

Konkani, A Language or An Identity? An Evidence-Based Report

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ABSTRACT

An individual's identity is dependent and involves personal exploration of one's ethnicity, occupation, gender roles, region, language, political ideology, and religious beliefs (Cooper & Denner, 1998). Language is an institution of identity construction both individually and collectively, and it helps one to form meaning in a particular context and roots one to the region to which one belongs (Clément et al., 2000; Wodak, 2012). Many Indian vernacular languages underwent an excellent change post-independence, as each ethnic group has a language they identify with. Such an identity is based on the language spoken by the Konkans, who speak Konkani.

Keywords: Konkani, Language, Identity, Evidence

The Konkani-speaking people, or the Konkans, with their unique culture spread across the coastal belt of the Western Ghats of India, have produced various artists, scholars, academicians, and business people and have been contributing to the intellectual and economic development as well as the cultural treasury of the country (Cheriyān, 2023; Hadap & Joglekar, 2008). The Konkani language has around 19 dialectical versions, yet it brings the community together despite settling in different states and adopting the regional cultures and climatic circumstances. Nevertheless, the community still follows and celebrates the ancestral customs and traditions (Cheriyān, 2023).

It is a myth in the Saraswat Brahmins regarding their settlement in the coastal belt. The ancestors from the regions around the Saraswati River migrated down the country to escape the Arab invasions. Moreover, they later became the followers of sage Saraswata, who helped them live on fish during a famine. They were brought further down in the lands of Parasurama and settled in the most fertile and sacred regions. Hence, the Saraswats identify themselves with the region they belong to and the language they speak, as the Konkans (Matsukawa, 2002; Cheriyān, 2023).

History/Trajectory and Context

The Indian government recognized the dominant vernacular languages of the states as the official languages in 1956; however, Goa was left behind until its liberation in 1961. The post-liberation era for the people of Goa and the Konkans had turmoil concerning the identity of a Goan identity concerning the state's culture and language. In 1961, after

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liberation, the identity of Goa with its language of Konkani was not easily achieved despite being added to the constitution and was acknowledged as the official language of Goa in 1987 and to the Constitution in 1992; still, the debate about who the Konkans are and what language do they speak. The people who spoke the language Konkani struggled against the Marathi superiority, leading to a language war between 1985 and 1987, which claimed that Konkani was merely a dialect of Marathi and was suppressed, making it a mere spoken language and Marathi the language of literature (Matsukawa, 2002).

Konkani might have been considered an inferior language during Portuguese rule, but that does not overlook the fact that it was used in churches and offices until its marginalization. Later, the educated Goan Hindus, Gauda Saraswat Brahmans, started migrating to the neighboring states and nurturing a Goan identity symbolized through the Konkani (Matsukawa, 2002). It is important to note that Konkani is a language with its own identity spread across the coastal belt. Despite leaving the region, the people who migrated from Goa and settled in the neighboring states continued to identify as Konkani-speaking people (Cheriyani, 2023; “Konkani-speaking People Are Loyal to Their Culture,” 2009). As the Konkani writer Shenoi Goembab in his work, *Konkani Bhasechem Zoit* (The Triumph of Konkani) said that the mother tongue of Goa has an independent character of its own, imbining a sense of pride in the language (Matsukawa, 2002).

Contemporary Concerns

With the inclusion of worldly ideas and globalization, the Konkani community has become more rigid, as they need to protect their community and continue the legacy ahead. The lack of portrayal of the language and the region in the mainstream media and the lack of recognition in the nation, wherein very few recognize the language, have been significant concerns. Concerning the immigration and assimilation of the society's youth to the different parts of the world, their lack of interest in learning the language is equivalent to shunning their identities. The lack of a script to the language, despite having been nationalized, and the difficulty in standardizing the language as there are several dialects, and the vocabularies differ from the Saraswat Brahmans to the Christians (Matsukawa, 2002). Strict cultural knowledge and rituals are being practiced and taught to the children as a part of their identity, and they are to practice the same in the upcoming generations. The changing ideology regarding spirituality and religion among the youth, and the lack of interest shown by the adolescents in practicing the rituals, has led to a state of anxiety within the community, making the community grow more rigid and bound to celebrate every ritual and practice. Furthermore, the recent waves of immigration and the aspects of acculturation and accommodation of the Konkans in different parts of the world have threatened their ancestral culture, posing a social dilemma (Cooper & Denner, 1998).

