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ENSURING LINGUISTIC SUSTAINABILITY IN BANGLADESH: CHALLENGES AND APPROACHES. PART II



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Ensuring Linguistic Sustainability in Bangladesh: Challenges and Approaches

Abstract. This study investigates the obstacles to language sustainability in Bangladesh, which boasts a wealth of linguistic diversity, and proposes a comprehensive plan to support this variety. The study begins with an examination of Bangladesh's linguistic demographics, highlighting the multitude of languages spoken by the country's various ethnic communities. It then delves into the historical context of language movements in Bangladesh and illustrates how language serves as a crucial marker of identity and unity. Subsequently, this research explores the socio-economic, political, and educational factors that contribute to language endangerment and change. It discusses the consequences of these changes on cultural identity, transmission of knowledge, and community well-being. This study proposes a comprehensive framework for language sustainability in Bangladesh, emphasising five key components: documentation and revitalisation of endangered languages, implementation of comprehensive multilingual education policies, utilisation of modern technology in language preservation, promotion of cross-cultural understanding through exchange programs, and national policy support for language rights and diversity. These initiatives aim to enhance linguistic sustainability, foster social cohesion, and empower marginalised communities. This study argues that by addressing these challenges and adopting these strategies, Bangladesh can secure a sustainable linguistic future and preserve its diverse cultural heritage.

Keywords: Cultural Identity, Indigenous Languages, Language Endangerment, Linguistic Sustainability, Multilingual Education Policies.

Asigurarea durabilității lingvistice în Bangladesh: provocări și abordări

Rezumat. Acest studiu investighează obstacolele în calea sustenabilității lingvistice în Bangladesh, care se mândrește cu o diversitate lingvistică bogată, și propune un plan cuprinzător pentru a sprijini această varietate. Studiul începe cu o examinare a demografiei lingvistice din Bangladesh, evidențiind multitudinea de limbi vorbite de diferitele comunități etnice ale țării. Apoi se adâncește în contextul istoric al mișcărilor lingvistice din Bangladesh și ilustrează modul în care limba servește ca un marker crucial al identității și unității. Ulterior, această cercetare explorează factorii socio-economici, politici și educaționali care contribuie la periclitarea și schimbarea limbii. Se discută consecințele acestor schimbări asupra identității culturale, transmiterii cunoștințelor și bunăstării comunității. Acest studiu propune un cadru cuprinzător pentru sustenabilitatea limbii în Bangladesh, subliniind cinci componente-cheie: documentarea și revitalizarea limbilor pe cale de dispariție, implementarea politicilor cuprinzătoare de educație multilingvă, utilizarea tehnologiei moderne în conservarea limbii, promovarea înțelegerii interculturale prin programe de schimb și sprijin politic național pentru drepturile lingvistice și diversitate. Aceste inițiative urmăresc să sporească sustenabilitatea lingvistică, să încurajeze coeziunea socială și să împuternicească comunitățile marginalizate. Acest studiu susține că, abordând aceste provocări și adoptând aceste strategii, Bangladesh poate asigura un viitor lingvistic durabil și își poate păstra moștenirea culturală diversă.

Cuvinte-cheie: identitate culturală, limbi indigene, periclitarea limbii, durabilitate lingvistică, politici de educație multilingvă.

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Approaches to ensure linguistic sustainability

Linguistic sustainability is the practice of preserving and promoting languages to ensure their continued use and vitality. The loss of languages is a significant issue worldwide, with many languages facing extinction due to numerous factors such as globalisation, urbanisation, and the dominance of a few major languages.

