Is It a Language Worth Researching?
Ethnographic Challenges in the Study of Pahari Language

Muhammad Gulfraz Abbasi, M. A., Ph.D. Scholar

Abstract

Pahari, also called Dhundi-Pahari or Dhundi Kairali, is the indigenous language of the native population of Murree in the extreme north of the Punjab province, including some areas of Khyber Pakhtoonkhwa province ("Consensus reached," 2010). It is like other regional languages in Pakistan. It is an underdeveloped, unprivileged and ignored language which lacks proper orthography. A sociolinguistic study was conducted by the researcher to gauge the level of language shift and maintenance.

This paper does not directly deal with the results of the original research but with an intermediate issue of ethnographic difficulties faced by the researcher during the prolonged stay in the field for interviews and participant observation.

This study focuses on the reaction of the community members towards the idea of Pahari as a language as well as the emergent challenges during the presence of the researchers in the field.

The study concludes that Pahari needs to be maintained and sustained through the confidence building measures among the native speakers regarding the value and significance of their language.

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Pahari as a Linguistic Group

Pahari, as its name suggests, is a language spoken by the natives of hills. Pahari is a general name for almost all the languages spoken from Nepal to Pakistan. This long path of Pahari languages contains many independent languages and dialects. Most often these languages are recognized by their specific geographical names or tribal names. *Ethnologue Languages of the World* 16th edition (Lewis, 2009) describes the Pahari in Pakistan and Pakistani part of Kashmir as Pahari-Potwari. This branch of Pahari has four major varieties in Pakistan.

These branches are:

1. Pahari of Murree Hills, Kotli Sattian, Gulyat and Circle Bakote, (also sometimes called Pahari-Potwari, Dhundi-kairali, Dhundi).
2. Pothohari spoken in Rawalpindi, Kahuta, Gojar Khan and Taxila.
3. Mirpuri
4. Poonchi of Muzaffarabad, Neelam Valley and Rawlakot
(Abbasi & Asif, 2010)

Pahari Used as a Common Name

The Pahari variety under study is sometimes referred to as Dhundi-kairali or only Dhundi in the language surveys (see, e.g., Masica, 1991) because it is principally spoken by two ethnic groups 'Dhunds' and 'Kairals'. Dhunds are also called Abbasis.

This name Dhundi-kairali was first used by Grierson (*LSI*, VIII) which was later objected to, because most of the people did not know this name. According to Lothers and Lothers (2007), the speakers of this variety of Pahari did not usually identify themselves as speakers of Dhundi-kairali. Most of them were not even aware of such a name as Dhundi-Kairali. Therefore, the name Pahari (widely known and used by the community members), instead of Dhundi-kairali or Dhundi-Pahari (used in the books and language surveys only), is used in this paper to refer to this variety of language.

Background of the Pahari Community

The major tribe in Murree is Abbasi tribe which constitutes the majority population of this area. Sattis are the majority tribe in Kotli Sattian. The people of these areas, by and large, lived a tribal life for quite sometime before the independence of the subcontinent. After the departure of the British, they started mixing up with the people of other areas and a language contact situation emerged. These people had strong tribal feelings and a sense of superiority in every sphere of life. This community had strong sense of unity with bravery and courage as the symbols of its character. They usually had their own crops and cattle. They had vast areas of land under their control. There were other smaller tribes but they were not able to foreground themselves and hence lived dominated by the Dhund Abbasis.

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Effects of Contact with Other Communities

The indigenous Pahari speaking community was faced with the contact situation when they opened up their avenues for the world. Murree was a hill station developed by the British and in the summer people started coming here to spend three months of extreme hot weather in the plains of Pakistan and abroad. Tourism was the industry which grew rapidly and the native population had set up their businesses here. These businesses directly or indirectly depended on the influx of the visitors. As a result, native people were exposed to the foreign culture and language. The people were influenced culturally and linguistically alike.

The Nature of Actual Research

Given this situation, in which language shift was taking place, I went into the field to see how much language shift had taken place and what the prospects of language maintenance were. I spent quite sometime in the field to collect data. My research was ethnographic in nature and I used participant observation to judge the very essence of the feelings and aspirations of the indigenous population. I participated in conversations with eight families of varying income groups, four each in rural and urban areas. I recorded the natural conversation of members of the families and interviewed them.

