

Research Article

Language and Identity: The Case of Kannada in Bengaluru

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ABSTRACT

English has always amalgamated with the local (language) despite its global status. It broadens its sphere of influence because it assimilates into the native space. In this article, we examine the specific ways in which English usage aids in the reconstruction of a new Kannadiga identity in Bengaluru. We analyse the role of new age media and its employment of the hashtag and rap cultures in producing norms of linguistic identity vis-a-vis English. We observe in the 'outer circle' of English that speakers and users of English do not take serious offence when their usage is questioned for its non-compliance with the standards set by the 'inner circle'. In contrast, speakers and users of a language like Hindi are seriously offended upon similar questioning. In the same line of argument, we observe that English does not pose a threat to anybody's linguistic identity at least in India. This assessment raises questions on the various ways in which English interacts with languages in the peripheries. Bengaluru, in particular, is a treat for observers of globalising trends as the city is an evolving example of the effects of globalisation and glocalisation. Along with an increase in intra-nation immigration, the IT sector boom of the 1990s created a space for a confrontation of multiple linguistic identities. While the economy of Bengaluru thrives on its cosmopolitan culture, calls for rooting the city in a homogeneous linguistic population have marked the rise of strong sub-nationalist sentiments. The recent pro-Kannada protests over Hindi signage in Bengaluru Metro witnessed an unprecedented coming together of organisations such as the Karnataka Rakshana Vedike and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam which share a common suspicion against the hegemonising (nationalising) tendencies of Hindi. Over the years, attempts have been made to synonymise the Bengalurean identity with Kannadiga identity. In this process, little or no attention is drawn towards the penetrating presence of English as a language of technology, education and social mobility.

Keywords: Mobility, Sociolinguistic, Language, Identity, Pluricentricity

INTRODUCTION

Braj Kachru's famous Three Circles Model of World Englishes places India in the 'Outer Circle'. English in India serves the four functions of being the instrumental, regulative, interpersonal and the imaginative language (as cited in Bhatt, 2001, p. 532). The English language occupies a unique position in a country that prides its multilingualism. The pluricentricity of English is an acquired characteristic contingent upon the interactions between various national, regional and local identities (Bhatt, 2001, p. 540). This article will throw light on the place and role of English in the changing sociolinguistic dimension in the country. This examination will primarily revolve around the sociolinguistic setting of the Kannada language. A comprehensive understanding of identity is requisite for a deeper analysis of the association of identity with language and society.

Identity is commonly understood as a sense of self with which an individual relates with a group or groups (Edwards, 2009, p. 2). The relevance of identity in everyday life is visible through the 'amount of energy individuals expend claiming, cultivating, expressing, or bemoaning the lack of it' (Leve, 2011, p. 513). The different identities in the typology of identities are neither exclusive nor singular. Individual social actors experience various levels of identity in their multiplicity and interactivity. While non-linguistic criteria are varyingly significant, language and communication are essential for a group to distinguish themselves. According to Leve (2011), professing a sense of belonging to one of the many 'affectively charged' and 'socially recognised groups' is a 'compelling concern' of the contemporary world (Leve, 2011, p. 513). Identity thus defines who or what a person is. Identity is also established on differences which may vary with time (Hasnain *et al.*, 2013, p. 15).

The use of language to communicate identity has intensified in the contemporary world in which social actors are at liberty to employ communicative strategies which may suppress certain identities and foreground others. Processes such as globalisation, urbanisation and hyper-mobility reveal the aspirations of the local to integrate with the global, further driving a pressing need to study the novel reconfigurations of identity (Kumar and Prakash, 2019, p. 2).

The close 'inter-relationship' between language and society is reflected in the role of language in 'establishing social relationships and conveying information' (Trudgill, 2000, p. 2). The human social order is generated concurrently with 'linguistic allegiance, shared narratives, collective memories, and common social history' (Kumar and Prakash, 2019, p. 2). The dominance of linguistic identity over other forms of identity is contextual and is a product of the temporal and spatial circumstances of a particular linguistic community.

Language is a 'potent' marker of identity as it works at both the individual and collective level. It enables the self to navigate the physical and social spaces and hence carries symbolic and communicative values for the individual and the collective (Hasnain *et al.*, 2013, p. 8).

Language becomes a symbolic experience of 'us-ness', the politics of which are predicated on the 'we-they' differences (Coulmas, 2005, p. 173). The 20th century saw an increase in affective attachments to language in practices such as literary writing, historiography, arts and entertainment, pedagogy, political reorganisation as well as socio-cultural representation. These led to recognisable shifts in attitudes of speakers of particular languages as owning distinct identities expressed through socio-political histories and religious-cultural literature.

