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Rising Voices: Indigenous Language Digital Activism

Subhashish Panigrahi

This narrative is based on a talk by Subhashish Panigrahi at the Global Voices Citizen Media Summit 2015, Cebu City, Philippines on January 25, 2015.

My name is Subhashish Panigrahi and I work at the Centre for Internet and Society (CIS) in Bangalore, India. I have been working with the Wikimedia Foundation since 2012 and then the program got shifted to Access To Knowledge at CIS. It is focused to support all the Indic languages, and the communities contributing to Wikipedia and its sister projects. I have been working with 63 different tribes from the Indian state of Odisha speaking various diverse languages. These communities speak about 15 unique languages as their native languages out of which only 10 have scripts. And they don't have a common language to communicate among themselves. And the state's language is kind of dominating their native languages. None of the languages have an application in their mobile phone or computer to type in their languages. And because of various such reasons these languages are slowly vanishing from the native speakers' tongues. Similar instances might be happening in the rest of the world as well. I will be talking about the setbacks that are stopping these languages to grow (technical challenges, linguistic challenges, and consensus), strategies and opportunities.

A language is a gateway to the linguistic and cultural heritage of a society and is a medium to communicate. Languages die out because of the dominance of the official languages in a state or country. Because of the predominant use of official languages for governance, languages spoken by indigenous people are often repressed and die out slowly. This language "Bo" (of the great

Andamanese language family) died with the last living person of the community.¹ That is sad! Hundreds and thousands of languages are dying every year because of the dominance of other languages. Language is also a tool to express any native practice of a community in its best way. When knowledge is transferred via translation there is always a “loss in translation”. Languages have historically been used to document and archive religious, cultural and other text for the future generation to enable them to learn about their ancestors.



[Image 1] Subhashish Panigrahi speaking at the Global Voices Citizen Media Summit 2015, Cebu City, The Philippines. Credit: Jeremy Clarke, shared under Creative Commons BY-SA 4.0 license.

The challenges that the indigenous communities face are mostly the reach of modern technology. Many languages don't have their writing systems in the computer, their scripts have not been standardized, many languages do not have Unicode support (Unicode is a script encoding standard by the Unicode Consortium that defines the character or glyph standards for a script). A lot of non-Latin script based languages have the problem of the script not being rendered in a computer. Many of the scripts have conjuncts where more than one character is joined with another and when you type them in a computer they look like gibberish. A lot of languages do not have native input methods built in the computer or mobile phone to type. Fonts that are used in a script do not exist for many languages. I have been working on a project for getting a font designed for this script Ol - chiki for the language Santali . This language is spoken in at least seven Indian states by about 6 million people. It is one of the official languages of India and has its own unique script. But it probably did not have a Unicode font until 2013. And then Google came up with a font Noto Ol-chiki which at the moment is the only available Santali Unicode font.²

We are working with a designer to design a font that could be used for print, mobile, web and everywhere else.

There comes the strategies around digital activism for languages. Many languages need external intervention by promoting its use in mainstream media. The web as a platform could be used to popularize a language. [Drawing an example,] may be sending text messages to farmers with the weather forecast could help common people to use their language more for knowledge sharing. Many languages and scripts need standardization and this work has to [involve] academics, linguists and researchers. A consensus has to be made for communities that are dispersed to have a single stand while creating standards. If a language is not feeding someone then there is no way it could be used by more people. Many communities today are pro-English because it is easier to get a job with English proficiency. Lack of jobs with native language competence has led to many people moving away from their languages. So there is a strong need to raise the languages in a societal system to a level that it enables people to earn equally with competence in their own languages. There is a need for adopting a multiple official language policy so that the enforcement of many languages being used in many places will make smaller languages get life that are otherwise dying out. Collaborating with other communities, leveraging the strength of local hacker or developer communities to build language input and other language related tools, designing good quality fonts, getting advertising media to promote regional languages will be very useful for enhancing usability of the languages. There is always a need for capacity building. Indigenous communities would not care for the preservation of their language using modern technology which requires some kind of external intervention from the academic, linguistic and researcher community. All of these will contribute to build an ecosystem to collaborate with native language speakers and empower them with advanced tools and technology to use their native language in every possible way. This has a parallel to how the missionaries started preaching in colonies. They learned the local languages, published books in people's languages and that is how the Bible has been the first ever published book for many languages. A similar strategy is possible to design without of course a religious intent.

Endnotes

- 1 2015. "Aka-Bo Language." Wikipedia. March 12. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aka-Bo_language.
- 2 "Noto Fonts." Google. <http://www.google.com/get/noto/#/>.

Annotation

Padmini Ray Murray

Designations such as “millennials” and “digital natives” implicitly connote a techno-utopian vision, underpinned by an assumption that all young people have equal digital access. However, it is safe to assume that the language of the digital native will almost inevitably be hegemonic in its scope, not only because of the foundational role the American military-industrial complex played in the creation of seminal operating systems such as UNIX, but also, as Tara McPherson persuasively argues, the philosophical principles that underlie the very structure of the digital tools we use. As McPherson goes on to demonstrate, the rules of modularity that underpinned UNIX computing, for example, “underscore a worldview in which a troublesome part might be discarded without disrupting the whole.” In this article, Subhashish Panigrahi writes on how to challenge these hegemonies by crowdsourcing efforts to help preserve endangered indigenous languages. Panigrahi’s observations regarding the efficacy of languages to articulate native practices provides

an object lesson regarding how local epistemological legacies can provide different ways of seeing and knowing; a learning that is crucial for those of us working on digital cultures and dissemination in South Asia, in order to create our own theoretical frameworks in response to technological change.

Consistency and standardization for Indic languages input is still a significant challenge for major living languages, let alone endangered ones, and it is imperative that consolidated efforts are made to amend this to ensure representation and survival. There are debates as to whether the Unicode Consortium, who are responsible for building and maintaining the scaffolding for a universal character set, are doing enough to ensure the interoperability of languages spoken by large swathes of the world’s population, or whether the responsibility rests with governments and native speakers. However, what Panigrahi manages to persuasively illustrate in his piece is that such endeavours are only effective when carried out with the relevant communities, as it endows agency and authority to those to whom it rightfully belongs.

References and Further Readings

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