ABSTRACT

In any multicultural and multilingual social contexts, there exists diversity with presence of different social groups. The rightful share of minority groups in a diverse set-up is challenged as they are often marginalized and subjected to coercive assimilation into dominant groups. In such asymmetry, there is an increasing demand from minority communities for assertion of their rights. Linguistic diversity of multilingual countries is associated with unequal functional use of majority/minority languages in different domains. It is often evidenced as one of the potent factors of ethnic conflicts among the linguistic groups in contact. This fact has its reflection in the socio-political movement of Bodos in Assam which centered around their assertion of linguistic rights and distinct identity. The movement resulted in a separate political identity for Bodos in Assam. In this backdrop, this study examined the nature and dynamics of ethnolinguistic identity of Bodos and intergroup relationship between Bodos and Assamese in the state. It took into account the mutual perception and strategies of both Bodos and Assamese students to examine inter ethnic group relationship and nature of multilingualism in the contact areas.

Outcome of language contact - language shift/loss or maintenance differs in different intergroup contact situations. Language contact in an intergroup contact situation entails a series of social psychological processes which has implications for ethnic identity, intergroup relationship and the nature of multilingualism. The underlying social psychological processes in Bodo-Assamese language contact situation were studied in the light of ethnolinguistic identity theory (Giles, Bourhis & Taylor, 1977) and acculturation model of intergroup relations (Berry, 1990, 2003). The ethnolinguistic identity theory (Giles, Bourhis & Taylor, 1977) posits that if the perceived own group vitality in comparison to outgroup is low, the ethnolinguistic group members develop negative in-group identity and try to assimilate into outgroup. The acculturation model of intergroup relations (Berry, 1990,2003) talks about four probable outcomes in an intergroup contact situation – integration (when members of both acculturating groups seek to maintain own group language and culture as well as positive outgroup
relationship), assimilation (when members of subordinate group don’t seek to maintain their own group language and culture but have positive relationship with the outgroup), separation (when members of both contact groups seek to maintain own group language and culture and hold negative attitude for outgroup relationship, or segregation when this strategy is imposed by the dominant group) and marginalization (when there is little interest in maintaining own group language and culture and having outgroup relationship). A bulk of studies on language contact suggests that numerical strength and socio-political, economic, linguistic status etc. of an ethnic group influence its ethnolinguistic vitality perception. The pattern of language maintenance differs as a result of variant ethnolinguistic vitality. This study was designed to examine the relationship between the dimensions of subjective ethnolinguistic vitality and the pattern of social identity of Bodos and also intergroup relationship strategies in Bodo-Assamese contact situation. The role of different majority-minority context of Bodos and medium of instruction (Bodo medium or Assamese medium) in social psychological processes in language contact was examined in the study. On the basis of aforesaid theoretical perspectives, the study assessed the perception of own group and outgroup ethnolinguistic vitality of Bodo and Assamese students, own group language and culture maintenance attitude and outgroup relationship attitude of both Bodo and Assamese students and nature of social identity of Bodo students. In supplement, it also examined the pattern of language use of Bodo students in different majority/minority context and mother tongue medium and Assamese medium schooling.

The measures in the study consisted of questionnaires for assessing Subjective Ethnolinguistic Vitality, Own Group Language and Culture Maintenance Attitude, Outgroup Relationship Attitude, Social Identity and Pattern of Language Use. These measures were administered to samples of Bodo students from Bodo medium and Assamese medium schools in Bodo majority or Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) areas and Assamese majority areas and Assamese students from Assamese medium schools in BTC and Assamese majority areas. All the students were from Grade IX and X in the age range of 14 to 16 years. The total sample size was 216. The data were analysed and discussed in the light of different theoretical perspectives and research findings.
The findings on Bodo-Assamese language contact situation showed strong social identity of Bodos. The majority/minority contexts and medium of schooling of Bodos have significant impact in their subjective ethnolinguistic vitality, social identity and intergroup relationship strategies. Subjective ethnolinguistic vitality of Bodos from majority contexts, i.e. Bodo concentrated areas was higher compared to their counterparts in Assamese majority areas. It had positive correlation with their language maintenance and social identity. The intergroup relationship strategy of Bodos in Bodo majority areas was separation oriented, whereas in Assamese majority areas, it was assimilation oriented, although tending towards integration orientation. These findings suggest that an ethnolinguistic group with high vitality develops high own group language and culture maintenance attitude. The ethnolinguistic groups with low vitality tend to assimilate into dominant group with language shift. When the minority group seeks or perceives scope to improve its ethnolinguistic vitality status, but experiences coercive assimilation into dominant group, the probable language contact outcome is separation or collective assertion of linguistic rights. In the Bodo-Assamese contact situation, Bodos in Bodo majority areas still show separation orientation in spite of recent change in political power and high own group language and culture maintenance trends. Assamese in the Bodo majority areas have also showed separation strategy towards Bodos and the contact outcome is separation oriented in the area. This reflects that the deep-rooted impact of recent collective linguistic identity assertion and socio-political movement of Bodos resulted in intergroup conflict and tension which may take some time to subside.