

Bilingualism: it's Impact on Assamese Society

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Abstract. *Bilingualism and multilingualism mainly deal with the use of different languages in a society, state or country. Bilingualism is a linguistic community sharing more than one language and their functional allocation. In bilingual societies, different languages and varieties often serve different functions. For example, in Assam, English is used in science and technology, international trade and higher level academic transactions, whereas the Assamese language is used mainly in religion and social gatherings. In other words, English is used as a language of modernization and Assamese is used as a language of intimacy. English and Assamese languages play a complimentary role in Assamese society.*

Keeping this background in mind, this research paper tried to find out the status of English language in Assam as a multilingual state. The purpose of this paper is to study how English words and expressions find their way in day-to-day conversations of the Assamese people.

Key words: *Bilingualism, Multilingualism, Education, Communication.*

INTRODUCTION

Living languages are ever in a state of flux. They respond to the on going changes in the social structure. In other words, language reflects a speech community. A speech community is identified as a group of people who form a community, e.g. a village, a region, a nation. The people have at least one speech variety in common. Though a speech community may speak one language or dialect, on the scale of social functions it shows variations. Therefore, there is always a process of renewal, revision and refinement in the massive ever-replenishing storehouse of language.

In bilingual and multilingual communities, the powerful groups assert linguistic dominance over the rest of the linguistic communities. This may result in the elimination of the less-powerful speech varieties. Differences in economic or political power and prestige always put the less powerful language at a disadvantage.

In bilingual societies, two people belonging to two different speech communities mix and switch linguistic codes for the purpose of communication. Bilingualism is a great area of interest for the linguists. The prevalence, reasons and impacts of bilingualism are directly linked to the socio-cultural environment. An interdisciplinary study of bilingualism reveals highly interesting aspects of the linguistic scenario of a bilingual community.

Code-switching and code-mixing are the most dominant facets of bilingualism. The main purpose of the present study is to analyze this phenomenon among the Assamese bilinguals. It is observed that not all bilinguals tend to use 'code-switching' and 'code-mixing'. The 'swapping' between languages is common among the more mobile sections of the society. In many cases, code-switching is motivated by the wish to express loyalty to more than one cultural group, as it happens in the case of many immigrant communities in the New World.

ENGLISH IN ASSAM

The British conquered Assam in 1826 and ten years later two distinguished members of the American Baptist Mission, Rev. N. Brown and O.T. Cutter arrived in Assam. This was in 1836, when Assamese was removed from schools and law courts of Assam. The missionaries realized that their proselytizing activities would not succeed without a simultaneous development of the language of the people, and they took up the cause of Assamese and tried to open the Government's eyes to the great mistake done. Bengali continued to be the medium of education and court administration in Assam for thirty seven years. As such, Assamese students and Government servants had to study a non vernacular language at least out of necessity. Thus, the study of Bengali and the struggle for restoration of Assamese went on side by side. This influenced the spread of English language in Assam.

During the nineteenth century, there were not many Assamese who were proficient in English. The impact of English language was first felt in Assam through the 'Christian Assamese'. They were quickly picked up and used by the missionaries. With the spread of English education, the number of English knowing persons increased, although college education was not available to many as it had to be pursued in Calcutta. Thus, historically, English and Assamese worked almost simultaneously as the medium of conveying Western ideas to the people of Assam.

Today, English Language is playing an important role among the Assamese people. It has become an inseparable part almost in all the fields of knowledge, scientific exploration, medical research, education, legal, judicial and administrative matters. English is now making itself very vigorously felt in the day to day conversations of Assamese irrespective of their economic and educational status. They use English expressions and words unrestrainedly in all the types of communication— simple, emotional, persuasive, scholarly, literary and scientific. For most of them, English has become the link language.

DEVELOPMENT OF BILINGUALISM IN ASSAM

Bilingualism is a situation where two entirely different languages are spoken. In bilingualism, the speakers have to face at least two languages in day to day activities. This states that the bilingual person masters in two linguistic systems, it also stresses that he possesses and uses them in the same way.

The great linguist BLOOMFIELD defines bilingualism:

"In----cases where----perfect foreign language learning is not accompanied by loss of the native language, it results in bilingualism, native like control of two languages. After early childhood few people have enough masculine and nervous freedom or enough opportunity and leisure to reach perfection in a foreign language, yet bilingualism of this kind is common than one might suppose, both in cases like those of our immigrants and as a result of travel, foreign study, or similar association. Of course one cannot define a degree of perfection of which a good foreign speaker becomes a bilingual; the distinction is relative."(1935:55-56)

There are three phases of the development of bilingualism in Assam, which need to be discussed in the light of changing scenario. In the first phase, it may be stated that since the pre-historic times Assam has been the homeland of many ethnic groups, tribes, and communities having different languages. They composed the Assamese community through the means of their various languages. These communities started learning other languages for communication, trade and commerce. So, necessarily and naturally these languages helped the residents of Assam for the development of bilingualism.

