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## Multilingualism, modern metropolis and youth: a sociolinguistic profile of a section of students of Calcutta University

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### **Abstract**

*Kolkata has been a multilingual city for several hundred years and like all modern metropolis it is home to diverse linguistic communities. Such multilingual metropolis almost always impacts the lives, the culture and languages of inhabitants. This is even more interesting when the communities in question are not a 'native' community but are migrated. This paper tries to investigate the nature of its impact on the language use of a section of Calcutta University students whose native language is not Bengali. Through a questionnaire-based survey, we try to explore the pattern of language use of these students. Through this study we would like to show the model of language dynamics as exists among a section of youth in Kolkata, who are not speakers of the principle regional language, and indicate its effect on languages, individuals and communities concerned.*

**Key words:** *multilingualism, urban sociolinguistics, language use, language maintenance and shift.*

A multilingual situation is always of immense interest. It can produce multiple and varied impact of the society, community and the languages themselves. Just as it may yield to diverse

outcomes, it also yields itself to diverse mode of examination of the situation. One of the many ways to look into it is to look into the relative position of the languages and communities in question and to find out the possible factors affecting the said position. Needless to say, such studies may give substantial indications about the present and future courses that the languages and the communities may adopt. It may show an ongoing shift which in its turns may end up in language endangerment or even loss, it can also throws light on the state of maintenance of languages and factors that may contribute towards them, it may also significantly reveal attitude of the language community which will impact the present and future of the languages, and issues that are shaping those attitudes.

A modern multilingual city demonstrates all the diverse language relationships. Rapid urbanization is making it progressively more evident. This is not to say that multilingual cities are a recent phenomenon. From its first advent cities in Mesopotamia, ancient Greece, Israel, China, Sumeria demonstrated all the characteristics. An interesting account, on how four major languages (Latin, Aramaic, Hebrew and Greek) balanced themselves in a distinct power distribution in ancient Israel two thousand years ago, can be found in Skupin (2007). Needless to say however, urbanization is occurring at a much faster pace in the current era and it is now seen as a major cause of linguistic change (c.f., Fischer, 1999). A modern metropolis is almost always a magnet, a centrifugal force for people of different races, making it a hub of cultural and social activities in which language is an undeniable factor. The city no longer hosts the "non-native" populations, but it also belongs to the so-called "non-native". The effect of this on language, as mentioned before, is immense. To quote Mac Giolla-Chrióst (2007:2), it "... is the birthplace of the most outstanding linguistic innovation but it is also a cemetery for languages".

The city of Kolkata represents all the general characteristics of a modern multilingual city and at the same time it has some unique characteristics of its own. It has a long tradition of

migration and settlement of different linguistic communities. It has been a multilingual city for at least two hundred years (c.f., Clark, 1956), if not more. According to a statement made at the assembly in August 2003 by the state government Bengalis constitute 37% of the city's population (as per report published in the daily newspaper *The Statesman*, 5/03/2005, page – 9). It must be mentioned here that a city where the 'major' or 'native' language speakers (unless the language in question is Hindi) constitute less than 50%, is increasingly common at least in India. Bangalore or Bengaluru, which is the native place for Kannada, is home for only 38% Kannada speakers, and a minority of Tamil and Telugu community, the rest of the population is made of speakers from northern states.

In the given situation, it would be interesting to see the degree of prestige attached to the native language. In Kolkata, among the non-native language speaking communities, Bangla is most likely not a dominant prestigious language (c.f. Ghosh, 2005). In such a situation what role does the other dominant languages play? More importantly what happens to the native languages of the different migrated communities in question? In order to find an answer to this question, we conducted a short survey among a selected and well defined sample of 50 post graduate students of Calcutta University, who are all native speakers of languages other than Bengali. The age of the sample is between 20 to 27 years. 76 % of them stayed in Kolkata for more than 21 years which means they stayed here all their lives. A complete profile of the respondents is as follows –

#### *A profile of the respondents*

Age: 20 to 27 years

(48% of them are 22 years old and 32% are 23 years old)

