‘Little Bangladesh’: A Language Landscape

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Introduction. Language is a comprehensible index of an ethnic population’s maintenance of cultural heritage. Heritage language proficiency/retention is also a catalyst in second language acquisition and academic success (Díaz, 1985; García, 1988; Goodman & Buck, 1997; Laubeova, 2000; Mercado, 1988; Ramírez, Yuen, Ramey, & Pasta, 1991; Vázquez, Vázquez, & López, 1999). This research was conducted in 2007 among the Bangladeshi immigrant community in Toronto. A follow-up to the original study was done in 2011. The research attempted to portray the heritage language maintenance situation among the Bangladeshi immigrants in Toronto. It portrayed the emic story of heritage language maintenance situation among this language and cultural group. Through a naturalistic exploratory inquiry, the study reviewed the issues of language maintenance particular to Bangladeshi Torontonians. The findings of this study described the emerging pattern of practices and manifest attitudes of the families regarding this issue and how they transmitted their language and language-specific values to their first and second generation immigrant children.

Five research questions guided the study; two of which were used to inquire about the noticeable extent of the presence, use, and maintenance of heritage language within the families. One question aimed to understand the relationships families have with outside contexts and resources of heritage language maintenance. Two other questions pertained to the manifest behavior of parents in transmitting language and conveying language-related values to the children. Data was collected through the ethnographic methods of observing participation and supported by document reviews and historical interviews. Findings were triangulated by using data, sources, and theory. Findings are reported the portraiture method. For follow-up, data was gathered through interviews and observation.

Background. “Toronto claims to be one of the most multicultural cities of the world. Its population, originating from 169 countries, speaks about 100 languages.” (Quadeer & Kumar, 2003, p.7). As many as 61 ethnic identities were reported to be present in these areas in the 2001 census report, and according to the 2006 census, 46% of the population was foreign-born. A comparison of foreign-born population in the largest metropolitan cities across the world was compiled by Ryerson University after the 2001 census (Figure 1), which shows the number of foreign-born people to be the highest among those cities.

Figure 1: Foreign-born population in several major metropolitan cities



Sources: Statistics Canada, 2001 Census; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001; U.S., Census Bureau, 2000

(Ryerson University, 2004)

According to a number of scholars, Canadian immigration policies were explicitly racist and favoured immigrants of European origin until 1971 countries. (Buchignani & Indra with Srivastiva, 1985; Kelley, & Trebilcock, 1998; Abu-Laban, 1996). However, in Toronto, all (European) ethnic groups did not assimilate in a predominant Canadian culture; many had laid out unique cultural heritages here. For example, Greeks have always maintained their heritage with pride; this would include their language, food, culture, and sometimes, faith. They have claimed a part of the city where street signs are subtitled in Greek. Despite the federal penchant for European immigrants, peoples of Chinese, South Asian, and other origins have incessantly arrived to Canada and settled in the major metropolitan cities. As in elsewhere, ethnic enclaves have grown in Toronto due to all this immigration. Major (in size) enclaves in Toronto, though not exclusive of members of other ethnicities, are Chinese, Italian, Jewish, and Portuguese (Quadeer & Kumar, 2003).

Nevertheless, the nature of ethnic clustering in Toronto is a little different than many other multicultural cities in the world because it is affected by a unique set of city factors in the rental practices, such as, a Canadian credit history, a stable well-paid job, and a reference or liability holder, known as a ‘co-signer’ to rent (Fong & Wilkes, 2003). Quadeer and Kumar (2003) conclude that it is far from the normal voluntary ‘ethnic ghettoization’. Here they are “more the result of the structure of the housing market, job opportunities and people’s locational preferences than the legacy of racial discrimination.” These enclaves, yet, continue to serve as the “reception areas for the poor and modest income immigrants” (p.8).