The second phase starts with the arrival of the British and it is a remarkable period for the growth of bilingualism. The British started ruling Assam and definitely there was a need for the Assamese people who could serve as mediators to help them in administration. They were looking for the person who can think like British. They started teaching English to Assamese people and started building schools and universities with English as a medium of instruction. The language of instruction at the university level was English, and therefore, the schools that emphasized English were preferred by large number of Assamese people for better prospect. The modern leaders of Assam also supported

English and claimed it to be the main key towards success. The acceptance of English in Assam slowly led to the emergence of bilingualism.

The third phase constitutes the demand of present environment and work culture to become bilingual with an advanced language. Presently, English has been playing a major role in all the aspects of life like political, economical, educational and social. English has been equated to growth, opportunity, and knowledge. As English is the language of science, modern technology and business, maximum number of people seem to adopt this language. Bilingualism in Assam is, thus, a result of the needs of the time and situation.

BILINGUALISM AND LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN ASSAM

Generally, people tend to think that bilingualism is the ability to speak two languages. Bilingualism presumes the ability to read and write two languages. However, most bilinguals tend to have a dominant language. Some people become equally fluent in both the languages, however, most of them are more fluent in one language than the other. Very often, the two languages are used in different circumstances, for example:

- *With the family
- * In the local community
- * At work
- *In church, chapel or other social contexts

For language education in India, there are some policies implemented by the government of India and University Grants Commission, which have been followed in Assam also. In 1955, the University Grants Commission appointed a committee under the chairmanship of H. N. Kunzru. The Kunzru committee submitted its report in December 1957. Its important recommendations are summarized in a later report (quoted in Dr. Anju S. Gupta. p.62-63), which are as follows:

- 1) That the change from English to an Indian Language as the medium of instruction at the university stage should not be hastened.
- 2) That even when a change in the medium of instruction is made, English should continue to be studied by all the university students.
- 3) That it would be necessary to have text books prepared on scientific principles and the government of India or the council of Secondary Education should take up this question for children.
- 4) In relation to the three year degree course which is now proposed to be introduced in our universities that the teaching of English be given special attention in the pre-university classes.
- 5) The teaching of English literature should be related to the study of Indian literature, so that apart from its value for linguistic purposes, it could be effective means of stimulating critical thinking and writing in the Indian languages.
- 6) It is desirable to have the question of courses of study in English and methods of teaching English at the university stage examined by an expert body and the recommendations of that body adopted by all the universities.
- 7) Where English is not the medium of instruction at any university it is necessary to adopt special methods to secure an adequate knowledge of English as a second language.
- 8) That greater attention should be given to linguistics in our universities and in our teacher training colleges.
- 9) It is in our educational interest that English should be retained as a properly studied second language in our universities even when an Indian language is used as the ordinary medium of teaching.

The recommendations of the Kunzru commission were presented before a conference of English teachers in 1958 at the Central Institute of English later renamed as Central Institute of English and

Foreign Languages in Hyderabad. The recommendations of the conference were primarily concerned with methods, curriculum and text books. In February 1960, the University Grants Commission appointed a committee of experts under the chairmanship of G. C. Banerjee to examine the issues involved in the teaching of English. The objectives of this committee were reported in the English Review Committee (1965:4) as follows:

- 1) To define the objectives of teaching and learning English at the various levels of university education.
- 2) To examine the standards of teaching in English Language and Literature both at the undergraduate and postgraduate level.
- 3) To examine the methods of teaching English used in our universities and colleges to equip students with the minimum competence required in this regard in the shortest possible time.
- 4) To consider measures for reorganizing the M.A. course in English to provide for an intensive study of the language as a tool of knowledge rather than literature.
- 5) To recommend the steps that may be taken to strengthen the teaching of English in the context of the medium of instruction in the universities.

The recommendations of the Committee of experts are not so insightful than the recommendations made by the earlier committees. However, this report presents another phase in the activity toward breaking the teaching of English away from the earlier approaches, goals, and curriculum of the education system of India.

Assamese is the primary language of Assam and it is recognized by the Constitution of India as one of the statutory languages. Assamese is also the first language of Assam, while English is used as a second language. However, in all the government and private primary schools of Assam, English Language is being taught from the first standard. It also continues as a medium of instruction for the higher education.

