Sambalpuri of Orissa, India
A brief sociolinguistic survey

Eldose K. Mathai and Juliana Kelsall
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SIL International®
2013
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Abstract

This report is on Sambalpuri (ISO 369-3: spv) of Orissa, India. The report summarises sociolinguistic research conducted in October 2006. The locations visited during the fieldwork were in Sambalpur, Bargarh, Jharsuguda, and Balangir districts of Orissa. The purpose of this research was to assess the need for further language and literature development in Sambalpuri. We conducted informal interviews to gain broad insights into the sociolinguistic situation. Questionnaires enabled us to find out about language use and attitudes among Sambalpuri speakers. Wordlist comparisons provided information about lexical similarity levels among Sambalpuri speech varieties, as well as between Sambalpuri and Standard Oriya (ISO 639-3: ory). These preliminary findings suggest that Sambalpuri language vitality is good. There is expressed interest among mother tongue speakers for continued language development. The lexical similarity between Sambalpuri and Standard Oriya is high enough to indicate possible intelligibility. Additional research is needed to clarify the linguistic relationship between Sambalpuri and Standard Oriya, and to provide a basis for making more specific recommendations regarding further Sambalpuri language development.

1 Introduction

1.1 Language and script

The Ethnologue (Lewis et. al. 2013) classifies Sambalpuri as Indo-Aryan, Eastern zone, Oriya. Alternate names for Sambalpuri are Dom, Kosali, Koshal, Koshali, and Western Oriya. Local people reported to us that in Sambalpur district and nearby places, they call their language Sambalpuri, but in other parts of the region, people call the language Koshali. This is because Koshal was a past kingdom and the Sambalpur region was previously under the Koshal kingdom. Since the designation ‘Sambalpuri’ is well known throughout the area, we will use it in this report.

During our fieldwork, we met non-tribal people living in western Orissa speaking Sambalpuri as their mother tongue, but in the villages some tribal people spoke their own mother tongues. Singh (1993:66,202) noted that the Binjhal and Pap people both use the Sambalpuri language for intra-group communication, and Sambalpuri and Standard Oriya for inter-group communication. Tribal languages such as Bhatri, Desiya, Gondi, Sadri, and Santali are also found in the Sambalpuri language region. According to the Ethnologue (Lewis 2009), some of these languages are also classified as Indo-Aryan (Bhatri, Desiya, and Sadri) while others are Dravidian (Gondi) or Austro-Asiatic (Santali). Neighbouring Indo-Aryan languages such as Awadhi, Chhattisgarhi, and Standard Oriya have considerably influenced Sambalpuri vocabulary (Patel n.d.:7–8).

The Sambalpuri-speaking people of western Orissa face a dual linguistic situation because they generally use Sambalpuri for oral communication among themselves and Oriya for formal communication (Patel n.d.:19). Sambalpuri does not have a separate script of its own. It is presumed that the people of this area used the Devanagari script in the past. After the merger of the Sambalpuri language area with Oriya in 1905, the people began to accept Oriya orthography as their own. At present most of the Sambalpuri speakers are in favour of using the Oriya script to write Sambalpuri, as they are accustomed to reading and writing in the standard Oriya language from childhood. Sambalpuri literacy materials are also mostly produced in the Oriya script (Patel n.d.:19). Tripathy (1984:49) expresses the view that although Sambalpuri has been treated as a dialect of the Oriya language, syntactic differences establish Sambalpuri as a distinct language.

1.2 Previous research

Many scholars have done their graduate theses on Sambalpuri, and most of them are working in Sambalpuri University. When we visited the university library, we found many theses written on Sambalpuri, but because of limited time and restrictions on library access, we were only able to get
information from theses by Bijay Tripathy (Semantics of Sambalpuri) and Kunjaban Patel (A Sambalpuri phonetic reader).

1.3 Current situation

There are some Sambalpuri speakers working for the recognition of Sambalpuri as a language distinct from Standard Oriya. Development of the Sambalpuri language is taking place in written materials, film, songs, and radio programmes.

1.4 Purpose and goals

The purpose of this brief survey of Sambalpuri was to collect preliminary information on the present-day linguistic and sociolinguistic relationship between Sambalpuri and Standard Oriya.

Goal 1: To assess lexical similarities between Standard Oriya and Sambalpuri speech varieties, and among Sambalpuri speech varieties.

Research questions:

What are the lexical similarities between Standard Oriya and Sambalpuri?
What are the lexical similarities among Sambalpuri varieties?

Research tool:

Wordlist comparisons.

Goal 2: To assess the use and status of Sambalpuri and Standard Oriya among Sambalpuri speakers.

Research questions:

What are the language use patterns of Sambalpuri speakers in key domains?
What are the attitudes of Sambalpuri speakers towards Sambalpuri and Standard Oriya?
What Sambalpuri language development efforts are happening in the region?

Research tools:

Questionnaires and informal interviews.

