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Language Attitude among the Students of Higher Education Institutions in Assam: A Contemporary Perspective

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Abstract:

The impact of globalization coupled with the technological developments is going to play a significant role in forming new linguistic climate of the twenty-first century. The emergence of English as a genuine world language is achieved especial prominence during the 1990s. When a language becomes a world language, what happens to it, and what happens to other languages as a consequence inspires researchers to enquire into. The arrival of global language, English, has altered the balance of linguistic power in unprecedented ways, and generated a whole new set of attitudes about language and languages. This paper intends to study the language attitude of students of higher education institutes in Assam towards English and mother tongue (Assamese) in the context of education, employability, trade and commerce and administrative use. The paper finds increasing dominance of English language in education, employability etc., and diminishing use of Assamese language in the said fields. It finally expressed concern over the future of the Assamese language.

Keywords: *Language attitude, globalization, global language, mother tongue*

1. Introduction

Impact of 'globalization' on different domains of society is a current theme that is discussed in local to international forum all over the world. The impact of this economic force coupled with the technological developments is going to play a significant role in forming the new linguistic climate of the twenty-first century. The emergence of English as a genuine world language is achieved especial prominence during the 1990s. When a language becomes a world language, what happens to it, and what happens to other languages as a consequence? The arrival of global language, English, has altered the balance of linguistic power in unprecedented ways, and generated a whole new set of attitudes about language and languages. Many speech communities have begun to feel threatened by a situation which can alter the character of their language, or, in the worst case, cause the use of their language to become so reduced that its very survival is at risk. In this context it is essential to study the changing language ecology, especially, in the Third World multilingual country.

The effect of globalization on the power, status and use of Indian languages is not immediately visible like its effect on economy, industry, etc. However, on language, globalization has indirect but highly effective and long lasting impact. English is the medium of a great deal of the world's knowledge, especially in such areas as science and technology. And access to knowledge is the business of education. Education and employment opportunities are directly related. So also are education and language. As education as a commodity, language that is used to impart instruction also has turned out to be a commodity. Only a saleable commodity remains in the market and others go out of the market. The education sector provides goods – human resources to both market and technology. The market decides employment opportunities, and the employability of the human resource. Therefore, it is needful to study the attitudes of the students towards English and mother tongue in the context of employability, technology, administrative use and trade and commerce. The paper aims to study the present scenario of language attitudes among the students of higher education institutions in Assam.

2. Language Attitude

Attitude is a mental disposition towards something; it acts as a bridge between opinion and behaviour. Attitude Studies figure in many scientific fields, such as psychology, sociolinguistics, cultural anthropology, ethnography, and education. Different researchers of various fields focus on different areas and hence definitions reflect their different perspectives. A vast variety of definitions of the concept of attitude exist. Language attitudes are distinguished from other attitudes by the fact that they are precisely about language. There is a broad range of perspectives to define language attitude. Some language attitude studies are strictly limited to attitudes towards language itself. Most often, however, the definition of language attitudes broadened to include towards speakers of a particular language or dialect. An even further broadening of the definition allows all sorts of behaviour concerning language

Generally, two theoretical approaches are distinguished to the study of language attitudes. The first one is the behaviourist view, according to which attitudes must be studied by observing the responses to certain languages, i.e., their use in actual interactions. The mentalist view considers attitudes as an internal, mental state, which may give rise to certain forms of behaviour. It can be described as “an intervening variable between a stimulus affecting a person and that person’s response”ⁱ. Crystal (1997) views language attitude as the feelings people have about their own language or the languages of othersⁱⁱ. The study of attitudes in general begins with a decision between two competing theories about the nature of attitudes. Most language-attitude work is based on a mentalist view of attitude as a state of readiness. A typical mentalist definition of attitude is found in Fasold (1987): “Attitude is considered as an internal state aroused by stimulation of some type and which may mediate the organism’s subsequent response”ⁱⁱⁱ. At a general level, however, attitude is a disposition to react favourably or unfavourably to a class of objects. This disposition is often taken to comprise three components: feelings (affective element), thoughts (cognitive element) and, following upon these, predispositions to act in a certain way (behavioural element). That is, one knows or believes something, has some emotional reaction to it and, therefore, may be assumed to act on this basis. Two points may be made here. The first is that there often exists inconsistency between assessed attitudes and actions presumably related to them. The second point is that there is sometimes confusion between belief and attitude; this is particularly so in the domain of language attitudes, and often shows up clearly on questionnaires and interviews designed to tap them. Attitude includes belief as one of its components^{iv}.