SCHOOL EDUCATION

Today in Assam, English is playing an important role in both the primary and secondary level of education. The Education Commission 1964-1966 was strongly in favor of recognition of English as a medium of instruction. The reviews of The Education Commission (1964-1966) observed as follows:

1. English dominates the mother tongue in different schools and various groups:
 - English continues to be a medium in almost all the private elitist schools.
 - English remains a medium of communication for most of the educated people.
 - English is used as a medium of instruction in the central schools and the Navodaya Vidyalayas for the development of highly mobile sectors of society and for rural talents respectively.
2. English as a subject of study:
 - English is accepted in Assam as the only second language and is being taught as a subject from the first standard.

HIGHER EDUCATION

The education commission (1964-66) had proposed English to be a medium of education. English as a medium of instruction continuously dominates the vernacular medium of universities of Assam. It continues to be an exclusive medium in all the medical, agricultural and engineering colleges of Assam.

1. English as a medium of instruction and examination:
 - All the four universities have accepted English as a medium of teaching and examination at graduate and post graduate level except for Assamese Literature.

2. English as a medium of scientific communication:

- All the universities of Assam offer M.Sc. courses in English as English is the only medium of instruction.
- The only agricultural university in Assam, i.e., Jorhat agricultural university has considered English as a medium of instruction.
- English continues to be a medium of teaching in IIT, medical and engineering colleges of Assam.

These and many other policies in the education sector are contributing to the widespread use of English in Assam. As a result, English has become a dominant language and is influencing the job sector as well.

BILINGUALISM AND PRESENT WORK CULTURE IN ASSAM

Bilingualism means being able to conduct everyday life in two languages. There are number of advantages of being a bilingual, not only at individual level but also at society level. The major advantages can be stated as follows:

ADVANTAGES IN COMMUNICATION

- Wider communication (extended family, community, international links, and employment)
- Literacy in two languages.

CULTURAL ADVANTAGES

- Broader cultural understanding and multicultural sensitivity.
- Greater tolerance and social harmony.

COGNITIVE ADVANTAGES

- Thinking benefits (creativity, sensitivity to communication.)
- Greater problem solving and analytical skills.
- Technical benefits.

PERSONAL ADVANTAGES

- Raised self-esteem.
- Flexibility and adaptability.
- Confidence in social interactions.
- Greater interpersonal skills.

ADVANTAGES FOR CURRICULAM

- Conceptual development in two languages.
- Transfer of the academic skills across two languages.
- Collaborative and co-operative learning.

The association of English with modern technology, economic progress, and internationalization, has encouraged people all over the world to learn English and the people of Assam are no exception.

Assam is a developing state. The concept of modern technologies is not new to the people of Assam. The modern companies are getting rooted in all the parts of Assam which encourage the people to learn English for development. These technology based companies depend on the English language for communication. As such, the job seekers need to have a good knowledge of English.

The computer revolution as a part of modern technology is an important factor in popularising English among Assamese people. Presently, computer related work like software and hardware engineering are the most desired professions for the educated young men and women of Assam.

The IT sector, BPO industries, national-international banks, insurance companies, marketing based companies and different franchisees give more importance to English Language. These companies preferably recruit the people who are fluent in English. For example, Business Process Outsourcing is an important segment of IT. It includes outsourcing of business process- like customer services, customer sourcing and information processing, including call centre operations and back office operations. These are mainly US and UK based companies. Without knowing English, it is difficult to work in this environment.

Aspirants of IAS, IPS, IFS, Assam Civil Services, banking examinations and so on have to face the interviews in either Hindi or English Language. Assamese people are not much familiar with Hindi; therefore, they prefer English as the medium in these examinations.

The present work culture of Assam is completely dominated by English Language. It also motivates the Assamese to learn English because it is only the language that helps them to get a good job. At present getting a government job is a tough task. Many people are qualified but they fail to make it on social, economic and political grounds. To overcome this situation the Assamese people are left with no other options except learning good English for getting jobs in the private sector.

CONCLUSION:

In the world of the bilinguals, anything is possible; languages play different roles on different occasions according to the need of the speaker. This precisely happens in the case of Assamese bilinguals who are perfectly capable of using English on different occasions and are able to use it as a separate code. This mixing of English with Assamese is not an isolated phenomenon, nor is it an aberration or an instance of 'deviant use', it is rather a regular rule-governed and context-bound process giving rise to the new mixed codes through a particular merger of English with Assamese Language. The mixing of English with Assamese Language does not represent 'a certain confusion of patterns' but a pattern and well structured mixer of language that has gained wide currency and acceptance by native speakers of Assamese Language. This kind of mixing is not the result of 'pathological switching' nor is it the result of ignorance or imperfect learning. It is a natural and inevitable consequence of the long contact between English and Assamese language.

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