As this study focused on the maintenance of Bangla, a language spoken both by people from Bangladesh (separated from India in 1947, and known as East Pakistan between 1945 and 1971) and by people from West Bengal, a province of India, it is important to understand the state of the language and the immigration pattern of its speakers to Canada. Statistics would prove Bangla to be enjoying a high status that would automatically ensure its maintenance among its speakers everywhere. It was, at the time of the study, the fourth major language in the world considering the population size that spoke this language (See Table 1.). In Canada and in Toronto Bangla seemed to have a large speaker group as well (See Table 2).

Table 1. Top Spoken Languages of the World: Number of Native Speakers:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Rank Order | Language | Number of speakers |
| 1 | Mandarin Chinese | 885,000,000 |
| 2 | Spanish | 332,000,000 |
| 3 | English | 322,000,000 |
| 4 | Bengali (Bangla) | 189,000,000 |
| 5 | Hindi | 182,000,000 |
| 6 | Portuguese | 170,000,000 |
| 6 | Russian | 170,000,000 |
| 8 | Japanese | 125,000,000 |

Source: Parijs, 2001. (Numbers rounded to the nearest million)

Table 2. Demographics of Bangla Speakers.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Area | Number of Bangla speakers | Speaks Bangla at home  Total | Only Speaks Bangla at home | Mostly Speaks Bangla at home | Equally Speaks Bangla and English at home | Regularly Speaks Bangla at home |
| Toronto | 18,470 | 15,785 | 6,050 | 5,640 | 1,500 | 2,595 |
| Canada | 34,650 | 29,705 | 12,840 | 9,615 | 2,780 | 4,470 |

Bangalis from both West Bengal and Bangladesh had been immigrating to Canada since the late 1960’s and early 1970’s with the relaxation of Canadian immigration rules and the government’s preference for more skilled professionals. The number of immigrants from Bangladesh had increased since 1971 because of the country’s establishment as an independent nation. However, until about the past ten/fifteen years, the flow of Bangladeshi immigrants had been limited to a few professionals, family-class immigrants, and political refugees. The establishment of an accessible immigration center and adjustment of the ‘point system’ that suited the Bangladeshi educated middle class resulted in a significant increase in immigration under the ‘skilled-worker’ category in the past decade or so. (Buchignani & Indra, 1985; Hossain, 2003; Indra, 1987; Health Information and Planning, 2003; StatCan, 2002; Shaha, 2005)

Even then, there seemed to be growing concerns about the future of the language in Toronto. Voices within the community were showing concerns about declining enrollment in Bangla language programs under both the University of Toronto and the school boards (Jalil, 2005, Mahmood, 2005). In 1987, a study showed that the Bangla-speaking population had a high demand of heritage language teaching programs in Toronto (Sengupta, 1987). This demand eventually led to the offering of Bangla language through the Toronto and Peel district boards and the University of Toronto, but these programs were under the threat of closing by the time of this study due to the lack of enrollment.

Language has always played an intrinsic and dormant but vital role in the identity of Bangladeshis. Sengupta, in her 1987 study, glorified the role of Bangla language by pointing out that Bangalis very much owe the birth of Bangladesh to the language movement of 1952. Nonetheless, as soon as the threat of Bangla becoming a second class language was removed through the independence from Pakistan, Bangladesh as a state (where 98% people speak Bangla), seemed to cling more to Islam, the religion of around 90% of the Bangladeshis, to define the national identity. Recent trends in elite education in Bangladesh also show an increased favoritism towards the use of English language instead of Bangla. (Iqbal, July 22, 2005). According to a news report, a survey in 2005 concluded that in Bangladesh, Bangla was lagging behind English while naming of trade brands, businesses, and enterprises (Bangla Reporter). Haque (2005) noticed the increasing use of Hindi everywhere in semi-public (such as blogging, SMS messaging) lives of the people of Dhaka (Capital of Bangladesh). He recognized this as the advent of Bollywood culture. (See also Lintner, 2005).

