INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RESEARCH – GRANTHAALAYAH

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MEASURING THE RATE OF LANGUAGE LOSS: A STUDY ON TAMIL IDIOMS

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ABSTRACT

When a language is passed from one generation to another, many linguistic components undergo changes in different degrees. These changes include addition of new elements (eg, neologisms), modifications, and loss of some elements (eg, obsoleteness). This study focuses on language loss in the pragmatic level by analyzing Tamil idioms and how well two subsequent generations comprehend them, arriving at a rate of loss between two generations of the study population. In addition, this study model can be used as a method to measure the rate of language loss through generations and to ascertain the rate of LL in a given language, especially in case of languages that are nearing the threat of endangerment.

Cite This Article: G. Banuchandar, "MEASURING THE RATE OF LANGUAGE LOSS: A STUDY ON TAMIL IDIOMS" International Journal of Research – Granthaalayah, Vol. 4, No. 6: SE (2016): 20-23.

1. INTRODUCTION

Language loss (LL) is a phenomenon in which components of a language are lost by time. LL can be classified to occur at 2 levels: in *individual* level and through *generations*. LL in the individual level refers to LL occurring in an individual's competence within his or her lifespan. This might be due to various reasons, such as migrating to a new location where the individual does not continue to use his or her native language or language attrition due to degenerative conditions/injury of the brain. Language loss through generations (LLG) indicates loss of linguistic components as generations pass. LLG is a serious concern because higher rates of LL can lead to language endangerment. In addition, LLG in pragmatics, which is a component of language, deserves attention. Thus, this study aims to measure the rate of LLG in Tamil idioms.

2. BACKGROUND

Although various studies exist focusing on LL, few studies have compared LL occurring in subsequent generations. For example, Smakman D and Smith-Christmas[1] analyzed the LL of 3 generations of a Gaelic-speaking family. They reported on the weak language transmission through 3 generations. They compared participants' linguistic proficiency in terms of percentages. In the present study, a simple model to quantitatively report LLG has been used to arrive at a LL percentage. The Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS) is an elaborate 13-level scale used to score a language based on its degree of endangerment based on various factors.[2] The EGIDS is an expanded form of the, 8-level, Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale introduced by Fishman.[3] Scales such as these are used to broadly score languages in by considering various factors. These scales are used to score a language with respect to its level of endangerment at a given period, but a standard method of measuring, and reporting, the rate at which a language is eroded respect to time is needed, which necessitates this study.

3. METHODS

PARTICIPANTS
Two responders belonging to different generations but of the same family (father and son) were chosen for the study. Thus, they were from the same linguistic background and from a semiurban location in Kancheepuram district, Tamil Nadu. The age of the responders was 59 years (Responder X) and 29 years (Responder Y). Both had similar educational qualification, in which both had school education but are not degree holders. Thus, any possible variation in the results due to educational difference or linguistic background was avoided. Both responders provided consent after the study purpose was explained to them.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS
Idioms used for this study were collected from the book "taRkaalat tamil maraputtoTar akaraati".[4] Of 1930 idioms in this reference book, 500 idioms were collected randomly using the online tool RANDOM.ORG (available at www.random.org). The idioms were checked for the responders' comprehension of correct meaning and context.

First, interviewed Responder X (older generation) was interviewed with the 500 idioms to check for his understanding of the idiom's correct contextual meaning. Of the 500 idioms, 474 idioms were comprehensible to Responder X. This list of 474 idioms was used while interviewing Responder Y (younger generation) in the similar fashion. Then, the number of idioms comprehensible to Responder X (n_x) and the number of idioms comprehensible to Responder Y (n_y) were counted. The difference between them was noted, and percentage change was calculated as loss percentage.

Percentage change was calculated as $[(n_x - n_y)/n_x] \times 100$. This is termed as the "rate of language loss" between two generations. A sample list of idioms and the responders' comprehension (yes/no) are provided in Table 1.

Table 1: A sample list of idioms and the responders' comprehension of their contextual meaning.

Idiom	Meaning	Responder X	Responder Y
1. uLLaṅkaiyil vaittu taaṅku	look after someone in every possible way	✓	✓
2. kaaTu vaa vaa eṉkiRatu	with one's foot in the grave	✓	✓
3. kaiyil piTikka muTiyaatu	will not behave with restraint	✓	✓
4. talaiyil kaTTu	palm something off on someone	✓	✓
5. paccai maN	newborn baby, innocent person	✓	✓
6. kuTattil iTTa viLakku	not widely known as deserves to be, modest	✓	✕
7. toṅkalil viTu	leave someone in the state of uncertainty	✓	✕
8. peruṅkaayam vaitta paaNTam	vestige of past greatness	✓	✕
9. maNalaik kayiRaakat tiri	to promise someone the moon	✓	✕
10. tumpai viTTu vaalaip piTi	trying to prevent damage or loss when it is too late	✓	✕
11. naaTu niiṅku	pass away (used for the royalty)	✕	✕
12. aḻuta piLLai vaay muuTum	an expression used mean someone's name inspires awe and fear	✕	✕
13. arcuṉaṉ peer pattu	an expression used as a charm against fright during thunder and lightning	✕	✕
14. kai iRaṅku	to decline in	✕	✕

	status		
15. ceTTum kaTTumaaka	frugally	✕	✕

*Samples 11 to 15 are from the list of 26 idioms that were excluded from the study list after they were found to be incomprehensible to Responder X.

4. RESULTS

Of 474 idioms comprehensible to Responder X, only 381 idioms were comprehensible to Responder Y. Thus, the rate of loss of Tamil idioms in the study family was found to be 19.6% per generation.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study provides evidence for the rate at which Tamil idioms are being lost through generations in the present-day situation. Idioms are an integral part of any language as they reflect cultural perspectives of the language community and quote traditional anthologies. More figurative expressions are being lost through generations, and younger generations are unaware of many traditional ornate forms of language. In these days, people shift toward using simple and plain language, and thus using idiomatic expressions is fading.

A possible limitation of our study is that it is a single-sample study, that is, only 2 participants of a family were interviewed, and one might question whether it can be generalized to the Tamil population. As language is a social phenomenon, it is logical to believe that a given generation share similar, if not equal, level of familiarity towards language especially in case of idioms.
This simple, but realistic, model can be applied to measure the rate of LLG, especially for languages that are nearing the threat of endangerment. In addition, the rate of LLG of different languages will find application in ranking of languages with respect to LL.

6. *REFERENCES*

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