

THE ROLE OF ATTITUDES IN LANGUAGE SHIFT AND LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE IN A NEW IMMIGRANT COMMUNITY: A CASE STUDY

by

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Abstract

Telugu is the second most spoken language in India, after Hindi and over 80 million have Telugu as their mother tongue. It is considered one of the fifteen most spoken languages in the world. Telugu speakers are recent immigrants community to New Zealand and their current numbers are estimated to be over 10000, with their numbers growing rapidly. The study seeks to investigate language attitudes of mothers and children in the Telugu community and how they relate to loss of language in an English speaking country. The study reveals that although most of the Telugu people speak their own community language at home, the children are rapidly losing their language. The study points out that if the Telugu community regards the language maintenance as desirable, then explicit steps need to be taken.

Introduction

Over the past few decades, New Zealand has been transformed from being predominantly bilingual to a dynamic potpourri of multilingual society. According to the 2001 census there are more than 160 different languages spoken in New Zealand but most of them were identified with a minority communities, consisting of less than 1,000 speakers (New Zealand Statistics, 2003). One such community with its own well-developed language is Telugu, whose immigration levels have increased quite significantly in the recent past. According to the Census 2001 there are 1419 Telugu speakers in New Zealand and their numbers have nearly doubled during the period 1996 – 2001 (New Zealand Statistics, 2002). About one third of the Telugu community is under 20 years of age indicating the importance of language maintenance in an alien environment. Since 2001, the numbers continued to rise and it is estimated that there are about 10,000 Telugu speakers in New Zealand (Telugu Association of New Zealand, 2003).

Who are the Telugus?

The word ‘Telugus’ refers to people who speak the Telugu language. Telugu is also known as ‘Andram’ and is the official language of Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, which was established on the basis of linguistic affinity in 1956. About 70 million people in Andhra Pradesh and another 20 million people in other parts of India speak Telugu. It is also the second largest spoken language after the national language Hindi in India. There are many Telugu migrant communities in different parts of the world, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, South Africa, Mauritius, Malaysia, Singapore and Fiji. As mentioned earlier, Telugus started migrating to New Zealand and Australia in large numbers in recent times.

Objective of the Study

According to Hoffman (1991:186), “when a community does not maintain its language, but gradually adopts another one, we talk about *language shift* [while] *‘language maintenance* refers to a situation where members of a community try to keep the language(s) they have always used”. Hoffman also observed that under certain cultural, social and political conditions, a community might opt to change one set of linguistic tools for another. This phenomenon is acute in the case of migrant communities. Various studies established the loss of language and shift in various migrant communities such as Dutch (Kroef, 1977; Folmer, 1992), Tongan (Aipolo, 1989), Greek (Verivaki, 1990), Polish (Neazor, 1991), Italian (Plimmer, 1994), Fiji-Hindi (Shameem, 1995), Cook Island Maori (Davis 1998), Gujarati and Samoan (Roberts, 1999) and Japanese (Nakanishi, 2000). The Telugu community in New Zealand cannot be immune to the language loss phenomenon; however, no previous study has covered this community so far and this study seeks to fill that gap.

One of the important factors that impact on shift and maintenance of language is attitude (Gardner, 1985, Holmes and Harlow, 1991). Attitude refers to “a hypothetical construct used to explain the direction and persistence of human behaviour” (Baker, 1992:10). So, it represents internal thoughts, feelings and tendencies in behaviour across a variety of contexts. The main objective of this study is to investigate whether there is any language shift among Telugu immigrants in Auckland and, if so, identify what role attitude played in the shift and maintenance of their language.

Significance of the Study

Many studies have established that change in language attitudes is one of the major factors affecting language shift among the linguistic communities in New Zealand. For instance, Roberts (1999) has done work on language shift and maintenance in three communities: Gujarati (the largest Indian language group), Dutch (the largest European language group) and Samoan (the largest Pacific Island language group). Similarly, Shameem (1995) has done work on Fiji Indians, which also has a great number of speakers in New Zealand. On the other hand, Holmes and Harlow (1991) have tried to illustrate some of the common characteristics of the communities in New Zealand, which have resisted language shift and have managed to maintain their ethnic language attitudes. The present study however is different as this is the first of its kind, which looks at the smaller Indian communities like Telugu speakers and also about language shift among the recent immigrant communities in New Zealand.

Methodology and Sampling

Telugu are scattered in all the suburbs of Auckland and so it became quite difficult to choose an appropriate sample. However, during the course of the search for a suitable sample, an ‘Indian Church’, which predominantly consisted of Telugu speakers, was discovered. This church not only served as a forum of worship but also as a place for socialising and supporting each other in an ‘alien’ environment. The sample chosen for this study is limited to the families attending this church, who were permanent residents and had lived in New Zealand for at least one year; the average time that the respondents had lived in New Zealand being two years.

The respondents fall into two categories: i) Telugu speaking mothers of school going children and ii) school going children of 11 years and above. In all, 14 mothers and 20 children were chosen for this study. Out of the 20 children, 14 were first-born children and 6 were second born children. The reason why mothers were chosen is because they were considered as repositories of culture and responsible for the maintenance of tradition and language. Children aged 11 and above were chosen as they use language with ease and they know to differentiate the use of language according to the situation while children below 11 years of age are still in their formative stage. Another reason for categorising the sample into two groups is to compare the changing attitudes of these two groups towards language shift in the community.

Collection of data was through self-reporting questionnaires and structured interviews from all the respondents. Interviews were conducted individually to minimise any external influence or bias in their responses. The questionnaire covered five major areas: a) language proficiency, b) attitude towards English, c) attitude towards Telugu, d) attitude towards bilingualism and e) language maintenance. The major findings are discussed in the next section.

