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## Language and Identity with Special Reference to North-East India

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### Abstract

Language is ‘the method of human communication, either spoken or written, consisting of the use of words in a structured and conventional way’ (Oxford Concise Dictionary). Identity means ‘the fact of being who or what a person or thing is’ (Oxford Concise Dictionary). In this paper an attempt is made to explain how identity of different social groups in general and of North-East India in particular is associated with their linguistic aspects. Here, the spoken form is under consideration as it differs in case of even speakers of the same language.

**Key Words:** Language, Identity, North East India

### Identities

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Language is seen to be associated with identity in a number of ways such as (i) national identity, (ii) regional identity, (iii) social identity, (iv) cultural identity, (v) professional identity and (vi) identity concerning age, sex, religion, caste and ethnic tribe, etc.

Use of the same language may differ concerning its accent and vocabulary from which identity may be observed, for example, American and British English. Such an instance of Hindi is found as spoken by the people of Dima Hasao District of Assam. Various groups of people in the North-Eastern states speak differently the same language in respect of accent, style and even vocabulary also.

### **North-East India**

North-East India contains a large number of linguistic speech communities belonging to different class, caste and ethnic tribes. In the day to day communication through language, their identities from different viewpoints are revealed. For instance, while addressing a person by name, title, etc., such address may indicate his/her identity of caste, community, religion or social position. Accent, style and pronunciation of words of a particular language may reveal the speaker's identity concerning the above factors as well as age, sex, etc. The dialectal variation of the speakers of the same language is another indicator of the geographical location to which the speakers belong. Use of particular words of other language (loan words) is a feature of the languages of north-eastern states of India which is observed to have an indication of particular identity.

### **Second Language Situation in North-Eastern States**

Identity in the context of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is also a matter of observation. Teachers of second language are able to identify the pupils to which speech or linguistic community they belong to and this enables them to teach suitably and effectively. In the north-eastern states of India, there are different languages used as second language in the curriculum. However, English is offered as one of the languages in all north-eastern states.

While teaching a second language, the teacher should be aware of the identity of the pupil regarding his/her caste or tribe because the student of a particular tribe may pronounce a particular sound in different way than others. For instance, a Bodo speaker generally pronounces /p/ as /ph/ as in /phen/ instead of /pen/; /s/ as /is/ as in /isku:l/ instead of /sku:l/ 'school'. Notable number of Assamese speakers is seen to pronounce /s/ instead of /ʃ/ as in /seim/ 'shame', instead of /ʃeim/. More instances are available in different other languages too.

### **Language and Identity**

'Language and Identity' has been a subject of research for sociolinguists in recent times. Language is 'the method of human communication, either spoken or written, consisting of the use of words in a structured and conventional way' (Oxford Concise Dictionary). Identity means

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‘the fact of being who or what a person or thing is’ (Oxford Concise Dictionary). Some suitable quotes about ‘language and identity’ as follows may clarify the meaning and relationship of these terms. “Language is the blood of the soul into which thoughts run and out of which they grow”. (Oliver Wendell Holmes). “If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head; if you talk to him in his language that goes to his heart.” (Nelson Mandela). “Language is the most massive and inclusive art we know, a mountainous and anonymous work of unconscious generation” (Edward Sapir). “Language is the armory of the human mind, and at once contains the trophies of its past and the weapons of its future conquests” (Samuel Taylor Coleridge). “A natural language is the archive where the experiences, knowledge and beliefs of a community are stored” (Fernando Lázaro Carreter).

### **Social Identity and Linguistic Aspects**

In this paper an attempt is made to explain how identity of different social groups in general and of north-east India in particular is associated with their linguistic aspects. Here, the spoken form is under consideration as it differs in the case of even speakers of the same language. Language is seen to be associated with identity in a number of ways such as (i) national identity, (ii) regional identity, (iii) social identity, (iv) cultural identity, (v) professional identity and (vi) identity concerning age, sex, religion, caste and ethnic tribe, etc.