Official recognition and support: Official recognition and support for minority languages are widely recognised as pivotal steps towards ensuring linguistic sustainability. In the case of Bangladesh, the implementation of such approaches can provide significant momentum to efforts aimed at preserving and promoting the country's linguistic diversity.

a) *Official recognition*: Formal recognition is an essential tool employed by governments around the world to officially acknowledge and legitimize languages spoken within their jurisdictions. This recognition doesn't only confer social legitimacy but also provides tangible support that can contribute to the preservation and promotion of a language, as highlighted by Hossain and Tollefson [1]. In Bangladesh, the grant of official recognition of Indigenous languages has significant implications. As a country with a diverse linguistic landscape, Bangladesh is home to numerous Indigenous languages that represent various ethnic and cultural groups. By officially recognizing these languages, the government acknowledges their historical and cultural significance while also underscoring their present-day social relevance. This action would demonstrate respect for the languages and, by extension, the cultural and historical heritage they embody. Granting official recognition to the Chakma language, for instance, would be an acknowledgment of the rich culture and history of the Chakma people, one of the largest ethnic minorities in Bangladesh. This recognition would empower Chakma speakers, fostering a sense of cultural pride and identity. Official recognition of indigenous languages can serve to counterbalance the dominant position of Bengali and English in Bangladeshi society. Bengali is the national language and English is often associated with socio-economic status and opportunities. By validating the significance and practicality of indigenous languages in various aspects of life, such as education, administration, and the media, language recognition can have a profound impact. The educational system could be influenced by this recognition. Introducing indigenous languages as mediums of instruction or subjects of study in schools located in regions where these languages are widely spoken could foster bilingualism or multilingualism. This would not only help preserve these languages, but also enhance students' cognitive abilities and improve their learning outcomes.

Official recognition could also challenge the social hierarchies that exist around languages. If an indigenous language, such as Santali in Bangladesh, was to receive official recognition, it would signal to the wider society that the language and, by extension, its speakers have value. This could contribute to reducing language-related discrimination and prejudice, fostering a more linguistically diverse and inclusive society. Furthermore, official recognition can promote these languages in various public domains, such as administration, the media, and the judiciary. Official documents, news broadcasts, and court proceedings could be conducted in these languages in their respective regions, thus increasing their visibility and usability. Doing so could also create job opportunities for speakers of these languages. In short, the official recognition of indigenous languages in Bangladesh or any other country holds numerous potential benefits. From acknowledging and preserving linguistic diversity to challenging language dominance and enhancing social inclusion, official recognition is a powerful tool for promoting language equity and cultural heritage.

b) *Official support*: To ensure the survival and thriving of indigenous languages, tangible support mechanisms are necessary beyond mere recognition. One effective strategy is the integration of these languages into the education

system, through bilingual or multilingual education policies. This not only promotes language learning among young speakers but also strengthens the cultural identity and pride associated with these languages. Additionally, the use of indigenous languages in public services and the media can increase visibility and usability. This ensures that speakers of these languages can access information and services in their native language, promoting linguistic inclusion and diversity. In short, official recognition and support are crucial steps towards ensuring linguistic sustainability in Bangladesh. By granting indigenous languages formal status and offering necessary institutional support, the government can significantly contribute to preserving and promoting the country's linguistic diversity.

Linguistic education policies: Education is a primary domain where language policies can directly impact linguistic sustainability. Linguistic education policies refer to the decisions made by the government about the languages that will be taught in schools and the medium of instruction. Given the influence of education on language use and attitudes, it presents a significant opportunity to promote linguistic diversity and sustainability. This approach involves creating policies and plans that promote the use of minority and endangered languages. It includes activities such as developing language immersion programmes in schools, creating language policies for government institutions, and promoting multilingualism in society.

a) *Multilingual Education*: One approach to promoting linguistic sustainability is the implementation of multilingual education policies. These policies typically involve teaching at least three languages: the mother tongue, a regional or national language, and an international language. The benefits of this model include enhanced cognitive development, increased multicultural understanding, and facilitated acquisition of additional languages [2].

In Bangladesh, this could involve incorporating indigenous languages into early education alongside Bengali and English, thereby fostering multilingualism from a young age [1]. By doing so, this approach could help preserve the linguistic sustainability by ensuring that younger generations are proficient in their native languages, which could prevent language shift and potential language loss.

b) *Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual education based on the tongue of the mother*: A subset of multilingual education, mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE), has gained recognition for its effectiveness in promoting linguistic and cultural diversity [3]. It involves initial literacy instruction in the mother tongue, with the gradual introduction of additional languages. This approach respects and values the first language of children, facilitates learning, and has been shown to lead to better academic results compared to immersion models in which children are taught a language they do not understand [4].