Locale. The locale of this study consisted of several high-rise and the residential area around them where many recent arrivals of Bangladeshis had settled in. The closest major intersection to this area is Victoria Park Avenue and Danforth Avenue. At the time when the study began, this intersection held a small ethnic Bangladeshi boutique named ‘Little Bangladesh’. This name was used to delineate the locale of the study. This area, just as other enclaves, did not exclusively house Bangladeshi immigrants. It was a ‘reception area’ to several other ethnicities as well. It also housed some modest income people of Canadian origin. The larger area around it held pre-dominantly people of South Asian origin in a mix of different ethnicities from India, SriLanka, Afghanistan, and even Africa and the Caribbean.

Methodology. Fieldwork observations and conversation type interviews had been primarily used to collect confidential data (using pseudo names or codes) (Bernard, 1995; Wolcott, 1997). A historical research type document review was also a part of the study (Rousmaniere, 2004). Interviews were, in addition, held to gather historical information on heritage language programs and resources. The secondary historical methods were used to supplement and triangulate ethnographic data. Use of more than one tool were convenient to access data, and contributed in enhancing the credibility and transferability of the study (House, 2004; Schutz, Chambless, & DeCuir, 2004).

Analysis included member checking to preserve participant ownership and to enhance validity. Triangulation through sources, data, and theory were also made a part of the analysis to maintain credibility, validity, and integrity. Additionally, portraiture methods were used in the analysis and reporting with purposes to account for the researcher’s lenses, create a ‘holistic’ product, and preserve the aesthetic essence of the subject (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

The researcher mainly observed first generation children of immigrants and second generation immigrant children of Bangladeshi origin and the environment around them to record the scope and nature of maintaining heritage language and how these children and their families used and transmitted their heritage language. Since claims had been made that in immigrant communities, heritage language was passed down to children primarily through the family (Rahim, 1990; Withers, 2004), the observing participant followed a convenient sample of three families closely. For the purpose of narrowing, and the importance of the coherence of setting, all families have been selected from those with close ties to the ‘Little Bangladesh’ area – families that have started their lives in this neighborhood. Besides observation in the families, informal conversational style interviews took place with some members of these families.

Another vital group of informants included knowledgeable members of the population or associated people who served as sources of historical data on use of resources in Bangla. This group of participants consisted of the following: teachers of Bangla language programs, administrators of continuing education programs, people affiliated with the Bangla Language courses at the University of Toronto, Bangla language bookstore owners, Bangla media-shop owners, teachers of heritage cultural medium such as music and dance, and other knowledgeable community members who worked as mediators of resources.

Toronto District School Board and Peel District Board (covering Greater Toronto Area and vicinities, the same area as the Toronto Census Metro Area) offer continuing education programs, of which teaching international/heritage languages (including Bangla) is a part. The University of Toronto also offers Bangla language courses to postsecondary students for credit. Community members involved with those programs and courses served as important suppliers of historical data. An owner of a Bangla language bookstore owner and a few Bangla media-shop owners provided pertinent information on media consumption habits of the community. One music/dance teacher and a few other providers or mediators of cultural and community resources also provided historic information through conversations on the patterns of Bangladeshis participating in ethnic cultural activities.

Findings. Beginning with the role of children, the background data and the portrait reveal that children in these households are mostly seen, but rarely heard by the adults. Children seem to live in a separate world of their own. Even if a lone child is trapped in the middle of adults, he/she is a world of his/her own. Children hardly have more than functional interaction with adults. Generally, their role in their families is to comply with their parents’ wishes and to aid their parents with major events like celebrations or dinner parties and with major chores like babysitting, tutoring, and preparing or processing food if they are older. Children are never seen to have meaningful conversation with adults. And there are doubts if they are in any real sense exposed to Bangla language as spoken by their parents. Even when aiding parents with housework, the language use is not generally beyond functional and does not seem to benefit or enrich children. Most of the very young children are spoken to in code-mixed Bangla by parents. A few parents use exclusively English with these children. Older children, however, seem to hear a lot of Bangla from their parents. Nevertheless, most of what they say to these children is functional instructions. During observation, this group of children was generally noticed to silently obey orders or reply in yes/no forms either in Bangla or in English as much as possible. When speeches in expanded sentence form were necessary, these children either used English or spoke in literal Bangla translations of English. They did not seem quite comfortable with code-mixing, but sometimes used the form.

