

Community of linguistic practice: Bilingual Bengalis' 'scraps' on orkut

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This paper examines linguistic practices reflected in the "scraps" of bilingual Bengalis on the online social networking site Orkut with respect to the hypothesis, based on the model of Milroy and Milroy (1992), that standard variants tend to be associated with weak social network ties, while vernacular variants are associated with strong network ties. In the case of this study, the standard variant is English, and the vernacular variant is Bengali. Scraps are text messages accessible to all members in Orkut. Specifically, the study examines whether the strength of ties (i.e. weak vs. strong) of users' social network has any relation to their choice of language in their 'scrapbook,' which is a public interface in which orkut members can leave 'scraps', for their friends.

To select a sample broadly representative of Bengali members, 373 scraps were systematically collected from the scrapbooks of 10 "addressee nodes," selected from the "Bengali" community on Orkut. The addressee nodes served as reference points to identify their friends as "addressor nodes," who left scraps for the addressee nodes. The data include a total of 93 friends in all. The friends represent three degrees of self-reported social closeness: "close friends," (those who post testimonials) "fans," (those who list themselves as fans) and "just friends" (those who do not fall into either of the other two categories). An equal of males and females were included in each category. Information about geographic location was then coded for each 'friend.' The analysis was informed by theories of code-switching (Blom & Gumperz, 1972, Fishman, 1964), sociolinguistic approaches to social networks (Milroy & Milroy, 1992; Paolillo, 1999), and classification of computer-mediated discourse (Herring, 2007). In order to investigate the language choice of the members I focused on inter-sentential codeswitching as well as intra-sentential codeswitching. Two sets of coding schemes were developed to account for inter-sentential as well as intra-sentential codeswitching. The analysis was done by using content analysis.

The analysis indicates that Bangla is preferred over English in socializing with their friends in orkut regardless of social closeness, gender, and geographical location. Nonetheless, codeswitching between Bangla and English is quite prevalent in intra-sentential level (e.g. *Tumi probably join korechile when I was about to leave karon Soma was my substitute. Translation: You probably joined when I was about to leave because Soma was my substitute.*). The analysis indicates there is a relationship between members' language choice and communicative practice which I argue is the result of *community of linguistic practice*. Community of linguistic practice was conceptualized on the analogy of Community of practice (Eckert 2000: 35) which is defined both by (formal) membership and by shared practice, i.e. members develop similar cultural and linguistic practices. The findings thus far suggest that orkut functions as a shared cultural space for diasporic

Bengalis, a 'virtual Bengal' in which Bengali is the reference language despite the fact that all members speak English and many reside in English-speaking communities.