

LANGUAGE DEATH AS A COMPLEX ISSUE: A CASE STUDY OF SRI LANKA PORTUGUESE IN EASTERN REGION OF BATTICALO.

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Key words: Sri Lanka Portuguese Creole, language, community, Dutch Burgher

Introduction

Sri Lanka Portuguese Creole is a language spoken by the Portuguese Burgher community in Batticalo, Eastern region in Sri Lanka and as well Kaffir community in the Northwestern region. The Portuguese arrived in Sri Lanka in the early 16th century and quickly conquered the coastal areas. The conquerors used a pidginized version of Portuguese for communication with the natives. Due to death of women among the conquerors, the soldiers took local wives from the Sinhala and Tamil population (McGilvray 1982). The community of this union forms the seed of the "Portuguese Burgher" population of Sri Lanka, which soon adopted the Portuguese Pidgin as their language, which eventually creolized. When the Portuguese were banished by the Dutch in the 17th century and the Dutch soldiers took local wives. In contrast to the Portuguese from former times, there was a European population available, so that the Dutch mainly married with Portuguese Burgher women (McGilvray 1982). This formed the base for the "Dutch Burgher"

community. The Dutch continued to use Creole Portuguese so that this language continued to thrive until well into the British period, which started in 1798. But it started to decline when the community switched to English or immigrated to Australia or to South Africa altogether.

According to the National Geographic Society, a language dies out every 14 days. At the rate, almost 3500 languages spoken around the world will be out of use by the year 2100. That would be about half of the languages spoken today. Languages represent vast storehouses of human knowledge. Most languages are not written down, but live only in the memories and cultural practices of human communities. As the same way, Sri Lanka Portuguese had lost its significant role and privilege in Sri Lanka. The absence of a written form for Creole has created a tendency to acquire a strong second language which they use as the social language in their day to day life. My field research is located in Batticalo, Eastern Province of Sri Lanka, and the

traditional stronghold of the Burghers. The majority of the inhabitants are Tamils with a significant percentage of Moors (Muslims). Both these groups speak Tamil. Use of English is less compared to other towns in Sri Lanka, and the usage of Sinhala language is absent. Tamil clearly being the standard code of communication, Burghers switched to Tamil as their home language about 30 years ago (Smith 1977). While interviewing, the elderly people in the village, they revealed that the young generation generally do not speak Sri Lanka Portuguese, and often do not even understand it. Cultural practices like particular customs at weddings and funerals with special Sri Lanka Portuguese music, food and dress are valued, but the last music combo consists of five members, all above 60 years and replacements are not in sight. The community is conscious of the potential loss of these cultural practices and engages in recordings of these musical expressions. People generally notice that the grandchildren do not speak Portuguese. The Batticaloa Burghers are organized in the Burgher union Batticaloa and the Burgher Foundation. Especially in Batticaloa, despite strong pressure to shift to Tamil, Sri Lanka Portuguese is still a living language. But the number of speakers decline day by day. Due to language shift both at individual and at community levels gradually lose proficiency in their mother tongue or the language of their speech community in favour of other languages. Specially the major influence of Tamil and English languages. The process may lead to language loss among individuals or

even language death for entire community.

Aim and the Scope of the study

But the important issue is what triggers the language shift? This question underlies a crucial consideration in the study of this important topic. The purpose of this study is mainly to find the reasons why a language falls out of use of the Creole speakers and why a language community shifts from its native tongue to another.

Methodology

Interviews, questionnaires, and participation observations have been used in this research.

Conclusion

Sri Lanka Portuguese is still a living language despite strong pressure to shift to Tamil. The language is threatened by extinction, where I find a major fact in Batticaloa, the youngest speakers are in their 50s. In general, the fewer the speakers left, the less known the language is and it causes a rapid loss of the language.

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