2 Lexical similarity

2.1 Introduction

A common method of measuring the relationship among speech varieties is to compare the degree of similarity in their vocabularies. This is referred to as lexical similarity. Speech communities that have more terms in common (thus a higher percentage of lexical similarity) are more likely to understand one another than speech communities that have fewer terms in common. Since only elicited words and simple verb constructions are analysed by this method, a lexical similarity comparison alone cannot indicate how well certain speech communities understand one another. It can, however, assist in obtaining a broad perspective of the relationships among speech varieties and give support for results using more sophisticated testing methods.
2.2 Procedures

A 210-item wordlist\(^1\) was used in this survey, consisting of items of basic vocabulary. This list has been standardised and contextualised for use in sociolinguistic surveys of this type in India. The wordlists were elicited in Hindi and were transcribed using the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA).

Each wordlist was compared with every other wordlist, item by item, to determine whether the items were phonetically similar. This process of evaluation was carried out according to standards set forth in Blair (1990:30–33). Those words that were judged similar were grouped together. Once the entire wordlist was evaluated, the total number of word pair similarities was tallied. The total number of items compared and multiplied by 100, giving what is called the lexical similarity percentage.

Using the lexical similarity counting procedures described by Blair (1990:30–33), two speech varieties showing less than around 60 percent similarity are unlikely to be intelligible and may be considered as two different languages, or at least as very different dialects (Blair 1990:20). For speech varieties that have greater than 60 percent similarity, intelligibility testing should be done to further clarify their relationship.

2.3 Site selection

According to the Ethnologue (Lewis et al. 2013), Sambalpuri is spoken in western Orissa and in Chhattisgarh. Based on our background research and available fieldwork time, we selected four villages as wordlist collection sites (Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VILLAGE</th>
<th>TEHSIL(^a)</th>
<th>DISTRICT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kabarapally</td>
<td>Sambalpur</td>
<td>Sambalpur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bichhuvan</td>
<td>Bhatli</td>
<td>Bargarh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jharsuguda</td>
<td>Jharsuguda</td>
<td>Jharsuguda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balangir</td>
<td>Balangir</td>
<td>Balangir</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) A tehsil is a government administrative unit that consists of a city or town that serves as its headquarters, possibly additional towns, and a number of villages.

2.4 Results and analysis

Table 2 shows the lexical similarity percentages matrix for the speech varieties compared in this study. The wordlists are arranged in generally descending order of shared similarity percentage. The villages and districts for the Sambalpuri wordlists are given in the chart.

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\(^1\) The total number of vocabulary items compared is sometimes less than 210 for some wordlists, usually because a certain item is not familiar to the informants, the proper word cannot be obtained, or a particular item is deemed inappropriate to elicit at a certain site.
Table 2. Lexical similarity percentages matrix

| Sambalpuri - Sambalpur | 95 | Sambalpuri – Bargarh | 90 | Sambalpuri – Jharsuguda | 91 | Sambalpuri - Balangir | 76 | 75 | 75 | 76 | Standard Oriya |

Lexical similarity percentages within the Sambalpuri varieties that were investigated are fairly high, ranging from 90 to 95 percent. The wordlists collected from these four sites are quite similar to each other; however, dialect intelligibility testing is necessary before it is possible to conclude that speakers of these Sambalpuri varieties can understand one another adequately.

The four Sambalpuri varieties have lexical similarities of 75 to 76 percent with Standard Oriya. Thus, they have a lesser degree of similarity with Standard Oriya than with one another. Still, these percentages are far enough above the 60 percent threshold for potential comprehension that further testing is necessary to clarify their linguistic relationship (Blair 1990:20). A 60 percent threshold is suggested by Blair and similarly a 70 percent upper confidence limit threshold is the value adopted at the 1989 International Language Assessment Conference (Kindell 1991).

3 Language use, attitudes, and vitality

3.1 Introduction

A study of language use seeks to describe the choices that people make about which speech varieties to use in particular situations. Language attitudes are the ways in which a person or community perceives the relevance and status of their language, often reflecting their attitudes about themselves relative to other groups. Ultimately these views, whether explicit or unexpressed, will influence the results of efforts towards literacy and the acceptability of literature development. Language vitality refers to the prospects for a language to continue to be spoken and passed on to succeeding generations. It is a reflection of the overall strength of a language, its perceived usefulness in a wide variety of situations, and its likelihood of enduring through the coming generations. This is directly influenced by language use and attitudes and is difficult to predict, though inferences can be attempted.

3.2 Procedures

A total of 17 subjects from locations in Bargarh, Balangir, Jharsuguda, and Sambalpur districts of Orissa (Table 3) responded to the Language Use, Attitudes and Vitality (LUAV) questionnaire used for our research. These were the same locations where we collected the four Sambalpuri wordlists. Because the survey fieldwork was conducted during a two-week period, we could not administer the questionnaire to a larger sample of subjects. In Bichhuvan, a local person was willing to help, and through him we were able to find ten questionnaire subjects there. While this limited pool of subjects is not adequate to represent the Sambalpuri-speaking community as a whole, their responses still help to give an initial picture of the sociolinguistic situation among Sambalpuri speakers in these locations.

