

Dr. Sudha Mishra
Assistant Professor,
ASCENT,
Amity University Madhya Pradesh, India.
Sudhamishra2@gmail.com

Language as a Reflection of Shifting Social Values in India

Abstract

Language is governed by two innate characteristics: first, that it is always changing, in all areas of its structure – be it phonology, morphology, grammar, semantics, vocabulary or conversation style, and second, that it changes in diverse patterns at diverse situations and times. What influences the change in linguistic usage and the pace of its change is the shifting social values and social development (urbanization, literacy etc.). Indian social structure has undergone a paradigm shift in the past few decades, and this has galvanized the shift in language usage too. The words that used to be a taboo in Indian ideological set up are now in common use. The use of slang, abusive words and rude gestures are now style statements for the youth. The movement for woman empowerment and the struggle for equality have influenced the shifting language usage by women too. Women were considered to be innately decent and modest, and this was reflected in their language usage too. But with the changing values in the modern times girls also find it comfortable to use profane language like boys as a reflection of their psychological adaptation to socio-cultural change. This article attempts to examine different aspects of socio-psychological changes in India, and their impact on language usage. There is an attempt not to judge, but to present the observations with objectivity.

Keywords: language, social change, socio-linguistic correlation, social values

Introduction

A society is an organized group of persons functioning in the background of different socio-cultural environments. The socio-cultural environment includes customs, traditions, religious beliefs, tastes and preferences, social institutions, etc. All these have a bearing on the behaviour of the people. The individual transforms his meanings into social values via language. As a product of social reality, language reflects the socio-cultural behaviour of a community that speaks it. In other words, language reflects the thoughts, opinions, attitudes

and culture of its users. Social changes, thus, produce changes in language. Being that cultural shifts are inevitable, we can see how Language is reflecting some of these shifts. We can identify the effects of cultural shifts on language without being objective witnesses at a distance; we can be right in the midst of all the action. In fact, in just a decade some rather unwelcoming changes seem to have become acceptable now, that weren't tolerable earlier. In today's world of fast social change, the rebellion occurs as social norms are questioned, altered and perhaps even rejected. The alteration in language usage replicates the paradigm shift in the attitudes, beliefs and ethics of the new Indian generation.

Methodology

Exploratory method of research was chosen and primary (self constructed structured Questionnaire) as well as secondary sources of data (web sites, journals etc.) were used for data collection. Structured questionnaire was prepared to interview 150 respondents coming from all cross-sections of society, comprising both male and female respondents from all age groups. Besides this, personal face-to-face interviews with 50 respondents were held and their responses were registered. The data thus received was then analysed on different aspects of language as a representation of social change, and the findings were categorized into: social acceptance of profane language, the waned linguistic politeness, impact of technology and internet, gender perspectives, shift in the norms of nonverbal behaviour and film and music industry as a mirror and medium of the linguistic change.

Discussion

Socio-linguistic analysis of the discourse patterns in a society is one of the profoundest tools of understanding the relationship between individual and society, and is ultimately one of the most substantial mirrors of social change. When one studies the question of changing values, and the attitude of the society towards those changes, discourse analysis proves to be the most reliable medium of tracing those transformations. Man depends on society, and it is the culture that acts as a strong societal force, which in turn is reflected through the way people interact. It is in the society again that man has to conform to the norms, occupy status and become member of groups. These aspects are significant in understanding how and why humans act and interact with each other with respect to age, gender, status and formality.

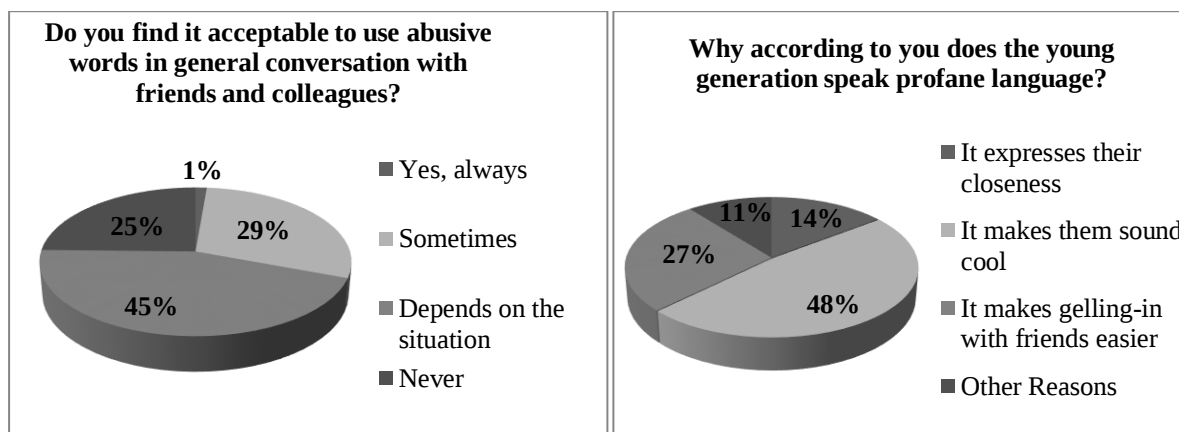
Mills S. Remarks, "It is important to focus on the complex relation between individuals and society in the analysis of the process of changes that take place in perceptions of what is acceptable or unacceptable linguistic practice at a social level. In order to do that, we need a more sophisticated model for language change"ⁱ

