Language in Society (CL2.203), IIIT Hyderabad

Assignment 6

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Note: All transcriptions are in WX, in inline code format after the word. The transcription is followed by the translation in brackets, *e.g.* വാക്ക് `vAkk` (word).

1 Question 1

The people whom I will consider are my parents and grandmother. They all speak various languages to each other, but two out of three of these languages (Hindi and Malayalam) make the T-V distinction. This is what we will consider.

1.1 Preliminaries

Hindi has three second-person pronouns. In increasing order of formality, these are तू `wU`, तुम `wuma` and आप `Apa`. All three occur in the sample.

Malayalam has two second-person pronouns. In increasing order of formality, these are നീ `nI` and നിങ്ങൾ `niffalY`. However, it is common to avoid pronouns altogether and simply repeat the addressee's name or designation, *e.g.* അമ്മയുടെ കണ്ണടയെവിടെ? `ammayuteV kaNNatayeVviteV?` (where are mother's glasses?) instead of നിങ്ങളുടെ കണ്ണടയെവിടെ? `niffalYuteV kaNNatayeVviteV?` (where are your glasses?). This usage is neutral w.r.t politeness, *i.e.*, can be (and is frequently) used regardless of the level of formality.

1.2 Analysis

1.2.1 Participant 1

My mother speaks English and Hindi with native-level fluency and Malayalam with slightly less fluency. She speaks Hindi with her husband, mother and sister, and Malayalam and English with her children.

Her speech shows examples of all Hindi pronouns. She uses `Apa` with her mother, `wuma` with her husband, and `wU` with her sister. These usages are near-invariant. In Malayalam, she usually addresses her children as `nI`, but sometimes uses their names as described above.

On one occasion, however, I noticed that she avoided the pronoun when speaking Hindi to her mother, showing a kind of interference between her languages; the exact utterance was यह मम्मी का फ़ोन है? `yaha mammI kA PZona hE?` (is this mother's phone?).

These cases show the relations of formality between my mother and her family. She uses a respectful mode of address towards her mother (common but not universal in India, and near-universal in Kerala), which shows respect, rather than a lack of solidarity. She uses an informal but not casual one towards her husband, which I interpret as coming from equal respect and solidarity. The most casual one, which she uses towards her younger sister, shows a great degree of solidarity.
She uses either the informal or neutral modes towards her children when speaking in Malayalam. This, too, is as expected.

1.2.2 Participant 2

My father speaks all three languages to similar levels as my mother, using primarily Hindi and English, and Malayalam to a little less extent. He speaks Hindi with his wife, Malayalam with his mother, and Malayalam and ENglish with his children.

He addresses his mother without a pronoun, consistently using the word അമ്മ `amma` (mother). This is a common practice with older family members in most parts of Kerala. He addresses his children as `nI`.

In Hindi, he uses `wuma` (usually) and `wU` (occasionally) with his wife.

Again, the relations of formality and solidarity are clear from these usages.
His use of the neutral means of address for his mother is, according to common practice, interpreted as respectful. The informal mode of address towards his children is, again, as expected.
The fact that he uses the semi-informal mode of address towards his wife only occasionally, rather than always, is probably due to his seniority. However, it also indicates high solidarity.

1.2.3 Participant 3

My grandmother (maternal) speaks Malayalam as a native speaker, and English and Hindi as second languages with roughly equal fluency. She uses Malayalam with her son-in-law, English (mostly) and Malayalam (occasionally) with her grandchildren, and Hindi with her daughters.

In Malayalam she uses the neutral mode of address towards her son-in-law and her grandchildren. She uses `wuma` in Hindi, with her daughters.

This usage requires some explanation. The fact that she uses the neutral mode of address towards her son-in-law, despite the age and generation difference, is probably due to the low solidarity. He too uses the neutral mode with her,

which, as we have noted, is common for addressing elders in Kerala.
The use of the neutral mode with her grandchildren is probably because of the general preference for this mode among Malayalam speakers. Since she speaks Malayalam to them only rarely, the less common `nI` is never used.
The use of `wuma` with her daughters may appear unusual, but rather than a lack of solidarity, it could be attributed to a lack of familiarity with Hindi's complete pronoun system.

2 Question 2

Bernstein puts forward a distinction between language varieties (which he terms as *restricted code* vs. *elaborate code*) based on the social context of their use. He describes the varieties, and then states a correlation between them and the social class of the speakers' community, and based on this, claims that the speakers of the lower working class, being "limited" to the restricted code, are disadvantaged in the setting of formal education, which is geared towards the use of the elaborate code.

He describes two levels of language – the syntax and morphology (the "structure") and the vocabulary. He says that expression of meaning (which he calls "discrete intent") is dependent on choices made at one or both these levels. Beyond these levels, he refers to an *extraverbal channel* of communication, which includes gestures, expressions, etc.
In terms of this distinction, he differentiates his two codes.

He characterises the restricted code (lexicon prediction) as relying heavily on extraverbal channels, and having high redundancy in at least one channel. On this basis, he describes three variants; the first one has redundancy at both extraverbal and verbal levels, and the second and third have it maximally in the verbal channel and relatively less in the extraverbal channel.
The exact distinction between the latter two variants is not at all clear, however.

Next, the restricted code (high structural prediction) is determined by the predictability of syntactic alternatives, rather than lexical ones. It presupposes a number of assumptions common to the speaker and listener, creating what Bernstein calls a "local cultural identity", and, according to him, reducing the need to make explicit the intent of the speaker.