Sex: 76% female students, 24% male students

Length of stay in Kolkata: (*in terms of years*)

1-5	6-10	11- 15	16 -20	21-25	25+
12	0	6	6	74	2

#### Mother tongue of the respondents:

Urdu	32
Bhojpuri	20
Hindi	12
Malayalam	6
Oraon	4
Sindhi	4
Nepali	4
Oriya	4
Maitheli	2
Gujrathi	2
Bodo	2
Magadhi	2
Marathi	2
English	2

#### Occupation of the head of the family:

Service	46
Business	34
Professional	06
Retired	08
Others	06

*(All figures are given in percentage)*

It is worth noting here that this is a preliminary survey, which would lead to and is part of a larger survey involving a larger and more varied set of respondents.

Concept of domains as popularized by Fishman (1972) is frequently used for studying multilingual situations with good results, and this survey makes no exception. Different settings are divided here mainly in five different domains—1) Home and family, 2) Education and employment, 3) friendship and informal interaction 4) Written communication 5) culture and religion. Apart from this, we have also tried to look into

intergenerational language transfer, choice of medium in education, language choice for inter and intra community interaction etc.

In home domain (Table –1) Mother Tongue is still Prevalent. However, it is evident that the use of Mother Tongue is steadily decreasing with generation (i.e., MT use is more preferred when conversing with Grandparents, less when conversing with parents, even lesser when conversing with siblings). At the same time there is an almost parallel and regular increase in the use of Hindi. This may indicate that while Mother Tongue still remains the principal language in home domain, there are indications that the usage here is not steady and deteriorating with generation.

*Table 1: Most preferred Language in Home and Family Domain*

	MT	ENG	HINDI	BENG	OTHER
Grandfather	<u>80</u>	3.85	7.69	3.85	3.85
Grandmother	<u>86.2</u>	-	6.9	3.45	3.45
Father	<u>66.67</u>	8.33	22.92	2.08	-
Mother	<u>71.43</u>	4.08	22.45	2.04	-
Brother	<u>65</u>	7.5	<u>25</u>	2.5	-
Sister	<u>67.65</u>	5.88	<u>26.47</u>	-	-
Relatives	<u>66</u>	-	<u>32</u>	2	-
Servants	8.92	-	<u>40.54</u>	<u>40.54</u>	-

Uses of language over generations also reflect a similar picture (Table 2), i.e., a decline is the use of Mother tongue with a simultaneous increase in favour of Hindi.

*Table 2: Most preferred language through generations within community*

	MT	ENGLISH	HINDI	BENGALI	OTHER
Children	46	14	38	2	-

(among peers)					
Your peers (among yourselves)	50	16	32	2	-
Older generation (among peers)	86	8	2	4	-

One of the factors directly influencing language choice of different age groups could be their educational background. As we can see in Table 3 choice of MT as first language in school is decreasing with generation. However, here it is shifting to English, where as for chosen language for peer group communication, there is a stronger preference for Hindi, even though there is an increase in favour of English as well.

*Table 3: First Language at school for different age groups*

	MT	ENGLISH	HINDI	BENGALI	OTHER
Childrens' FL	18	62	18	2	0
FL of peers	38	42	18	2	0
FL of older ppl	53.06	2	38	2	4

Another notable feature in Table 1 is a consistent increase in MT usage when conversing with female members of the family (this ratio, again is decreasing with generation). However, if we see a break up of the male and female respondents (Tables 4 and 5), we can see that male respondents show a stronger preference for MT, with the exception of when conversing with brothers (male respondents 55.56%, female respondents 61.54%). These tables also show that, with some exceptions, both sexes maintain a preference for MT when comes to conversing with female members in home domain. The exception for male respondents is the percentage of preference of MT usage when conversing with parents, which remains

unchanged and for female respondents, when conversing with siblings, MT preference is higher in case of brothers.