In Indian context the shifting social values as reflected through language behaviour can be categorised in various sections:

I - Growing Social Acceptance for Profane Language

Over the past few decades, our society's liberality with offensive language has undergone a radical shift. Profanity, it seems, is becoming very much commonplace. There is an altogether change in people's stances towards a socially acceptable language. Just as the mass preference in dressing has become more casual and bold, the preference of language has also become either more liberated or uncouth, depending on age and outlooks. In addition, a general moderation in what is regarded to be taboo has influenced language use significantly. Many words that were considered taboo have now become a part of socially appropriate lexemes. Uttering a taboo word in public is now taken as something normal, rather something cool and stylish. The vocabulary of offensive language and its use continues to become more and more socially acceptable in India.

74 percent of the respondents accepted that abusive words have now become far more acceptable in general conversation with friends and colleagues. 48 percent believe that the young generation uses abusive language in order to sound 'cool' in front of friends whereas according to 27 percent of them it helps them in gelling-in with friends. Some also find it to be an expression of closeness while to a few abusive language also sometimes works as a stress buster and as a medium of giving vent to pent-up negativity.

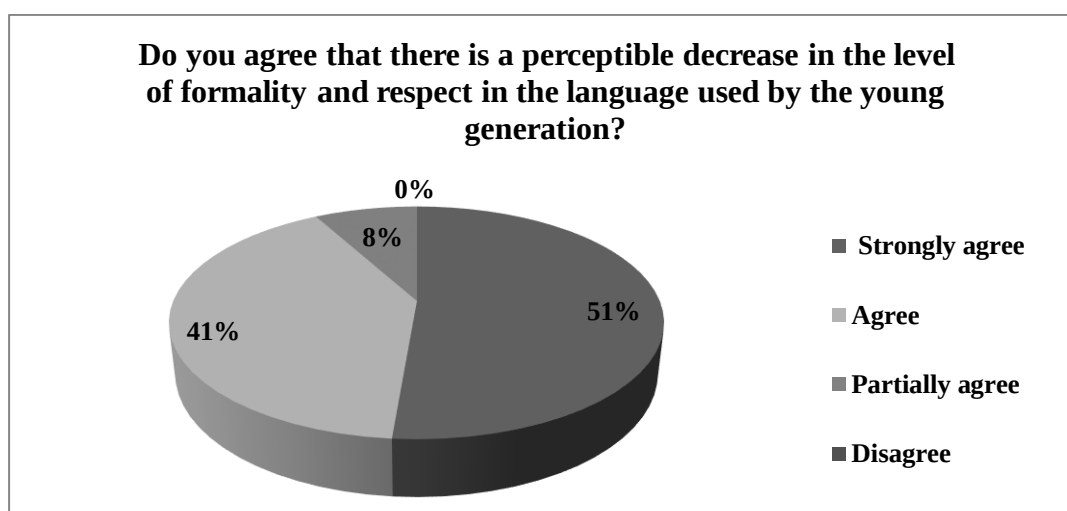


II - The Waned Linguistic Politeness

The concept of politeness is closely linked to linguistic behaviour in the interpersonal communication. According to Watts et al, "Politeness derives from the fact that it lies at the junction between the study of certain forms of language usage such as address terms, honorifics, indirect speech acts, formulaic utterances, etc. and the study of processes of socialization and consequent social behaviour."ⁱⁱ

The most noticeable change in language usage by the new generation can be seen in the waned “Linguistic Politeness” and a shift with formality in language. Age and authority is barely given the deserved reverence. Now there is scarcely any difference in the way young boys and girls addresses the elderly, the peer group and the youngsters. This is observed most commonly when the young boys and girls do not find it important to add appropriate salutations, honorifics, or words of reverence while addressing elderly people or senior authorities. This linguistic shift reflects the waned importance of respect, obedience, social affiliation and general etiquette in everyday life of the young generation; they find it irrelevant to attach too much of formality in any communication.

A large number of respondents – 51 percent of them, strongly agree, 41 percent of them agree, and 8 percent partially agree that there is a perceptible decrease in the level of formality and respect in the language used by the young generation. None of the respondents disagrees to this fact, thus substantiating the proposition.

