Social Determinants of Linguistic Turn with Reference to a Diachronic Study of Two Indo-Aryan Languages

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ABSTRACT

The rise of open informatics systems, large language models (LLMs), and digital documentation practices raises critical questions about the role of power politics in the spread, succession, and standardisation of languages. Beyond linguistic imperialism, this study asks: What enables a language to succeed and become standardised when speakers worldwide now have open access to practice their preferred languages? This paper explores alternative factors in linguistic change, particularly standardisation and stigmatisation, through the lens of social determinants theory, which emphasises the role of social interaction and acceptance in linguistic shifts. Adopting a historical-comparative method, the study analyses secondary texts on Sanskrit and Bangla, two languages from the same family practiced historically in Bengal. The analysis reveals patterns of standardisation and stigmatisation, showing why Sanskrit declined while Bangla was standardised at a critical stage. The findings support the hypothesis that authoritative imposition alone cannot guarantee the standardisation of a language. Instead, widespread social use, flexibility in pronunciation, and the ability to accommodate diverse expressions enable a language to flourish and increase the likelihood of its standardisation. Future research should focus on empirical data to verify whether widespread social use, flexibility in pronunciation, and the ability of a language to accommodate diverse expressions help in strengthening the standardisation process.

Keywords: Linguistic turn, linguistic standardisation, linguistic stigmatisation, social determinism

INTRODUCTION

The 'Linguistic Turn' delineates a process of linguistic standardisation to stigmatisation or vice versa (Glock & Kalhat, 2016). This shifting is the gift of some socio-political or socio-cultural factors (Holmes, 2013), whereas the political or cultural agencies

interplay behind this process, which Phillipson (2009) terms as linguistic imperialism due to the deliberate imposition of the preferred language on the community. Specifically, power politics acts behind the standardisation-stigmatisation process (Romaine, 2000). Again, the Bengali community inherited Sanskrit as a religious legacy and English as a colonial legacy (Hamid & Baldauf, 2014); though, neither of them succeeded in replacing community practices. Then, the reality of glocalised village conception, in conjunction with the advancement of open informatics systems, generative AI, large language models (LLMs), and digital documentation practices, tends to limit the authority of politico-religious agencies over linguistic imposition. It does not mean, no community has its standardised language. Rather, it suggests that some factors work for linguistic determinism (Gordon, 2003) beyond the classical view of linguistic succession stated by Phillipson (2009) and Romaine (2000). The historical shift from Sanskrit to Bangla provides a revealing case study. Sanskrit, once the master register of the Indo-Aryan language family and the medium of Aryan scriptures and Brahminical practice, gradually lost its dominance. Despite the efforts of linguists like Panini and Patanjali to preserve its purity in religious and academic life, Sanskrit became stigmatised in Bengal, while Bangla, evolving from Prakrit, flourished as the language of common practice (Chatterjee, 2025). Exploring why Bangla succeeded where Sanskrit failed allows us to ask:

a. Can linguistic succession be explained solely through power politics? And,

b. Do other cultural and social factors determine a language's survival and growth?

This study has explored answers to the above questions to explain the following:

c. What compels a language to be standardised beyond religious and political determinants?

The objectives of this study are to explore, investigate, and analyse the dynamics of language survival, growth, and standardisation apart from the paradigm of religious-political determinism.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative, diachronic, and comparative research design. This confluence aimed to explore the paradigm of linguistic standardisation in the Indo-Aryan language context in reference to the Sanskrit and Bangla languages. No empirical data has been used in this study; rather, five secondary sources have been employed here as the primary dataset for historical and comparative inquiry, which functions as the textual foundation for tracing the courses of Sanskrit and Bangla. Particularly, *Ideology and Status of Sanskrit: Contributions to the History of the Sanskrit Language* (Houben et al.,

1996), *A History of Sanskrit Language* (Renau, 2005)*, Whence Sanskrit?: A Brief History of Sanskrit Pedagogy in the West* (Tull, 2015)*, A Collection of Linguistic Essays on the Bengali Language* (Azad, 2002)*,* and *Bengali Language* (Chatterjee, 2025) helped this study as principal resources for identifying historical courses and drafting a comparative tabulation of these two languages. This study used a twofold analytical lens. Firstly, a diachronic analysis was employed to analyse the historical-religious-political shifts of dominance from Sanskrit to Bangla. This analytical lens puts special attention to the process of standardisation-stigmatisation beyond authoritative agency in the politico-religious terrain. Secondly, a comparative thematic analysis was undertaken to identify the themes of phonological flexibility, religious authority, social accessibility, and expressive capacity. This led to the development of a comparative analysis of how these factors shaped the respective destinies of Sanskrit and Bangla. A sociolinguistic framework was used to interpret the findings. Theories of linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 2009), sociolinguistic standardisation (Curzan et al., 2023; Labov, 2001), and social determinants of language change (Holmes, 2013), and Bangla succession theory by Shaw (2014) and Onarjo (2020) guided the discussion of whether only religious and political prestige helped to sustain a language, or whether adaptability and social belonging provided more conclusive explanation. The combination of document analysis, diachronic comparison, and a critical sociolinguistic framework enabled to capture of the rise of Bangla and decline of Sanskrit within a broader discourse of linguistic turn and succession.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

