On the Classification of Varieties of Bangla Spoken in Bangladesh

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Abstract

This study emphasizes the necessity for the classification of speech varieties of Bangla spoken in Bangladesh on the premise of language planning. There are a range of varieties of Bangla spoken in the different regions of Bangladesh. These varieties show a continuum spanning from the region of Meherpur to the region of Chittagong or Khulna. Now, there have been different standpoints in the classification of the varieties of Bangla. The difference in the standpoints of classification caused to bring forth some controversy. An appraisal on the different standpoints shows that the existing controversy can be reconciled if the classification of the speech varieties is undertaken on the premise of language planning.

Keywords: Bangla, Speech Variety, Language Planning, Classification, Controversy.

Introduction

Language planning involves a process which creates a premise for the classification of speech varieties. Accordingly, an attempt to the classification of language varieties requires a premise substantiated on the discipline of language planning. Unfortunately, the practice of classification of the varieties of Bangla, which is now prevalent, is not based on any premise of the language planning. Consequently, the present scholarship on the classification of varieties of Bangla has been inappropriate. Therefore, a new classification of the varieties of Bangla spoken in Bangladesh has been necessitated from the perspective of language planning. Accordingly this study on the classification of varieties took a theoretical position that the development of a variety of languages is a natural process which is the subject matter in the discipline of Language Contact, while the classification of speech varieties is the focus of study in the discipline of Language Planning.

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1. In sociolinguistics, a variety is a specific form of a language or language cluster. This may include languages, dialects, accents, registers, styles or other sociolinguistic variation, as well as the standard variety itself. ‘Variety’ avoids the terms language, which many people associate only with the standard language, and dialect, which is associated with non-standard varieties thought of as less prestigious or ‘correct’ than the standard.
Creating a Premise of Language Planning for the Classification of Varieties

Though the language planning is a deliberate effort to influence the structure, function or acquisition of languages or language variety within a speech community, it helps to create a premise for the classification of speech varieties. Sociolinguists such as Kaplan and Baldauf (1997) divided the language planning into three types:

1. **Status planning**: Status planning is the allocation or reallocation of a language or variety to functional domains within a society, thus affecting the status, or standing, of a language. Status planning is a task which is primarily undertaken by the politicians with greater knowledge of policy making.

2. **Corpus planning**: Corpus planning refers to the prescriptive which intervene the forms of a language, whereby planning decisions are made to engineer changes in the structure of the language. Corpus planning activities often arise as the result of beliefs about the adequacy of the form of a language to serve desired functions. There are three traditionally recognized types of corpus planning: graphization, standardization, and modernization. Corpus planning generally involves planners with greater linguistic expertise.

3. **Acquisition planning**: Acquisition planning is a type of language planning in which a national, state or local government system aims to influence aspects of language, such as language status, distribution and literacy through education. Acquisition planning can also be used by non-governmental organizations, but it is more commonly associated with government planning.

As it is evident from the above description on language planning, the corpus planning and status planning are directly relevant to the classification of speech varieties.

State of Language Planning in Bangladesh throughout the History

Presently, the Bangladesh government has no explicit language policy to undertake the issues of structure, function and acquisition of language varieties spoken in Bangladesh. In the past, the country, now known as Bangladesh, has undergone the processes of language planning mostly in informal manner in several occasions throughout its political history. The language planning which Bangladesh has experienced in different occasions is discussed in three different sections as follow.
Language Planning in pre-Pakistan Period

During the pre-Pakistan period, language planning was the matter of royal decree; it was not associated with the wish of common people. Therefore, all the Government of that period would allocate a status to a particular variety of speech by ignoring varieties spoken by the common people in this land. As a part of language planning, the languages which were accepted as languages of status in this region until the British period include Sanskrit, Prakrit (popularly known as Pali), Persian and English, three of which now have been classical languages. Throughout this period, though some particular languages- languages of the political elites- were assigned status, the corpus planning would naturally occur in the hand of the literary scholars. The corpus of a particular language would grow through the writing of literature. For example, the corpus of Prakrit was developed through the writing and compilation of the Tripithaka, which is exclusively the result of the efforts of the Buddhist scholars. Similarly, the corpus of middle Bangla evolved through the writing of Mangla Kaviyas, e.g. Srikrishnakirtan (Shahidullah, 1965 and Chatterjee, 1926). Similarly, the corpus of the promito Bangla evolved from the efforts of writing and compiling literary works in Bangla throughout the 18th and 19th centuries.

