

MULTILINGUALISM IN MULTICULTURAL CONTEXT: THE CASE OF MANIPUR

Dr. M. Rameshwor Singh
Assistant Professor
P.G. Department of English
D.M. College of Arts, Imphal

Dr. H. Subrata Singh
Assistant Professor
P.G. Department of English
D.M. College of Arts, Imphal

Abstract

Bilingualism or Multilingualism is a worldwide phenomenon. Most nations have speakers of more than one language. Hundreds of millions of people the world over routinely make use of two or more languages in their daily lives. Even, the so-called monolinguals also routinely switch from one language variety to another in the course of their daily interactions. A multi-lingual's facility in moving from one language to another as the occasions demand is but an extension of the monolingual's capacity to shift registers and styles. The study of multilingualism, therefore, not only focuses on one of the most significant types of language use but also has the potential to shed light on language behaviour in general. In a heterogeneous speech community, with varying degrees of linguistic diversity and social complexity, speakers interact by using different speech varieties drawn from a repertoire of choices. On the contrary, the distribution of usage of these choices is determined by several factors in the social communicative system of the community. The term 'multilingualism' is aptly applicable in the context of Manipuri society. Manipur is actually a microcosmic aspect of the Indian union. Here, more than 30 recognized dialects are spoken by various communities all over the state. The teaching and learning of any dominant dialect in a complicated multilingual setting like Manipur is a multipurpose and multidimensional task because in such a society different languages or dialects are allocated different functions depending on the prevailing multicultural circumstances. The present paper attempts to highlight the multilingual character of its people in the multicultural context of Manipur. It attempts to showcase the socio-linguistic and socio-psychological factors behind learning and using a particular language or languages. It also attempts to point out the language-specific issues and factors affecting language education in the state.

Key words: Multilingualism, Multiculturalism, Linguistic diversity, Language behaviour, Language education.

Introduction:

The terms *bilingualism* and *multilingualism* have been used interchangeably in the literature and language study to refer to the knowledge or use of more than one language by an individual or a community. Multilingualism can be, and has been, studied both as an individual and as a societal phenomenon. When it is viewed as an individual phenomenon, one is concerned with issues such as how one acquires two or more languages in childhood and how they are accessed for speaking and writing and for comprehension. When it is viewed as a societal phenomenon, one is concerned with its institutional dimensions, i.e. with issues such as the status and roles of the languages in a given society, attitudes towards languages, determinants of language choice, the symbolic and practical uses of the languages, and the correlations between language use and social factors such as ethnicity, religion and class.

Bilingualism or multilingualism is a worldwide phenomenon. Most nations have speakers of more than one language. Hundreds of millions of people the world over routinely make use of two or three languages in their daily lives. Furthermore, even so-called monolinguals also routinely switch from one language variety – a regional dialect, the standard language, a specialized technical register, a formal or informal style and so on to another in the course of their daily interactions. According to one influential theory (Gumperz, 1971), a multi-lingual's facility in moving from one language to another as the occasions demand is but an extension of the monolingual's capacity to shift registers and styles. The study of multilingualism, therefore, not only focuses on one of the most significant types of language use but also has the potential to shed light on language behavior in general.

Reasons for Multilingualism:

There are many reasons for societies to become multilingual. The most obvious factor leading to societal multilingualism is migration. When speakers of one language settle in an area where another language is used and over the years continue to maintain their own language, the result is multilingualism. Another cause of societal multilingualism is cultural contact. When a society imports and assimilates the cultural institutions (e.g. religion or literature) of another society over the years, multilingualism may result. Other reasons include the commercial, scientific, and technological dependence of the speakers of certain languages on the speakers of other languages.

Language Choice:

As a discipline, sociolinguistics provides the methodology for analysis and description of the interactional context: 'who uses what language with whom and for what purpose?' It provides frameworks with which to analyze the linguistic choice available to the multilinguals and their reasons for choosing one code from among the several that are available to them. One basic assumption in sociolinguistics involving multilingual speech communities, as stated by Elias-Olivares (1979), is that:

In a heterogeneous speech community, with varying degrees of linguistic diversity and social complexity, speakers interact by using different speech varieties drawn from a repertoire of choices, which for the most part are not random. On the contrary, the distribution of usage of these choices is determined by several factors in the social communicative system of the community.

