Thesis abstract

Sindhī multiscriptality, past and present: a sociolinguistic investigation into community acceptance

Arvind Iyengar

Abstract of a thesis for a Doctorate of Philosophy submitted to the University of New England, Armidale, Australia

This thesis falls within the field known as the sociolinguistics of writing, namely, the study of the role of written language and writing in society. It deals with the mutual relationship between the written form of a language and a community that uses the language, and how the use of written language within the community is impacted by societal changes.

The thesis focuses on Sindhī, an Indo-Aryan language native to the Sindh province of southern Pakistan, but also spoken by 1.7 million people in India. The minority Sindhī community in India is recognised as having achieved exceptional economic success and near-universal literacy. However, the community has attained literacy predominantly in languages other than Sindhī, chiefly English and Hindī. In fact, community competence in written Sindhī in India has been declining for several decades. This is attributable to the lack of economic use for the language in India, and to the fact that the language has traditionally been written in the intricate Perso-Arabic script. Consequently, community motivation to learn this script purely for reading and writing Sindhī is low. Attempts have been made to use the Devanāgarī script for the Sindhī language in India, with partial success. Of late, a community proposal for using the Latin or Roman script for the Sindhī language has emerged, claiming to bridge the script divide in the community between Perso-Arabic and Devanāgarī.

On this basis, the thesis investigates the use of scripts for the Sindhī language, both from a diachronic and synchronic perspective. It addresses the questions of how and why certain scripts were and are being used for the Sindhī language. It also explores what the Indian Sindhī community today feels about using the Roman script to read and write the Sindhī language. In doing so, the study examines the potential Roman has in improving community competence in written Sindhī, and identifies solutions that may aid Sindhī language maintenance in India.

The thesis first analyses the rich but understudied script history of the Sindhī language from the tenth century to modern times. Domains in which certain scripts were used are investigated, and definite patterns in script distribution are identified. Particular attention is paid to Perso-Arabic and Devanāgarī, which emerged as the two most widely used scripts for the language in the twentieth century. The diachronic analysis draws on archival sources as well as academic works on the Sindhī language, and brings to the fore hitherto neglected data on historical script use for the language.

The thesis then analyses present-day community opinion on the proposal to use the Roman script to read and write Sindhī. Distinct themes in community opinion are highlighted, and popular semiotic associations of Roman, Perso-Arabic and Devanāgarī are identified. The synchronic analysis is based on original fieldwork data, comprising in-depth qualitative oral interviews with members of the Indian Sindhī community (n = 50) of diverse backgrounds and ages from various geographical locations.

The findings of the historical and contemporary sociolinguistic investigation in this study challenge the simplistic view prevalent in the literature that past and present script use for the Sindhī language has been the result of either authoritarian imposition or voluntary choice. They also question the oft-asserted claim in the literature that the choice of script for a language is a reflection of its speakers' ideological affiliation. Rather, the study's findings point to more quotidian factors influencing historical and contemporary script use for Sindhī, including socio-economic need and situationally-determined appropriateness. The study's findings also indicate that community members consider oral competence in the Sindhī language to be more important than written competence in it. Finally, from a pedagogical point of view, both Devanāgarī and Roman are shown to have distinct advantages for beginner readers in Sindhī. The thesis thus makes key contributions not just to the existing body of knowledge on the Sindhī language, but also to the fledgling field of inquiry that is the sociolinguistics of writing.

Dr Arvind Iyengar
Discipline of Linguistics
School of Behavioural, Cognitive and
Social Sciences
University of New England
Armidale NSW 2351
AUSTRALIA

Email: arvind.iyengar@une.edu.au

Thesis: https://goo.gl/LnkLzL