Language Planning during Pakistan Period

After the repatriation of the British, language planning has been the concern of all the post-colonial states including Bangladesh in South Asia. In Pakistan, the language planning was undertaken under a desperate national policy of language, the main aim of which was to allocate Urdu as the national language at the expense of other languages. By this language policy, the Government of Pakistan ignored the other languages spoken in the provinces, including Purbo Bangla, Punjab, Sindh, North-West Frontier Province and Balochistan and relegated them to inferior statuses. As Rahman (1997) describes, the effects of this policy have manifested in the language situation of present day Pakistan. A case in point is Punjabi; though it is the mother tongue of about 50 per cent of the citizens of Pakistan but is not taught as a subject at school level.

Language Planning in Bangladesh Period

Bangladesh has no explicit national policy of language. It is, however, implicit that Bangladesh has some kind of mechanism which compensates for the language planning. After the independence of Bangladesh as a nation in 1971, it required a status planning, under which the Government of Bangladesh allocated the promito Bangla which was developed by the cultural elites including Rabindranath Tagore at the center of Bengali Renaissance, i.e. Kolkata during the period from the late 19th century to early 20th centuries.
This standard variety of Bangla widely spoken in Kolkata was developed through an process of corpus planning from the vernacular of Nadia district. Since the independence of Bangladesh, no measure of corpus planning has been undertaken though a kind of acquisition planning is in practice for which all the people including the minority speech communities, e.g. Garo and Hajong inhabiting in Bangladesh are required to receive education through the media of Bangla. This implicit practice of acquisition planning also allows the people in Bangladesh to receive education through the medium of English.

**Varieties of Bangla Spoken in Bangladesh**

The variety of Bangla, i.e. promito Bangla is not a vernacular of any of the regions of Bangladesh. However, the vernaculars, i.e. varieties of Bangla spoken in Bangladesh are existing as a part of a language continuum of Indic languages, e.g. Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, Bhujpuri, Chakma spoken in the Northern and North-Eastern South Asia. This existing continuum of Indic languages has been created as consequences of language contact which occurred for centuries in the past. In Bangladesh, it includes two types of speech varieties: a) speech varieties of Bangla spoken by the Bengali people and b) several speech varieties spoken by the people of Mongoloid origin, e.g. Chakma, Hajong, Tanchangya, Rajbangshi and Mal Paharia. The varieties of Bangla which are spoken in the different regions of Bangladesh show variation through a continuum spanning from the region of Meherpur (formerly a subdivision of Nadia district) to regions of Southern districts, Chittagong or Khulna. Accordingly, a particular variety of Bangla in this continuum shows a deviation from its center, i.e. Nadia district (in which Meherpur was formerly annexed as a subdivision) on the basis of which the standard variety of Bangla was developed. It means that the more distant is a particular region from Nadia, the more deviant is a speech variety of that region from the speech variety of Nadia. The varieties of Bangla in the different region show variation at different levels: phonological level, morphological level, syntactic level and semantic level of their linguistic structure. The following are the examples of these variations:
Variation in lexical level for the word 'son'

Standard variety: \textit{chhele}
Midnapore variety: \textit{po}
Malhdah variety: \textit{byata}
Manbhum variety: \textit{beta}
Shingbhum variety: \textit{chha}
Khulna and Jessore variety: \textit{chhawal}
Bogra variety: \textit{byata chhail}
Dhaka variety: \textit{pola}
Mymensingh variety: \textit{put}
Sylhet variety: \textit{puya}
Manipur variety: \textit{puto}
Noakhali variety: \textit{hut}
Chittagong variety: \textit{poya}
Chakma dialect: \textit{poya}

Variation at the morphosyntactic level for the sentence 'Will you go?' in English.

Standard variety: \textit{jaben na ki}?
Chittagong variety: \textit{jaiben ne}?
Comilla variety: \textit{jaiben ni}?
Rangpur variety: \textit{jaiben bahe}?
Mymensigh variety: \textit{jaibain na-ki}?
Sylhet variety: \textit{jaebae ni}?