MTB-MLE could be a promising approach to ensuring linguistic sustainability in Bangladesh. It could help validate and strengthen indigenous languages, improve education quality among speakers of these languages, and foster cultural pride and identity among younger generations [1].

c) *Policy support*: Regardless of the model adopted, these approaches require comprehensive policy support to be effective. This includes developing language-friendly curriculum and learning materials, training teachers in multilingual education methods, and ensuring sufficient resources and institutional support for these programmes. Government support and cooperation among different stakeholders (including educators, community leaders, and parents) are also crucial to ensuring the successful implementation and acceptance of these policies [5].

In short, linguistic education policies offer Bangladesh an opportunity to support and promote its linguistic diversity. The implementation of multilingual education and MTB-MLE, together with the necessary policy and institutional support, could go a long way to ensure the linguistic sustainability in the country.

Documentation and research: Documentation and research are the key to ensuring linguistic sustainability by providing a basis for understanding, preserving, and promoting language diversity. This approach involves documenting endangered languages and developing strategies to preserve and revitalise them. It includes activities such as recording oral traditions, creating dictionaries and grammars, and developing language teaching materials. In the context of Bangladesh, these approaches can contribute significantly to efforts aimed at maintaining the rich linguistic heritage of the country.

a) *Language Documentation*: Language documentation involves systematic recording of the features and use of a language. This includes recording spoken and written forms, grammatical structures, vocabulary, idioms, and cultural nuances. Language documentation serves as a preservation tool, allowing future generations to learn about and from the language even if it ceases to be spoken [6].

In Bangladesh, language documentation can contribute to linguistic sustainability by creating a record of indigenous languages, many of which are under-documented or undocumented. It can help ensure that the knowledge embodied in these languages is not lost and can provide a resource for language revitalization efforts [7].

In addition, language documentation can also enhance the visibility and recognition of indigenous languages. It can serve as a tangible representation of these languages, validating their existence and significance, and potentially contributing to their prestige and status in society [8].

b) *Linguistic Research*: Linguistic research is essential for ensuring linguistic sustainability. This involves the scientific study of languages, including their structure, history, variation, and social context. This research can inform language policies and practices and provide insights into the factors affecting language use and shift [7]. Linguistic research in Bangladesh can contribute to understanding the dynamics of a country's linguistic diversity. It can provide valuable information on the status and use of indigenous languages, the factors that contribute to their decline, and strategies that can be employed to promote their use and transmission. Furthermore, research can inform policy development and provide evidence to support the necessity of language preservation efforts [1]. Research can also contribute to increasing awareness of the importance of linguistic diversity and sustainability. By highlighting the cultural, cognitive, and societal value of linguistic diversity, research can foster appreciation and support for linguistic sustainability efforts among policymakers, educators, and the public [9]. In short, documentation and research are crucial to ensure the linguistic sustainability of Bangladesh. By recording indigenous languages and conducting research on their use and status, we can contribute to the preservation, understanding, and promotion of linguistic diversity in a country.

Community mobilisation and awareness: Community mobilisation and awareness-building constitute vital approaches to promoting linguistic sustainability. Based on grassroots efforts and public engagement, these strategies emphasise the role of communities and individuals in sustaining linguistic diversity. This approach involves collaborating with communities to promote language use and vitality. It includes activities such as organising language festivals, creating language learning groups, and supporting community-led language documentation and revitalization efforts.

a) *Community mobilisation*: Community mobilisation involves engaging and organising communities to act on issues that affect them. In the context of language preservation, this means encouraging communities to take an active role in preserving and promoting their languages [10]. Such community-driven efforts can be particularly effective as they often carry greater legitimacy and are more likely to respond to the unique needs and circumstances of the community [11].

