The Negotiation of Identities in Pluri-lingual Conversation: A Theory of Code Choice in Jharkhand

The Negotiation of Identities in Pluri-lingual conversation: A theory of code choice, is related on the one hand to a balancing of the equation of language maintenance and language shift in a growing Bi- and multilingual tribal state of Jharkhand, providing a choice of code to the speakers, and on the other hand, to a variety of social, psychological and historical factors, giving a changed look to the aspect of tribal identity. A minority group may shift completely to the language of the host society in some domains, maintain its own language in a few others while using a mixed code showing varying degrees of mixtures of the two languages in contact in the rest. Even when social and cultural assimilation is almost complete, the native language may still continue to be used in extremely formal situations e.g. rituals and ceremonies as well as in extremely informal situations e.g. family, while mixed varieties may be used in several informal and semi-formal situations, e.g. peer groups. Depending on their historical and cultural background and the response of the host society, two communities may behave very differently in the case of language maintenance and language shift.
On the one extreme we have the case of a speech community whose complete assimilation to the majority community has been called the most striking event of current history, e.g. the American Jews; On the other are the German Mennonite farmers who have struggled to maintain their religion and language against heavy odds. Language thus acts as a shield against complete loss of Identity. Generally, however, the conditions for maintenance and language shift effecting the Identity process is obtained when two communities speaking two different languages come in contact and in studying this we are concerned with the relationship between degree or change on degree of stability in language use patterns, on the one hand and ongoing psychological, cultural or social processes, on the other.

The number of historical, cultural, social, political and psychological factors involved in the processes of linguistic negotiation is so large and complex that the formulation of any comprehensive model to investigate the phenomenon in all its complexity seems fraught with unprecedented dangers. In spite of the freedom to use one's language, the pressures to assimilate to the language and culture of the immigrant society may be very powerful. The linguistic minorities in many countries have often
maintained their group identity while merging more or less completely linguistically.

Having lost their land, their main moorings, the tribals were just a drifting population till yesterday. With the formation of the newly tribal state of Jharkhand, the problems have not reduced. They are exposed to new dangers of losing everything they have, their language, their literature and ultimately their very tribal identity, as the development of any tribal language is directly linked with the stability of the tribal community. As they are coming in contact with the non-tribals, they are losing their 'tribal' character which is reflected in their linguistic atmosphere. The compulsion of having to acquire non-tribal language in order to participate in the new politico-economic situation is influencing the perception of the tribal speakers and their attitude towards their own language. Children are in fact encouraged to learn non-tribal like Hindi to maximize their opportunities for employment. The affluent and educated elite among the tribal prefer to communicate primarily in Hindi. What is happening to the tribal language, culture and the tribal psyche is a complex mix of socio-linguistic acculturation, crisis of identity and total incomprehension of their role in linguistically and pluralistic atmosphere.
In examining the various factors we find that little attention is afforded to language behaviour and for understanding the role of language in ethnic groups, a model is necessary that describes the socio-psycholinguistic factors which can influence whether an ethnolinguistic minority will or will not seek to establish its own in-group language as viable mode of communication. Secondly which could outline some of the socio-psychological processes which allow us an explanation of the linguistic strategies they adopt. And here we take aid of the speech accommodation theory which explains the language behaviour.

The first chapter titled "The Theoretical Framework" has three subsections. First is the theoretical setting; second, the problem and its background; and third, tribes. The first subsection i.e. Theoretical setting takes into account the theory of social psychology and speech Accommodation theory. The specifics of social psychology is that its studies the laws of behaviour and actions of the people depending on the social group they belong to and also focuses on the mentality of the separate individual. It is seen studying both mass mental processes and the position of the individual in a group. the second is speech accommodation theory proposed by Giles, Bourhis and Taylor (1973). It has drawn on four social psychological
theories to focus on the interactive aspects of interpersonal communication. The theory is highly "negotiative" in its character.