An examination of how the languages of a multilingual community are used reveals a highly sophisticated and efficient pattern. Not all the languages are used in all the domains. It is believed that certain languages are particularly suited to certain domains. There is an enormous body of research investigating language use in different domains, for example, language use in intimate (e.g. family, friends, neighbourhood) versus utilitarian (e.g. place of work, government offices, banks) domains has been investigated by many researchers. K.K. Shridhar demonstrates that speakers in urban centres in South India employ a triple-layered distribution in which English, the regional language and Hindi (the official language of the country) play different roles, depending on intimacy, status, and power.

All the languages in the repertoire of a multilingual community are not equally distributed in terms of power, prestige, vitality, or attitude. In other words, some languages are more valued than others. For instance, in a tribal community in North-East India, the tribal dialect may be given a lower status in the hierarchy because its sphere may be limited in the community itself. Whereas an educated tribal may give higher position in learning English because English empowers the speaker to gain access to higher technical education, to communicate on an intercommunity, interstate and international level, and to participate in the influential national press and media, and it provides national and international mobility as a job-seeking candidate. Depending on lifestyle and networks of business and personal interactions, an individual might also learn one or more regional languages, which he or she will use with varying degrees of proficiency. Thus, in a multi-lingual's verbal repertoire each language uniquely fulfills certain roles and represents distinct identities, and all of them complement one another to serve the complex communicative demands of a pluralistic society.

In another aspect, the dynamics of language in a multilingual society reflect the evolution of power in that society. Thus, the languages of multilingual society exist in a state of organic tension with one another that involves small but cumulatively perceptible shifts in functional range. This state of organic tension of languages in case of Manipur is perceptible in the recent trends of imposing ban on Hindi movies in the theatres by the militant outfits. The efforts of Meitei *Eyok Erol Loinasillon Apunba Lup (MEELAL)*, an organization working for the cause of developing the native language) to replace the Bengali scripts by the indigenous Manipuri scripts is another indicator of the native people's resistance to Hindi dominance.¹

Socio-linguistic and socio-psychological factors behind learning language:

The study of language attitudes is a complex phenomenon, originated in social psychology as a discipline. The issue of language attitudes has become important particularly in view of the regular formation and growth of multilingual societies. The individuals are under constant pressure to learn more than one language because of pragmatic/cultural/political reasons. The languages in such situations often generate linguistic controversies about the relevance and primary or supremacy of one language over others. The individuals undergoing the process of socialization develop positive, negative or mixed attitudes toward one or more languages. However, more interesting are the cases of contradictory positions of condemning a language in which one has acquired or has a desire to acquire a very high level of proficiency. For example, a Caribbean writer, Jamaica Kincaid indicts the colonial rule and English as an instrument of colonization: "Isn't it odd that the only language I

¹MEELAL in their protest against the government policies and pressing their demand to include the Meitei Mayek (indigenous Manipuri script and language) in the school curriculum and recruit Meitei Mayek teachers unfortunately burnt down the central library located at Imphal in April, 2005.

have in which to speak of this crime is the language of the criminal who committed the crime? And what can that really mean? For the language of the criminal can contain only the goodness of the criminal's deed..." (Bailey, 1996). On the other hand, it is possible that individuals, in spite of their positive attitudes toward a language, make no effort to acquire proficiency in that language because the target language lacks social or instrumental value. Some people wish to relate themselves to their culture, roots and people but at the same time do not want to be left behind in the race achieving economic benefits, social prestige and positions of power. The relationship between language attitudes and power is an important socio-linguistic issue (Phillipson, 1992).

Another area of great interest is where a language holds social as well as instrumental value and people wish to gain proficiency in it but cannot fulfill their wish because of their socio-economic background, improper training and learning and living environment. In these situations, individuals make decisions about which language to learn and use. They must choose between the opportunity to gain social mobility and prestige by adopting the language of power and dominance or to maintain the ethnic identity by preserving their own language. Many people develop ambivalent language attitudes under cultural, pragmatic, and socio-economic pressures.