### **Objectives**

1. To introduce how language plays vital role in respect of identity of people belonging to different class, caste, community, nationality and religion, etc.
2. To discuss language and identity with reference to North-East India.

### **Methodology**

Information and data have been collected from both secondary and primary sources. The secondary source includes books, journals and Internet. The primary source includes mainly fieldwork reports.

### **Language and Identity with Reference to North East India**

North-East India contains a large number of linguistic speech communities belonging to different class, caste and ethnic tribes. In the day-to-day communication through language, their identities from different viewpoints are revealed. For instance, while addressing a person by name, title, etc., address terms may indicate his/her identity of caste, community, religion or social position. Accent, style and pronunciation of words of a particular language may reveal the speaker’s identity concerning the above factors as well as age, sex, etc. The dialectal variation of the speakers of the same language is another indicator to the geographical location to which the speakers belong. Use of particular words of other language (loan words) is a feature of the

languages of north-eastern states of India which is observed to have an indication of particular identity. The above mentioned points are discussed below with particular reference to North-East India.

### **National Identity**

Language used by a person may indicate his/her identity not only in the case of mother tongue but also in the case of other languages used. For example, if a speaker uses Hindi appropriately in a foreign land it clearly indicates the nationality of the speaker. Again, for the same speaker speaking a foreign language, e.g. English, Arabic, etc., some of the features, i.e., accent, style, etc. used may identify him/her to be an Indian. However, there may be a few exceptions in this regard and those are applicable to a very few individuals and so these should not be counted for consideration.

### **Regional Identity**

Use of a language may reveal the regional identity of a speaker when it is seen that the person uses a language of a particular region with mastery especially in its spoken form. In the case of written form, a non-native may show expertise which is generally absent in the case of spoken form. The regional identity is clearly visible in the use of foreign, national and regional languages, the instance of which is very pertinently present in the North-Eastern region of India. When speaking English, the use of accent, the way of utterance, structure of the utterance, etc., point to the identity of the speaker. For example, a Bodo speaker generally pronounces /p/ as /ph/ as in /phen/ instead of /pen/. Again in the case of national and regional languages some particular features available with people of a particular region point out the identity of the speaker. Such interesting example has been witnessed in the case of the local Hindi speakers of Dima Hasao (formerly North Cachar Hills) District of Assam. Hindi spoken in the District has got a separate identity as Dima Hasao Hindi. This particular form of Hindi has been used extensively by the local people as a means of communication in everyday affair amongst various local linguistic groups and it is observed that such widespread use is mainly due to the Bengali business community who started using Hindi with the local tribes for business communication. As a consequence, this particular form of Hindi has been influenced mostly by the Bangla language. For example, the utterance in Dima Hasao Hindi 'itu kitna rupiya?' (yeh kitna rupiya?), which means 'what's the price of it?', has the word /itu/ which comes from Bangla word /eta/ means 'this/it'. But more interestingly, Dima Hasao Hindi has got a non-formal recognition in the region and has been used by the many people as a means of communication in public places although this form of Hindi is not used in any other district of Assam. So, whenever a speaker utters such a form of Hindi, it indicates either the identity of the speaker or the language itself.

Similar is the case of Nagamese language used in Nagaland as a link language amongst different sections of Naga people as well as a means of communication with other people of North-Eastern states. Nagamese had sprung up in the form of a language due to the influence of

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Assamese, a dominant language of the North-Eastern states, which was extensively used by all for exchange of ideas in different fields. Interestingly, Nagamese has got such recognition today that news bulletins and other programmes are telecast/ broadcast in the language.

### **Social Identity**

Language is an indicator of social identity of people since it is through the use of language that a person may reveal his/her social status. Various features such as style, vocabulary, etc. present in the speech of a person can distinguish him/her from others belonging to different status in the society. For example, a laymen's style of using the same language is certainly different from the style of speaking used by an educated person. The same is applicable in the case of persons belonging to different castes and classes of a society. However, such differences have been minimized to some extent as a result of the spread of education and democratic attitude among the people.