The Accommodation theory incorporates ideas from four socio-psychological theories: Similarity-attraction; social exchange; causal attribution and Tajfel's theory of inter-group distinctiveness. Similarity-attraction theory proposes that the more similar our attitudes and beliefs are to certain others, the more likely it is we will be attempted to them. Specifically it involves the reduction of linguistic dissimilarities between two people in terms of their languages, dialects, paralinguistic features, etc. Convergence perhaps reflects a speaker's desire for his listener's social approval. Social exchange processes states that prior to acting, we attempt to assess the rewards and costs of alternate courses of action, for e.g. the increased effort made to converge might be a loss of perceived integrity and personal (and sometimes group) identity. Causal attribution process suggests that we interpret other people's behaviours and evaluate the persons themselves, in terms of motives and intentions that we attribute as the cause of their behaviour.

In process of inter-group distinctiveness Tajfel proposes that when members of different groups are in contact they compare themselves on dimensions which are important to them such as
personal attributes, abilities, material possession and so forth. This will lead individuals to search for, and even create dimensions on which they can make themselves positively distinct from the out-group, and this perception will ensure that they have an adequate social identity.

The next subsection describes the problem and its background, i.e. the negotiation of identity in the tribal speakers of Jharkhand in the four major tribal communities, the Oraon, Munda, Santhal and Ho. The phenomena of pluri-lingualism is general and is rising continuously, presenting a scene of paradoxical oscillation between language maintenance and language shift. The working hypothesis is that the old generation tribal speakers maintain their tribal language while middle and the younger generation tribal speakers are giving up tribal tongue and shifting to Hindi (particularly in the Urban locations) in other words the older generation is negotiating less while the younger generation negotiates more in pluri-lingual conversation.

Major dimensions of the study are:

(a) to establish that phenomena of negotiation occurs

(b) to determine the level of negotiation amongst the social variables – age, location, education, socio-economic class.
(c) To determine the historical, social and cultural factors which may be responsible for negotiations i.e. language maintenance or shift.

(d) To reflect on the socio-psychological process involved in such negotiations based on the accommodation theory.

The data is collected from 4 tribes, the Oraon, Munda, Santhal and Ho. The last sub section of this chapter talks about the characteristic features of tribes.

Chapter two deals with the sociolinguistic profile of Jharkhand. It gives a general information about the state, its history, its people, particularly the four tribes that has been taken for the purpose of study, their language, family classification, scripts etc. The situation of tribal language as well as the non-tribal language, the rising inclination towards the non-tribal language leading to growing Bi and Multilingualism due to various, historical, socio-economic and psychological factors and the pressures created by the dominating non-tribal society.

The third chapter titled “Multilingualism in the tribes and its impact on identity features” in various subsections describes the phenomena of Bi- and multilingualism, the classification based on the context of development of bilingual skills, the early studies showing the negative consequences and the positive consequences
of bilingualism, and the phenomenon of multilingualism particularly in the Indian context. The last section of this chapter is the analysis of the data collected through questionnaire and brief interview. Analysis is done simply by taking the percentage based on hundred as common denominator. It is found that the Oraon (Kurukh) speakers have negotiate their identity at the maximum degree, language shift is more than maintenance with code switching and mixing. Then is the case of the Munda community while Santhal and Ho tribal speakers have negotiated the least.

The fourth chapter is titled “Negotiation of Identity” which takes into account the historical, cultural and social factors which are responsible for such negotiation in the Ethnolinguistic Identity and an account on the application of the speech accommodation theory in the tribal speakers of the Jharkhánd.

It is thus concluded in the last chapter that linguistic identities are negotiated in plurilingual conversation. The hypothesis that old generation tribal speakers maintain their tribal language while middle and the younger generation tribal speakers are giving up their tribal mother tongue and shifting to Hindi is accepted greatly in the case of the Oraon and Munda community but is partially accepted in the case of Santhalias and to a great extent unacceptable regarding the Ho community.
Negotiation of identities is an important feature found in pluri-lingual conversation in all the four communities in varying degrees. With Oraon this negotiation has occurred in the maximum then is the Munda and Santhal. In the Ho speakers it is found in the least degree. Negotiation has been found greatly with the younger generation, then in a lesser degree in the middle generation and in the least in the older generation. Urban tribal settlers negotiated more than the rural the literature and the tribal speakers occupying a better position in the socio-economic ladder negotiated more. And the speech accommodation theory is also well applied to the tribal speakers of Jharkhand.