

Research Methodology for Contact Languages

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Abstract

The typological study of emerging contact languages brings in ambiguities and challenges. This paper explores several methodological issues that emerged in the study of contact Hindi (CH). It goes a step ahead and proposes solutions to these issues. In fact, the paper has designed a methodology that was developed during research work on contact Hindi in North East India. This methodology can be used for research on contact languages in general. The present paper states several reasons for requiring a specific methodology for studying contact languages. It also states that in order to achieve Labov's (1972) 'observer's paradox' the fieldworker has to adopt a methodology that aims to elicit random narrations in order to tap natural features of an emerging contact language. This paper is of high relevance in absence of any specific methodology for working on contact languages.

Key words: contact language methodology, contact language research methodology, linguistics methodology.

1. Introduction

Literature has several typological accounts of contact languages those focus on aspects such as, contact induced language change, language processing in bilingualism, language universals and language change etc. But it is surprising that none of these discussions unravels the methodology for studying the contact language. The study of contact languages needs specific methodology for several reasons. To begin with, it is difficult to tap the features of a contact language at its emerging stage. This is so, because at initial stage its features are not stable. A speaker can have several forms and patterns for denoting a single linguistic feature. Thus, a contact linguist's aim is to sift out the idiosyncratic linguistic features from the conventional linguistic outcomes. Secondly, the Labov's (1972) 'observer's paradox' has to be

kept in mind. The data should contain ‘that speech’ when the speaker is not being observed. Hence, the data should comprise random narrations. Thirdly, the current language contact situations are much more complex in terms of composition of languages and linguistic attitudes. Thus, it is imperative to have a specific methodology for studying contact languages. This methodology comprises a set of parameters, pre conditions and guidelines specific to language contact.

2. Research Overview

This study was conducted in two North eastern states of India, namely Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya. The interview method is best suited for typological studies. Thus, prior to pilot survey, two questionnaires, each for linguistic and sociolinguistic research were drafted on the recommendations made by Abbi (2001) in her book “A Manual of Linguistic Fieldwork and Structures of Indian Languages” and Comrie & Smith (1977) in their work “Lingua Descriptive Studies: Questionnaire.” The ‘*Atlas of Pidgin and Creole Language Structures (APiCS)*’ project’s questionnaires were also referred in order to frame the linguistic questionnaire. The CHs of AP and Meghalaya are not codified. Thus, the only source of data was primary data collected by intensive field work. The informants were drawn from a large cross section of the community so that the representative sample of these Hindis could be studied. The linguistic questionnaire comprised basic word list and basic sentence list. The sociolinguistic questionnaire tried to explore the source of learning, domain and extent of usage and acceptability of Hindi by the speakers of the two target areas. It was kept in mind that there was a need to study CH in its social context which gives rise to what Labov (1972) termed the ‘observer’s paradox.’ That is, the CH, which the research wished to observe closely, is the very style which speakers use when they are *not* being observed.

3. Methodological Issues/Problems

The research had to undergo several methodological issues that surfaced during the field work. These are:

- i. **No questionnaires:** The biggest challenge that emerged was that the conventional linguistic questionnaire comprising basic sentence and word list did not prove to be a success. Most informants translated the English sentences into Standard Hindi (SH)

instead of CH. Thus, the questionnaire had to be reframed aiming at narrations and unconscious speech. (In Northeast India people study SH in schools as part of compulsory subject. “Hindi the official language, based on Western Hindi, is the standardized form of a language that is also referred to as Modern Standard Hindi, to distinguish it from the colloquial and regional varieties of the language” (Kachru 2006:1-2). It is the codified variety which is used for official purposes and has several registers. Hence, Standard Hindi is a continuum of varieties. For the sake of comparison and point of departure, we have taken the spoken form of Western variety of Hindi as the Standard Hindi. This variety is primarily based on what is popularly known as ‘*KhariBoli*’.)

ii. *Is it a language:* Linguistic research or enquiring about CH did not make enough sense for any of its speakers. They do not consider CH to be a language. This is so because CH is a mixture of several languages such as Bangla, Assamese, Tibeto-Burman languages etc. Thus, the informants were sometimes not keen to participate and show seriousness during data elicitation.

iii. *No man’s tongue:* CH does not belong to any particular group. Everyone speaks it but a few claimed that they were CH speakers. This may be because of the fact that in this contact situation CH is not a means of flagging identity but is only a means of linking and connecting. Thus, it was difficult to find the keen and eager speakers.