Multilingualism in Manipur's multicultural context:

Manipur is a state in North-Eastern India, with Imphal as its capital city. It is bounded by Nagaland to the north, Mizoram to the south, and Assam to the west. Myanmar lies to the eastern side of the state. The state covers an area of 22,327 square kilometers and has a population of 28,55,794 (according to 2011 census report), including the Meetei, who are the majority group in the state, Naga, Kuki and Manipuri Pangal (Muslim) people, who speak a variety of Sino-Tibetan languages. Besides, Nepalis and Marwaris also form a major chunk of the population in the state. The Meetei ethnic group represents 26.3% of the population of Manipur. The main language of the state is Meeteilon (also known as Manipuri). In addition to Manipuri language, some main tribal languages/dialects spoken in Manipur are Tangkhul, Thadou-Kuki, Paite, Kabui, Mao, Hmar, Liangmei, Kom, Lushai, etc. By comparison, indigenous tribal population constitutes more than 20% of the state. They are distinguished by dialects and cultures that are often village-based. Manipur's ethnic groups practice a variety of religions. According to 2011 census, Hinduism is the major religion in the state, closely followed by Christianity. Other religions include Islam, *Sanamahism*², Buddhism, etc.

In Manipur, Meeteilon is the predominant language and *lingua franca*. It is the official language in government offices. It is also spoken in the other Indian states of Assam and Tripura, and in Bangladesh and Myanmar. However, it is currently classified as a vulnerable language by UNESCO. It is a Tibeto-Burman language whose exact classification remains unclear. It has lexical resemblances to Kuki and Tangkhul Naga. The Manipuri language has been considered as the integrating factor among all ethnic groups in Manipur who use it to communicate among themselves. It has been recognized by the Indian union and has been included in the list of scheduled languages (included in the 8th schedule by the 71st amendment of the constitution in 1992). Apart from being a

²Sanamahi Iainig refers to the indigenous peoples' religious belief and practice prevalent since time immemorial. With the coming of Vaishnavism in Manipur in the 18th century, it has been affected a lot. Still a large section of the population follows this cultural and religious belief and practice in the state.

medium of instruction up to the undergraduate level, Manipuri is taught as a subject up to the Post-Graduate and Ph.D. level in some of the universities in India.

Manipur is a place where, in addition to a very rich linguistically diverse landscape, there is Manipuri, English and Hindi used as *lingua franca*. As a consequence of multiplicity of mutually unintelligible languages coexisting in a symbiotic relationship, language contact situation arise where languages tend to influence each others in significant ways. The linguistic behaviour of Manipuri speakers of English is rather complicated. Every literate Manipuri by default is multilingual because he has to learn Manipuri or a tribal dialect as the mother tongue, Hindi as the national language and English as the link language. They have a strong tendency to preserve and develop their own culture and language, and in the meantime, they want to participate in the current trend by encouraging the young generation to have greater exposure in the sphere of education.

Moreover, there is a close affinity between the ELT scenario in India and that of Manipur. Manipuri society, at large, is also a multicultural and multilingual one. In such a complex situation, there arises a need for a common link that can bridge up all the differences. Though Manipuri is the *lingua franca* in Manipur, several communities' attitudes towards this language is the matter that is to be taken into account. Moreover, the question of common link language is not socially neutral. In a multiple linguistic set up like ours, there is always a possibility of having linguistic tension. Therefore, the analysis of the complex problems concerning society, language and teaching and learning of languages in a multilingual, multicultural and multiethnic society like Manipur have great theoretical importance in addition to its practical implications.

Language-specific issues in Manipur:

Manipur is microcosmic aspect of the Indian Union. More than 30 recognized dialects are spoken by various communities all over the state. Manipuri (Meiteilon) along with various tribal dialects are introduced in the school curriculum. Most of the dialects (other than the Manipuri) spoken by various tribes in the state have no script and therefore, Roman scripts are used to write these dialects. English has been introduced as the accepted medium of instruction in most of the schools, colleges and university in the state. The teaching and learning of English or any other dominant language in a complicated multilingual setting like Manipur is a multipurpose and multidimensional task because in such societies different languages/dialects are allocated different functions depending on the prevailing circumstances.

As the Manipuri learners are mostly bilinguals or multilinguals, English to them is a second language after their respective mother tongues. However, depending on its relevance in the current situation, the roles and functions attach to this language in the multilingual and multiethnic social context like ours have variously been defined. Considering the recent developments in the socio-economic and socio-cultural life of the people, the needs and requirements of the learners of this language have also been changed. In addition, at the same time, the use of the said language and related problems has increased. The following are some of the language-related issues prevailing in the state.

