

## **Creating Code Language in Peer Talk: A Case of Children from Malda district of West Bengal**

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### **Abstract**

Peer Talk of children have been studied from different viewpoints keeping in mind the children's language use and socialization process (Cook-Gumperz and Kyratzis 2001, Kyratzis 2004). It is evident from peer talk studies that children actively resist the adult culture through peer talk in order to maintain their identity. The paper discusses a case of children's peer talk where adult language is resisted by the children by adopting a particular strategy. The strategy of children is to create a set of codes by manipulating certain linguistic features where the code is exclusively used among them.

**Keywords:** Peer Talk, cultural categories, playground activities, language use, children's identity, set of codes

### **Introduction**

Language plays a major role in shaping the children's social identity. Children use codes of their own while they play. Observation of peer talks at the playground activities exhibit the transformation of cultural categories by children.

This paper:

- a) Discusses a strategy of peer talk among the children.
- b) Tries to understand how the children are trying to establish a group identity by a newly created form.
- c) Tries to understand how the modification of the linguistic features helps them to exclude themselves from adults and also helps them to gain power.
- d) Tries to examine if the identity of a low status minority group is creating the ground for the creation of new identities of the children.

## Background

The children from Gopalpur village of Englishbazar block of Malda district in West Bengal speak a linguistic variety which is termed as Khotta Bangla. The variety is a mixed language where Eastern Hindi and Rajshahi dialect of Bangla from Bangladesh have been mixed while the target language remained Standard Colloquial Bangla (SCB). Khotta Bangla has different sets of pronouns in comparison to SCB. For example; First person plural pronoun in Bangla ‘amra’ becomes ‘hamra’ in Khotta Bangla. Verbal forms in Khotta Bangla are also quite different from Standard Colloquial Bangla (SCB). For example;

1a. hamar bohut piyas lagluya

I-gen very thirst get-1p-pres-perf.

b. amar khub teSTa peyeche/legeche

I-gen very thirst get-1p-pres-perf.

“I am thirsty.”

The demand of the formal education system forces the Khotta Bangla speaking children to use SCB in classroom domains.

In many instances the teacher does not speak any of the non-standard variations spoken in the Malda region. These are: Khotta Bangla, Maldaiya Bangla (which is a commonly spoken variety of Bangla in Malda region) and Rajbanshi (widely spoken linguistic variety across different districts of Northern Bengal). The teacher does not even understand the local varieties if he/she belongs to urban areas far from the district in most of the cases. The distance between the children and the teacher are reflected through different cultural categories including language. Teacher prohibits the use of non-standard varieties in classroom which becomes an obstacle for the children. Children cannot speak fluently or write using the SCB. They are punished for using the non-standard and ordered to stop using the stigmatized forms in classroom.

Conflict with the teacher’s language and the children’s language is a common phenomenon in various areas of West Bengal where non-standard languages are spoken (Piplai, 2015). Children adopt different strategies to combat the conflict. The children of the

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specific area of Malda try to resist the language of teachers by creating a set of linguistic forms which are not intelligible to the teachers. The creation of the new set of vocabularies involves a process where a combination of vowel and retroflex consonants are inserted in the words. The creation of the new set of words is done in a simple insertion process. But the aim is to resist adult culture, specifically the language of the teachers and build resistance against it.

### **The New Set of Codes**

By using the new set of codes children exclude the adults. They also try to confuse the members of the adult world by using the newly constructed constrained linguistic items. They also use the newly created forms in their own games and songs and rituals which are not a part of adult culture.

The children of Malda construct words with their own variants by using specific linguistic devices. For example,

2a. bhat 'rice' > bhinTat

b. cOl 'go-imp' > cinTOl

c. khabo 'eat-1p-fut' > khinTabo

Basically, the process allows the children simply to add a vowel and a cluster of retroflex stop and nasal 'inT' before the first vowel of any word in order to create the new set of linguistic elements in their code language.

Close observation of the words in a sentence by an adult can find out the strategy easily. In the following sentences:

3a. inTebiler inTupor inTekTi ghinTori inTache

Table-gen on one-cla. clock copula-3p-pres-prog

b. Tebiler upor ekTi ghoriche

Table-gen on one-cla. clock copula-3p-pres-prog

'There is a clock on the table'

It has been observed that if a first sound of a word is a vowel, ‘inT’ has to be added before the vowel, i.e. in the beginning of the word. But the word ‘inTebiler’ is an exception in sentence 2a. where the word is begun with the retroflex ‘T’ and ‘in’ has been added before it. So, it can be inferred that ‘T’ has been viewed as a speech sound which has to come with ‘in’ before it. This is a strategy too.

