Variation of Lexical Choice and Changing Need of Identity Expression

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Abstract : Language plays complex roles in society. The previous studies on language and society explain their interconnected, complementary and complex interactions and, those studies were primarily focused on the variations in the language. Variation being the fundamental nature of languages, the question of personal and social identity navigated through language variation and established that there is an interconnection between language variation and identity. This paper analyses the sociolinguistic variation in language at the lexical level and how the lexical choice of the speaker(s) affects in shaping their identity. It obtains primary data from the lexicon of the Mappila dialect of Malayalam spoken by the members of Mappila (Muslim) community of Kerala. The variation in the lexical choice is analysed by collecting data from the speech samples of 15 minutes from four different age groups of Mappila dialect speakers. Various contexts were analysed and the frequency of borrowed words in each instance is calculated to reach a conclusion on how the variation is happening in the speech community. The paper shows how the lexical choice of the speakers could be socially motivated and involve in shaping and changing identities. Lexical items or vocabulary clearly signal the group identity and personal identity. Mappila dialect of Malayalam was rich in frequent use of borrowed words from Arabic, Persian and Urdu. There was a deliberate attempt to show their identity as a Mappila community member, which was derived from the socio-political situation during those days. This made a clear variation between the Mappila dialect and other dialects of Malayalam at the surface level, which was motivated to create and establish the identity of a person as the member of Mappila community. Historically, these kinds of linguistic variation were highly motivated because of the socio-political factors and, intertwined with the historical facts about the origin and spread of Islamism in the region; people from the Mappila community highly motivated to project their identity as a Mappila because of the social insecurities they had to face before accepting that religion. Thus the deliberate inclusion of Arabic, Persian and Urdu words in their speech helped in showing their identity. However, the socio-political situations and factors at the origin of Mappila community have been changed over a period of time. The social motivation for indicating their identity as a Mappila no longer exist and thus the frequency of borrowed words from Arabic, Persian and Urdu have been reduced from their speech. Apart from the religious terms, the borrowed words from these languages are very few at present. The analysis is carried out by the changes in the language of the people according to their age and found to have significant variations between generations and literacy plays a major role in this variation process. The need of projecting a specific identity of an individual would vary according to the change in the socio-political scenario and a variation in language can shape the identity in order to go with the varying socio-political situation in any language.

Keywords : borrowings, dialect, identity, lexical choice, literacy, variation