It is true that children are exposed to the Bangla language and culture quite a lot as their parents always socialize in Bangla are around, most families live in more or less ethnic neighborhoods, many families subscribe to ethnic television channel(s), and some families are involved in the ethnic cultural life in the city. Although very rarely, but a few children do have their grandparent(s) visit them for a few months once or more in their lifetimes. Most children also make a trip to Bangladesh about every five to eight years. Yet they seem to be more or less oblivious of those or deliberately ignore many of those influences.

Adults seem satisfied with the roles children play. Their focus is on providing care for the children. Care comes in three forms. Firstly, by ensuring that they are in good health through feeding them (‘in good health’ in Bangladeshi terms is opposite to ‘dry’, suggesting ‘skinny’), parents ensure health. Also getting them medication with any sign of abnormality of physical condition and ensuring that they are protected against dangers such as being in an accident or getting sick translates to caring for children well. Secondly, by providing them opportunities of education, if necessary tutoring and other help known to the community parents care for their children. Lastly, parents may go out of their way and their affordability to provide children opportunities of being happy through having clothing and accessories, entertainment, and companionship. In most cases, any other Bangladeshi child, (especially children of friends, relations, and acquaintances of the father or the mother, regardless of any common grounds between the children) is assumed to be a companion and referred to as the child’s friend by the adults. Although children are rarely asked about their preferences in companionship, food, or clothing, they seem to manage to assert their choices in food, clothing and sometimes in activities.

An inspection of the adults’ lives discloses that they do not have much time to spend for anything besides routine events with children. Life constantly poses survival challenges for these people. Beginning with the climate and lifestyle demands, everything is different for them, and people who were generally considered the most equipped and embellished in their own country suddenly discover themselves lacking many of the basic life-skills needed to survive here. Although it might surprise many, these folks have to learn almost everything afresh; starting from how to shovel the snow to how to drive, from which side to walk on the sidewalk to how to fit their family spending to their income. They are slow and reluctant in letting go the time-consuming ways of doing things they are accustomed to and comfortable with. As a result of their shortcomings in life-skills, they end up spending much of their time learning those or making up for those in comparison to adults who grew up in the mainstream culture. The lacking of life skills also makes the members of this group more dependent on others and time is thus wasted waiting for others to be able to help them out at their convenience. Reversely, they also spend time on helping out others in similar situations or at least by sharing knowledge and information. These kinds of needs in life skills and survival issues give rise to the necessity and emphasis of networking and socializing. The information needed to solve the problems that arise from lack of life skills or trying to adjust to the ways of a new place is met through information sharing facilitated by networking. For almost all of these people, love is split between Canada and the rest of the world. Aging and infirm parents are sources of constant worry and care. Siblings, cousins, in-laws, uncles, and aunts are the ones who are supposed to share every moment of sorrow and joy. Sometimes, these people stay awake into odd hours to make these calls. Much time is often spent on dialing and re-dialing to get these calls connected.

Observations reveal that people’s lives are surrounded by reputable cars, brand name/expensive clothes and cosmetics, expensive ornaments, expensive-looking furniture and home decoration, and rich food. Conversations with many of the community members explain it as a natural expectation or standard according to their upper class/upper middle class upbringing – the consumption habit is simply supposed to be so. From this stand, it is understood that it is necessary to maintain this standard of living for one to fit in, to be accepted by “ten other people in the community” and consequently, to be able to maintain the network links within the community. . Food is one outstanding priority in this group’s way of life. It is noticeable that the food served to guests and foods consumed in company are different than regular daal, rice, and other comparatively simple dishes of vegetables and fish. They are usually much richer and elaborate in preparation. While cooking up a regular meal may take one to two hours in the kitchen, most of the dishes served on the occasions are quite rich and take elaborate, time- and labor-intensive preparation. Collecting, processing, preparing, serving, and consuming food is very important to the adults of this group and occupy a major amount of their time.