In the following sentences:

4a. bilTelunTi minTukhe ninTiye finTuliye binTOro kinTOrar

Balloon-cla. mouth-loc. Take-conj.ppl. blow-conj.ppl big to do

cinTeSTa kinTorteche

trial do-3p-pres-prog

b. belunTi mukhe niye fuliye bOro kOrar

Balloon-cla. mouth-loc. Take-conj.ppl. blow-conj.ppl big to do

ceSTa korteche

trial do-3p-pres-prog

‘By putting the balloon in mouth (he/she) is blowing and trying to make it larger.’

In 3b. The final verb is not a standard Bangla verb form. ‘korteche’ is a non-standard Bangla verb form which has been modified by the children to a new form. Here, as the children are targeting to use their own set of words, they are easily choosing a non-standard form for modification, which nobody is there to correct. A form which is otherwise prohibited in classroom domain or any other formal domain can easily be used as a base form before modification.

### **Children’s Initiative to Separate Themselves from Adults**

Kyratzis (2004: 641) mentions that ‘Peer talk is an essential device for displaying identities and ideologies and for resisting them’.

In the course of language development children not only acquire the norms of adult grammar, they also acquire the communicative competence in terms of social knowledge and

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appropriate speech. The target is to gradually acquire different aspects of adult culture. At the same time, children also try to be a member of a social group which has a different culture in comparison to the adult world. Children try to reproduce adult culture with their language use on one level. They also negotiate with the adult world through their use of language.

The children reformulate social categories (e.g. gender). Similarly, the children also try to reformulate the linguistic categories for peer group communication. As a result, exclusive linguistic forms are used by the children, which help one to differentiate between language use of the adult world and the newly created world of children.

It is a clear resistance to the adults for the sake of the protection of the children's interactive space. Children use their own variants while they organize a game. The peers monitor their value in the social market (Eckert, 2000).

Children try to gain control over the confusions of the adults by constraining the use of their own set of language use. The strategy of language use includes construction of a new set of variants like the case mentioned in the paper. Children in other places adopt various other strategies to keep themselves different from the adults. The strategies include code switching, modifying the narrative or argument etc.

### **Identity of a Low Status Group vs. a New Identity**

Reconstruction of identities by minority children within peer group affiliation has importance from the perspective of exclusion.

When children grow up in a society where minority and non-prestigious languages are spoken and the minority languages are in contact with the dominant language, children try to reconstruct their identity by peer group affiliation (Rampton 1995). As a result, they develop a complex set of access strategies (Corsaro, 1997). Children try to reformulate the existing social categories and they want to be a member of the culture which is different from the adult world (Kyratzis, 2004). The reformulation of the cultural categories is to achieve power in a peer group (ibid).

Mainstreaming the children of the minority and low status group children has been a target for a teacher in most of the cases. As a result, the relationship between language use, ethnicity and social identity is not understood (Leung, Harris and Rampton, 1997). Linguistic

and ethnic composition of the pupils is generalized in a broader way where the native speakers of minority languages are viewed as speakers of a dominant language of the state. The children from the minority communities are viewed as the part of an imagined community (Anderson, 1983). The teacher expects the students to use the variants of the language of the imagined community as a result.

The children attempt to build a resistance against this imposition by the adults by the creation of the new identity. This new identity is maintained by the use of the markers, insertion of 'inT' in case of the Malda children.

### **Conclusion**

Creating exclusive set of language uses among children can be observed among different peer talk observations and analyses. Children create and recreate forms while playing in everyday life. But the creation of the new forms can have importance from two dimensions. Firstly, the children can create new linguistic forms just for maintaining a group identity, even if there is no linguistic discrimination from the adult world. Modification of words with a particular sound is common in child talk which can be found in conversation analysis of peer groups. Secondly, children sometimes start creating their own code if there is threat to the speaking their own language in public domain, specifically in conversation with teachers. The second set of codes is different in nature from the first set of codes as these are created under different circumstances. But the overall mechanism of code language creation of peer groups can help us to understand the identity questions of children, which are inevitably reflected in the children's linguistic behaviour.

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