

ASSESSING THE IMPLICATIONS OF LINGUISTIC RELATIVITY IN MAITHILI SPEAKERS (A PRELIMINARY PERCEPTION STUDY)

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this preliminary perception study is to lay the foundation of assessing the implication of relativity hypothesis with respect to Maithili, an Indo-Aryan language spoken in Nepal and India. The linguistic relativity hypothesis also known as Sapir and Whorf hypothesis in the field of sociolinguistics believes that *people of different languages think differently*. Despite facing vigorous attacks from the Universalists, especially the followers of Noam Chomsky in the recent years, the notion of relativity takes a centrestage in many linguistic debates worldwide. Going in favour of the hypothesis, this study delves into eliciting perceptions of twenty one (21) respondents (convenience samples) from Maithil community of North India to see whether Maithili shows idiosyncratic linguistic features and influence the thought patterns and worldviews of Maithils distinctly or not. The findings show that Maithili, due to its distinctive linguistic features, also shows Maithils have a unique thought pattern not only in terms of its lexicon and grammar but also in terms of its socio-cultural values.

KEYWORDS: Linguistic Relativity, Lexicon & Maithili Speaker

INTRODUCTION

In the past couple of decades, a growing debate has surfaced among sociolinguists and psycholinguists as to whether human thought patterns are universal and innate or whether they are a result of cultural and social conditionings which vary from place to place or from one language to another. According to the universalist, all humans share the same thought patterns and any difference due to cultural differences is negligible. On the contrary, the believers of linguistic relativity (proposed by Sapir and Whorf in 1983) assume that the structure of a language affects the perceptions of reality of its speakers and thus influences their thought patterns and worldviews. states that there are certain thoughts of an individual in one language that cannot be understood by those who live in another language.

Pertinently, this study, favouring the stance of linguistic relativity, makes an attempt to see whether or not Maithili speakers' thought patterns are distinct and affected by their native language, Maithili. Maithili belongs to an Indo-Aryan language family. Maithili, one of the scheduled languages of India with its distinct typological features, is the 16th most spoken language of India and the 40th most spoken language of the world (Chandrana, 2017). There are around 35 million speakers of Maithili of which 2.8 million live in Nepal and the rest live in India (Yadav, 2016).

FINDINGS

Under the purview of the hypothesis of linguistic relativity above, this study reported ten types of idiosyncracies in Maithili as opposed to English as follows:

Table 1

| Idiosyncrasies | Maithili | English |
|---|--|---|
| Pronominal System | Tu, əhā, əpne (Nominative) toħər, əhāk, əpnek (Genitive) əhākē, əpnekē (Dative) | You (Nominative) Your (Genitive and Dative) |
| Number System | Lok | Person |
| | Chari lok or Chair ta lok | Four persons |
| | Gaam | Village |
| | Gaam sab | Villages |
| | Devta | God |
| Concord System | Devta lokani | Gods |
| | Ham ja rahal chhi. | I am going. |
| | Ham sab jaa rahal chhi. | We are going. |
| | Wo padhi rahal achhi. | He is reading. |
| | Wo padhi rahal achhi. | She is reading. |
| Pronoun Drop | Wo sabh padhi rahal achhi. | They are reading. |
| | rohit kahane chala je kaalhi aayab | Rohit had said that he would come the next day.' |
| Pragmatic Implication | A: Ahak ela se bachcha sab ke khub nik lagai chhai. B: Se te thik chhai, lekin hamro grihasti dekha paraiye. A: Nai nai ekhan rahiyau du din. B: Nai ekhan te hamra bahute kaaj ye math par. C: He jidda nai karyau. A: Nai te se gap ye te ham nai rokab, takhan jau. Lekin pher ab. | A: Kids are very happy when you come B: That's fine, but I also need to look after the household. A: No, no, please stay for at least two more days. B: No, I've got lots of work. C: Listen, do not pressurize. A: If so, then I will not stop. Please go but come back once in a while.. |
| Comparative Superlative | 1. Ram Shyam sa lamba chhaik. 2. Ram sab sa lamba chaik. | 1. Ram is taller than Shyam. 2. Ram is the tallest. |
| Reduplicative Verb | 1. Daru pilak baad wo Barbarabe lagai chhathin. 2. Wo okra tar tara delkai. 3. Gari chak-chak karai chhai. 4. Wo ekhno huk huk karai chhai. 5. Karaita chai wo lak lak, lekin chhot sanak gap par phan phan karai lagai chhai | 1. After taking white rum, he starts speaking loudly. 2. He hit him hard. 3. The car is shining. 4. He is still breathing. 5. He looks feeble but loses his temper soon at small issues. |
| Reduplicative Comparison | 1. Lal tuh tuh 2. Haryar kachor 3. Ujjar phak phak or ujjar dag 4. Kari khat khat 5. Gor bhū bhukka | 1. As red as blood 2. As green as grass 3. As white as snow 4. As black as coal 5. Very white (skin colour) |
| Negative Conjunction | 1. Basi bachai na kutta khai 2. Mari maachh nai upachhi pain | 1. No substitute in English 2. No substitute in English |
| Worldviews in the form of Proverbs | 1. Bigral beti bane nurse; bigral beta padhe commerce. 2. Kha ke mutti suttī bam wo ghar nai baida ke kaam | 3. No substitute in English 4. No substitute in English |