### **Cultural Identity**

Cultural identity is another aspect of language that is witnessed in almost all languages of India, which is a multi-cultural and multi-lingual country. In the north-eastern states of India such cultural aspect is pertinently present in the words used by different communities. In day-to-day use of mother tongues, many words relating to culture (food, dress, religion, etc.) are heard and are pronounced which indicate the cultural identity of speakers. For example, uttering words like /pitha/, /doi-čira/, /khar/, etc. (names of Assamese traditional food) and discussing about these may indicate the Assamese cultural identity of the speakers. Similarly, words like /Krishna/, /Hari/, /Allah/, /Hemphu/ (names used for the almighty God), etc., indicate the religious identity of speakers. Again, words such as /sadar-mekhela/, /dokhona-phasra/, /pini-pekok/ etc. (names of cultural dress) point towards cultural identity of speakers as Assamese, Bodo and Karbi respectively since the above mentioned dress items belong to the culture of the said communities of the North-East. Words such as /Bihu/, /Puza/, /Eid/ etc. (names of festivals) indicate the culture and religion of the speakers. However, from mere utterance of such terms we cannot say that the speakers belong to a particular community but based on the situation and manner of utterance, etc., it can be assumed with some certainty. For example, when a person utters /Hari/, /Krishna/ or /Allah/ in exclamation and when two ladies discussing about a festival and its preparation in a particular situation, then religious or cultural identification may be determined. The following remark justifies the fact, "Neither identity nor language use is a fixed notion; both are dynamic, depending upon time and place" (Norton, 1995).

### **Identity Concerning Age, Sex, Religion, Profession, Caste and Ethnic Tribe, etc.**

Language may indicate a speaker's identity from different aspects such as age, sex, religion, caste and ethnic tribe, etc. We can very easily determine these features of a person while speaking or uttering some speech except in a few exceptional cases. In the North-Eastern

region of India, identity concerning ethnic tribes is clearly witnessed through some particular linguistic features such as accent, vocabulary, style, etc. used by the members of particular tribes. For example, a Karbi person's style of speaking the Assamese language is different from that of the Bodos or the Hajongs, and so without seeing the speaker his/her ethnic identity can be determined. To be more specific, for example, a Karbi person utters /kakhir/ for the Assamese word /gakhir/ which means 'milk'. This word is pronounced as /gaikher/ by the Bodo speakers. Assamese word /narikɒl/ 'coconut' is pronounced as /narikɒi/ and /nariŋkɒl/ by the Karbi and Bodo speakers respectively which may be due to the fact that the phoneme /l/ is absent in final position in Karbi and there is a nasalized epenthesis in the case of Bodo.

### **Identity in the Context of Second Language Acquisition (SLA)**

Teachers of second language are able to identify the pupils as to which speech or linguistic community they belong to. This helps them teach effectively. In the north-eastern states of India, there are different languages used as second language in the curriculum. English is used in all the states as a second language. While teaching a second language the teacher will become aware of the identity of the pupil regarding his/her caste or tribe because the student of a particular tribe may pronounce a particular sound in a different way than others. For instance, a Bodo speaker generally pronounces /p/ as /ph/ as in /phen/ instead of /pen/ means 'pen'; /s/ as /is/ as in /isku:l/ instead of /sku:l/ which means 'school'. A notable number of Assamese speakers are seen to pronounce /s/ instead of /ʃ/ as in /seim/ for 'shame' instead of /ʃeim/, /sɒp/ for 'shop' instead of /ʃɒp/. More instances are available in different other languages too.

### **Conclusion**

From the above discussion, we can conclude: a) Language is an indicator of identity concerning many factors such as age, sex, culture, region, nation and religion, etc. b) Relationship between language and identity is not fixed and can be determined based on the context of utterance only. c) Regional identity is more easily discernible compared to national identity.

### **Recommendations**

There is ample scope of research for sociolinguists to investigate the languages of the North-East India concerning the above topic since this region is a hub of languages belonging to different language families such as Indo-Aryan (IA), Sino-Tibetan and the Austric. An intensive study of two or more languages regarding such matters from different linguistic viewpoints may be undertaken by researchers.

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