Phonological koinéization in Kathmandu Tibetan

This paper tests the new-dialect formation model of Peter Trudgill (1986, 2000 *inter alia*) by examining several phonological features the Tibetan language spoken in the diaspora community of Kathmandu, Nepal. Since 1959, over 120,000 Tibetans have come into diaspora in South Asia, where Kathmandu forms one of the major population centers. With a large community developing out of many speakers from different regions, and the second generation of diaspora-born children reaching adulthood, this represents a unique opportunity to study koinéization, or new-dialect formation, as it occurs.

In particular, Trudgill’s model predicts that first and second generations born in the new region should exhibit both *simplification*, the failure of marked variants to transmit across generations. Additionally, the second generation’s speech should be characterized by *focusing*, the selection of particular variants as a new norm for the community’s new variety. Trudgill also predicts that this selection should proceed deterministically, choosing only the variants most frequent in the input populations, a position that has elicited criticism. As an alternative hypothesis, features from socially prominent regions would persist into the second generation, as speakers seek to speak like people from those regions.

To test these hypotheses, seventy-three sociolinguistic interviews were conducted with Tibetan speakers in Kathmandu in the summer of 2016. Some speakers had come into diaspora as adults, from several Tibetan-speaking regions; others, of varying ages, were raised in the Diaspora. The resulting data was coded for a battery of phonological variables known to differ across Tibetan-speaking regions. In order to visualize similarity between speakers, NeighborNets were constructed in SplitsTree, as shown below (Fig. 1).

Results indicate that regionally marked variables were not transmitted into the first or second generation of Diaspora-raised speakers. These included onset cluster lenition processes characteristic of the outer Tibetan-speaking regions of Amdo and Kham, whose speakers also constituted a minority of the first wave of immigrants to the Diaspora. In general, Diaspora speakers exhibited a high degree of variation comparable to that of speakers from the socially-dominant U-Tsang region. However, features unique to the historic capital city Lhasa, a particularly prestigious location, also failed to transmit. Additionally, first- and second-generation Diaspora speakers did not appear to differ with respect to phonological variability.

Taken together, the data support the view that less-marked variables are more likely to survive into later generations. However, in contrast to Trudgill’s classic model, the younger speakers have not yet converged on a single new variety, suggesting additional factors play a role in the rate at which koinéization takes place.

Selected references


Figure 1: NeighborNet of speakers by phonological data. Numbers reflect speaker codes; letter labels are as follows: U = U-Tsang, K = Kham, A = Amdo, Dy = younger diaspora, Do = older diaspora. Note cluster of Amdo and Kham speakers, but lack of clustering among Diaspora and U-Tsang speakers.