Different Standpoints on the Classification of Varieties of Bangla

Grierson (1903-1928) is the first to classify the speech varieties spoken in the region, which was known as the province of Bengal. The speech varieties, which he had undertaken for classification included the varieties of Bangla spoken by the Bengali people and those of other Indic languages, e.g. Chakma and Hajong spoken by the people of Mongoloid origin. He grouped the speech
varieties of Bangla into several groups: Central (Standard) Bengali, Western Bengali (Kharia Thar, Mal Paharia, Saraki), Southwestern Bengali, Northern Bengali (Koch, Siripuria), Rajbanshi, Bahe, Eastern Bengali (East Central, including Sylheti), Hajong (Hajong), Southeastern Bengali (Chakma), Ganda, Vanga, Chittagonian (possible dialect of Southeastern Bengali). Though the grouping by Grierson is a little confusing, it sheds light on the classification of speech varieties of Bangla.

Chatterjee (1926) grouped the varieties of Bangla in this language continuum into four large clusters: Rarh, Banga, Kamarupa and Varendra. Sukumar Sen later added one more cluster of Jharkhandi- the variety of Bangla spoken in Jharkhand- to this grouping. This grouping of varieties of Bangla by Chatterjee focuses on the classification of varieties of Bangla spoken in the region of greater Bengal covering Bangladesh and Indian states of Paschim Bangla and Tripura, and parts of Assam and Jharkhand. According to this grouping, the varieties of Bangla spoken in Bangladesh can be grouped into two clusters:

1. Varendra cluster- the languages of Northern districts, and
2. Banga cluster- the languages of Southern districts except the variety of Chittagong.

Though this grouping has long been considered to be appropriate, a regrouping of the speech varieties of Bangla has been necessitated after the independence of Bangladesh. As it is noted previously, the classification of speech varieties involves linguistic analyses and decision making undertaken under a language policy, which, however, Bangladesh does not have. In the absence of such a language policy, there presently emerged two standpoints for the classification of varieties of Indic languages spoken in Bangladesh with two different lines of orientation.

The Standpoint based on Domestic Scholarship

There is a standpoint on the classification of speech varieties of Bangla based on the writings of academics and independent scholars. According to this standpoint, there are as many varieties of Bangla as there is the number of greater districts. This version of standpoint has been supplemented by some institutions within the country including the Bangla Academy (BA) and the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh (ASB).

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2. He has view that Rajbangsi, Kharia Thar and Mal Paharia are closely related to Western Bengali dialects, but are typically classified as separate languages. Similarly, Hajong is considered to be a separate language, although it shares similarities to Northern Bengali.
The ASB has recently (2006) come with a collection of essays in the Banglapedia which shows that there is a standard variety along with at least 16 regional varieties of Bangla spoken in the greater districts of Barisal, Bogra, Chittagong, Comilla, Dhaka, Dinajpur, Faridpur, Jessore, Khulna, Kushtia, Mymensingh, Noakhali, Pabna, Rajshahi, Rangpur and Sylhet.

Morshed3 (2006), however, in an essay of the Banglapedia attempted to group the regional varieties of Bangla into four different clusters:

- North Bengal dialects those of Dinajpur, Rajshahi, Bogra and Pabna;
- Rajbanshi, the dialect of Rangpur;
- East Bengal dialects which include those of a) Dhaka, Mymensigh, Tripura, Barisal and Sylhet, as well as b) Faridpur, Jessore and Khulna, and
- South Bengal dialects including those of Chittagong and Noakhali and some languages of Chittagong hill-tracts, e.g. Chakmas and Murongs spoken by the people of Mongoloid origin.

The Perverted Standpoint of the Foreign Institutions

Apart from the above-mentioned domestic scholarship, there has been a perverted standpoint on the classification of speech varieties of Bangla promoted by some foreign organizations. The Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) Bangladesh is one of them which is registered as an NGO with the NGO Affairs Bureau in Bangladesh and funded by different foreign organizations. It is involved in developing the orthography of the languages of minority speech communities in Bangladesh in cooperation with the Bible Society of Bangladesh. The parent organization of it, i.e. SIL International came up with a publication on the linguistic landscape of the world in the form of book titled Ethnologue: Languages of the World (cf. Lewis, 2009). With its own perspective, it classifies all the varieties of Bangla into four different languages: Bangla, Chittagongian, Sylheti and Rangpuri. Hence, it allocates the varieties spoken in the greater districts of Chittagong, Sylhet and Rangpur as separate languages. The SIL, however, does not concern with any kind of regional varieties of Bangla.