Bernard Cohn (1996) concluded that linguistically grounded identities in India arose out of the policy and practices of colonial administration which included the creation of linguistic districts for easier revenue collection, creation of administrative posts for Indians which also included the job of translators and colonial education among others (p. 53). India is home to hundreds of languages which struggle to exist alongside each other. The politics surrounding languages opens up an entire area for sociolinguistic research concerning how speakers understand language and identity. With the advent of new media and social media, linguistic boundaries are getting dissolved following the digital revolution (Kumar and Prakash, 2019, p. 2). The study of the myriad manners in which linguistic identity is constructed holds the promise to unravel fresh perspectives about human nature itself.

Karnataka as a state and Kannada as a language are curious cases for sociolinguistic research owing to their distinct socio-cultural and political interweave. Bengaluru, the state's capital is an interesting site where linguistic identity plays a different ball game altogether. It is the perfect stop for studying the process of globalisation. With a business activity built on its prized IT services which contribute a lion's share to the state's economy, Bengaluru screams cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism, pluralism and all other fancy words, academic and otherwise, that describe a crazy concoction of the global and the local. It is pitted as the platform for the state's integration with the rising cosmopolitan order on which the linguistic identity finds space to contest. It is this very description of the city which has lead its residents to (re)visit and (re)configure their identities. Linguistic identity is by far the most prominent entity that is constantly milked for various political, socio-cultural and economic reasons.

KANNADIGA IDENTITY: AN OVERVIEW

Karnataka as a homeland of the Kannada-speaking people was cast into its current geographical existence only after the *States Reorganisation Act of 1956*. While the

discursive presence of Kannada identity was crucial for the state's linguistic unification, three significant moments are often described in the development of the Kannada identity post 1956 viz the Gokak Agitation of 1982, the Cauvery Agitation of 1991 and the anti-Urdu agitation in 1994. Gokak agitation encompassed the entire state with its organising base in the north-central district of Dharwad. The Cauvery agitation was chiefly concentrated in the southern districts with a struggle for land, water and jobs. The agitation against Urdu was restricted to the capital city and focussed on the visibility of Kannada in state-sponsored media.

The formulation of Three-Language Formula by the Government of India in 1968 was the precursor to the events of Gokak Agitation. The policy which was further enunciated in the National Policy Resolution called for the study of 'Hindi, English and modern Indian language (preferably one of the southern languages) in the Hindi speaking states and Hindi, English and the Regional language in the non-Hindi States'.¹ After Karnataka adopted the Three-Language Formula, there was severe opposition to such an 'imposition' of Hindi due to which people started leaning towards English. The apprehension was also against Sanskrit, which was the dominant language taught in schools. The Gokak Agitation or the *Gokak Chaluvali* soon turned into a language rights movement in Karnataka in the 1980s. The Gokak report (penned by educationist and writer V. K. Gokak) urged the state government to ensure the primacy of Kannada as the language of education and administration. The movement was successful in achieving primacy to Kannada in Karnataka but it failed to move beyond that. The promise of it turning into an all-encompassing identity movement with nationalistic sentiments dwindled due to the absence of socio-economic reasons (Dakshina Murthy, 2016, p. 1834).

Karnataka is home to many languages including Telugu, Marathi, Tamil, Konkani, Tulu and Kodava among others. The role of Kannada shifts varyingly as the language of work, culture, governance and religion (Nair, 1996, p. 2814). Asghar Ali Engineer (1994) points out that Kannadigas have become 'oversensitive' in matters regarding language and culture. He ascribes this development to the increase in 'outsider' population in the capital, Bengaluru, which has further resulted in the establishment of numerous Kannada organisations (p. 2855).

KANNADIGA (RE)CONSTRUCTED

The post-war dismantling of cultural barriers resulted in increasing cross-cultural contact. True to the post-modern times, there are no fixed identities. Every identity is a negotiation.

¹'Three Language Formula' Government of India, Ministry Of Human Resource Development, Department Of Education.<https://web.archive.org/web/20120222082907/http://www.education.nic.in/cd50years/u/47/3X/473X0I01.htm> Last Accessed 30 April 2019.

It is a matter of self-fashioning. While globalisation gave rise to linguistic hybridity, it also led to linguistic hegemonies and disparities. Identity thus is a politically and socially loaded phenomenon. It then becomes imperative to approach 'mother tongue' or 'linguistic identity' as a political entity and not merely a linguistic fact.

