

Code-Switching among Stranded Urdu Speaking People in Bangladesh: An Observation

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The use of multiple languages has assumed a considerable importance in the present linguistic world. Monolingual people or countries are hardly found nowadays; even a country though homogeneous, has linguistic minorities who use various languages. People, therefore, tend to develop their ability of speaking several languages simultaneously. Sociolinguistics observes that bilinguals or multilingual often switch from one language to another at the middle of conversation without hampering any motive they are talking for. Different grounds provoke the people to language shifting. In Bangladesh, there are some Urdu speaking people using two languages Bengali and Urdu. The old people who have been living in this country since the then East Pakistan and are habituated to speak Urdu often use Bengali amidst their talks whereas the young people who are used to speaking Bengali, as they are born and brought up in Bangladesh, sometimes do shift languages from Bengali to Urdu. This paper focuses the causes of code switching taking into concern the cases of both the old and the young people shifting their codes either from Urdu to Bengali or from Bengali to Urdu.

Keywords: Biharies, code switching, advantage, solidarity, humiliating

Introduction

The history of the Urdu speaking people called Biharies in Bangladesh dates back to the partition of India in 1947. The community comprises of over 300,000 with no defined identity (Farzana, 2008). After their migration to the then East Pakistan that later turned to Bangladesh these Bihari Muslims, an ethnic minority, failed to integrate with the Bengali Muslim society because of their linguistic differences. As the nationalism of Bangladeshi people was based on Bengali language, it was challenging for them as linguistic minority to assimilate the Bengali Muslim society (Alam, 2011).

Linguistic gap existing between two communities makes them survive with undefined identity as “in many cases language may be an important or even essential concomitant of ethnic –group membership (Trudgill, 2000, p.44)”. It deprives them of civic rights like education and health care. Except for a few they are mostly engaged in different demeaning jobs. Out of their keen aspiration to assimilate the mainstream people they begin to speak Bengali in their various communications. Diverse necessities intrigue both the old and the young people to speak Bengali and gradually they are being efficient to use the language. Therefore, it now seems almost needless for them to use both languages Urdu and Bengali in their conversation but they are observed

using both languages in dealing with both communities. To avail themselves of the opportunity of knowing both languages and to be facilitated in different arenas especially in the job sectors apparently seem to be provoking them to code-switch. Due to their undefined identity problem their will to express solidarity with the Bengali speaking community may also draw the attention as a cause of their language shift. Several research works have been made about their dolorous, social conditions but no work, as far as it is known, has been done regarding their language change. So the researcher attempts to find out the existing reasons behind their language shifting from Urdu to Bengali and from Bengali to Urdu.

Literature Review

“People may select a particular variety or code because it makes it easier to discuss a particular topic, regardless of where they are speaking. At home, people often discuss work or school, for instance, using the language associated with those domains, rather than the language of the family domain” (Holmes, 2001, p.25).

“In community multilingualism the different languages are always used in different circumstances, and the choice is always controlled by social rules.

Typically one language is reserved exclusively for use at home and another is used in the wider community” (Hudson, 1996, p.52).

“Anyone who speaks more than one language chooses between them according to circumstances. The first consideration, of course, is which language will be comprehensible to the person addressed; generally speaking, speakers choose a language which the other person can understand” (Hudson, 1996, p.51).

“Code choice becomes a form of political expression, a move either to resist some other power, or to gain a power, or to express solidarity” (Wardhaugh, 2000, p.102).

Types of code switching

Inter-sentential switching: It occurs *outside* the sentence or the clause level (i.e. at sentence or clause boundaries). Example: *Tumi kemon aso? (How are you?) Tum kaha jara? (Where are you going?)*

Intra-sentential switching: It takes place *within* a sentence or a clause.

Example: *Tomaderke tahrir (to describe) karte habe.*

Tag-switching: It is the switching of a tag phrase, a word, or both, from language-B to language-A, (common *intra-sentential switches*).

Intra-word switching: It occurs *within* a word, itself, such as at a morpheme boundary.

“Bilinguals often switch between their two languages in the middle of a conversation. These code-switching can take place between or even within sentences, involving phrases or words or even parts of words” (Spolsky, 1998, p.49).

In some books, considering ‘tag switching’ and ‘intra word switching’ within intra-sentential switching, it is simply divided into two types. They are inter-sentential switching and intra-sentential switching.