*Table 4: Most preferred language in home domain by male respondents*

	MT	ENGLISH	HINDI	BENGALI	OTHERS
Grandfather	100	-		-	-
Grandmother	80	-	-	-	20
Father	83.3	-	16.67	-	-
Mother	83.3	-	16.67	-	-
Brother	55.56	22.22	22.22	-	-
Sister	87.50	-	12.50	-	-
Relatives	58.33	-	33.33	8.33	-
Servants	12.50	-	50	25	12.50

*Table 5: most preferred language in home domain by female respondents*

	MT	ENGLISH	HINDI	BENGALI	OTHERS
Grandfather	78.26	4.35	8.69	4.35	4.35
Grandmother	84	-	8	4	4
Father	61.11	11.11	25	2.78	-
Mother	67.57	5.41	24.32	2.70	-
Brother	67.74	3.23	25.80	3.23	-
Sister	61.54	7.69	30.77	-	-
Relatives	68.42	-	31.58	-	-
Servants	20	-	36.67	43.33	-

Another interesting feature in these tables (4&5) is a consistently higher preference by female respondents for Hindi and English. This is matched by a display of stronger preference for English by female respondents in most domains.

This is in keeping with the trend shown in most sociolinguistic surveys (c.f., Trudgil 1972, Holmes, Bell and Boyce 1991, Labov, 2006) of women's (or at least urban women's) significant linguistic behaviour – a consistent leaning towards

using prestige forms. In sociolinguistic research, gender as an independent variable is often found to be more salient than social class (C.f., Holmes, 1997:197). Labov (1990) notes following three principles of linguistic differences in men and women based on 30 years of consistent findings in sociolinguistic research

Principle I: The stable sociolinguistic stratification, men use a higher frequency of non-standard forms than women

Principle II: In change from above, women favour the incoming prestige forms more than men.

Principle III: In change from below, women are most often the innovators.

Therefore, women in sociolinguistic researches have emerged not just as conscious users of prestige forms of language but as creators of those. This phenomenon is a consistent finding across boundaries. Various explanations are offered to explain this – such as an attempt to sound less local to voice against traditional norms (Fasold, 1990), an attempt to disassociate with the stereotype (Gordon, 1997), a strategy to maintain 'face' (in Goffmanian sense of the term) in situations where women are powerless (Deuchar 1988), as an attempt to acquire social status (Trudgill, 1972). In the context of our work we will attempt to situate and analyze the results in current setting once the data of the major survey is acquired.

Intergenerational language transfer is another area of particular concern. According to the a report of the UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on endangered Languages (2003), shifts in domains of use and intergenerational language transfer are two of the nine major evaluative factors that may be indicative of the vitality status of a language. In our study it can be assumed that on both counts the status of the Mother Tongue is scoring

low in vitality index and losing ground to dominant languages and in most cases it is Hindi.

In more formal domain English and Hindi share the most use (table 6, 7&8). Female respondents show a greater preference for English for communicating with teachers. At the same time there is also a stronger preference for Mother Tongue, whereas for male respondents prefer Hindi in larger number.

*Table 6: Most preferred language for formal interaction*

	MT	ENGLISH	HINDI	BENGALI	OTHER
Teacher	26	42	30	02	-
Classmate	32	24	32	12	-
Other official interaction	-	52.08	10.42	37.50	-

*Table 7: Most preferred language for formal interaction (male)*

	MT	ENGLISH	HINDI	BENGALI
Teachers	16.67	33.33	41.67	8.33
<b>Classmates</b>	16.67	25	41.60	16.67

*Table 8: Most preferred language for formal interaction (female)*

	MT	ENGLISH	HINDI	BENGALI
Teachers	28.95	44.74	26.31	-
Classmates	36.84	23.68	28.95	10.53

*Table 9: Most preferred language for informal interaction*

	MT	ENGLISH	HINDI	BENGALI	OTHER
Friends	34	18	40	8	-
Neighbour	28	2	44	26	-
Taxi driver	14	-	54	32	-
Post Office	8.89	-	17.78	71.11	2.22
Bank	6.25	25	16.67	52.08	-
Restaurant	10.20	38.78	32.65	18.37	-

