

Endangered Language Practices in Sri Lanka: A Study of Intergenerational Transmission among Tribal Communities

H.A.M.P. Silva¹

Abstract

This paper will touch on the threatened language practices prevailing in tribal communities of Sri Lanka, specifically looking at patterns of intergenerational transmission. With increased globalization, formal education, and top access media are influencing the lingual environment of young generations, old forms of speech within indigenous communities like the Vedda are being quickly replaced. Based on recent fieldwork in Dambana accompanied by interviews with both elders and youth, this paper examines how and to what extent language is being transmitted within families and communities, and what sociocultural processes determine it.

The study follows a qualitative, ethnolinguistic research design, including participant observation and semistructured interviews to understand about language attitude, daily pattern of speech, and areas of language use.

Keywords: endangered languages, intergenerational transmission, tribal communities, Vedda, Sri Lanka

Of particular concern is the role that ritual, storytelling, and kinship terms play in linguistic continuity but also how their degradation is an indicator of larger changes in identity and cultural strength.

Results indicate a drastic generational gap in language proficiency, as younger generations in the community increasingly adhere to Sinhala and abandon their forebear's language. Although a few cultural elites and households strive to maintain conventional language use, the initiatives are usually not sponsored by official organizations or wider state policy.

The study adds to existing literature on language endangerment by bringing the lived realities of an insider and marginalized community to the fore and urges the need to seriously consider how intergenerational transmission may be prioritized to facilitate the survival of linguistic diversity in Sri Lanka.

¹ MA Student, Delhi University. E-mail: manushi.online123@gmail.com

Introduction

Language does not only act as a means of communication, but it also functions as a vehicle of cultural memory, ancestral knowledge and identity. To tribes, especially those whose cultures have traditionally been oral and socially focused, language is a living library of custom, ceremony, and environmental knowledge. The Vedda peoples in Sri Lanka, believed to be the oldest inhabitants on the island, exemplify one of the most dramatic cases of a local community whose language culture faces extinction. Vedda linguistic traditions are particularly threatened with extinction because of a concurrence of sociopolitical marginalization, cultural assimilation, and generational language shift despite their special historical and cultural status.

The tribal and marginalized groups around the entire island are facing heightened pressure with Sinhala-dominated education, migration to urban areas, and the power of mainstreaming media. These forces have contributed to a sizeable break in the passage of indigenous language manners between the older and younger generations. The core area of oral tradition and linguistic inheritance, the home, is slowly strangled in the net of Sinhala or Tamil, particularly, the younger generation in government school affiliation and consumers of national media. This trend has far reached impacts on not only on language diversity but also cultural self-determination and identity of these communities.

This paper examines the threatened language way of life of the tribal groups in Sri Lanka, and specifically intergenerational transmission in the Vedda community. The qualitative fieldwork (interviews and participant observation) in Dambana should help us to identify what factors are currently contributing to language maintenance or shift, and what broader factors are translating as indigenous language endangerment in South Asia.

Research Problem

Although the indigenous cultures and oral traditions are reviewed more and more in Sri Lanka, a little pile of deep studies on dealings and issues of language transmission between/among tribal communities still exists. Specifically, the linguistic future of Vedda people is unclear since their conventional speech forms are eroded by the lack of intergenerational transmission. Whereas the older representatives of the community still adhere to ancestral linguistic practices and appreciate them, younger generations gradually switch to Sinhala the prevalent language of the education process, government, and media. This change is not just linguistic but represents a more profound change in identity and cultural affiliation and collective memory.

The fundamental issue investigated as part of this analysis is erosion of the intergenerational succession of languages by the tribal groups with the Vedda subgroup being the most affected. What are social, educational and cultural conditions leading to this

breakdown? What makes younger members disinclined or incapable of speaking the ancestral language? And how does family and community structure, external institutions contribute to or work against survival of traditional speech forms?

Research Objectives

The aim of the research is to:

1. Review the situation of current status of the usage of the language by the Vedda community of Dambana, with specific focus on the differences associated with the fluent knowledge and the retention of the vocabulary by the different generations.
2. Determine the sociocultural reasons that may affect the diminution or preservation of traditional linguistic involvement.
3. Get to learn how family or community organizations facilitate or inhibit language being taught between generations.
4. Discuss the perception of younger local people about the ancestral language and identity of their culture.
5. Contribute to the larger discourse of language encampment and language revitalization processes in Sri Lanka and South Asia situations as a whole.

