

Ethnolinguistic Otherness: The Vedda Language (Baasapojja) of Indigenous Adivasi (Veddas) of Dambana in Sri Lanka

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Abstract : Working with the indigenous Adivasi (Vedda) community of Dambana in the district of Badulla in Sri Lanka, this research documents linguistic data to address language and cultural endangerment. The ancestral language of Adivasi has undergone sustained restructuration over a long historical period due to its contact with Sinhala, an Indo-Aryan language spoken by the majority Sinhalese. The Vedda language is highly endangered today. At present, all speakers of the Vedda language spoken in Dambana are Adivasi men in the parent generation, who are Sinhala-Vedda bilinguals. Adivasi women and children do not speak the Vedda language but Sinhala in everyday life. Women can understand the Vedda language and would respond to a Vedda language utterance in Sinhala. The use of the Vedda language is largely restricted to self-ascribing Adivasi men who employ it in the context of cultural tourism in Dambana to index ethnolinguistic otherness. Adivasi of Dambana often refers to this distinct linguistic code that they speak as baasapojja or language. This research employs a cooperative model of ethnographic documentation to explore the interrelations between discursive practices, linguistic structures, and linguistic (and broader sociocultural) ideologies in this community. The Vedda language has been previously identified as a dialect of Sinhala or a creole emerging in the contact between Sinhala and the ancestral Vedda language. This paper analyzes the current language endangerment context of bilingual Adivasi members that allows the birth of a mixed language. The aim of this research is to preserve ongoing linguistic innovation among this endangered language speech community. It contributes to the appreciation of creative cultural and linguistic production of a stigmatized minuscule indigenous community of South Asia that strives to assert a distinct linguistic and cultural identity from the dominant populations.

Keywords : Vedda language, language endangerment, mixed languages, indigenous identity

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