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Linguistic study by speakers: efforts of an institute

E. Annamalai

Languages have been studied and grammars of them written in the described language itself from the times of the ancient Indian grammarian Panini. Classical Sanskrit remained a spoken language before and after Panini described it. In the past, the grammarian may have learnt the language as their first or second language or as a dialect, but spoke it before coming to describe it. This was true of tribal languages in India also. Murmu, a teacher from the Santali community, analyzed the phonological system of his language and devised an orthography called Ol Chiki in the nineteenth century. This common method of describing a language using the language itself changed with the advent of modern linguistics. The modern grammarian may not speak the language at all, or may speak it in fragments, while recognizing that speaking it with a reasonably good command makes one a better grammarian. The researcher learns to speak the language while doing the analysis, not preceding it, unlike most missionary grammarians, who first learnt the language from its speakers before describing it.

Another change brought by modern linguistics is that the metalanguage of grammatical description is different from the language described. This came about because the grammarian could not communicate well enough in the language to be described, the technical vocabulary of the metalanguage was not rendered into the language described, and the grammar was addressed to an audience outside the language community. Another explanation for the fact that the described and describing languages are different is that grammatical description requires specialized training in theory and methods and in the language that goes with them; this is typically only available to those few who choose linguistics to be their profession. The emergence of syntactic studies initiated by the Generative Grammar paradigm in linguistics made grammaticality judgments part of the data, however the metalanguage (except for English and some other major languages) and the audience of grammatical description, as defined in modern linguistics, remains unchanged.

A change in the situation was felt to be warranted in sociolinguistic studies in order to reduce the effect of the observer's paradox, but this did not find widespread acceptance in practice in the profession. Language documentation, however, provides a serious opportunity for change because of the enormity of the work to be done and the recognition of the need for the linguistic work to be relevant and useful to the language community. Language speakers are co-opted in linguistic work as partners of professional linguists. The gain is for both linguistics and the community simultaneously. The gain is larger for linguistics in certain kinds of linguistic work such as dictionary making (see Mosel, this volume), correlational studies of language

variation, situational studies of language use, or studies of language in primary socialization etc.

The Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL) in Mysore is entrusted with the work of research, training and materials production for the development of all Indian languages (other than Hindi and Sanskrit), including tribal and other minor languages, and for the solution of language problems of this multilingual country. The Institute has highlighted the use of languages in education as a primary step in language development and in facilitating communication to solve problems. Both are done in the context of multilingualism and with the goal of maintaining language diversity.

There are about 200 distinct languages in India, half of which are called 'tribal', as they are languages spoken by communities that are legally identified as tribes. Apart from 20 regional languages, which are majority languages in a region or state, the rest are non-tribal minor and minority languages. All of them require significant language development. There are about 40 linguistics departments of variable quality in the country, each training an average of five postgraduate students every year. The departments do not attract bright and committed students because of the lack of employment opportunities. Limited employment also has the deleterious effect of forcing many students to take non-linguistic jobs after graduation. Realizing the need for trained linguists to study tribal and other minor languages from the points of view of language development and communication, CIIL has tried out some manpower development programmes with various degrees of success.

Students from tribal communities are given scholarships by the government to receive college education. Jobs in government and public institutions are reserved for them as part of affirmative action for disadvantaged social groups. Unfortunately, linguistics does not attract tribal students; the brighter among them prefer disciplines like political science, economics, apart from the hard sciences and professional courses, which they believe will empower them by getting 'all India service jobs', by becoming contractors for forest produce and infrastructure development companies in tribal areas, or by getting into politics. To offset this trend, CIIL has increased the amount of the scholarship grants to study linguistics at a university of the student's choice. This programme was most successful with the North Eastern Hill University, Maghalaya, whose postgraduates are now working on a project in CIIL itself which aims at producing a linguistic and sociolinguistic study of the languages of the north-eastern part of India. One reason for the success of this particular programme is that a staff member of CIIL joined the faculty of the university and later returned to the institute. Another staff member of CIIL went to join the faculty of another university in the north-east, but in this case, it did not develop this way. This might be explained by the low literacy rate in Arunachal Pradesh and, consequently, the relatively small college-going population. One student from Nagaland, who graduated in linguistics from Delhi University with the help of the scholarship, later joined the staff of CIIL.

