

What Does My Bangla Say About My English?

Naira Khan
(Stanford University)

Perhaps one of the most commonly researched areas of sociolinguistics is the study of linguistic innovation in contexts of socioeconomic change. In this study, I follow an ‘incorporational’ perspective (Irvine 1989; Fairclough 1992; Coupland 2001; Eckert 2008) in analyzing bilingual code-switching (CS) in speakers of Bangla and English, contrasting trained CS of radio speech with untrained CS resulting from natural bilingualism, and social perceptions therein.

I follow the Matrix Language Frame Model (Meyer-Scotton 2001c; 2002; 2011) as a theory of CS, identifying Bangla as the Matrix Language (ML) and English as the Embedded Language (EL). The selected variables are diphthongization of the /e/ vowel and the ‘r’-ness of alveolar trills, both in the ML. I show that both are EL features used in the ML as a social construct to create a social style tied to perceptions of English proficiency. The variables themselves are interesting because the influence of the EL occurs in isolated ML lexical items and is not a phonetic bleed from the EL.

My study is based on data from an interview aired on a Bangladeshi radio channel called Radio Foorti, broadcast all over Bangladesh. Radio interviews are particularly interesting in light of the training of RJs which involves speech training. RJs who are not completely proficient in English are specifically trained and instructed to code-switch and code-mix between Bangla and English. This training of RJs results in CS that is very different from the CS of bilinguals who are proficient in English. The resultant variation in CS is, however, a continuum rather than a binary distinction. My hypothesis is that the variables serve to anglicize the ML without the hearer being exposed to the EL of the speaker, leading to perceptions regarding the background of the speaker i.e. associations of socio-economic status and access to a particular type of education. Furthermore, such tokens serve to create perceptions associated with a revered and admired subgroup in the younger generations that are considered ‘cool’ and ‘trendy’ and emulation-worthy, leading to a copycat effect. I test the hypothesis in two ways:

- a. Auditory Perceptions Studies: Analyzing ML tokens containing the variables and testing for both sound features and social perceptions. Participants included Bengali speakers and non-Bengali linguists.
- b. Spectrographic Analysis: Analyzing the spectrogram of selected ML tokens in PRAAT, focusing on the diphthongization of /e/.

My results show that there is indeed a difference in the /e/ vowel of the interlocutors. Although diphthongization is not clearly distinguishable auditorily, the spectrographic analysis confirms the difference by means of plotting the euclidean distance of the graphed vowels. Similarly, the difference in the ‘r’-ness noted by the Bengali speakers through social perceptions was confirmed auditorily by non-bengali speaking linguists trained in distinguishing sounds. These findings highlight the importance of studying CS beyond the prototypical studies of grammatical constraints and typological classification of CS, and shows how social perceptions can be tied to sound features of the ML influenced by the EL but not resulting from phonetic bleeding through CS.

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