The relevance of linguistic identity can be gauged by the extent to which language becomes a factor affecting contemporary political discourse in Karnataka and the language politics in the city. On 3 July 2017, *Hindustan Times* reported that the organisation at the forefront of the linguistic movement, Karnataka Rakshana Vedike (KRV), had joined hands with the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) of Tamil Nadu (Gopal, 2017). It was the same pro-Kannada organisation which had previously taken up acts of mob violence against Tamil-speakers in Karnataka over the Cauvery water-sharing dispute. Previously, in December 1991, thousands of Tamil residents in southern Karnataka had fled to Tamil Nadu after language activists targeted them after the first award of the Cauvery Water Tribunal. In a major departure from its historical enmity, the apparent coming together of the two was a show of unity against 'Hindi imposition'.

The new Kannada Identity Movement was at its peak during the protests that broke out in June 2017 after Phase I of the Bengaluru Metro was opened to the public. The protestors alleged Hindi imposition after the Metro put up sign boards in Kannada, Hindi and English. Angered with the prominent display of Hindi signage, activists of the KRV blackened the signage at various metro stations, leading the Metro authorities to tape up the Hindi parts in its sign boards across the metro lines. It is to be noted here that English signage was left untouched. While the activists were out on the streets protesting, there was a simultaneous campaign running online. Within a day or two of the Metro's inauguration, social media were abuzz with activism against the Hindi signage. The movement gained immediate support from Bengalureans so much so that the hashtag #Namma Metro Hindi Beda started trending on Twitter. Adding momentum to the angered activism was a campaign by Banavasi Balaga Prakashana, a group focused on preserving the Kannada language. The group on its Facebook page urged the fellow Kannadigas to join its campaign on #Namma Metro Hindi Beda and #Namma Metro Kannada Saaku to stop 'Hindification' of Karnataka and to safeguard the supremacy of Kannada.² This kind of a campaigning culture on social media dates back to as early as 2010, to a time when online networking sites started gaining popularity with the masses. This was also the period where a significant change in discourse began. Incidents as far back as the exodus of panic-stricken North-East Indians from Bengaluru in 2012 to the recent incidents of blackening Hindi sign-described above are all part of the change.

²<https://www.facebook.com/banavasibalagaprakashana/> Last Accessed 30 April 2019.

One immensely successful and popular campaign which informed this change in discourse is the Ganchali Movement. The Ganchali Movement, so to speak, has been chiefly aided by online activism. A page of the name ‘Ganchali Bidi Kannada Mathadi’ which translates into ‘Let go of Ganchali, and speak in Kannada’ became extremely popular on Facebook.³ The administrators of the page describe it as a site for ‘Hyperlocal Kannada Content to a Glocal Kannadiga’. The word *Ganchali*, meaning plain ‘arrogance’ or ‘attitude’, entered the everyday lexicon of Kannada speakers after several videos highlighting the ‘typical’ Ganchali went viral on social media platforms such as WhatsApp, YouTube and Facebook. The videos usually featured ‘loyal’ Kannadigas shaming ‘disloyal’ Kannadigas for displaying ‘arrogance’ by speaking English or any other language for that matter, despite knowing Kannada. The usage of the word Ganchali increased after the resurgence in Kannada language activism after 2010. Statistics reveal an upward spike in the number of followers of the ‘Ganchali Bidi, Kannada Mathadi’ page after 2012.⁴ The increase in the use of language as both political and non-political currency calls for unpacking the underlying motivations of the same.

It is generally acknowledged by the speakers that the Kannadigas have constantly felt like being a minority in their own state. It is observed to be the reigning feeling psychologically, literarily as well as linguistically (Kulkarni, 1990, p. 60). Kannada nationalism has always measured itself against the successes of other linguistic nationalisms within India right from the colonial period (Nair, 1996, p. 2809). In the pre-independence days, Alur Venkata Rao and the others in the Indian National Congress felt the strong need to recast the history of Kannada people. It was felt that a strong wave of nationalism riding on linguistic sentiments could be created with a rich narrativisation of Kannada literature and culture. Economic factors delayed the arrival of Kannada speakers to the linguistic identity scene. The contemporary Kannada identity carries an advantageous edge over other languages. Technological base, support from scientific establishments and the state’s favourable attitude towards industrial development are counted as the reasons for such an impression.