The results showed significant decrease in the usage of Pahari and increasing trend in the usage of Urdu. In schools and colleges, there was a growing tendency of using and patronizing Urdu and English as the media of instruction. Thus, I noticed that the native Pahari language was in the process of decline.

Ethnography

Ethnography is a technique used by anthropologists to approach the dispersed data in the culture and to interpret them in meaningful terms. It is primarily based on recording and interpreting distinctive things in a culture (Embers and Embers, 2009). In ethnographic fieldwork, the researcher throws himself or herself into the field by becoming a part of it with a view to infer the social meanings of the behaviour and other naturally occurring activities. Ethnographer approaches the community with a very basic and crude idea or a research question. This question is later modified as the culture and the community open themselves up.

Language is an important part of culture and a system of expression for the culture. Therefore, the phenomenon of language usage can best be elicited through ethnographic fieldwork. As participant observation is an important tool of ethnography, I resorted to be a participant to observe the real language use of the families which I had selected for observation and interviews. In my situation, I had to observe the natural language used by the community members among each other; therefore, participant observation was the best possible technique to be applied in my case too.

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Participant Observation

Ethnography relies much on participant observation. Participant observation as a technique is widely accepted in Anthropology for the space it provides to the researcher. It provides an atmosphere for the researcher to collect diverse type of data. Participant observation is a suitable technique in my research work as the principal data is to be collected from the natural conversation of the people in the families. This is only possible if the researcher goes to these families and participates as an insider. Generally, it is very difficult to be a part of the families as an insider, because the outsider can never be an insider, howsoever much he or she may try.

Perhaps this was the reason that the classical technique of participant observation used to be very lengthy and the researchers had to spend six months to one year in the field to approach the true data from the people. But as far as my situation was concerned, it was easier as I did not have to go to a place where I was completely an outsider and where I had to first mix up with the local people to create a frank atmosphere for the information to be collected.

My Position as a Participant Observer

There were two elements which made it easier for me. The community where I wanted to collect data was hardly aware of this phenomenon of language shift. Therefore, it was not a great issue as compared to other social issues. Secondly, I was also a member of this community and had personal relation with the different families. I worked in eight families as a part of them. I kept on sitting with the members of these families and involved them in discussion. The real conversation usually took place when some guests came and then the real language was observed. On such occasions, it appeared that the participants were speaking spontaneously without any inhibition. So I always wanted to have some guests from the neighborhood to join the conversation. That would also serve to divert the attention of the family members to other issues from the recording that was being done.

Initial Expectations

This was my first ever ethnographic study. I had different expectations from the community members in regard to their response to my queries. I myself belonged to that community and Pahari was my native language too. In this regard, I thought that I would be able to easily accomplish the task of data collection. In the beginning, I planned to participate in sixteen families belonging to different areas of Murree. Then I reduced the number of families to twelve and finally I decided to record the natural conversation of eight families, because of the difficulty arising in the selection of the relevant families. However, I interviewed the members of twelve families to maximize the validity of data.

First Response

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When I entered the field to select families, I came to know that it was not an easy job. I had to select the families according to a criterion which I had already fixed. I had to select four families from the rural areas and four from the urban. These four families each from rural and urban had to have a certain level of income. I did a pilot study of the families if they fulfilled my criterion. It was again not an easy job, because the families which I selected were not all suitable to be observed and studied. I wanted to have preferably those families which had all three generations currently alive. Finally, I selected families on my own to interview and participate. When I contacted those families, I came to know that I might not be able to get the help of all the members of the families because of the fact that people, especially men, would be away from their houses. Some had their jobs and they would come back late in the evening. Others were employed in different departments located in Rawalpindi/Islamabad or Karachi. So they would come back to their houses generally on weekends. When I entered the field to interview people, I also told them that I was working on Pahari; they first smiled and laughed as if to show 'if this is a language worth researching'. Many of them did say that I was wasting my time and I should have worked on any other better language.