As an extension to the postgraduate training programme, CIIL gave preference in its doctoral and post-doctoral fellowships, to linguistic postgraduates from tribal communities. One student from Manipur, who is a teacher of English, did doctoral work on his native language at the institute. CIIL also funded combined postgraduate training programmes in linguistics and anthropology specifically oriented towards tribal students in selected universities closer to tribal areas such as Dibrugarh University in Assam. But this did not become popular, perhaps because of the career preferences of tribal students mentioned earlier.

CIIL gives linguistics training to officials of the state governments who do specific language-related work such as the preparation of phrase books, or grammatical sketches, and also to senior government officials posted in tribal areas. This constitutes a part of the tribal development work from the perspective of state governments. Some of these officials are drawn from the tribal communities of the state and some are from non-tribal communities, having learnt the tribal language informally. The CIIL training programme on-site and at the institute consists of basic linguistics, phonetics, dictionary making and pedagogical material production. The primary focus of the training is to prepare materials to help outsiders learn the tribal languages, but it has also spilled over to the preparation of materials needed for first language learning by tribal children. The linguistic capacity built in the tribal welfare or development departments in many states is noteworthy in terms of the number of people involved but its implementation is still not to the desired level. They continue to work more like officials than like activists.

CIIL organizes many in-service training programmes to teachers in tribal schools, who may be from tribal communities or from outside. The teachers are invariably from outside when the tribal community is pre-literate or neo-literate. During the training, the non-tribal teachers are supported in recognizing the importance of the tribal child's language in education, and of their learning the first language. All teachers are trained in the methodology of first language pedagogy, materials production and language evaluation in the classroom. Tribal teachers are specifically trained in word formation and term creation for use in writing non-language textbooks, as well as in dictionary making. In workshops, the teachers actually prepare primers in tribal languages and other subjects under the guidance of the institute's faculty members and invited experts. This includes composing nursery rhymes for tribal children. In some of the tribal communities whose literacy level is well beyond the threshold, such as Mizoram and Nagaland, there were creative-writing workshops for teachers and postgraduates. These communities do have liturgical literature, and the workshop aims at creating secular literature as well. As part of this training, skills in translation are also imparted. The effect of such training may take time to become apparent.

Some tribal communities, especially those in the north-east, have literature committees composed of people with some language awareness who take up activities in support of their language. These activities include the selection of the variety of

language to be used in education; the differentiation and unification of language varieties; the standardization of orthography, spelling and the translation of liturgical literature. These committees have political weight in the community. Some of them are engaged in making dictionaries. CIIL works closely with them in matters of orthography, spelling and primer preparation. In the process, they get to know of linguistic intricacies and the rationale for decisions on language, and this knowledge is useful when linguistic studies of their language need their support. Many are willing to give CIIL a consulting role in their language activities. A major dictionary of Bodo in Assam was thus compiled by its literature committee with consultation from CIIL, which also defrayed the cost of its publication.

CIIL co-opts speakers of tribal languages in its research projects, particularly sociolinguistic surveys, as it has done in the sociolinguistic survey of Arunachal Pradesh. Before the actual work in the field occurs, the native speakers are given orientation in the use of questionnaire and survey methodology. There is no information, however, on how many of these people are later motivated to undertake full-fledged linguistic training in universities.

From the experience of CIIL in linguistic capacity building, it is obvious that one of its preconditions is a certain level of literacy among the speakers of tribal languages, and an adequate level of education among the participants in training as partners of linguistic projects or in formal institutional training. It is extremely rare to have people with school education from pre-literate communities. Secondly, there must be willingness on the part of the communities to work with outsiders. Capacity building is almost impossible in hostile communities like the Jarawas and Sentinels in Andaman Islands. Thirdly, the participants in training must be able to relate the skills and knowledge they acquire to their perceived needs of the language and the community. The lofty ideals of understanding the significance of the linguistic human cultural heritage and the value of language resources for humanity will have limited appeal in motivating them to do linguistic work on their languages.