

## **Mother tongue in education: a step towards preservation of language diversity of the Himalayas<sup>1</sup>**

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The term “language endangerment” describes the situation in which the transition of the language between generations becomes limited. According to terminology based on UNESCO’s Language Vitality and Endangerment framework, the language is considered to be safe if it is spoken by all generations, thus its intergenerational transmission is uninterrupted. If the majority of children speak the language, but it is restricted to certain domains (e.g., home), its status is vulnerable. The language is definitely endangered if children do not learn the language as their mother tongue at the home. The most salient factor of vitality or endangerment is the intergenerational language transmission. The main indicator of the language vitality is children's language competence.

According to the UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger the status of many languages in Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh varies from vulnerable to critically endangered. These languages are mostly spoken during daily communication at home and within the neighborhood, have no official status or standard norm and are not present at school. Our fieldwork research among school children in Kullui-spoken area (2017) proves Kullui to be vulnerable. Parents speak Hindi with children from their birth, children also speak Hindi at school and with their friends. Children speak some Kullui only

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<sup>1</sup> The research is supported by Russian Foundation for Basic Research, project 17-34-00018 “Sociolinguistic research of the Koraput Munda languages and development of a multimedia corpus of texts exemplifying different social conditions of language usage”.

with their grandparents who cannot speak Hindi properly, and some children can only understand Kullui, but do not speak it.

Both in India and in Russia it is not infrequent to hear regretful remarks from speakers of minor languages about their children who are not willing to speak their native language, as if their children's personal choice was the sole reason. Referring to our field research experience of minor languages of India and Russia we can conclude that regional language endangerment is connected with the rise of education provided on official language without any role of the regional language in it. To illustrate it properly, let's compare two Indian languages like Marwari in Rajasthan and Kumaoni in Uttarakhand by their language situation. Both areas present large dialect continua, Hindi serves as an official language in both states. Both Marwari and Kumaoni are means of oral communication in villages and both of them are not taught at school. Still, Marwari has safe status and Kumaoni is vulnerable. This difference can be explained by the levels of literacy in Rajasthan and Uttarakhand. By Census of India 2011, Uttarakhand is on the 17th place in the list of Indian states by the level of literacy and specifically female literacy (79.63% and 70.70%). Rajasthan is on the 33<sup>rd</sup> place by the level of literacy (67.06%) and has the lowest level of female literacy (52.66%).

Why does the current educational system in India have negative impact on minor languages, and Pahari languages in particular? First of all, according to psychological studies, children learn to express their thoughts in regular verbal form at the age of 5-7 years, therefore their systematic thoughts and consciousness depend on the language of primary education. Right from the primary level, the education is conducted in Hindi or English, speaking Pahari at school is either unofficially prohibited or not approved in order to improve Hindi or English skills. Hence, children are being taught to express their thoughts not in their native language. More than this, parents speak Hindi with their preschool children to facilitate their primary education. Also, attitude

towards Himalayan languages becomes negative due to incorrect linguistic conceptions and prejudice imposed by today's school education. Idioms are classified as either *bhasha* or *boli*. Traditionally these terms are translated into English as 'language' and 'dialect', but their common use is far from linguistically accurate. In English linguistic literature, a dialect is a local variety of a broader idiom which is called language. But the difference between *bhasha* and *boli* supposes the absence of a written form for the latter, and does not suppose latter is a variety of the former. In common opinion we may also see a wrong equation between language and script, resulting in the idea that every language has to have its own graphics (e. g., writing with Devanagari script is understood as writing in Hindi, writing with Roman script as writing in English, Gurmukhi as Punjabi, etc.) Due to this bias, any language lacking unique graphics may be classified as a *boli*.

To quote Cynthia Groff, who has done the most accurate research of the attitude of Kumaoni speakers to their native language:

“Most young Kumaonis are being taught that Kumauni is a *boli*, in contrast to Hindi, among other languages, as *bhasha*”. [Groff 2010: 159] “When I got here to the Ashram... that's when I learned that Kumauni is a *boli* and that Hindi is a *bhasha*. Kumauni isn't written”. [Groff 2010: 160] “I heard Kumauni referred to as “just a spoken language,” “just a *boli*,” “only a dialect.” The implication seemed to me to be that a *boli*, as “just” a *boli*, is in some inferior condition in its progression towards becoming a *bhasha*, something more advanced or more developed than a *boli*”. [Groff 2010: 161] “Kumauni... is a dialect -- what we call *boli*. It is not a language; it is a dialect. Because when we write Kumauni we write it in Hindi”. [Groff 2010: 165] “You can't call Kumauni a language. It is a *boli*. It needs to have a script. Now Kumauni uses Hindi script...” [Groff 2010: 165]

Language is identified with script in all regions of India. For instance, this concept was the the invention of the autochthonous scripts of languages belonging to the Munda family in the XX century by native speakers of these

languages. These scripts include Ol Chiki invented by Raghunath Murmu for the Santali language (1925), Sorang Sompeng invented by Mangei Gomango for Sora (1936), Warang Chiti invented by Lako Bodra for Ho (1950-s) and Hisir Bani invented by Rohidas Singh for Mundari (1990-s). Munda languages never had original scripts, and for these language activists it was easier to invent a new script than to fight the linguistic biases. The equalization of language and script seems to date back to the beginning of the XX century or maybe earlier. Even Kumaoni speakers who know that both Hindi and Nepali languages have the same Devanagari graphic base often have this prejudice leading to a vicious circle: Kumaoni is a boli, not bhasha, because it is not used in education. And it cannot be used in education because it is just a boli