Janaki Nair (1996) calls Kannada nationalism as a ‘beleaguered nationalism’ and a ‘diglossia in crisis’. The Kannada linguistic identity does attempt to fight for a discursive presence against English as the language of science, technology and global capitalism. However, its failure to successfully challenge English has left it to create hegemony over other languages such as Tamil and Urdu. In the process, linguistic identity also takes communal colours (p. 2814).

³<https://www.facebook.com/GBKMofficial/> Last Accessed 30 April 2019.

⁴SMOEYE, a social media monitoring tool provides a statistical analysis of the page’s fan following and the number of people talking about it. Last Accessed 30 April 2019. <http://www.smoeye.com/monitor/125287/facebook/www.facebook.com/Ganchalibidi.Kannadamathadi>

THE IRONY

We generally understand linguistic chauvinism to be synonymous with language purification. The overall flow of sentiments, be it in the form of hashtags or protests, reveals that the contemporary recasting of the Kannadiga does not display any puristic strains. English is predominantly used to tweet or post. Seamless code-mixing and code-switching are visible between English and Kannada. This article singles out the irony of the new linguistic identity as it appears that it is singularly defined as anti-Hindi and pro-Kannada. However, very little anger is expressed against English. Both English constructions and the Roman script are used to create social media content on Kannada identity despite the availability of Kannada script online. English is also used in rap content. This also serves as an example of linguistic globalisation in which English dominates over Kannada prominently as the language of modernity and technology (Sonntag 2015, p. 210). English also provides nationwide mobility and socioeconomic progress to its users (Iyer and Ramachandran, 2019, p. 106).

The irony of the Kannadiga identity was reiterated in the state's reaction to the draft of the new National Education Policy⁵ brought out by the Government of India's Ministry of Human Resource Development on 31 May 2019. The draft policy suggested that Hindi be taught as a second language in non-Hindi states. However, the draft was renewed after wide-spread criticism from the non-Hindi states, especially in southern India. Opposing the policy, the Chief Minister of Karnataka, H. D. Kumaraswamy called the education policy as a 'one-language policy' while former Chief Minister K. Siddaramaiah slammed the central government for its 'Hindi-imposition' and called upon it to 'recognise regional identities' ('Hindi Imposition?' 2019). What is ironic is that the same state government of Karnataka proposed to introduce English as the medium of instruction in a 1000 government-run schools beginning in the academic year 2019–20 (Kulkarni, 2019). Although this measure of the government is a contentious one, there seem to be no takers of opposing stands.

CONCLUSION

An identity morphs with the needs of the time and place. The linguistic identity reflects the immediate concerns of a linguistic community. Threat perception and the fear of socio-economic replacement can be viewed as the trigger for a rekindling of linguistic pride, further leading to an external display of the identity. Such an identity redefines the speaker. In the process of linguistic identity formation, all other available identities are

⁵The draft National Education Policy 2019 can be accessed at <https://innovate.mygov.in/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/mygov15596510111.pdf>

subsumed under one overarching linguistic identity. The new Kannada identity movement thus focuses on the socio-economic status as well as the linguistic prestige of Kannada speakers. Having been made available for consumption and utilisation within the public discourse, hashtag activism is taken up socio-political mobilisation over linguistic identity. The socio-economic reasons are the increasing anxieties over internal migration in India to fill up the job market created by the IT hub in the state capital. The market space centred around Bengaluru also attracts labour for tertiary services. It also shows that political and socio-economic advantages of language influence the attitude towards linguistic identity rather than purely sentimental solidarity with or emotional commitment to the language.

Cowaloosur (2018) states that language in India is neither hegemonic nor non-hegemonic. Similarly, linguistic power is neither regional nor cultural. The anti-Hindi agitation reflects the power dynamics among languages in India. Languages are politicised in different contexts. Linguistic identity becomes a mere plot twist in the larger struggle to define the markers of Indian identity (p. 20). Thus, the hostility towards Hindi brings together representatives of languages from non-Hindi states such as Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Maharashtra, Odisha and West Bengal. The sentiment was clearly captured when the Minister for School Education in Tamil Nadu, K.A. Sengottaiyan declared that ‘Only Tamil and English will bravely march in Tamil Nadu’ (Nath 2019).

Linguistic identities of non-Hindi languages are linked in a manner where they are not adversaries. Rather they co-exist with a threat of losing their identity to a larger player like Hindi. Identity then becomes a multi-layered process rather than an inborn attribute. Thus, we conclude that the Kannadiga identity visible in Bengaluru is an interesting case of language politics. It demonstrates that linguistic communities strategically exploit linguistic identity as an inclusionary or exclusionary tactic.

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