Local shop	20	-	44	36	-
Fish/veg market	22.22	-	28.83	48.89	-
Shopping mall	16.33	44.90	30.61	8.16	-
Parties/gatherings	30	30	30	10	-
Hospitals	10	18	30	42	-
Govt offices	4.5	18	20.45	56.80	-

Most preferred language for conversations with friends most is also Hindi – as is the case with neighbours and taxi driver. (It is worth mentioning in this context that Mother tongue of the respondents' friends is mostly the same Mother tongue as their own followed by Bengalis. Table 10). A comparative language use can be seen in more and less prestigious places --- in local shops and Fish/Veg market Hindi and Bengali take the two most used language places, while in Shopping malls and restaurants the choice is between English and Hindi. In case of restaurants female respondents again score higher (42% as opposed to 27%) as far as preferring English is concerned (tables 11& 12). A good percentage of female respondents also show preference for English when communicating with friends (23%), where none of the male respondents reported English as their first choice for conversation with friends. There is an increase in the use of Bengali in Govt offices, hospital and bank, and its use is highest in post office (71%). Here again women use Bengali in much higher percentage than men (78.79% as opposed to 50% by men)

*Table 10: Mother tongue of friends and classmates*

	MT	ENGLISH	HINDI	BENGALI	OTHER
MT of Friends	40	2	22	24	12

MT of Classmates	32	2	22	40	4
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*Table 11: Most preferred language for informal interaction (male)*

	MT	ENGLISH	HINDI	BENGLI	OTHERS
Friends	25	-	58.33	16.67	-
Neighbours	16.67	-	50	33.33	-
Taxi Driver	25	-	50	25	-
Post Office	25	-	16.67	50	8.33
Bank	16.66	8.33	25	50	-
Restaurants	18.18	27.27	36.36	18.18	-
Local shops	25	-	33.33	41.67	-
Fish/Veg market	25	-	41.67	33.33	-
Shopping Malls	18.18	45.45	18.18	18.18	-
Parties/Gatherings	25	33.33	16.67	25	-
Hospitals	8.33	8.33	33.33	50	-
Govt. offices	8.33	16.67	16.67	58.33	-

*Table 12: Most preferred language for informal interaction (female)*

	MT	ENGLISH	HINDI	BENGLI
Friends	36.84	23.68	34.21	5.26
Neighbours	31.58	02.63	42.11	23.68
Taxi Driver	10.53	-	55.265	34.21
Post office	3.03	-	18.18	78.79
Bank	2.78	30.55	13.89	52.77

Restaurants	7.89	42.10	31.58	18.42
Local shops	18.42	-	47.37	34.21
Fish/Veg market	21.21	-	24.24	54.55
Shopping Malls	15.79	44.74	34.21	5.26
Parties/Gatherings	31.58	28.95	34.21	5.26
Hospitals	10.53	21.05	28.95	39.47
Govt. offices	3.12	18.75	21.88	56.25

As for language of preference for communicating with different language communities the respondents show a clear preference for adopting the language of the community they are conversing with. However, it can be noted here that number of people favouring Mother Tongue for intra community interaction (76%) is less than the number favouring Hindi for communicating with Hindi speakers (86%) and even those favouring Bengali for communicating with Bengali speakers (80%) (Table 13). Preferred language of communication for communicating with speakers of other languages (than Hindi, Bengali or the respondent's Mother Tongue) is English, with women again showing a stronger preference for English (77.78% as opposed to 54.55%) (Table 14 & 15). This may be more evident if we compare language usage between Hindi and Urdu mother tongue speakers (Table 13A and 13B). Hindi MT speakers use their Mother Tongue more than Urdu speakers (100% and 75% respectively) in intra- community interaction.