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3. He additionally grouped the varieties of Bangla spoken in West Bengal into two clusters: (1) Rarhi and Jharkhandi dialects, spanning the regions of South and West Burdwan and most Presidency district, and 2) Varendri and Kamrupi, spanning Goalpara and Purnia.
Appraisal of Different Standpoints on the Classification of Varieties of Bangla

The classification of speech varieties as dialects or languages and their relationship to other varieties of speech usually results in controversies and inconsistent verdicts. The literature of speech varieties of Chinese and Hindi address this point. Though Chinese shows variation across China with different speech varieties, e.g. Mandarin, Cantonese and Shanghainese, they are not classified as different languages despite they are mutually unintelligible. Similarly, Hindi shows variation in speech varieties across regions. The government of India, however, considers other speech varieties, e.g. Awadhi, Bagheli, Bhojpuri, Bundeli, Chhattisgarhi, Garhwali, Harauti, Haryanvi, Khortha, Kumauni, Lamani, Magadhi, Malvi, Marwari, Mewari, Nimadi, Pahari, Rajasthani, and Sadri (which comprises 39% of the Hindi speaking population) as the dialects of Hindi. In a similar vein, the classifications of varieties of Bangla provided respectively by the ASB and the SIL have brought forth such controversies.

The ASB, which lacks the evidence of corpus planning, shows that there is a standard variety of Bangla along with at least 16 regional varieties. The classification of the varieties of Bangla which has come into existence is partly supplemented with the evidence of corpus planning. Morshed (2006) in order to group the varieties of Bangla into clusters included the speech varieties of Chakma and Murong in the cluster of South Bengal dialects. In this way his consideration of speech varieties, e.g. Chakma and Murong of minority speech communities as the dialects of Bangla has brought forth a controversy.

On the contrary, the SIL has a standpoint on the classification of speech varieties which is not based on the corpus planning at all. Though the publication of the SIL by Lewis (2009) does not concern with any kind of regional varieties, it bears a standpoint which considers some speech varieties spoken in the greater districts of Chittagong, Sylhet and Rangpur as the separate languages. The SIL puts the speech varieties of Chittagong, Sylhet and Rangpur in a cluster together with other Indic languages spoken by the people of Mongoloid origin, e.g. Bishnupuriya, Chakma, Hajong and Rohingya as follows.
Table 1: Classification of Speech Varieties of Bangla and Other Indic Languages by the SIL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speakers by Racial identity</th>
<th>Languages</th>
<th>Number of speakers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bengali people</td>
<td>Bengali</td>
<td>110,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chittagongian</td>
<td>13,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rangapuri</td>
<td>10,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sylhetti</td>
<td>7,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>140,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Bengali people</td>
<td>Bishnupuriya</td>
<td>40,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chakma,</td>
<td>150,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hajong</td>
<td>8,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rohingya</td>
<td>200,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>398,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As it is evident in the above table, the classification of varieties of Bangla by the SIL has lead to a statistics which shows that the population of Bangla speakers in Bangladesh is only 11 cores. Though this standpoint has little support, it is gaining support from the vested corner involved in deconstructing the spirit of nationalism of Bangladesh.

It is here mentionable that the institutions or organization commissioned under a language policy by the Government usually undertake the allocation of status to the particular speech varieties under the status planning. However, the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh and the Summer Institute of Linguistics which allocated the status to some speech varieties are not commissioned to undertake the status planning of the speech varieties spoken in Bangladesh by the Government of Bangladesh.

**Conclusion**

As we come through the discussion in the foregoing sections, the premise of language planning emphasizes the necessity for the utilization of wisdom of corpus planning and status planning in the classification of speech varieties. However, the current scholarship on the classification of varieties of Bangla lacks an appropriate premise of language planning and enough findings on the corpus planning. Due to these lacking of appropriate premise and findings of corpus planning, there grew a contention between different standpoints on the classification of speech varieties. This contention, however, can be reconciled if the classification of varieties of Bangla is undertaken on the findings of corpus planning as well as the status planning in the premise of language planning.
References