Finally, he talks about elaborate codes (low structural prediction), which, he says, provide an "extensive range of syntactic alternatives". He describes them as "person-oriented" rather than "status-oriented". They presuppose a degree of "social isolation", separating in some way the individual (speaker) from the social structure which demands the use of these codes.

He concludes that children raised in a social setting that promotes restricted codes (which group he specifies as lower-class children) are in an unfavourable position to succeed in school, which attempts to "develop in children the ability

to manipulate elaborated code, and thereby"change cultural patterns", as stated by Wardaugh.

I feel that many of the terms in Bernstein's paper, as criticised by Rosen (1972) and quoted by Wardaugh, are inadequately defined. Such terms include *level* (as in *level at which a speaker operates a particular code*, page 58), *variant* (the variants of the restricted code listed from page 58), *status aspects [of relations]* (as in *the saliency of ascribed status aspects of the relation generates the characteristics of the order of communication*), and *order* (of communication, relationships, experience, among other things).
Furthermore, his study is not data-based and he provides very few examples in this work – in fact the only ones are that of a mother narrating a story to a child (page 58, second variant of restricted code (lexicon prediction)), and of a boy asking a girl to dance in a dance hall (page 59, third variant of the same). A vague mention is made of "a group of boys at a street corner, or a group of close friends in a bar, or a a courting couple" (page 61, restricted code (high structural prediction)). These are not adequate descriptions to clarify his intentions. I feel that this strengthens the criticisms of Rosen and Labov (1972), as quoted by Wardaugh, with regard to Bernstein's lack of scrutiny of actual working-class life and language and his data.

However, I do not think Bernstein's work is entirely without merit. The distinction that he makes between the two modes of speech is not fully meaningless. I feel that it is certainly possible to distinguish the two "speech-systems" he posits, although I find their strict relation to class and psychology doubtful.

Bernstein claims that children acquiring language from a restricted code or an elaborate code develop differently psychologically, in terms of the way they learn social relations and participate in them. He theorises that a child's learning of a certain code reinforces the social relations associated with it.
This claim appears difficult, if not impossible to test. Its plausibility is also questionable, considering that it appears to be a case of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which we know to be heavily debated and controversial.

3 Question 3

3.1 Part 1

Especially in the Indian context, this question is a difficult one to answer briefly. There are many aspects – both pros and cons – to be considered.

The immediate consideration is one of uniformity. If the mother tongue is promoted as the medium of instruction everywhere, it becomes difficult for students to be acclimatised to education in another medium. This will preclude migration among different regions of the country, and make it difficult for students to, say, continue for higher studies elsewhere.

On the other hand, it has been shown that the fact that the mother tongue

is not legitimised in the school setting can have an adverse effect on students. Making the mother tongue a medium of instruction would improve this situation, effectively raising the prestige of their home language.

A third point to consider is that vernacular languages are typically ill-equipped (in terms of vocabulary) in scientific and technical domains, *i.e.*, scientific and technical terms are usually nonexistent or little-known. Most regional Indian languages solve the former issue by borrowing roughly equivalent terms from Sanskrit, which is a working solution, but the latter issue remains.

In conclusion, the mother tongue as a medium of instruction is probably not an optimal choice to make. In addition to the points presented above, see Part 2 (below) for a consideration of English as a medium of education.

3.2 Part 2

The first advantage English presents is that it is widely accepted as a lingua franca (albeit with a significant amount of controversy), and so students studying in one part of the country may easily shift to another. In effect, it adds uniformity to the medium of education across the country.

Related to this point is the prestige that English has at an international level. Considering this, it appears that making English a medium of instruction in India would, as Wardaugh mentions, empower students to succeed by teaching them an international language like English.

The point of legitimation of the home language, however, presents a valid counter to the use of English. As we have seen, the prevention or avoidance of speaking one's mother tongue is not beneficial towards the students.
Again, however, there is commonly-cited counter that immersion in English at school causes children to lose contact with their mother tongue and home culture, also leading to language attrition in some cases. Personally speaking, my original first language (Malayalam) underwent attrition once I joined an English-medium school, and eventually I could not speak it at all; I learnt it later, although I continue to speak it in a formal, "printed" way that sounds unnatural to a native speaker.

In support of English, however, as noted in Part 1, we know that in terms of vocabulary, it is well-suited to instruction in scientific and technical domains. The English terms, in addition, are well-known and tend to be used even in the context of regional languages.

3.3 Part 3

In my opinion, it definitely does widen the gap between the advantaged and disadvantaged. When English is made the medium of instruction, students for whom English is spoken at home, or who are otherwise fluent in English, have a clear headstart.

Thus, students with less or no prior exposure to English would necessarily struggle to adjust to it. This could lead to poor academic performance, jeopardising their chances. On the other hand, students with a background in English start off on higher ground, making academics easier on them. This creates a cycle which is vicious for those who don't speak English and virtuous for those who do – hence widening the gap.

The issue is exacerbated by the perception of English as a prestige language in India. It frequently happens that a knowledge of English increases an applicant's chances in a job in several sectors. Further, the increasing globalisation in today's world leads to a greater need for English, especially in engineering disciplines.

In summary, although English is a good option as a uniform medium of instruction, it is to be noted that this arrangement also comes with its issues. Consideration needs to be given to them and measures taken to minimise their ill effects on society.