Code-switching and code-mixing:

When two or more languages exist in a community, speakers frequently switch from one language to another. This phenomenon, known as code-switching (Mckay, 1996), has attracted a great deal of research attention in the last two or three decades. Scholars have investigated the

structural patterns, functional determinants, social correlates, and psycholinguistic processes of code-switching in diverse communities such as India, Kenya and the United States to name just a few. Code-switching is not random, but functionally motivated. In order to explain code-switching, we need theory of language that considers not only the structure of sentences but also the structure of conversations, theory that addresses not only grammaticality of sentences but also their acceptability with reference to the functions of language and the contexts in which it is used.

A common mode of code-switching is the switching of languages within sentences, which some researchers refer to as *code-mixing*. The example from Kachru in Hindi-English (1992a) is illustrative: “*Bhai, Khana Khao* (Brother, eat up), *and let us go*”. Consider also this example from Manipuri and English:

Director: Tomba, File do loirabra? Mantrina file do ngashi pikhatlaktaba yade haibani. Mantrigi phone kadi laklamdabra? Khara thuna amukta loisillu, ei meeting amasu yaoba chatkadabani (in mixed code).

Tomba, have you completed the file? Minister asked to submit that file today itself. Did the minister ring up? Complete the file quickly. By the way, I have to go to attend a meeting (in English).

The distinction between code-switching and code-mixing is important because code-mixing raises several issues involving grammar. For example, what kinds of morphemes, words or phrases can be mixed from one language into another? Is this mixture governed by the grammar of the host or the embedded language? Are there any universal constraints on the structure of such bilingual mixing? What textual, stylistic, or literary functions are served by such mixing? These and related questions have been studied extensively since the mid-1970s, making code-mixing one of the hottest topics in the research on bilingualism or multilingualism.

Code-mixing and code-switching serve the same functions. Among the more prominent functions is *identity marking*. A speaker may use a particular code to signal a specific type of identity. For example, English or French is used for modernity, sophistication, or authority in many parts of the world; Sanskrit for nationalistic and traditionalistic image in India (Kachru, 1978); Arabic and Persian for Islamic identity; and local languages for ethnic or tribal solidarity in North East India. Code-mixing also serves important socio-cultural and textual functions as an expression of certain types of complex personalities and communities. It is a versatile and appropriate vehicle, especially for the expression of multicultural communities. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that many creative writers have used code-mixing as a powerful expressive resource to convey multicultural experiences. As increased communication brings greater linguistic and cultural contact among nations, an increasing use of code-mixing can be found in many multilingual societies around the world.

In Manipur, it has been observed that the Manipuri bilinguals use many English and Hindi words in their everyday conversation. Earlier, code-mixing with English was common in professional and academic domains but was hardly noticed in personal domains and vernacular literature. However, this trend is slowly changing as code -mixing with English has made inroads into the family situations even. Educated speakers, especially in urban areas, code-mix with English words in their everyday communication. Code mixing with English has cut across language barriers. It is considered a marker of modernization, socio-economic position and membership in an elite group. The strong motivation to learn English in Manipur has made it obligatory to use English in normal day-to-day conversation. Other than the prestige, status, motivation et al attach to this

language, there are numerous other reasons for the sprinkling of English words and expressions in conversation. For instance, technical terms or scientific terms are best understood in English and therefore, even if there are loan translations or equivalents for those words people prefer to use them in English as they are understood easily. In such places, the use of English is inevitable. However, what is surprising is that people use several English words for which equivalents exist in their mother tongues. It becomes imperative to study the various social and psychological factors that are responsible for or necessitate code-mixing.

There are various factors affecting language education in any social situation. Some of them are:

Linguistic Skills (of parents and learners):

Linguistic skills in different language indicate one's educational and social position. In fact, skills in some language are acquired as a commodity. These skills can also be marketed as a pride possession. The linguistic skills in more than one languages mark individuals as educated persons. The children of such parents who have higher linguistic skills may benefit from them (parents) in achieving high level of linguistic skills. They also can influence their children to acquire these skills. Thus, the level of linguistic skills of a student and his parents is also an indicator of one's socio-economic background and the level of proficiency in the target language.

Previous education:

Previous education of a student may play an important role in his choice for a language for higher education. It includes the medium of instruction, the location and the educational standard of the school one attended. The location of a school in terms of urban and rural area is an indicator of the availability or lack of proper facilities at the school.

