

4. Balancing multilingualism

It seems complicated! But it wasn't. The children figured out which language they would use for each relationship. Thus, if children are able to achieve fluency in all the languages they use, competently maneuvering each relationship in the established language for that relationship, then should Rajasthani parents be concerned that exposure to their heritage language will diminish fluency and competence in languages with greater prestige?

No! This situation is not unusual. It is the essence of a multilingual ecology. For example, the island nation of Papua New Guinea (PNG), in an area of less than 453,000 square kilometers (The world factbook, 2014) "with less than a thousandth of the world's population … (and) probably more than a sixth of the world's languages" (Romaine, 1992) is the most densely concentrated linguistic environment in the world today. However, due to socio-cultural norms that prohibit marriages within the same community, most individuals are compelled to be multilingual. Especially in rural PNG, as mothers and fathers are generally from different villages, children learn to speak to each parent in a different language and the dominant language, Tok Pisin, frequently becomes the family's mutual language (Romaine, 1992).

But, if speakers are content with their linguistic choices, why is loss of the language considered problematic? If speakers determine that linguistic change is necessary for them to be able to improve their socio-economic status should anyone begrudge them their desire to do so? Today, the absence of an ancestral language in a family's language plan is not unusual, especially when the language is a minor language with limited functionality in the family's social environment. In these circumstances, it is not unreasonable for parents to feel children are better served by knowing the dominant languages. Reasons given by the interviewees for using the dominant language in lieu of the ancestral

language, even at home, ranged between institutional influence, socio-economic aspirations, and a need for proficiency in the lingua franca.

4.1 Socio-cultural benefit versus economic advantage

The reasons why certain members of Mumbai's Rajasthani community are opting not to use Marwari in domains that were historically spheres of heritage language use exemplifies the conflict between socio-cultural benefits of preserving heritage languages on the one hand versus the economic advantages of using lingua francas and dominant languages on the other. This is a conundrum faced by communities as disparate as Ghanaians (Bodomo, Anderson, & Dzahene-Quarshie, 2010) and the Gaeltacht people of Ireland (Watson, 1989: 44). According to Hagège, "(m)onolingualism in English is seen as a guarantee, if not a necessary condition, of modernism and progress … (and) speakers find … (they must) either retain their mother tongue, a minority and politically impotent language even if the majority speak it, or learn English and give up their mother-tongue" (2009, p. 122). Thus, the question remains: is it reasonable to expect individuals to hold on to linguistic traditions if they feel that not using the dominant language would jeopardize their family's socio-economic status?

5. Conclusion

Heritage languages do not have to be a casualty of socio-economic progress in India. As we have seen, when they are expected to, children are imminently capable of using multiple languages fluently and, as Hagège points out, "learning a new language does not require renouncing their original one" (2009, p. 122). When children are provided with the opportunity to do so, they can communicate competently in multiple languages. Notably, the parents in the above examples who are English speakers, grew up in multilingual homes where their parents did not speak English, however, today, they themselves are fluent English speakers. Thus, the Indian joint-family offers a potential solution since children can interact with extended family members: even if parents do not speak to them in their heritage language, intergenerational transfer of ancestral languages can be facilitated by other family members even if parents choose not to do so.

This conversation is significant for future generations of speakers who would benefit from the unique language-specific wisdom and cultural wealth that is embedded in every language, and that cannot always be accurately translated into a different language: the songs, the sayings, the sentiments of a community who developed vocabulary that was intimately woven into their culture. Individual inabilities to value the intangible benefits of heritage language use deprive future generations, and the world-at-large, of the unique communal wisdom inherent in every language.

Ancestral memories ground us and make us unique. These memories are tied up in our heritage languages: their absence leaves our lives incomplete. But, can a person miss something that they have never had? If a child is not presented with the opportunity to know his/her language wouldn't he/she be oblivious to its absence? That specifically is where the problem in intergenerational language transfer lies. When a family's language plan does not balance heritage language use with that of dominant languages, children are unaware of the language's absence in their lives. These are silenced voices … ones that never had a chance to develop.

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