Research Methodology

To conduct this research and to find out the causes of code-switching fifteen individuals from the target group have been thoroughly interviewed. Samples regardless of their age and jobs have been selected. Each of the respondents has been exhorted to answer verbally the selected questions designed in a questionnaire as all the interviewees cannot write. Their speeches have been recorded with permission during the interview. To ensure the authenticity and to remove any shortcomings, close observations have

been done. The names and identities of the respondents have been symbolically used in this article in order to maintain confidentiality. In this research, apart from the causes of code switching, some other factors like their literacy of Bengali language and the source of entertainment have also been explored.

Sample Selection

The researcher has selected the samples of his study from the Bihari community ranging from, businessmen, teachers, students, weavers and barbers either young or old. Both the Geneva camp and Mirpur 10 (Benarashi Palli) located in Dhaka city have been visited to conduct the research work.

A recorded example of Inter-sentential code switching:

Two Urdu speakers working in a Saloon were minutely observed while they were converging.

Md Ali: *Doss deri kae hoa* (Friend, why is this delay for?)

Co-worker: *Bahut vir thato ich liea deri hogaya, hotel mey bahut customer tha,* (It was very crowded and that’s why I am late, there were so many customers in the hotel)

Meanwhile a stranger, a native Bengali speaker, came to have his hair cut off and finding all the seats engaged addressed one of them (Urdu speakers) saying:

The stranger: *Ali Vai deri hobe? (Brother Ali, Will it take long time?)*

Md. Ali: *Ektu boshen hoye jabe* (Wait a bit, it will be done soon.)

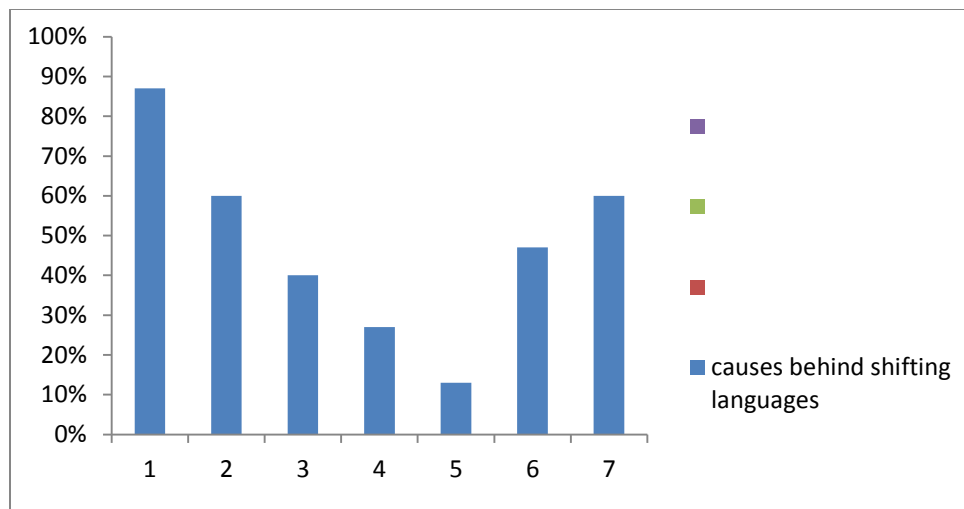
Findings

Reasons for language shifting from Urdu to Bengali:

1. To be advantaged of both languages
2. To be benefitted in respective profession
3. Marital relations with Bengali speaking people
4. To avoid embarrassing situation of being called a Bihari
5. To express solidarity with Bengali speaking people

Reasons behind shifting from Bengali to Urdu:

6. Inability to pronounce the exact Bengali words timely
7. To hide something secret from others



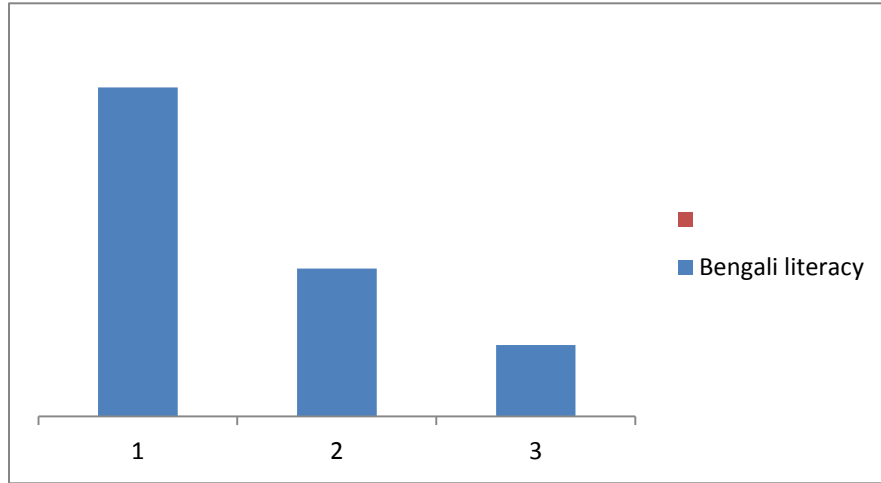
Bar diagram of the reasons of language shifting