“Our Kumauni is not recognized as a language. We just speak it. It is not written. It is not used for teaching”

“I asked about the poems that are written in Kumauni as possible evidence that Kumauni is not just a spoken language. I also told them about the books in Kumauni that I had seen in Almora. “But those aren't school books” [Groff 2010: 165]

“It is not used in schools at all. Hindi is what they call the mother tongue here. If we think about it, Kumauni is our mother tongue, but there are not books in Kumauni -although there is some poetry and stories written in Kumauni - but it's not used in school. Hindi is considered to be the mother tongue”. [Groff 2010: 154]

There are three steps we would suggest to undertake in order to save the intergenerational transmission of minor languages. First of all, it is necessary to use minor languages as languages of education in primary school as a part of Multilingual Education program. The second step is to introduce minor languages as school subjects. And the third step is improving linguistic competence of the students and uprooting the linguistic prejudices.

The MLE program becomes more and more popular in India. The core of the program requires the education in primary school to be conducted in children's native languages. The program helps children facing problems with the state language integrate gradually into the education process. The state language is introduced as a subject, and children improve their skills in it up to grade 5, when it becomes the only language of school education. Currently the program is promoted actively in Odisha. For example, there are schools where primary education is conducted in Sora or Bonda (< Southern Munda).

In case of Pahari, introducing the MLE program in schools (with some variations) would solve the majority of problems caused by the educational system. In many cases local schools have local teachers who can speak with children in their local dialect, therefore the MLE program will not require any special training for teachers. It will help children learn to express their thoughts in their native language. The subjects do not require difficult terminology at the primary level of education. The status of Pahari will improve, because as it becomes the language of school education it will be considered more prestigious by the speakers. Hindi will be taught as a subject in school by qualified teachers. Therefore, parents will have no reason to speak Hindi with their children since birth while knowing that primary education will be in Pahari and Hindi will be taught as a subject.

Is it necessary to publish text books in Pahari languages, as a part of the MLE program? If the answer is yes, then the standardization of the written form of the language is also necessary. We will try to answer this question for the case of Kumaoni. Historically, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand language maps were described in two different ways. In Himachal Pradesh, Himachali idioms are recognized as languages (Kullui, Mandeali, etc.), but in Uttarakhand, two main languages Garhwali and Kumaoni are in fact two large dialect continua with significant differences between the dialects. The standardization of the

Kumaoni language has been discussed for dozens of years and still faces a lot of problems.

In case of the Sora language in Odisha, a spontaneous standardization happened on the base of the Lanjiya dialect. It is the dialect of Baptized Christians that constitute the most active and educated part of the Sora people. The Bible was translated in Lanjiya Sora. The authors of school textbooks in Sora are also speakers of Lanjiya, so these books are written in this dialect. The other dialects of the Sora language are not studied, and the MLE program does not cover their areas.

Results of standardization of one of the dialects from a continuum if being taught as a school subject according to the observations in our field researches in Russia, also cannot be called encouraging. Sometimes it leads to a transition to the standard norm and loss of the native dialect (e.g., Khakas language). In other cases students just reject or do not want to learn a very different dialect (Ket and Evenk languages). Also, it may lead to a competition and even to hostility between two dialects (Khakas, partly Selkup of Tomsk district).

Our suggestions for standardization of Kumaoni can be summarized as follows:

- 1) there is no need in standardization, local teachers and kids can communicate in a local dialect, thus maintaining it.
- 2) textbooks in Hindi can be used for teaching. In primary schools, their content is rather visual than written.
- 3) children must learn to write in Kumaoni, but there is no need to maintain an orthographic standard.

To propose a minor language as a school subject means to answer inevitable questions about the contents of the classes. If there is literature in this language, it should be taught. This literature can belong to different dialects of the language, in this case it should be taught while sorting out the dialectal differences, as it is being done in the Telengit dialect of the Altai language in

Russia. And in any case, folklore should be taught. It is also very important for children to not only be passive objects of teaching, but to be encouraged to collect folklore by themselves from the elderly generation of speakers, e. g., from their grandparents and neighbours. The status of cultural legacy of the local people should be raised in children's minds by the school teachers. The teachers should encourage children to create school museums, exhibitions, folklore collections and cultural programs connected with local languages and traditions.

The third step we assume to be necessary is to improve the linguistic competence of teachers and children. The linguistic biases described above should be rejected. In modern India, language hierarchy, just as caste hierarchy should be left back. It is important for children to fully understand all the richest linguistic diversity of their great country, therefore we recommend to introduce "Language diversity of India" as a school subject. We also recommend to popularize importance of native languages and multilingualism for children's cognitive skills. The "Unity in diversity" patriotic concept should come into linguistic reality of the Indian youth.

## **References**

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