iv. *Non standard speech:* It is a challenge to elicit data when the speakers are convinced that they speak a non-standard variety of a language and it is incorrect. The people of AP believed that they speak ‘broken Hindi’, ‘non standard Hindi’ and the people in Meghalaya believe that they only speak Hindi words occasionally.

v. *Silence or hypercorrection:* The speakers primarily had two ways of responding; either they were hesitant and quiet or gave the hypercorrect Hindi during elicitation. For instance, none of the CHs have gender and number agreement. Thus, unlike SH, in CHs, the sentences ‘Sita went’ and ‘ram went’ will not inflect the verb for gender and number.

But a lot of informants did inflect the verb, during elicitation.

vi. **Everything Hindi:** CH is the amalgamation of several distinct languages. In such a complex contact situation it became a task to adjudge what came from where and how? Thus, many times the non Hindi items such as, classifier *-tHu* or functions of plural marker *-lok* which are from EIA and TB languages respectively, are also presumed as 'Hindi' by the CH speakers. Such beliefs of terming everything as Hindi were sometimes misleading.

vii. **Lack of uniformity:** In Meghalaya, CH is neither willfully practiced nor have stable forms. There are several interlanguages. Hence, there is a lot of variation. The lack of uniformity across the place became a challenge to decide on structures of CH.

viii. **Lack of previous records:** There are no elaborate linguistic or socio-cultural records on CHs. The present research work is the first ever compiled work on grammar of CH. Thus, sometimes it was a challenge to find explanations for certain changes or make comparisons with another work.

ix. **Representative data:** Lastly, the entire data was elicited in form of random narrations. Thus, it was not category-wise classified. In such a case, there was a possibility that all the linguistic categories were not covered.

3. Techniques

Several techniques were designed in order to overcome the challenges faced during the pilot survey and fieldtrips. These have been divided into various phases and can be applied to various contact situations. These are as follows:

3.1. Pre-fieldwork

This includes the preparation before starting the fieldtrip to the target areas. It can be divided into two phases as follows:

i. Off Field

Prior to the fieldtrip it is essential to make following off field preparations:

a. Thorough reading: It is extremely important to read significant theories on language contact, typological sketch of a few contact languages and the grammars of those languages that are believed as the source for the contact language in study. For instance, I covered major theoretical works on language contact and grammar of Hindi. The primary readings included Thomason (2001), Seigel (2008), Matras (2009), Aikhenvald (2007), Heine & Kuteva (2005), Kachru (2006).

b. Extensive research on target areas: Prior fieldwork, an in-depth study of the field area is an indispensable step. It is done through studying the resource material on the land, people and culture of the area. The resources can be acquired from government archives, web-sites, personal blogs, travelogues etc. Thus, a detailed study should be done on the history, culture, people, food and languages of the two states. Precisely, this enables the fieldworker to blend in with its informants during fieldtrip.

ii. On field

The fieldtrip is preceded by a pilot survey. The pilot survey can be conducted either going on the field or in the nearby area that has the contact language speakers. In the present study, a pilot survey was conducted in the national capital of India, Delhi. This is so because it is the employment and educational hub of the country. People from all Indian states travel here for several purposes. In general, the methodological plan for such a study should be drawn post pilot survey report. Apart from linguistic features, the pilot survey should focus on two other important aspects. These are:

a. Demography: During pilot survey, the past and present demographic compositions of the areas should be explored. It should be asked for, during the interviews with the informants. This gives the idea of the migration pattern in the area. This migration pattern will also reveal the linguistic profile of the area.

b. Extensive research on target areas: The informants should be asked about the land, culture, people and economy of the area. This gives an idea about the do's and don'ts of the place which would be helpful in blending in with the people of target areas.