- To take advantage of knowing both languages: Most of the respondents say that as they know both languages, they can use them without any difficulties. They prefer speaking both Bengali and Urdu to take benefit of the situation they are in. The bar diagram shows that 87% people use the languages to be advantaged in their personal and social life.
- To be benefitted in professions: The response found from the interviewees demonstrates it is a matter of gains to switch the language accordingly. People are engaged in different petty business or teaching profession dealing with the customers coming from both Bengali and Bihari communities. 60% people observe that language shifting earns them profit in the field of their occupations. They can easily arrest the attention of the buyers and sell their products more.
- Marital relationship with Bengali speaking community: The data analysis conveys the message that having marital relationship with Bengali speaking people provokes them changing their language. 40% respondents shift their language owing to the relationship they or their close ones have had by marital bondage. They think that code switching lends them a hand to understand the people coming from Bengali community and to be understood by them.
- Avoiding embarrassing situation: The Urdu speaking people are called with different humiliating titles like Bihari, Maura etc. when they are heard speaking Urdu. To address them with these titles in public sometimes causes them to face embarrassing situation.
- 27% respondents think that they switch their code from Urdu to Bengali as speaking Urdu humiliates them publicly.
- To express solidarity: Various needs intrigue the people living inside the camp areas to go out. As they have passed long time in this country since independence, they cannot help coalescing the Bengali speaking people. Wholeheartedly, they want to be the part of the mainstream people of this country with all their barriers overcome. Data analysis shows that 13% interviewees are highly aspirants to express solidarity with Bengali speaking people and that is why they switch from Urdu to Bengali.
- Inability to use exact Bengali words: People speaking Urdu use both Bengali and Urdu languages at intervals. 60% informants say that while going to use Bengali with those who understand both Bengali and Urdu, they shift their language from Bengali to Urdu due to their shortage of Bengali vocabulary. As for instance, a school teacher while teaching their students says *Tomake tahrir korte hobe* (You have to describe) instead of saying *Tomake barnana karte hobe*. The Bengali word 'barnana' has been replaced with an Urdu word 'tahrir'.
- To hide something secret from a particular person: 47% informants say that to hide something secret from others they shift their language. The Urdu bilinguals deal with Bengali speaking customers in Bengali. They switch from Bengali to Urdu if they are required to alienate the customers. Mr Sabbir Ahmed works as an employee in a photo shop of an Urdu speaker. Once he fails to deliver

the product to the customer timely. At that time switching language from Bengali to Urdu, he explains the real causes to his boss to have him managed and then somehow convinces the customer. Here Mr. Sabbir

changes his language in order to hide the real causes from the customer.

Bengali Literacy

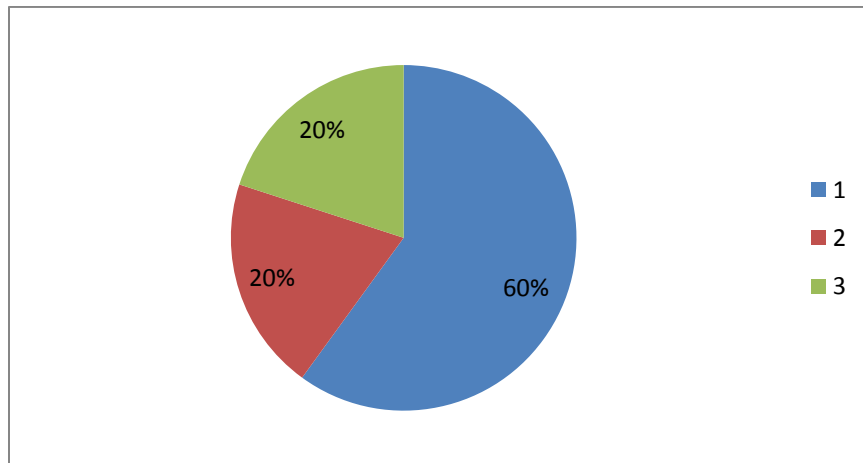


Bar diagram of their Bengali literacy:

1. 60% informants have both reading and writing ability. The respondents who are mostly young get institutional education and thereby can read and write.
2. 27% people have no competence of reading and writing. They need to depend on others to meet their needs. Most of them are old or despite being young, did not get any academic education because of their involvement with different jobs since their childhood.