The parents in this community generally prioritize other preoccupations over paying attention to their children. The study data reveals that a general lack of awareness about the importance of maintaining heritage language or the effectiveness and strength of it in their daily lives prevails among the adults of this population. In general, many of the parents seem to value religious education, English education, tutoring (especially in Math and Science), and training in performing arts that is based on Bangladeshi/Indian culture much more than Bangla language education. As opposed to Bangla education, English language education is highly esteemed not only among the Bangladeshi immigrants, but also by the upper and upper-middle class in Bangladesh. The assumed importance of English education and the opposite (negative) assumption about Bangla education is voiced by some participants of the study. Almost none of the adults in the community see any deep-rooted need of heritage language instruction for their children. Most are either unaware or disinterested about resources that support heritage language acquisition and development.

Conclusion. It is found that the heritage language of the population under study, Bangla, is indeed present in many ways within the context of the family; however, the extent of its presence falls short of reaching the children significantly or meaningfully. Although children spend most of their time outside home at school, the most noteworthy chunk of time they spend outside their homes with their families generally are at the homes of friends, relations and acquaintances. However, children generally get isolated and use English among themselves in these settings. Despite the presence of some resource materials and programs, very few families exposed their children to these in a significant manner. The findings of the study suggest that generally parents consciously foster and transmit only some religious values and cultural behavior and manners. Nevertheless, these values are not consistent across the families. Positive attitude towards the language and culture are occasionally modeled by the parents. Only a few parents attend live cultural events. While a larger number of adults watch ethnic TV and videos and some listen to Bangla music on their audio equipment, it has not necessarily had the impact of positive modeling. While some children enjoy and appreciate elements like Bangla music and dance to a certain extent, many do not care. It is important to note that many of the adults who come from cosmopolitan upper class background enjoy Hindi media as well. The presence of entertainment element from the larger Indian culture has been noticed to confuse the youngsters. Reading behavior in heritage language is generally not modeled by adults in the families. On top of shortcomings in modeling and appreciation of the Bangla language and cultural values, many adults/parents nurture a negative attitude towards these elements.

Very little effort has been noticed among the parents with regards to maintaining and transmitting heritage language. The general assumption is that their own use of Bangla around the children and with the children will automatically transmit the language to their children. Most parents do not seem to notice that their children are not using the language beyond the basic functional level; that they are not using more than a few words in Bangla or in some cases, none at all. These parents remain unaware about what is happening to their children and what could or should be done to prevent attrition until it is quite late. Parents see it as challenging to find time and means to better transmit heritage language, especially to children born in Canada or immigrated at a very early age. Even for those who are most willing to do so there seems to be a shortage of context for such transmission. Children who immigrated at a somewhat older age also slide down in their use and practice of heritage language because their parents lack knowledge or awareness. Children who immigrated with certain extent of Bangla literacy become aloof from their reading and writing skills. However, children fluent in the spoken language who had minimum experience with literacy due to attending English medium schools seem to be the most quickly and intensely affected. For various reasons, most parents seem not to place any significant amount of importance on heritage language transmission or maintenance. The effort of the few parents who do is not strong enough for the whole group to maintain heritage language. Most families show definite signs of attrition of heritage language. Practice of Bangla literacy almost totally absent from the family’s environment. Complete maintenance of heritage language is only noticeable among the adult members of this population. Overall, maintenance of Bangla language within the Bangladeshi immigrant families in Toronto was not found to an extent to be hopeful.