Table 3. LUAV questionnaire locations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VILLAGE</th>
<th>TEHSIL</th>
<th>DISTRICT</th>
<th>NO. OF SUBJECTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bichhuvan</td>
<td>Bhatli</td>
<td>Barghar</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balangir</td>
<td>Balangir</td>
<td>Balangir</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jharsuguda</td>
<td>Jharsuguda</td>
<td>Jharsuguda</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kabarapally</td>
<td>Sambalpur</td>
<td>Sambalpur</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.3 Results and analysis

3.3.1 Language use

The responses of all 17 subjects to three questions about domains of language use are summarised in Table 4.

Table 4. Domains of language use

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QUESTION</th>
<th>SAMBALPURI</th>
<th>OTHER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Which language do Sambalpuri-speaking children use while they are playing with friends?</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which language is used while parents are talking to their children at home?</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which language does a teacher use while explaining lessons to the students?</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All of the subjects said that Sambalpuri-speaking children use their mother tongue when playing together. Almost all of the subjects said that Sambalpuri is used between Sambalpuri-speaking parents and children in the home. The same number also reported that teachers use Sambalpuri to explain lessons to the students.

3.3.2 Language attitudes

The responses of all 17 subjects to two language attitude/vitality questions are summarised in Table 5.

Table 5. Language attitude/vitality responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QUESTION</th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are young people in your village happy to speak in Sambalpuri?</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think that your grandchildren/the coming generation will speak your language?</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All of the subjects said that the young people are happy to speak in Sambalpuri, and nearly all felt that Sambalpuri will continue to be spoken by future generations.

Additional language attitude questions

What is your favourite language?

Nearly all subjects (15 out of 17) said that Sambalpuri is their favourite language. Two subjects mentioned other languages as their favourite.

Where is the purest Sambalpuri spoken?

Most of the questionnaire subjects responded that Bargarh and Sambalpur are the two districts where the purest Sambalpuri language is spoken. When we interviewed Sambalpuri poets and university professors, they also said that the purest Sambalpuri is spoken in those districts.

In what ways is Standard Oriya different from Sambalpuri?

Of the seven subjects asked, all reported that Sambalpuri is different from Oriya in areas such as pronunciation and semantics. One person also responded that Sambalpuri is mixed with Oriya.
### 3.3.3 Language development

**Are there books available in Sambalpuri?**

All of the subjects responded that many kinds of books are available in Sambalpuri, including dramas, stories, and songbooks. Most of the Sambalpuri literature that we learned about was written in the Sambalpur or Bargarh varieties.

**Is Sambalpuri used in the media?**

According to subjects we interviewed, there is a radio station that broadcasts in Sambalpuri. Occasionally there are television broadcasts (agricultural programmes and Sambalpuri songs). A Sambalpuri newspaper using Oriya script is published in Bargarh; it contains articles written in the Bargarh variety of Sambalpuri.

**How do you write Sambalpuri?**

All of the subjects responded that they use the Oriya script for writing Sambalpuri.

**Would you like to have more literature produced in Sambalpuri?**

All of the subjects except one said that they would like to have more literature in Sambalpuri. The one person who responded ‘no’ said this is because he finds it difficult to read Sambalpuri in the Oriya script.

### 4 Summary of findings and recommendations

#### 4.1 Summary of findings

This was a brief survey and we were able to collect only a limited amount of data. Therefore our conclusions must be tentative. However, we can summarise our findings as follows.

The lexical similarity of the four Sambalpuri wordlists we collected on this survey was fairly high (90 to 95 per cent). Their similarity with a Standard Oriya wordlist was lower (75 to 76 percent), but still indicated possible comprehension between Sambalpuri and Standard Oriya.

During our survey fieldwork, we observed that the use of Standard Oriya is fairly extensive in the locations we visited. However, it appears that there are Sambalpuri speakers, particularly older people and the uneducated, who have difficulty understanding and speaking Standard Oriya. Through informal interviews, we learned that the perspective of Sambalpuri speakers regarding Standard Oriya seemed to range from neutral to fairly positive.

The responses of 17 subjects to a sociolinguistic questionnaire indicated that they are using Sambalpuri in home and village domains. Teachers also use it to explain lessons in school. Subjects’ attitudes towards Sambalpuri were generally positive and they feel that Sambalpuri will continue to be spoken in the future. These 17 subjects also expressed interest in further Sambalpuri language development. Some development is already going on in areas such as oral media and literature.

#### 4.2 Recommendations

Initial results of informal interviews and responses to a questionnaire indicate interest among mother tongue Sambalpuri speakers in further language development. Additional research is needed to further clarify the relationship between Sambalpuri and Standard Oriya.
References