In Bangladesh, mobilising indigenous communities around language preservation can have several benefits. It can promote language

use, foster cultural pride and identity, and lead to community-led initiatives such as language classes, cultural events, and the production of language resources [1]. Furthermore, community mobilisation can help challenge language attitudes and shift societal perceptions toward valuing linguistic diversity.

b) *Awareness-Building*: Alongside community mobilisation, awareness building plays a critical role in promoting linguistic sustainability. This involves raising public understanding about the importance of linguistic diversity, the threats facing minority languages, and the value of multilingualism [12].

In the case of Bangladesh, increasing awareness of the country's rich linguistic heritage can contribute to the societal appreciation for linguistic diversity. It can challenge linguistic dominance and promote respect and support for indigenous languages [1]. This awareness can be promoted through various means, including education, media campaigns, cultural events, and public discussions.

Furthermore, awareness building also includes promoting an understanding of the rights related to language use. Encouraging awareness of language rights can empower communities to demand respect for their languages and advocate for supportive language policies [13].

In short, community mobilisation and awareness-building represent powerful approaches to ensuring linguistic sustainability in Bangladesh. By engaging communities in language preservation efforts and fostering public understanding about the value of linguistic diversity, these strategies can significantly contribute to maintaining the rich linguistic landscape of the country.

Language technology: The utilisation of technology is a crucial aspect of ensuring linguistic sustainability. This encompasses a range of activities, including the development of language learning applications, the creation of speech recognition software for minority languages, and the application of machine translation endangered language texts. The advancement of language technology has become increasingly pivotal in safeguarding linguistic diversity, which is under threat due to the rapid pace of globalisation and the dominance of certain languages in various domains. By using technology, linguistic sustainability can be promoted and preserved through language documentation, text digitisation, and machine translation, thereby making it possible for a wider audience to access and utilise endangered languages.

Another approach to ensure linguistic sustainability is through the use of language learning tools. These tools can provide individuals with access to resources for learning new languages, including endangered languages. By promoting engagement with different languages, people can help to preserve and maintain linguistic diversity. In addition, language technology can assist in the creation of language resources such as lexical databases, speech corpora, and grammars. These resources can then be used to develop language technology applications, such as speech recognition and natural language processing systems, which can further aid in the preservation of endangered languages. Language technology plays a significant role in ensuring linguistic sustainability. Through various approaches such as language documentation, text digitization, machine translation, language learning tools, and the creation of language resources, we can promote linguistic diversity and ensure that endangered languages are preserved and maintained for future generations. The use of social networks and other online platforms can also help promote linguistic sustainability in Bangladesh. Social media can be used to connect speakers of minority languages and to promote the use of these languages. It can also be used to educate and raise awareness of the importance of linguistic diversity. Language technology and the development of digital resources are crucial to ensure linguistic sustainability in Bangladesh.

Conclusion

Ensuring linguistic sustainability is a pressing concern in an increasingly interconnected

world where language plays a crucial role in shaping a community's cultural identity. The loss of a language can result in the loss of a unique perspective on the world. Bangladesh, a nation with great linguistic diversity, is grappling with the challenges of language shift and loss, which are exacerbated by factors such as linguistic dominance, a lack of official recognition and support, and the impacts of urbanisation and globalisation. As highlighted by Hossain and Tollefson [1], the dominance of Bengali and English, the absence of support for indigenous languages, and the pressures of modernization and global integration pose significant threats to the country's linguistic heritage (see also Mohanty, Panda, Phillipson, & Skutnabb-Kangas [14]). In conclusion, the promotion and preservation of linguistic diversity in Bangladesh is of utmost importance. Official recognition and support, language education policies, documentation and research, and community mobilisation and awareness are viable strategies for achieving this goal. These approaches must be grounded in respect for linguistic rights and cultural diversity, and must align with global commitments to cultural diversity, human rights, and sustainable development. The pursuit of linguistic sustainability in Bangladesh is not only about preserving languages, but also about valuing diversity, fostering inclusion, and promoting social cohesion. It is imperative that policymakers, educators, researchers, and communities continue to work together toward this goal in order to ensure a more inclusive, diverse, and sustainable future for Bangladesh.

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