*Table 13: Preferred language for inter and intra community interaction*

	MT	ENGLISH	HINDI	BENGALI	OTHE R
Within MT community	76	2	20	-	2
With Bengalis	2	8	10	80	-
With Hindi speakers	12	2	86	-	2
Other MT speakers	4.25	72.34	21.28	2.13	-

*Table 13A: Preferred language for inter and intra community interaction (Hindi MT speakers)*

Language Usage	MT	ENG	BENG	OTHER
Within MT Community	100%			
With Bengalis		33.33%	66.67%	
Other MT speakers	20%	80%		

*Table 13B: Preferred language for inter and intra community interaction (Urdu MT speakers)*

Language Usage	MT	ENG	HINDI	BENG	OTHER
Within MT Community	75%		25%		
With Bengalis			18.75%	81.25%	
With Hindi MT speakers	6.25%		93.75%		
Other MT speakers	6.67%	80%	13.33%		

*Table 14: Preferred language for inter and intra community interaction(male)*

	MT	ENGLI SH	HINDI	BENG ALI	OTHER S
Within MT community	66.67	-	25	-	8.33
With Bengalis	8.33	-	16.67	75	-
With Hindi MT speakers	8.33	-	91.67	-	-
With Other MT speakers	9.09	54.55	36.36	-	-

*Table 15: Preferred language for inter and intra community interaction(female)*

	MT	ENGLISH	HINDI	BENGALI
Within MT community	78.94	2.63	18.42	-
With Bengalis	-	10.53	7.89	81.58
With Hindi MT speakers	13.16	2.63	84.21	-
With Other MT speakers	2.78	77.78	16.66	2.78

When it comes to writing/reading use of Mother Tongue is remarkably low, and English is clearly the dominant language. (Table 16) and here again female respondents consistently show a stronger preference for English than male respondents (Table 17 & 18).

*Table 16: Language use in written media:*

	MT	ENGLISH	HINDI	BENGALI	OTHER
Newspaper	14	72	14	-	-
Books	22	52	24	2	-
Letters	16	68	16	-	-
Other	8	88	4	-	-

*Table 17: Language use in written media ( male)*

	MT	ENGLIS H	HINDI	BENGAL I
Newspaper	16.67	58.33	25	-
Books	16.67	33.33	41.67	8.33
Letters	25	58.33	16.67	-
Other documents	16.67	75	8.33	-

*Table 18: Language use in written media (female)*

	MT	ENGLISH	HINDI	BENG ALI
Newspaper	13.16	76.31	10.53	-
Books	23.68	57.89	18.42	-
Letters	13.16	71.05	15.79	-
Other documents	5.26	92.10	2.63	-

In the domain of culture and religion, Hindi is the most favoured language (Table 19). MT figures prominently only in religious events. Female respondents preferred Hindi in higher percentage. However, for entertainment media (cinema, song and TV) male respondents showed a stronger liking for English (table 20 & 21).

*Table 19: Most preferred language in cultural and religious domain*

	MT	ENGLISH	HINDI	BENGALI	OTHERS
Cinema	2	10	88	-	-
Songs	6	10	84	-	-
TV prog	-	10.42	89.58	-	-
Other Cultural Events	8.16	4	82	4	-
Religious events	62.07	-	31.03	-	6.89

*Table 20: Most preferred language in culture and religious domain (male)*

	MT	HINDI	ENGLISH	OTHER S
Films	-	83.33	16.67	-
Songs	16.67	58.33	25	-
TV programs	-	72.73	27.27	-
Other cultural events	16.67	83.33	-	-
Religious programs	75	-	-	25

*Table 21: Most preferred language in culture and religious domain (female)*

	MT	HINDI	ENGLISH	BENGALI	OTHE RS
Films	2.63	89.47	7.89	-	-
Songs	2.63	92.10	5.26	-	-
TV programs	-	94.59	5.41	-	-
Other cultural events	5.41	83.78	5.41	5.40	-
Religious programs	36	60	-	-	04

In conclusion, the principal trends found in this survey are as follows:-



- The mother tongue of the migrated population is undergoing a shift even in home domain.
- Though the mother tongue remains the prevalent language in home domain, it is preferred less when interacting with younger members which may indicate a shift in intergenerational language transfer
- This tendency corresponds with the choice of First Language in education and preferred language for communication of younger generation
- In most cases, except in written media and some formal settings, Hindi is emerging as the language replacing the mother tongue.
- Women show a stronger preference for English (or Hindi in settings where it has more prestige) in many domains.

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