Sociolinguistic patterns of language subordination: Kashmiris in diaspora

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The context of transnationalism and increased intra-/and inter-national mobility of people present theoretical and methodological challenges to the sociolinguistic analyses of migrant identities and attitudes, due mainly to their ambivalence toward self and the target community (cf. Fortier 2000, Delanty et al. 2007). Kashmiris in diaspora, however, are an exception: they demonstrate no ambivalence in their patterns of linguistic-identity shift towards the target community. Using socio-historical and discourse-analytic methods, this paper presents evidence to claim that contemporary negative linguistic attitudes of Kashmiris in diaspora, leading to cessation of inter-generational transmission of Kashmiri, derive from systemic-historical subordination of Kashmiri, language politics, and the language ideological discourses of the British colonizers that validated its subordination. The analysis is based on data from historical texts and language policies dealing with Kashmiri, and transcriptions of 44 hours of recorded sociolinguistic interview data.

Historically, different languages in Kashmir served as "legitimate language," creating conditions where the acquisition of symbolic and cultural capital meant acquisition and use of a language other than Kashmiri: Sanskrit from 7th–late 13th century; Persian from 14th –early 20th century, and now Urdu, the "official language" of the state. In addition, language ideological discourses during the colonial period presented Kashmiri negatively, as "uncouth," "harsh," "a patois". Furthermore, in the diasporic context, Hindi and English (official languages of India), exert further pressure on Kashmiris to assimilate locally for socio-cultural and economic mobility.

Based on the data, I conclude that the cumulative effect of the historical-linguistic conditions of language contact, language policy, and the language ideological discourse is that Kashmiris (i) express awareness of the low "value" of their language, (ii) reproduce the inherited (colonial) discourses, and (iii) are actively erasing all linguistic-phonetic indexicalities of their ethnic identity in their bid to assimilate into the diasporic context of Hindi and English linguistic culture.

Keywords: Language subordination, Language in Diaspora, Language loss.