Psycho-Social Implications

Psychological adjustment concerning learning a second language after immigrating to a different region has been shown to profoundly affect the outlook and fate of the groups to which they belong. Especially if a minor community concerning the number of people in the community has shown greater preservation of distinctiveness of their cultural identities along with adjustment and acculturation, it was further noted that immigrants showed a distinct separation and integration. As Weinreich illustrates the usefulness of a situated approach to identity variation and acculturation, it was seen that identity profiles are linked to meaningful social and situational characteristics, reflecting the in-group contact and the contextual constraints imposed by characteristics of interactions (Clément et al., 2000).

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Similarly, we can also see the aspects of accommodation without assimilation, as investigated by Gibson (Cooper & Denner, 1998); the Konkans had to move to different states of the coastal belt, wherein they accommodated themselves to the regional cultures, language, weather, cuisine, and few customs as well (Clément et al., 2000; Cheriyan, 2023). However, there is no evidence of assimilation to the regional cultures.

In the regions of first and second-language groups, the second-language groups' confidence mediates the effects of the contact on communicative competence identity formation and effective coping in intergroup contact. It was seen that language confidence mediates the effects of contact on identity formation and adjustment (Clément et al., 2000).

Obgu's cultural-ecological theory proposes that an individual's competence is not defined in universal terms but within the cultural and historical contexts in which they develop (Cooper & Denner, 1998). Hence, culture and language mainly frame the identity and how one perceives and interprets the world. The Konkans, who have struggled with protecting their cultural identity, being an ethnic minority group, have developed coping with barriers to social identity and mobility.

An analysis of a Mexican speech style showed that language serves as an identificational resource, a speech style, and a way of speaking and comprehending that serves as an identification with a group and differentiation from others. Language is seen as a preeminent sign of ethnic identity, and in communities where the number of speakers declines over successive generations, the language becomes more opaque, loses its essence, and eventually, the people lose their identity. This has been a problem, and the declining use of language by the younger generations would lead the language to lose its legacy (Bauman, 2000).

Future Pathways

With the use of technology and social media platforms, the community has been celebrating its culture and creating awareness among the youth regarding the culture they belong to. A similar phenomenon is seen in the Konkans, who have migrated to different nations and individuals in different states of India. Spreading the importance and the culture through the art form tiatr, which is a musical theatre performed in the Konkani language ("Konkani Culture and Tradition," n.d.) which was on the verge of extinction (DHNS & DHNS, 2013b) along with performing bhajans, and broadcasting them across the world has been an effective way of bringing in the community together and celebrating each other's language and identity. In this light, the Vishwa Konkani Samaj or the World Konkani Centre was established by the Konkani Bhas Ani Sanskriti in 1996 to preserve and enhance the language and the Konkani identity and culture, and has been working actively since then (About Us, 2023; "World Konkani Centre," 2023). Internationally, events are being conducted by bringing in the flourishing artists in the community and hosting programs for the Konkans and everyone. It has been a wonderful initiative to celebrate the language and culture. As rightly said by Na D'Souza, "Konkani supports various dialects, in different regions, spoken by various sects of people. It is possible to popularise Konkani culture through the exploration of Konkani folklore" (DHNS & DHNS, 2013).

CONCLUSION

Konkani is a language and linguistic identity. Despite having a historical turmoil of inferiority and an endangered language, it is regaining its shine and legacy through the upliftments and the celebrations of the Konkani culture. Though the Konkani community is

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smaller in number, one should recognize that it is one of India's national languages. Konkani as a linguistic identity is gaining significance, and the Konkans are flourishing in every field of the economy, leading to a more significant attraction and identification with the language and the Konkani Culture. Konkani is the mother tongue of several communities; despite the differences in the dialects, it is still considered a single language and identity.

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Conflict of Interest

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