3. A few people undergo some situations like accompanying their kids during their learning or get inspired by their friends to read books or newspapers. 13% respondents are of the view that getting involved with such circumstances helps achieve competence in reading rather than in writing.

Urdu songs or movies as their source of Entertainment



Pie chart showing Urdu songs or movies as their source of entertainment.

1. 60% interviewees say that Urdu songs or movies no longer work as their source of recreation. They neither hear Urdu songs nor do they watch any Urdu movies.
2. Data given by the respondents convey the information that 20% of them are in the habit of hearing Urdu songs but not watching any Urdu movies.
3. Another 20% interviewees are of the opinion that both Urdu songs and movies still satisfy their thirst of entertainment along with Bengali songs and movies.

Reaction to code switching

Though different reasons have been exhibited as to their code switching, their reaction to shifting language is so harsh and unwelcomed. Forty three years have passed since their identity problem arose. They are yet to be entitled to any defined identity that causes them fall in a series of troubles. They suffer much being deprived of their all kinds of rights. They yearn for the end of this degrading condition without any delay. They aspire to lead their life like the mainstream people of this country enjoying all facilities offered. They believe that their access everywhere in the society especially the educational institutions should be ensured.

Difficulties faced in research work

People feel scared to be interviewed at first but small talks with them make them feel easy to converse and have interviews. Next, as all interviewees are not able to write down the answers to the questions set in a questionnaire and therefore, they have to undergo verbal interviews, it creates difficulties to let the interviews be translated into English. On the other hand, to make the people feel easy the researcher has to ask some additional questions. That is why, sometimes the order of questions in questionnaire could not be properly maintained. Because of some religious restrictions no female person was interviewed.

Some significant comments from the extensive interviews on the reasons of code switching

- i) "I enjoy speaking both Bengali and Urdu as we understand both". "Sometimes we feel humiliated to be named as Biharies when we speak Urdu outside." The speaker works as a photographer.
- ii) "I speak Bengali with my mother as she is a Bangalee. But I speak Urdu with my siblings as they

prefer Urdu." "Sometimes it is advantageous. I feel comfort in it." "At times when we are heard speaking Urdu, people call us Bihari which is humiliating. It makes me switch from Urdu to Bengali." The speaker is a butcher.

- iii) "Suppose one of my sisters-in-law is Bengali speaker. So in the same setting and in the presence of both Bengali and Urdu speakers if we talk to, we use Bengali and Urdu simultaneously." He is a petty businessman dealing in cloths in the camp area.
- iv) "Actually we take the advantage of learning both languages." "I do mix according to the customer. If they speak Urdu, I speak Urdu. If Bengali, we speak Bengali." The speaker is a barber.
- v) "Yes, to describe my problems behind my inability to deliver the product to my customer I speak Urdu to my master and then convince the customer." The speaker works as a salesperson in a shop.
- vi) "But sometimes we feel problem to speak Bengali as we are not fluent in Bengali." He is a weaver.
- vii) "We have three languages Bengali, Urdu and English. The students are being expert in all. We emphasize learning Bengali as they live here." The speaker is one of the teachers of the community school.

Conclusion

The research findings reflect various causes of code switching of Urdu speakers. Many significant facts behind language shifting of Urdu speaking people have been traced from the extensive interviews with them. To be advantaged of knowing both languages and using them spontaneously according to the domains appears as the key cause of their language change. Gaining benefit in their professions where both kinds of people are dealt with and the intention to express solidarity with the target community are significant and relevant as well. Establishing marital relations with the target people and making their speech comprehensible to the relatives also entice them to change codes. Apart from that, endeavoring to avoid embarrassing situations of being called with diverse derogatory titles, the failure to recollect exact words of target language during the conversation and attempts to hide something special from others have come out as fresh and significant causes that provoke the Urdu speaking people to switch from one code to another one. As an ethnic minority in Bangladesh they are the victims of undefined identity caused only by their language. The issue of their identity problem needs to be addressed before it is too late.

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