Finding and Discussion

a. Language Proficiency:

The respondents – both children and mothers – were asked to report on the use of Telugu and English languages. Even though, Telugu is the mother tongue and used by all children while in India, the study reveals that its use has declined significantly to 85 percent in contrast to 100 percent use of English language. On the other hand, all the mothers (100 percent) reported use of Telugu and English for themselves and their first child; but the use of Telugu declined for the second born child (83 percent). Further, it is noticed that the loss of the Telugu language is greater in reading and writing skills than in speaking and listening skills, as hardly any of the children used Telugu. Clearly the loss of the Telugu language is rapid, as the respondents had lived in New Zealand only an average of two years.

b. Attitude towards English

As regards to attitude towards the English language, a set of questions were asked about what the respondents feel on the use and their attitude towards the English language in New Zealand. Both mothers and children reported a 100 percent positive attitude towards English. When asked whether they felt ‘proud’ to use the English language, 71 percent of mothers and 85 percent of children reported affirmatively. In fact, 55 percent of the children reported that they are encouraged by their parents to ‘use English always’. Such a positive attitude towards English enables the new immigrant community to succeed in an English-speaking environment.

c. Attitude towards Telugu

Respondents were also asked a set of questions relating to the use of and their attitude towards the Telugu language in New Zealand. The responses to the questions indicate mixed, and seemingly contradictory, views. While most of both mothers and children (95 percent) reported positive attitudes towards the Telugu language, the majority of mothers (57 percent) and children (60 percent) 'do not feel it is necessary' to learn Telugu. In fact, 50 percent of mothers feel that it is 'a waste of time' to learn Telugu in New Zealand. Such a mixed set of views towards the mother tongue indicates an ongoing conflict between their linguistic identity and utility of the language, as an enabling factor, to settle in a new environment.

Similarly as regards to speaking Telugu at home, while an overwhelming majority of mothers (86 percent) want to speak Telugu at home which is closely linked to their linguistic identity, relatively fewer children (65 percent) are willing to do so as they don't feel it necessary for their daily chores.

d. Attitude towards Bilingualism

As regards to the attitude towards bilingualism, the study reveals a divide between the two sets of respondents, namely mothers and children. While 100 percent of mothers feel that it is important to speak in both English and Telugu, only 85 percent of children felt it necessary. This may be due to the level of perceived difficulty by the respondents to be bilingual speakers - while 100 percent mothers felt it was not difficult to be a bilingual speaker, 80 percent of the children felt it was difficult. There appears to be a close relationship between the perceived difficulties and the need to be a bilingual speaker. In general, the attitudes reported towards bilingualism are consistent with the attitude towards Telugu where mothers report being more favourably inclined than children.

All mothers commented that their children mixed English words with Telugu. However, when asked whether they felt 'proud' of their bilingual ability, the respondents were not enthusiastic – only 57 percent of mothers and 55 percent of children felt so. Since a significant proportion (over 40 percent) is not favourably inclined towards bilingualism, it indicates that there is perceptible shift from Telugu to English. This finding is consistent with the attitudes found towards English and Telugu (paras 6.1, 6.2 and 6.3), which indicated a shift from Telugu to English. What is interesting is that such a shift is occurring in such a short period of two years.

e. Language Maintenance:

Language maintenance is crucial for its survival. Even though the loss of the Telugu language was clearly evident, the study reveals many interesting steps taken for its maintenance. Over 86 percent of mothers reported that they spoke Telugu at home and corrected their children's language. It was also reported that 64 percent of mothers enjoyed listening to Telugu songs while only 25 percent of children did so. Therefore, Telugu language maintenance was mainly through the use of entertainment resources such as videos and music.

It was noted in para 6.1 that the language loss is more in reading and writing compared to speaking and listening. Obviously, in order to maintain language those are the areas that need attention. However, the majority of the children (90 percent) and mothers (75 percent) do not want to learn/teach Telugu script. Such a negative attitude is definitely detrimental to the language maintenance efforts and leads to quick erosion of language ability and the consequent shift.

Concluding Remarks

The findings reveal that there is a clear evidence of language shift among Telugu immigrants to New Zealand. This is consistent with other studies for different languages such as Samoan (Pilkinton, 1990) and Fiji-Hindi (Shameem, 1995) who consciously placed more importance on English to enable them to integrate and settle in an English speaking country. However, the loss of the Telugu language is more in the written and writing skills than the listening and speaking skills. Further, this loss is found to be more in the second born than the first-born child.

It has been obvious that ‘necessity’ and ‘pride’ have been the two influencing factors of language shift. Both mothers and children have less positive attitude towards Telugu than English, which adversely affects Telugu language maintenance. Ironically, such a language shift is occurring at a time when the New Zealand government is encouraging bilingualism (New Zealand Herald, 2003).

From a functional point of view, the loss of the Telugu language many not necessarily cause any significant disability to the Telugu speakers in an English speaking country like New Zealand. However, if the Telugu community feels the need for language maintenance for reasons of cultural and ethnic identity, the study points to the need for the Telugu community to come together and take explicit steps rather urgently to prevent further loss of language and language maintenance. Telugus around the world now have a website (www.Teluguone.com) to network and maintain the culture. Cooperation with other minority language speakers for language maintenance can be of mutual advantage as the problems faced are similar in nature.

At present, the Telugu community faces a dilemma regarding two seemingly conflicting goals – whether to preserve linguistic identity or improve their children’s English language skills that are essential for their active professional career. The authors strongly believe that these are not mutually exclusive goals and that both the goals are achievable concurrently and contribute richly to the composite culture of New Zealand. The next stage of research covering a larger sample is likely to throw more light on this issue.

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