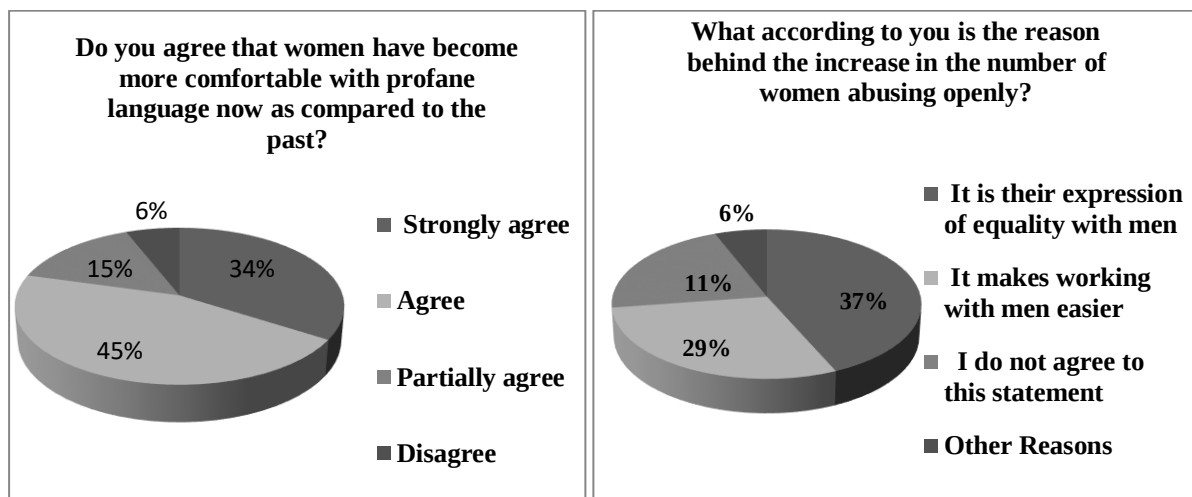


III - Gender Perspectives

Gender is no more a parameter to decide the language usage standards. In traditional Indian societies, specific traits were ascribed to men and women. The prominent qualities ascribed to males in our society were ‘knowledge’, ‘strength of mind’, ‘determination’, ‘firmness in decision’ and ‘confidence’, whereas, those ascribed to females were ‘shyness’, ‘ignorance’, ‘timidity’ and ‘delicacy’. This has had its linguistic correlates in the language usage by the two sexes too. The communication style of males was marked by commanding, aggressive, dominant and socially disfavoured variants of language: deprecating words or exclamations to show their inner feelings, high pitch and robust body language. Women, on the other hand, used prestigious and more standardized language. They used to be more refined in their speech, and used less coarse and gross expressions.

However, in the past few years, under the impact of feminist movements, and the struggle for equal rights, women have discovered profanity as an expression of their equality with men. They too like dominance, and act out abusively for the same reasons that men do: power and control. This usage of profane language has become acceptable, as a reflection of psychological adaptation to socio-cultural change these days. There are records of more women using obscene language in public than ever before.

The data analysis very well authenticates this premise: as many as 45 percent of the respondents strongly agree that women have become more comfortable with profane language now as compared to the past. Majority of them feel that it is an expression of their equality with men, whereas a good percentage of them also assert that using such a language makes their working with men easier in today's stressful work environment. A few also find it an expression of anger and frustration against their suppression and social limitations.

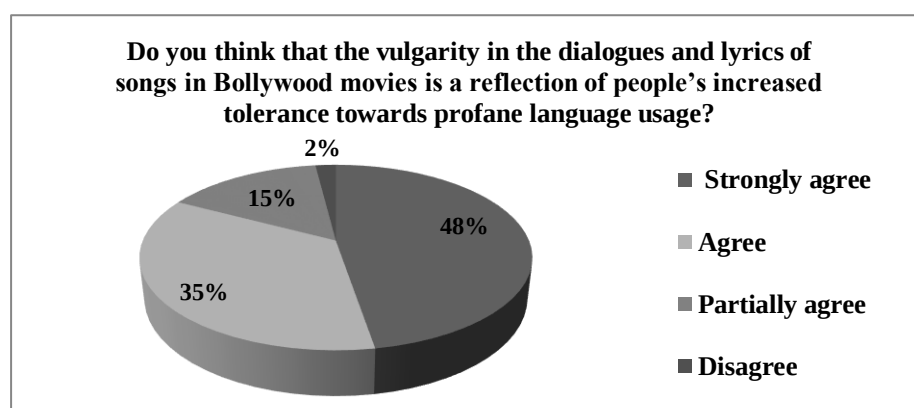


IV - Shift in the Norms of Nonverbal Behaviour

The shift in the Nonverbal part of communication also mirrors the changing socio-cultural structure. The most conspicuous change is the increased comfort level of people with the reduced intimate spaces as well as Haptics. Touching, holding hands and hugging has become very commonplace in India, as it is in European countries. The young generation finds it okay even in the case of opposite genders. This has been my general observation in my Graduate and Post-Graduate classes. There are several factors leading to this change: the co-education system wherein the boys and girls work on group projects, the implicit and explicit sex education, and increased confidence of the women in themselves are a few to mention. This also seems to be the result of men and women working together in MNC's, which makes them feel at ease with each other.