It is clear that while there is a broad range of perspectives from which to define language attitude, the general unifying concepts about attitude are that it involves both beliefs and feelings, that it theoretically should influence behaviour, and that there are a range of issues about which people have language attitudes, from opinions about one’s own language, to foreign speakers of one’s own language, to foreign languages, to official policies regarding languages.

3. Methodology

Present study has adopted the mentalist view. From mentalist point of view, the study examines the attitude of the students of higher education towards mother tongue and English in the context of employability, technology, administrative use and trade & commerce. The data and information used in this paper are adopted from a research project conducted by an M.Phil. Scholar in the Dibrugarh University Campus^v. A sample of 120 students has been selected purposively from across the disciplines covering Arts, Science, Engineering and commerce. From the individual discipline, again sample students are taken from undergraduate and post-graduate level separately.

A questionnaire is the most often used method in language attitudes study. The questions that have been asked on these questionnaires have been valuable in giving a general picture of how people feel about their languages. To learn the language attitude of the students, a structured questionnaire has been served and responses have been collected. The questionnaire consists of two parts. Each part has its own focus. The objective of Part one is to find out the students’ attitude towards their mother tongue and related language development issues. The objective of the part two of the questionnaire is to understand the attitude of the students towards English language in the context of employability, administrative use, trade and commerce etc. Overall the questionnaire intends to find out what attitude the students possess towards English and Assamese (their mother tongue) for education, employment, business and administrative use. Apart from the questionnaire, researcher’s personal observations also play an important role in collecting data.

4. Discussion

The responses collected through the questionnaire have been tabulated and analysis of the responses reveals the following:

When the sample students were asked about their preference of language as a medium of instruction in education, responses vary at different levels of education. At the primary level 61.67 percent prefer mother tongue as medium of instruction and only 23.33 percent opines in favour of English. In the secondary level preference for mother tongue was 22.5 percent and for English, it was 60 percent. Similarly, in Higher secondary, preference for mother tongue 17.5 percent and English 69.17 percent; in the graduation level – mother tongue 10.83 percent and English 76.67 percent and in the post-graduate level – mother tongue 5.84 percent and English 83.33 percent. From the opinion of the students, we find that the higher two level of education, the higher is the preference for English language and the lower is the preference for mother tongue.

In the context of getting employment opportunities, 50 percent of the sample students express that English language has the greatest demand. Because the employment tests and interviews by both the government and non-government organizations and various competitive examinations are held usually in English. Besides, most of the transactions in the multinational companies, banks and many government offices use of English language is prevalent. Thus, fluency in the English language helps in getting employment. In this era of liberalization, privatization and globalisation, business transactions relating to e-marketing, e-banking etc are increasing the demand for English language. Hence, 48 percent of the respondents feel that English medium is helpful in attaining economic self-reliance. Only 16.6 percent students feel that a person’s enterprise, competence, attitude etc are more important than the language proficiency.

In the context of trade and commerce, 41.67 percent students opine that the demand for Assamese, Hindi and English are almost equal. However, it is said that depending upon the size and level of the business, demand for language varies. Interestingly, the students of the Department of Commerce express that knowledge of the Assamese language is very much necessary for trade and commerce in Assam.

When students were asked which medium of education would be helpful for a secured future, 52.54 percent voted for English medium. According to them, English medium students are preferred by the employers. Besides, in these days of information

technology, knowledge of different subjects can be acquired through English language and thereby one can mould himself or herself according to the need of the time.

In the context of Assam, 7.5 percent of the respondents are of the opinion that Assamese medium is more effective for a secured future. Some of them feel that students from Assamese medium school are having better chance for a secured future. On the other hand, 21.67 percent of the sample students did not express any opinion regarding the medium of education. They said that the medium of education does not determine a secured future.