Medium of instruction:

It can be stated here that if people recommend a language as more suitable than the other languages for the medium of instruction at different stages of education, it conveys their attitude toward the language(s) under consideration and the relevance of the recommended language for the people because of various reasons. For example, if the mother tongue of a community is recommended as the medium, it is because education is more easily acquired through the mother tongue and people held their mother tongue in high esteem. Nevertheless, if a language other than the mother tongue of a community is used as the medium of instruction, it is because that the language is perceived to have instrumental value.

Motivation:

Motivation is generally considered to have an important role in language learning. Revising their previous thesis of positive attitudes and success in second language acquisition, Gardner and Lambert (1972) categorized motivational orientation as integrative, instrumental, resentment and manipulative. They found that the instrumental motivation also played a significant role in second language acquisition. When a learner perceives that the target language is an instrument of doing things, the motivation is said to be *instrumental*. *Integrative* motivation is concerned with a person's desire to be the part of the target linguistic community. The motivation is identified as *resentment*

when someone learns the target language under various kinds of pressure and it is *manipulative* if target language is learnt with the aim of using it to manipulate the situation.

Agnihotri and Khanna (1997) have argued that all types of motivational orientation introduced and advocated by Gardner and Lambert do not obtain in India in the context of learning English as a second language. They point out that in India, “People learn English for a variety of reasons but all of them have unmistakable instrumental colour; some are integratively instrumental, some instrumentally integrative and some instrumental despite resentment” (Agnihotri and Khanna, 1997:83). It is possible to elaborate it further and add two more categories of *environment-adaptive* motivation and *self-improvement* motivation, which, in some way, may be viewed as instrumental. When someone learns the target language to earn the appreciation of the people and to add it as an attraction to his personality, it may be described as *environment-adaptive* motivation. The motivational orientation is *self-improvement* if an individual learns the target language at the higher level of education to improve his skills in that language. Thus, the languages are learnt for a variety of inter-mixed reasons and the situation is more complicated when it is pursued for higher academic study. But an important point to note is that the instrumental motivation is the most prominent when someone studies a language for a higher degree and it is irrespective of whether the language is mother tongue, second language or a foreign language.

Conclusion and implications:

It is certain that the learner is a member of a community that has certain views about the purpose of teaching and learning languages and the role that language teaching fulfills in the general system of education. These views are a reflection of the attitudes the community adopts towards the language being taught. The implication of these attitudes and views can be far-reaching. For instance, if a language is a second language in the students’ own community, it has a clear practical use in everyday life and the students will be aware of this. Similarly, if the learner knows that he is learning an international *lingua franca*, he will see its practical relevance for his future life, and more general question concerning the educational and literary value of the language will be seen less important. It is right that the social and economic needs of the community should exert the most powerful influence on shaping the content and methodology of language teaching courses, and in this connection, it is interesting to see how English teaching enterprises, ELT materials and methodology, motivation and parental outlook to this language in Manipur are gradually being transformed.

In general, the global objectives of language teaching and learning can be defined as helping learners to learn a language or languages to perform a variety of functions. These range from the sociable use at the highest level of *cognition*, *catharsis* and *self-expression*. Underlying these functions are the two fundamental functions: (i) helping children to ask questions, the most important intellectual ability man has yet to develop, and (ii) helping children use this language effectively in different social networks. Languages in a multilingual and multiethnic setting form a system network. Each language in this network has a function-determined value of the other languages. A society or a government can assign a new value to any one of the languages in the system network in terms of its own policy of language planning, but the society or government must realize that this assignment of a new value to a language will produce a chain reaction in the network. The values of the other language in the network are bound to undergo changes as well. Moreover, effective bilingualism or multilingualism is a powerful way of enriching the linguistic repertoire of individuals. These resources offered by plurality of languages can be used for rapid social and economic changes and modernization programmes.

In a multilingual interaction, no single language caters to all the needs of the particular languages and they are rather determined by: (i) pragmatic demands of the situation and (ii) the institutional factors of identification. For instance, in a way, the use of English language in post-colonial India reflects the pragmatic approach of the nation's capacity to accept and make a language as foreign as English so utterly her own. It becomes so evident from our transactions in academic, technological, commercial and administrative sectors, and also in the mass media, tourism and entertainment circles and among the urban youth. Today the penetration of English in a variety of domains has begun to sink roots in the multilingual Indian soil. Moreover, Indian English is getting further detached from native English speakers. The same situation like this also prevails in the state of Manipur, and the state being multicultural one, multilingualism remains to be a basic nature of its social life.

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