An Alternative History behind the Succession of Bangla

Sanskrit had prominence over other Indo-Aryan languages, such as Prakrit (Bangla), due to its religious functionality. This led to Sanskrit reclaiming a gradual political favour (Houben et al., 1996) as the religious scriptures of the Aryans, who converted the native people to their religious belief, were written in Sanskrit, and the religious preachers, Brahmins, were highly supported and protected by political authorities. Again, the linguist and grammarian Panini positioned this language as spiritual and heavenly through his grammar (Renau, 2005), and the use of the language was restricted only to those who knew grammar and used it in religious activities. Alternatively, the common people, 'Prakrit Jona' by their native name, communicated through the Prakrit language, transforming to the current Bangla. Many Sanskrit pundits have tried to prove Prakrit as other register emerging from Sanskrit, the master register (Ayres-Bennett & Bellamy, 2021; Curzan et al., 2023), and they codified Prakrit or Bangla with the help of Sanskrit grammar, letters, and a maximum number of Sanskrit morphemes to retain lineage connection (Azad, 2002), which comply with Phillipson's (2009) theory of establishing the superiority of English through language control in academia. Yet, Sanskrit failed to spread across the

communities, underscoring the fact that religious consideration does not comply with linguistic consideration when a language cannot pass through the practice of common people due to a lack of belongingness (Shaw, 2014). Thus, the propositions of elitedom (Holmes, 2013), linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 2009), and linguistic hegemony (Zeng & Yang, 2024) fail to justify the succession of Bangla, though Sanskrit possessed all the qualities of being an imperialist language. This discussion verifies the stance curated at the first research question that religious favouritism and power politics cannot ensure a linguistic succession. Conversely, one of the determinants that leads a language to succeed is linguistic belongingness, implying a practiced language by the commoners in a society, which affirmatively responds to the second research question.

Flexibility Principle behind Phonemic Merging

The Sanskrit honorifics tried to Sanskritise Bangla through an academic process to retain the prestige of Sanskrit and raise the practice due to their identical alphabet source and vowel-consonant symbols. However, Bangla sounds experienced reversal. Sanskrit has three /ra/ sounds: cerebral (ষ-ra), fricative (ড়-ra), and frontal palate (র-ra), though Bangla speech lacks the cerebral /ra/. Instead, aspirated /ra/ is expressed through fricative /ra/, and unaspirated /ra/ is expressed through frontal palate /ra/. Finally, the cerebral /ra/ letter has been deduced from the Bangla alphabet list. Again, Sanskrit has three /sa/: dental /sa/, palatal /sa/ and cerebral /sa/. However, the Sanskrit cerebral /sa/ merges into the palatal /sa/ in Bangla speech. Hence, the speech sounds can detect dental /sa/ for short /sa/ and palatal /sa/ for the long /sa/, though the Bangla alphabet retains three /sa/ letters as convention (Tull, 2015). Labov (2001) stated that institutional imposition and authority help to retain phonological merger, and Baranowski (2013) suggests that linguistic change is often difficult when it becomes intellectual and cultural inheritance. These theories experienced reversal in Bangla sounds, adopted from Sanskrit. Flexibility won over inheritance in the Bangla sound system. This argument states that linguistic constituents determine which language can survive among people. This flexibility theory supersedes the politico-religious imposition of a language, answering the third research question.

Semantic Convergence

The LLMs and open informatics have transformed language into an important tool for communication. The theory of language standardisation as a process of politico-economic power (Curzan et al., 2023) can be critiqued, while AI has reshaped the presence of central authority in imposing a language. In this emerging phenomenon, a language sustains that embraces diversity in accents, vocabularies, and semantic convergences. Onarjo (2020) has argued that Bangla has been established with the confluence of 54 indigenous regional languages, and it has embraced Sanskrit, half-Sanskrit, transformed Sanskrit, native, and

foreign vocabularies into its register. In reverse, Sanskrit was developed with the vocabulary of the Vedic language. Hence, Bangla succeeded as the language of the wider community. Bolger et al. (2008) expressed this phenomenon that when cultural amalgamation takes place, morphemes of a distinct region embrace a fixed connotation. For instance, "Allah", the Supreme Being, is amorphous according to Islam. Again, the Aryan underscores "Brahma" as the Morpheus Supreme Being. Now, the entanglement of these two cultures leads to jeopardising the sectoral concepts infused in the morphemes, and people tend to fill in the gap with a third neutral conception, or use those concepts as per the demand of the context. Thus, a linguistic compromise takes place for communication. As Bangla borrows words from diverse sources, it turns out to be a vibrant language, and Sanskrit loses its diversity in this regard, coupled with its stigmatisation. Thus, the above findings comply with the third question, which seeks to find out the operating factors for linguistic standardisation.

CONCLUSION

The diachronic comparative study of Sanskrit and Bangla enlightens that a linguistic succession entrusts to sociolinguistic aspects: community belongingness, free from restrictive rules of language use and sanctity in public accents, and the ability to achieve semantic convergence. The reservation of Sanskrit to use in religious ceremonies by the Brahmins (Tull, 2015) and the effort of keeping purity from merging led to limiting its use and restricting the inclusion of vocabularies from other sources that accelerated Bangla succession (Onarjo, 2020; Shaw, 2014) beyond Sanskrit.

The findings imply that the presence of essential components- elitism, religious and economic-politico dimensions, authoritative control- for linguistic imperialism is not universal. In reverse, there are stories of sociolinguistic dimensions in the linguistic succession paradigm. This study has used secondary sources as research data. Future research may use empirical data to test whether phonological flexibility and semantic convergence lead to standardising a language and whether these are essential components. Again, future research may explore what situations lead an elitist language to give way to a commoner language in succession.

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