It is noteworthy that idiosyncrcies found in Maithili can be broadly categorized under two parameters namely lexicon (vocabulary) and grammar (grammatical structure) as follows:

- As for the pronominal system of Maithili, it is much richer than English as Maithili shows three nominative markers for English 'you' and three genitive markers for English 'your' and two dative markers for English 'your'.
- As for the number system of Maithili, it is unique in the sense that plural nouns in Maithili do not take any plural suffix markers; rather head nouns remain in singular form but are preceded by pre-quantifiers like one, two, three, etc.
- As for concord, Maithili is again unique in the sense that it does not show any morphological inflections as part of subject-verb agreement especially when a sentence is in present tense.
- As for the omission of pronoun, Maithili is flexible in terms of omitting or retaining a pronoun in reported speech.
- As for the pragmatic implication, Maithil community is very dexterous in conveying and accomplishing the intended message and task with an illocutionary force and a perlocutionary act respectively. In the above exchange, A is wife's father, B is son-in-law, and C is wife's mother. Such an exchange of conversation not only shows an approach to hospitality but at the same time to send off the son-in-law who might have thought of staying at her wife's place for a longer period of time.
- As for comparison, Maithili uses comparative and superlative adjective markers after the nouns being compared.
- As for reduplicative verbs, Maithili is unique in that it uses reduplicative form of verb as seen in the five examples above in which barbarana, tartarana, chak chak karna, huk huk karnalak lak karna, and phan phan karna have been used as reduplicative verbs.
- As for reduplicative comparison, it again is a unique feature of Maithili in which comparison is made with some reduplicative forms like 'tuh tuh', 'phak phak', 'khat khat', and 'bhu bhukka' or some intensifiers like 'kachor' and 'dag' in 2 and 3 respectively.
- As for negative conjunction, Maithili is unique in terms of using a single negative marker by connecting two sentences. In the two proverbial examples above, '*basi bache nai kutta khai*' and '*mari maachh nai upachhi pain*', only one negative marker 'nai' has been used. More precisely, in the second proverbial sentence two verbs 'fishing' and 'flushing' have been joined with 'nai' which not only can be seen as negative marker but also as a connector between two independent clauses.
- As for the worldviews in the form of proverbs, Maithil community shows an idiosyncratic thought pattern. The first proverb implies that an average girl will pursue the career path of nurse; whereas, an average boy will study commerce. In the next proverb, a halthy message has been give that there is no need of a doctor in a house where one urinates after having food and sleeps on his/her left side.

CONCLUSIONS

Although, the findings here show ten areas of idisyncray but Maithili shows idiosyncratic linguistic and soci-cultural features in abundance which in turn supports the hypothesis of linguistic relativity and can claim that Maithili speakers

have distinct thought patterns and language use. In addition, Maithili speakers are fun and sarcasm loving which reflect in their locutionary act and illocutionary force. Most often, abusive languages are used by parents for the children affectionately to chide and to counsel as desired. Expressions like ‘he re jaralka’, ‘he re abhagla’, ‘he re karamghatua’ standing for *an ill fated one* can be heard frequently in exchanges between parents and children. This is also an idiosyncratic feature of Maithili and Maithil community.

Based on the above observation, the characteristics of Sapir-Whorf hypothesis with respect to Maithili can be summarized as follows:

- Peoples of the world have developed different ways of viewing the world.
- Language differences reflect differences in culture.
- Language differences reflect differences in conceptual structure.
- Our worldviews are conditioned by our language and vice-versa.
- Language differences affect our daily thinking, rather than what we *are capable* of thinking about.
- Social rituals show different thought patterns.

Since, this study was confined to available samples of 25 respondents only, its findings cannot be generalized at large. The study aims to be comprehensive in its second phase of data collection wherein all inferences tend to be more accurate and authentic. However, the study concludes that Maithili has plenty of idiosyncratic linguistic features which may support the notion of linguistic relativity.

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