3.2. During Fieldwork

While on the fieldwork, following things should be kept in mind:

i. Attending festivals and public gathering: In order to know the extent of usage of contact language it is absolutely essential to be the part of local life. Thus, the fieldworker should attend the local festivals, community gatherings etc where mass communication occurs. For instance, I attended the celebration of the *mopin* festival of Galo indigenous group of AP.

ii. Visiting public places: The key function of contact language is to bridge the communication gap between the speakers of different languages. Thus, contact languages are found most functional in public places such as markets, banks, government offices, taxi stands, restaurants, hospitals etc. Hence, it is extremely important to visit all the public places.

iii. Media in contact language: The contact languages often become popular and influential languages in the society. Thus, it is used in print and electronic media to reach out to larger audience. It can prove to be a significant resource material. For instance, I found a play written in Arunachalee Hindi.

iv. Collecting random narrations: These are the most reliable sources in place of translation method. The translation method does not work in the situation where speakers are familiar with the standard variety of the primary source language of contact language. In that case, the speakers translate the sentences into standard variety instead of the contact variety. The random narrations can be elicited through following:

- a. folk tale/story,
- b. daily routine,

- c. recipes,
 - d. opinions on any issue,
 - e. real life incidents etc.
- v. *Making daily check notes*: In case of emerging contact languages there can be several repetitions and idiosyncracies. In order to avoid these it is extremely important to keep a daily check.
- vi. *Principal informant*: It is important to locate principal informant with whom data can be cross-checked. In contact situations there can be innumerable variations. Hence, the data should be tested with the principal informant.
- vii. *Long recordings*: The natural speech is usually captured in long narrations. Thus, in order to get the natural speech one should aim at long recordings.

3.3. Post Fieldwork

The fieldworkers work does not culminate with fieldtrip. There are several post fieldwork vital issues as follows:

- i. The smallest change can be significant in challenging the typological theories. Thus, everything should be noted. For instance, in CH of AP there is a lamino-dental allophone of retroflex stops, which is otherwise not present in Hindustani. The same sound is a phoneme in CH of Meghalaya. At times this lamino-dental is just perceived as a dental. Hence, a close observation should be done.
- ii. Post field work, all the data should be transcribed and later classified under several grammatical headings. The sooner the data organization is done the better it is for the researcher.
- iii. Once the primary observations are made then the theoretical model should be selected. The research should question, support or challenge existing theories. For instance, I chose Aikhenvald's 2007 model proposed in "Grammars in Contact" to compare my results with.

4. Parameters

It should be the precondition of fieldwork that only those informants should be interviewed who permanently stay in the target areas. There are several other parameters that should also be kept in mind during samples collection: These are:

- i. *Age*: The data should represent all the age groups. This helps in deciding the age group that mostly uses the contact language.
- ii. *Gender*: The data should represent all genders in order to understand the concentration of contact language i.e. which gender uses the contact language most.
- iii. *Type of employment*: The data should be collected from government, private and self employed people. This helps to ascertain whether contact language is the language of economy or not.
- iv. *Education*: The data should be collected from both public and private schools. This will display the ratio of government and public in promotion, usage and learning of contact language. Along with this, it is also necessary to find out the medium of instructions at schools. In several cases the contact language is widely used in schools as an informal medium of instruction.
- v. *Linguistic profile*: It is essential to note the linguistic profile of the speakers. The field investigator should know the number of languages spoken in the area. This helps in determining the source of borrowing and interference in the contact language.

5. Questionnaire & Data elicitation

All typological works require questionnaires. The questionnaire should aim at the primary research questions. Usually, two different questionnaires; linguistic and sociolinguistic are prepared by the fieldworkers. In contact situations, if the speakers are familiar with the standard variety of the contact language then translation method cannot be used. In such case, the questionnaire cannot comprise of basic word list or basic sentence list. Instead, this situation requires a questionnaire that aims at natural speech and narrations. The questionnaire should comprise following elements:

- i. Narration of folk tales
- ii. description of festivals, traditions, social ceremonies such as marriages, birth anniversary, death ceremonies
- iii. narration of real life incidents

- iv. description of recipes
- v. Description of procedures such as hunting, construction of bamboo house, making baskets, farming or anything about the community's daily life.
- vi. Opinion on issues such as, movies, songs, current affairs, marriage, re-marriage, higher studies, teaching profession, development work in their area, politics, elections, public policies.
- vii. Description of the famous areas/tourist spots such as, how to go and why?
- viii. Description of their occupations such as, in Meghalaya, a coal miner was asked about business of mining (how is it done, what are the machinery used, what are the dangers involved during extraction etc).
- ix. Narrations of a movie story.

The questionnaire should aim at asking about the speakers daily lives, their personal choices, daily surroundings, occupations etc. In other words, the questions should pertain to those elements towards which the informants feel personally attached.

6. Conclusion

Thus, it is correct to say that grammar writing of a contact language is a complex process. Each contact situation can bring in new challenges woven in new social conditions. Thus, the fieldworker has to be really careful while devising its methodology.

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