

Abstract

Spirantization of labials in Silchar Bengali

This study investigates variation and change in spirantization of labials in Silchar Bengali spoken in Silchar, which is located in the southern part of Assam and bordering Bangladesh. Silchar Bengali emerged as a direct consequence of the movement of the labour population triggered by the Tea Plantation which started coming up in the early 19th century in this region. Spirantization was essentially brought into Silchar by the immigrants from the eastern Bengali dialect regions, particularly from the south-eastern Bengali dialect regions. Silchar consist of two main groups, one who came from Bengali speaking areas or acquired Bengali identity and secondly, those who came from Hindi dialect areas and maintained non-Bengali identity, 'Hindustani'.

The variables addressed in the study are the voiceless bilabial plosive [p] including the aspirated bilabial plosive [ph] which are variably realized as labio-dental fricative [f] as in: *porika* ~ *forika* 'examination', *shopno* ~ *shofno* 'dream', *phula* ~ *fula* 'swollen', *maph* ~ *maf* 'to forgive'. The paper explores the role of internal and external constraints on spirantization.

The findings of the study suggest that spirantization is conditioned by phonological constraints. In addition to phonological constraints ethnicity and gender play a significant role in understanding the social differentiation of spirantization within the speech community. In terms of the linguistic ethnicity, the Bengalis are far ahead in the use of spirantization than the non-Bengalis, suggesting that in spite of several generations after the two groups arrived on Tea plantations in Assam, they behave differently with respect to spirantization. The wide gap between the two groups particularly among older age groups is indicative of the socio-psychological separation of these two groups. The gap between the two groups is slowly getting neutralized among the younger generation with increasing participation in spirantization.

Women use more spirantization compared to men in general. This is particularly true among the older generations. Spirantization also shows an interesting pattern of change. Having been on the decline for some time, it is now on the rise among the fourth generation men. The fourth generation men, both Bengali and non-Bengali show considerable higher use of spirantization as compared to women.

The study is based primarily on conversational data drawn through sociolinguistic interviews from a well age graded and stratified sample.

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Silchar Bengali is a variety of Bengali spoken in Silchar. Silchar is located in the southern part of Assam. It shares international boundary with Bangladesh (earlier part of East Bengal) on the west, the state of Manipur (Meitheis) in the east, North Cachar Hills (Dimasas, Kacharis) in the north, the state of Mizoram (Mizos/Lushais) in the south and on its south-west are the Bengali dominated districts of Hailakandi and Karimganj. Bengali spoken in Silchar has its roots in numerous Bengali dialects brought to Silchar by immigrants coming to work on Tea Gardens in the early part of 19th century. Silchar being in Assam is also deeply embedded in a non-Indo Aryan linguistic region. Bengali is the official language of southern districts of Assam.

