

Role of markedness and a dominant language in L1 attrition

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In 1947, the subcontinent was divided by the British colonialists on religious grounds into two independent dominions i.e. Pakistan and India. A mass migration of population occurred across the Indo-Pak border. Lots of Saraiki speaking Hindu families migrated from Pakistan to India. With the arrival of Saraiki speakers in the Indian capital, Saraiki became a minority language in Delhi. The Saraiki speaker migrants gradually shifted from Saraiki to the dominant language i.e. Hindi. Consequently, Saraiki is attriting in Delhi these days. This paper attempts to study direction of language loss with a focus on palato-alveolar nasal [ɲ], retroflex nasal [ɳ] and velar nasal [ŋ] of Saraiki. In attrition of a dominated language, role of the factors like markedness (Seliger 1996) and dominant languages (Ecke 2004) has already been identified. Primarily, the current study tries to tease apart the effect of these two factors. A study of contribution of the following factors in L1 (i.e. Saraiki in this study) attrition is also a secondary aim of this study;

- a. gender,
- b. learning environment,
- c. frequency of speaking L1 and
- d. functional load of a phoneme

Saraiki has palato-alveolar nasal in its phonemic inventory which Hindi lacks. It also shares with Hindi retroflex nasal and velar nasal (see for Saraiki, Shackle 1976:18; for Hindi Shapiro 2007:259). Retroflex nasal is more frequently used than velar nasal in Hindi and Saraiki. According to the universal markedness scale, coronal sounds are less marked than velar sounds (de Lacy, 2007). On account of complexity, retroflex nasal is more marked than palato-alveolar (non-retroflex) nasal. If language loss is exclusively triggered by only universal markedness, the velar nasal of Saraiki should be lost prior to the coronal nasals, and in the coronal nasals, retroflex nasal on account of being more complex, is expected to attrite before the palato-alveolar nasal. But if only a dominant language is the cause of language loss, the Saraiki speakers should be equally faithful to retroflex nasal and velar nasal because these sounds exist in the dominant language i.e. Hindi ; in that case, they may lose only palato-alveolar nasal because it does not exist in Hindi. And if the effect of frequency of occurrence (functional load) also contributes to language loss, the palato-alveolar on account of being non-existent in Hindi should die first, and retroflex nasal on account of being a more frequently occurring phoneme, should disappear before velar nasal from the phonemic inventory of the Saraiki speakers of Delhi.

To test these hypotheses, an experiment was conducted with two groups of 120 Delhiite speakers of Saraiki (60 in each group). One group comprised of migrants (mean age=75.25 years, standard deviation=6.26) who were born in Saraiki speaking monolingual environment of Pakistan, and the second group comprised of sons and daughters of the migrants (mean age=52.53 years, standard deviation =8.90) who were born in Delhi where Saraiki is a minority language. The number of male and female participants in each of the groups was equal. The data were collected in an interview and a word production task. In the interview, the participants were asked to provide information about their personal and linguistic background. According to their statements, they speak Saraiki for an average of 2.75 hours (standard deviation: 2.83, minimum:0.5, maximum;10) per day. In the word-production task, they were asked to produce some words of Saraiki in the best pronunciation of their own dialect of their mother tongue (i.e. Saraiki). The words in the list carried the target nasal sounds word-finally.

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Word-final position was selected for the study because the target sounds do not occur in word-initial position in Saraiki. The productions were recorded and evaluated on a five-point Likert scale by three native speaker judges. The selection of the participants and the judges was very careful. Before migration, all migrant participants were living in an area in Pakistan where northern Saraiki is spoken. The judges were also speakers of the northern Saraiki from Pakistan. The judges were asked to judge the pronunciation of the participants considering their own pronunciation as a standard. A score of 5 was awarded to 'quite native-like' production and a score of 1 was awarded for 'quite different from native' pronunciation. The scores awarded by the three judges were averaged for further analysis.

The results show that the participants were the poorest in production of palatal nasal and the best in retroflex nasal with velar nasals in between. The role of gender and learning environment in language loss was found non-significant. There was no significant correlation between number of hours the participants speak Saraiki and their accuracy in pronunciation of the Saraiki nasal consonants. This supports the view that the L1 spoken in the L2 environment does not accrue any benefit to the L1 speakers (Schmidt, 2012). The results also confirm that contribution of Hindi rather than universal markedness, is more effective in attrition of Saraiki in Delhi. The findings also indicate that more frequent occurrence (i.e. functional load) of the target sounds in the L1 and L2 is an effective resistant to language obsolescence. Although retroflex nasal is more complex, the performance of the participants is better in production of retroflex nasal than velar nasal. Since the performance of the participants is better in velar nasal (a non-coronal nasal) than alveo-palatal nasal (a coronal sound), the better performance of the participants in production of retroflex nasal may not be ascribed to the universal un-markedness of coronals. Actually, the participants performed better in retroflex nasal because retroflex nasal occurs more frequently than velar nasal in Saraiki and Hindi. This supports the idea that a high functional load also resists L1 attrition (Babel, 2008). Overall, the study concludes that a dominant language has stronger effect than universal markedness in obsolescence of a dominated language.

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