



Social media rescues dying Indian languages

The Internet and mobile communication are doing the most unexpected - resurrecting hoary languages given up for lost.

Bijoyeta Das Last updated: 29 Dec 2013 12:53



Technological advancements have helped dying languages to grow again [Jeremy Fahringer/Living Tongues] In the language of the Bhatu Kolhati, a remote nomadic tribe in India's western Maharashtra state, *tatti* means tea and *gulle* is meat. But, Kuldeep Musale, 30, who belongs to this tribe barely remembers his mother tongue. Well educated and having studied in boarding schools since he was six, Musale instead uses the dominant languages – Hindi, Marathi and English.

His ancestors were traditional folk artists and dancers, but not Musale. He works like any other professional in Pune city, 150km from the provincial capital, Mumbai.

"When you don't hear a language you forget," he says.

The mobile phone is a blessing as that enables him to communicate with his parents who still live in his ancestral village. This has helped him keep in touch with his mother tongue. Not just that, Musale is consciously relearning his language which is on the endangered list. Whenever he goes home on vacation, he makes it a point to record songs and voices of elders on his smart phone.

Linguists say these are exciting times as technology promises to resurrect dying languages. At the very least, digital tools can help store the languages in archives. This has already started showing results.

"India today is showing a remarkable phenomenon of growth in non-protected and minority languages," says Ganesh Devy, chair of the People's Linguistic Survey of India.

Languages spoken by 4,000 people or thereabouts as Mangeli, Hadoti, Haryanvi, are endangered no doubt but are being increasingly used. But those languages used by 30 or 40 people like Sidi, Jarawa and Onge are in dire straits.

"Earlier villagers thought that access to modernity was only through another language. But now because of technology they can be in their own area and still feel that they are connected to modern life without having to migrate out of their language zones," says Devy.

Camcorders, digital cameras and recorders have long replaced notebooks and cassettes of linguists. They are also often used by the local communities themselves. This has galvanised documentation.

India's mobile and internet outreach has opened up the possibility of harnessing digital tools - such as social media, mobile apps, interactive games, online dictionaries, and open source software: even Facebook and Google which are increasingly being used by indigenous communities in other countries.

Mapping Indian languages

India speaks 780 languages, but the official number is 122, while 220 languages have disappeared in the last 50 years, says Devy, who has mapped all languages spoken in India. With 197 endangered languages, India tops the list of UNESCO's Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger.

Devy compares India to Papua New Guinea, Indonesia and Nigeria as the demography and language density are similar. But, India is managing to resurrect its dying languages.

For example: Bhilli has shown a 85 percent growth in two decades. Khasi, Garo, Koya, Tripuri all show a rise in speaker base. Printing had wiped out many oral traditions. But "simple, affordable, popular tools" such as mobile, radio, and videos support these languages. Livelihood opportunities in language zones and multi-lingual education in tribal languages will ensure survival, Devy adds.

For Machung Lalung, 28, his mother tongue Tiwa is synonymous with muddy roads and earthen lamps of his village in Karbi Anglong in the northeastern state of Assam. "Knowing English and Hindi meant you are smart, you have a future," he says. So, as a teenager he moved to Delhi to work at a call centre.

"Now when I watch music videos on YouTube and text my friends by typing out Tiwa words in English, I feel nostalgic not awkward," he says with a smile.

Technology boom holds promise

Communities abandon languages when they internalise the negative values connected to their identities, says Greg Anderson, director of the Living Tongues Institute. "Language endangerment is almost always the result of discrimination and bias."

Technology levels the playing field, he says. "But there is no quick fix," he cautions.

India is on the verge of an Internet boom according to a 2012 McKinsey&Company report. About 120 million users make it the third largest Internet population globally. By 2015, India will scale to second position with at least 320 million users. This has been buoyed by decrease in the cost of Internet access and mobile devices. Indians, ironically, have access to more cell phones than toilets, with 867.80 million users of the mobile.

Anderson and K David Harrison launched eight online talking dictionaries as part of the Enduring Voices Project by National Geographic Society and Living Tongues Institute. These dictionaries contain more than 32,000 word entries, and include Ho and Remo of India.

A similar dictionary for Koro Aka, spoken in Arunachal Pradesh, is being created. This language was previously unrecognised by science and the Indian census.

"The Koro are a community that is embracing technology and carrying their language forward across the digital divide, to help it survive, while keeping many of their traditional values and knowledge base," Harrison says. Now the speakers are sharing videos on YouTube about medicinal plants, beads and myths.

The Google Endangered Language Project plans to digitally archive 3,000 languages.

Transformative social media

Digital tools allow people to use their language creatively, and can be potentially used in India, according to Kevin Scannell, researcher of computational linguistics at St Louis University.

"If all of the content that young people are exposed to on Facebook and Twitter is in English or another major language, it reinforces the idea that these big languages are the language of technology and the computer," he says.

Bucking the trend, his website Indigenous Tweets tracks 61,909 users tweeting in 153 languages, of which 79 are endangered including six spoken in India - Khasi, Lushai, Karbi, Mara Chin, Thado Chin, and Tulu.

Scannell explains how social media is resurrecting dying languages- it unites small and scattered language communities and provides way for learners to converse directly with fluent native speakers. Social media is mostly written while most indigenous languages are oral traditions. But sites such as SpeakTalkChat focuses on group and video chats in endangered languages.

Indigenous language-learning mobile apps are fashionable. "Really transformative is the First Voices Chat app: Basically, it just provides good keyboards so people can type in their language on a mobile device," he says.

Language groups are sharing resources, such as software toolkits. Darrick Baxter developed an iOS app for Ojibwe language and the source code is freely available. This enables other groups to create similar apps without starting from scratch.

Facebook's translation app allows volunteers to use it in about 100 languages. Language groups can also use the script Greasemonkey and translate into any language without Facebook's approval.

Tools boost survival. But as Scannell says, "When you boil it all down, to save a language the most important thing is for people to have babies, love them, and speak their language to them."

Source: Al Jazeera

Hide Comments