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Sociolinguistic Community Profiles

Calvin R. Rensch

Some sociolinguistic factors which we study are not evenly distributed throughout a community. Levels of proficiency in a second language, for example, are usually much higher in some sociolinguistic groups in the community than in others. This is sometimes also true of patterns of language use and language attitudes.

In many communities the more educated people and those who travel more show higher levels of second-language proficiency. It is of interest then to study the distribution of such factors in the society in order to learn which factors correlate with the higher levels of second-language proficiency. One implication is that a change in the frequency of that factor is likely to affect the progress of bilingualism.

Furthermore, the number of people associated with the different factors varies from factor to factor. Men and women are likely to be equal-sized groups. On the other hand, younger educated men often constitute a much larger group than older educated men. Men who are educated may be much more numerous than women who are educated.

When selecting subjects for studying multilingualism it is important to draw them from various sociolinguistic groups even though members of the different groups may not be equally available. Educated young men, for example, are frequently quite willing to serve as test subjects whereas older women, usually uneducated, are not. So, if it proves impossible to draw subjects from the various sociolinguistic groups in numbers proportionate to the size of their group, a sociolinguistic profile permits the scores of each group to be weighted in proportion to the size of that group. Let us assume, for example, that fifty percent of the subjects were drawn from the

group of young educated males. Let us further assume that they performed quite well on a bilingualism test. These data need to be placed in the perspective that the sociolinguistic group of young educated males constitute only, say, twelve percent of the population. It needs to be recognized that that high-performing group constitutes an influential, but modest-sized, segment of the population.

So, it is very useful to conduct a census which leads to a sociolinguistic profile of the community for at least three reasons: (1) It is helpful in studying the association of certain factors in the population with high levels of second-language proficiency; (2) it provides information about the relative numbers of people in the various sociolinguistic groups of the community; and (3) it provides guidance in the selection of test subjects so that the sample selected will be as representative as possible.

In such a census a representative of each household is interviewed to gather information about the members of that household. Categories suggested by Frank Blair (1990:40) are as follows:

1. number/name of interviewee
2. date of interview
3. location of interview
4. name
5. age
6. sex
7. education
8. occupation
9. previous occupation(s)
10. religion
11. place of current residence
12. place(s) of previous residence
13. caste or social class
14. clan or moiety
15. marital status
16. number of children
17. number of people in household
18. mother tongue
19. other tongue(s)
20. literate and in which script(s)

If the community is not large, it is wise to collect such information concerning each household of the community. If the community is very large, it may be necessary to select simply a large sampling of the households of the community. Since factors such as availability of educational opportunity vary from one community to another, it is helpful to conduct

a census in more than one village of the language area in order to avoid the skewing that might come from information from a single village. For example, in the Hinko study in northern Pakistan, census information was collected in four quite different villages. The four villages were found to vary with respect to access to education, especially for girls, and the particular language(s) of wider communication used in the vicinity. Several of these community variables were found to be related to differing patterns of language use and differing levels of second language proficiency in those communities.

On the basis of the census data collected, a sociolinguistic profile of the community can be prepared, in which the various sociolinguistic variables thought to be significant form the categories of the display.

A sociolinguistic profile of men in a Torwali-speaking community of northern Pakistan is provided as an illustration. In this profile age ranges and levels of education in the male population are the factors which define the sociolinguistic groups.

(1)	more educated		less educated		both education groups	
	n	% of men	n	% of men	n	% of men
15–24	45	24.9%	28	15.5%	73	40.3%
25–39	27	14.9	33	18.2	60	33.1
40+	7	3.9	41	22.7	48	26.5
all age groups	79	43.7%	102	56.4%	181	100.0%

Some of the significance of the sociolinguistic groups of the Torwali-speaking community can be seen from the fact that the performance of subjects from the various groups varied considerably. The average scores of twenty more-educated and twenty less-educated Torwali male subjects in three age groups are shown in (2), which gives results on the recorded-text test in Urdu.

(2)	more educated	less educated	both groups
15–24	86.9 %	56.3%	75.2%
25–39	90.0	64.3	75.0
40+	100.0	88.0	91.4
all age groups	89.0%	67.0%	78.0%

From the scores partitioned in this way it can be seen that education is a very powerful factor in learning Urdu. This is not surprising since school is the primary context in which Urdu is learned in the Torwali-speaking area. This is in contrast to Pashto, which is learned more informally. Performance on tests in Pashto does not show any correlation with levels of education.

However, it can also be observed that progressing age leads to increased proficiency in Urdu. The older men scored noticeably higher than the younger or middle-aged men, suggesting that later in life men use the Urdu that they learn in school and thereby become more proficient. If the performance of the subjects had not been compared to the sociolinguistic profile of the Torwali-speaking community, the factors which lead to proficiency in Urdu (and Pashto) among Torwali men would not have been evident.