As stated earlier, this study tries to understand the attitude of the students towards their mother tongue (Assamese) in the context of the future of the language. Assam is a land of many ethno-linguistic groups who speak different languages as their mother tongue. However, Assamese speech community is the major language community in Assam and the different ethnic groups also speak Assamese language. According to the 2001 census data, the number of Assamese speaking people in Assam was 1, 30, and 10,478. By this time this figure must have crossed 1.5 crore. Apart from having this number of speakers of Assamese language, considerable number of respondents of our study expressed concern over the diminishing use of their mother tongue (Assamese) in practical situations.

One of the reasons the respondents have cited for the diminishing use of Assamese in different sectors is mushroom growth of English medium schools in every nook and corner of the State. Presently, most of the parents like to send their children to English medium schools for obvious reasons. As they have mentioned earlier, for undergoing higher education in Science and Technology, Information Technology, Medicine, Engineering and Management knowledge of English is a must. Hence, the parents and students themselves want have their elementary education too in English medium so that they can get easily admitted to the higher education institutions of their choice. As the students earn education in English medium from the beginning, most of the students neglect learning of their mother tongue (Assamese). The students pursuing education in English medium schools usually communicate among their peers in English and as such Assamese is getting neglected in day to day communication too. Many students studying in the higher education institutions are found not being able to read and write in their mother tongue (Assamese).

Like education, in the employment sector also diminishing use of Assamese language is evident. As stated earlier, most of the employment tests and interviews are held in English. For many of the jobs, employers specially want proficiency in English language both in speaking and writing. So, to get a job of their choice, students put extra efforts in learning English and having proficiency in the language and thus use of Assamese language is gradually decreasing.

In the context of trade and commerce, some of the respondents said that for running trade and commerce activities in Assam, knowledge of Assamese language is essential. But this is required for day to day transactions between customers and the businessmen. Actually, one needs to be capable of speaking Assamese language to do business in Assam. Whereas, all the higher business dealings among wholesalers and retailers, manufacturers and suppliers, manufacturers and distributors have been taking place in English. All the written business communications are also performed in English. Though the business dealings with the customers mostly take place in spoken Assamese, for higher business dealings and communications, Assamese language does not find a place.

Information Technology is another area which has brought lot of changes in the day to day life of the younger generation. It has influence in taste and preference, communication language, fashion etc of the youth. Presently, information pertaining to any subject and anything of the world are available in the Internet. Now Internet is all inclusive in subject-matter, designed for multimedia interaction between computer users anywhere in the world. Besides, through e-marketing one can purchase necessary items of daily use and items of latest style and fashion sitting at home. In all these transactions and communications, English is the only medium which is also an important threat to Assamese language. Thus, these have caused diminishing use of the mother tongue of the educated youth (Assamese).

As stated earlier, most of the government communications, notices, and circulars are found to be served in English. In spite of the enactment of the Assam Official Language Act in the year 1960, most of the official communications of the government of Assam are made in English till today. Government of Assam of different parties from time to time are also to be blamed for diminishing use of Assamese language by not implementing the Official Language Act in true spirit. Our respondents of the study also pointed out this fact and have shown concern over the diminishing usage of Assamese language at the instance of the government.

5. Conclusion

From the foregoing discussion on the attitude of the students in the higher education institution, it is evident that English has gradually been dominating in different sectors of the society. In the current era of globalization, almost all the Indian languages have been cornered to a position of helpless defence. How they are going to defend their own territories and continue a meaningful existence is the question that we should ponder in the near future. Assamese is also in such a position of helpless defence. English is the dominant language in the Internet. Since, it is the language of globalization; it already has the well-defined or allocated status of the global language.

The greatest threat to the future of Assamese language is not the growing importance of English, but the gradual neglect of Assamese language by the Assamese people themselves. This is evident from the mushroom growth of English medium schools and neglect of the Assamese medium schools. To protect the language, Assamese people must be conscious about it and different social organizations should come forward to pressurise the government to implement the Official Language Act. People must be motivated to use the Assamese language in the official communications, in the Sign Boards of different offices, shops and establishments. This concern is seen in other parts of India whereas in Assam, not to speak of bigger towns and cities, in small urban centres of the state sign boards are written in English. If the people themselves are not taking care of their own language, in these days of globalization, dominance of English will reduce Assamese to the status of an endangered language.

6. References

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