V - Film and Music Industry as a Mirror and Medium of the Linguistic Change

Lyrics in the popular cinema, is one of the end products of the change that the society has undergone – as it also is a vehicle of this transition. The blaring modern music with quirky, romantic lyrics reflects the changing tastes. Unconventional lyrics and dialogues fuelled by commercial significance and advertising have resulted in songs with vulgar lines that small kids and youth uninhibitedly recite anywhere and everywhere. Pun, repartee, repetition, sarcasm and hyperbole seem to rule the film and music industry, defying rationale. Violence, obscenity, vulgarity and mischievous double meaning dialogues are the trademarks of today's cinema. These raucous songs and bold dialogues lack the subtler elements of sensibility. The songs with derogatory words and mischievous connotations manifest the current lifestyle, culture and social ethos that have undergone tremendous transition in the past few decades.



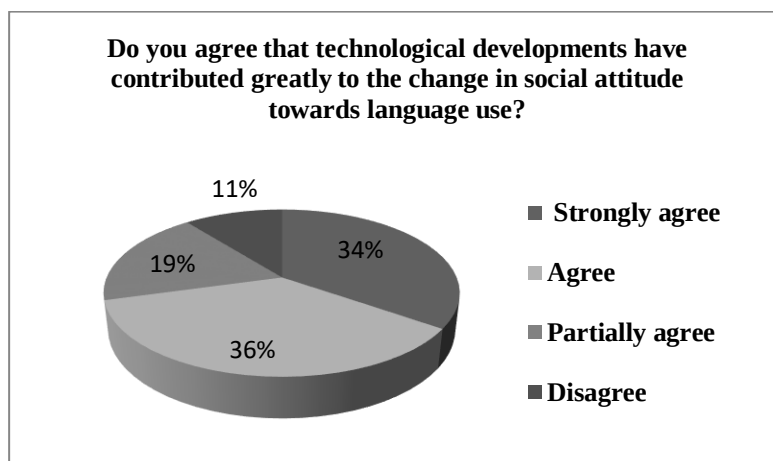
VI- Influence of Technology and Internet

Boom in technology has also resulted into changes in social attitudes, which have influenced language usage too. As people spend a great deal of their time online, the language of the internet has thrived, and has found its way into spoken and written language too. With this language has adopted new lexemes, specifically acronyms and abbreviations. Online conversation gives a feeling of talking to a machine, and thus the sender as well as the receiver fails to recognize the need of necessary courtesy and consideration in the language.

In today's internet society media has attained an all-encompassing effect and has influenced all private and public spheres of our lives. With this, the rate of dissemination as well as consumption of information has also amplified exponentially, thus widening the realms of language use too. The magnitude of such language use has resulted into the burgeoning of new linguistic forms, raucous and loaded expressions and brazen jargons. There remains a very hazy boundary between real and virtual world. These fundamental changes in human networking patterns have significantly affected the socio-cultural norms, and are catalyzing the sociolinguistic changes that are fundamentally mediate by internet and technology.

Manuel Castells remarks “The virtual life is becoming more social than the physical life, but it is less a virtual reality than a real virtuality, facilitating real-life work and urban living.”ⁱⁱⁱ

This ease of the modern Indian population with the virtual world has facilitated transmission of individualized messages without any public scrutiny and social censorship. A large number of the respondents - as many as 70 percent of them – agree to the proposition that technological developments have contributed greatly to the change in social attitude towards language use.



Conclusion

The study of language use, language change, language maintenance, and language shift in sociolinguistics keeps major thrust on language aspect and seldom or never on social changes. The study of text can be comprehensive and effective only if we look at the context in its entirety. If society is to be taken as context and language as text then any structural change in the context correspondingly affects the form and patterns of the text as well. It is proposed that in order to understand language form and pattern, we need to engage in the ever-changing context as well.

The public language behavior at large, as stated by Habermas 1989, is appropriated by public scrutiny and social-cultural censorship^{iv}. The processes of language change reflect social processes; this is an outcome of the truth that language is primarily social. The line between formal and informal; socially appropriate and politely marked forms; civility and offensiveness; is getting blurred. The rapid transformation in public discourse and language usage can be attributed to the changing power structure in the new social order and growing pursuit for new identity. The paper makes an attempt to recognize the public acceptability of this change and emphasizes the need for taking into account various socio-cultural factors and changing communication forums while understanding changes in language forms and their usages in the context.

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