

Variation in Tense and Aspect marking in Bishnupriya: Impact of Bilingualism

This paper discusses variation in the tense and aspect categories in Bishnupriya as spoken in Hailakandi in Assam. It is argued in this study that variation in the tense and aspect categories in Bishnupriya stems primarily from bilingualism. This study sheds light on the nature of interaction between the grammars of two languages embedded in a bilingual context. In Hailakandi, the Bishnupriyas co-exist with the Bengalis, whose language Bengali apart from being one of the primary languages that contributed to the formation of Bishnupriya, is the dominant and official language of Hailakandi. Therefore, the Bishnupriyas living in Hailakandi are embedded in a bilingual context. Though Bishnupriyas use Bishnupriya among themselves, outside the Bishnupriya community, Bengali serves as the most important language of interaction.

The study is based on three kinds of speech data such as (i) Bishnupriya monolingual data (ii) Bishnupriya to Bengali code-switched data and Bengali monolingual data which together constitute the verbal repertoire of the Bishnupriyas.

Bishnupriya like Bengali (the variety spoken in Hailakandi) has one tense category, that is, past and one aspect category, the imperfective. The past tense is denoted by [l] or [s] in both Bishnupriya and Bengali. Though Bishnupriya and Bengali employ [l~s] to encode past tense, the frequency of distribution of these two past tense variants in the two languages display an opposite trend. In Bishnupriya [l] is preferred over [s], whereas in Bengali [s] is used more than [l]. A quantitative analysis of the past tense variants [l] and [s] in Bishnupriya indicated that the most salient constraint affecting variability between [l] and [s] is the “bilingual patterns of language use” of the Bishnupriyas. Bishnupriyas favor [l] more in Bishnupriya monolingual speech only, but in code-switched data and in monolingual Bengali speech [s] is preferred over [l]. This suggests that the Bishnupriyas follow the Bengali pattern of past tense marking when they either switch to Bengali or interact in Bengali. However, a comparison of the results of the quantitative analysis of the past tense variants [l] and [s] in Bishnupriya and Bengali demonstrated that linguistic constraints conditioning variability between [l] and [s] in these two languages are not exactly the same. Bishnupriya shares a few linguistic constraints with Bengali, but deviates from Bengali with regard to many other constraints operating on the past tense variants [l~s].

The aspect is represented by the imperfective in both Bishnupriya and Bengali. But unlike Bengali, the aspectual category of imperfective (habitual and progressive) shows lot of variability in Bishnupriya. The progressive situations embedded in the present are assigned by three markers [r ~ s ~ te-s] and the past progressive situations are indicated by *r* only. The present habitual is expressed by [r ~ Ø ~ l ~ s], and the past habitual is denoted by [r ~ l ~ t ~ s]. The bilingual patterns of language use turned out to be the only factor responsible for triggering variability in marking habitual and progressive situations as well. Many of the imperfective variants appear predominantly in the code-switches and in Bengali monolingual data of the Bishnupriyas. Apart from bilingualism, no other linguistic and social factors condition variability in aspectual marking in Bishnupriya.

The variability in tense and aspect marking in Bishnupriya is thus linked with the variable patterns of language use. The study reveals how bilingualism triggers variability in tense and aspect marking in Bishnupriya.

My paper on “Variation in Tense and Aspect marking in Bishnupriya: Impact of Bilingualism” deals with a language called Bishnupriya. Bishnupriya is a contact language which emerged as a result of interactions between speakers of two typologically different language families, Tibeto-Burman (primarily Meitei) and varieties of Eastern Indo-Aryan languages (particularly Bengali) in Manipur. Though Bishnupriya originated in Manipur, at present it is spoken in southern part of Assam, Tripura and Bangladesh. There are various versions available regarding the origin of the Bishnupriyas, which are highly controversial. In Satyanath and Laskar (2008, 2009), it has been suggested that Bishnupriya developed primarily as a result of the arrival of Vaishnavism (a Hindu Sect) in Manipur in eighteenth century or late seventeenth century.

Its total population in India is estimated to be around 77, 545 (Census report 2001). This study is based on a Bishnupriya locality in Hailakandi district in south Assam. In south Assam (also known as Barak Valley), Bengali is the official as well as the local language. The Bishnupriyas co-exist with Bengalis in Hailakandi and in south Assam, in general. The Bengalis in Hailakandi, speak a variety of Eastern Bengali. In this study, along with Bishnupriya, the local Bengali spoken in Hailakandi is examined as well.



▲ Location of Hailakandi: 24° 40' 59"N, 92° 34' 0"E

Map of the area where Bishnupriya is spoken and originated (Map not to scale)