My Introduction at the Research Site

It is generally held difficult to gain access to the research site and the researchers have to be very cautious for their entry into the field and get them introduced. But, in my case, it was not as much difficult. I was a member of this community and had personal relations with the people. I was born in village Musyari which is adjacent to Murree city. It is one of the oldest villages of Murree. The residents of this village personally owned the area which is now called Murree city. Musyari was also the old name of Murree. I got primary and middle education from the local village schools and then I received my secondary and higher secondary education from Government High School, Murree and Government Degree College, Murree.
In this way, I developed my relations with the people of other villages as well. Later, I was appointed as a lecturer at the Government College Murree in 1999. Since then, I developed relations with many students belonging to all parts of Murree.

All these made my work a bit easier as my entry into the field was not very surprising for the people. There are numerous examples of the researchers who were not accepted by the community where they wanted to research and where they had to face a lot of problems. Sometimes they had to wait for a long time to settle down before they could start formal data collection. In my case, I was lucky enough to have my own native community to observe. This gave me mental satisfaction. But there were other unseen problems which crept into the setting which were not expected.

Unexpected Reactions

Despite the fact that I was a member of the community where I planned to conduct my research, I had to face some unexpected reactions from the families. Before I started my work I contacted different families and discussed with them my intent of recording the natural conversation. The

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students who played the role of informants and introducers between me and the families told me that the families were suspicious about recording of conversation. They wanted to convey that the conversation might be harmful for them because there was a chance of saying something against the government or its policies. There were certain examples before the people when people were taken by the government agencies for their alleged involvement in militant activities. I observed that there was a sense of fear among the people regarding the recording of natural conversation in their homes. These feelings of the people did not hinder my work as I was able to satisfy them because of my personal contacts and family relationship. In spite of this, I felt that people were a bit reserved and thus I had to put some more labor to make myself as an insider.

Recording Dilemma

The recording of the natural conversation was not an easy job. In the western societies, ethnographers usually select the lunch or dinner time when all the family members get together and discuss the things of daily life. In this way a very short time can be helpful in getting a lot of data which comprise a variety of conversation of the people. The same has been done by Li Wei (1997) when he studied the Teochew community in Singapore.

In the Pakistani situation, however, this is not generally possible especially, when the communities of the regional and indigenous languages are to be studied. In my fieldwork, I faced the same kind of general Pakistani problem. As Murree is a hilly area, the houses are scattered and lying at a distance from one another. Similarly, the houses are very scattered in the rural areas. The family kitchen may be outside of the house and the washrooms are sometimes separately built at a distance. So at lunch, people do not get together. Some eat their lunch outside, some sitting inside; some are seen in their courtyard. In this situation, recording of natural conversation becomes very difficult. So one has to take shots of different places while, being very careful all the time.

Shyness

It was again a very significant phenomenon which I observed during my fieldwork. I, being a male researcher, had to face this problem. Usually the women constitute the major population as the men folk go away for jobs and businesses. Women mostly live in their houses and have less world exposure. So, the presence of a male disturbed them to some extent despite the fact that I had developed very good terms with the family members. So, they were careful in speaking about anything which might not be good in the company of a male alien.

Shame

Language shame was another factor which hindered the people from speaking their heart out in the conversation. For them, Pahari was a weak language in comparison with Urdu, English or Punjabi. So, in the presence of a college lecturer and a Ph.D. researcher, they would like to speak

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in Urdu in place of Pahari, even when they knew Pahari very well. So, for some, Pahari could be used within their families only. They would like to use Urdu or Punjabi when somebody from outside came to their family.

Conclusion

The research which I conducted to know language shift and maintenance among Pahari speakers in the Pahari speaking community of Murree, revealed so many socio-psychological facts to me.

I passed through various stages of enlightenment and surprises. It was like a journey through the community and the psyche of the community. I can say that I started the research as a novice researcher, but, when I came out of this community, I was an educated person. I learnt a lot from the crude knowledge lying scattered in bits among the various sections of the society. I also learnt to deal with emerging challenges which is the hallmark of ethnography. I travelled from darkness, groping like anybody and came out with a clear vision of the socio-psychological behaviour of the Pahari community.

During this research, I was able to identify many more issues which have not been researched. The community was hesitant in the use of Pahari and especially when it was recorded. Sometimes, it looked as if Pahari were not a language to be used for recording in a technological device like the voice recorder. So, this cultural study enabled me to conclude that the users of Pahari should be encouraged to speak it. Moreover, it also raised a psychological question as to why Pahari speakers feel such an inferiority complex. This ethnographic study has opened up many questions to be answered in due course of time.

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