Research Methodology

The ethnolinguistic knowledge in this study is of qualitative nature, leaning on fieldwork conducted in July 2025 of the Vedda community in Dambana,

Sri Lanka. The study focused on deciphering trends of intergenerational language transfer and influences of sociolinguistic variables on language maintenance or shift.

Semi-structured interviews and participant observation, along with recording of a conversation were the main means of collecting primary data. Other important interlocutors were Uruvarige Wannila Aththo, and the Upanayaka Aththo, who are community leaders. Well, their experiences provided good background into the current situation of the Vedda language, cultural transfer between generations as well as the constant fear of losing the culture and language. Interestingly, both were optimistic about any documentation and revitalization activities and wanted their linguistic heritage to be preserved.

Besides interviewing the elders, school going children and youth who had been exposed to formal education and young members of the community who had minimal or no formal education were also interviewed. There was a sharp division of these groups developing; the former with excellent grasp of Sinhala, some knowledge of English, with the other group retaining the old Vedda pronunciations with little borrowing of Sinhala words. These variations allowed gaining valuable knowledge about the way education, exposure to mainstream media and language attitudes condition language practices younger generations engage in.

Thematic analysis was done by code book to discover the reoccurring themes

with reference to language use, areas of transmission (e.g. home, ritual, peer group), and generation changes. Strict ethical considerations were adhered to such as informed consent, anonymity in cases of request, and cooperative validation of interpretations among the participants.

Results and Discussion

The results of the given study illustrate an apparent and alarming trend of intergenerational language shift in Vedda people of Dambana. Interview and participant observation material shows the difference in the language of different generations and also the general societal processes that drive the changes.

1. Generational Differences in Language Use

The language use had a notable mismatch between the welleducated young generation and the elders, largely untouched by institutional education. Sinhala was the predominant local language among the young population especially students of Class 1 to Class 11 in Mahiyanganaya Kanishta Vidyalaya (Mahiyanganaya Junior School). Many were also competent in English, particularly at lower grades. Most children could read or write simple sentences in both Sinhala and English with greater evidence of writing a language in higher classes. It indicates the dominance of national languages in the education system of Sri Lanka and reduced manifestation of Vedda speech in schools.

Importantly, at the time of any inquiries concerning songs, hunting chants, or folklore, children of the lower grades all answered that they could not even recollect any of these traditions. Through this, it can be identified that there is a breakdown in oral cultural transmission, implying that more ancient forms of knowledge, formerly handed down through songs and stories, are no longer actively performed or maintained among younger generations.

2. Language Retention Among Non Formally Educated Youth

Comparatively, however, young people born before exposure to formal education continued in active use of more traditional Vedda speech forms, with little usage of Sinhala borrowings. These people had a greater connection to ritual speech, family legend, and localized terms, particularly inside the home or within a group. This highlights the importance of formal schooling both in providing linguistic capabilities as well as in reshaping cultural identity that is not indigenous.

3. Elders' Perspectives on Documentation and Cultural Marginalization

Uruvarige Wannila Aththo and the Upanayaka Aththo, among the elders there, were extremely concerned about their language loss. They stressed that the Vedda language has been carried down the generations by word of mouth and memories, but that in the age of technology, new preservation techniques are needed. The two elders insisted that documentation was needed,

since their language and customs were urgently in need of documentation and preservation in archives. Nonetheless, they bemoaned a lack of institutional or government support of such efforts.

Indeed, Uruvarige Wannila Aththo in a strikingly poignant observation stated that when the government wants to exhibit traditional culture in a state festivity the people of the Vedda race are paraded just like the elephants at the Perahera, not to incorporate them into the state but to display them as artifacts. This metaphor is representative of the performative tokenism that indigenous communities can often be subjected to, where token appearances during state ceremonies do not equate to actual assistance in linguistic or cultural maintenance.

4. Cultural Knowledge and Cognitive Structures

The paper also pinpoints the disappearance of culturally embedded cognitive systems, like kinship terms, spatial deixis, and classificatory systems, which were historically expressed in the Vedda language. The loss of these features in the younger generation incorporates not only language loss, but a breakdown in culturally specific patterns of thought and memory. The formulaic and prosodic structures employed in traditional oral genres, which served memory and transmission, are today but little known by children and adolescents.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The results of our analysis show clearly

that the traditional language practices of the Vedda people are in grave danger and that the possibility of intergenerational transmission is particularly poor as well. Although the members of the older community still are possessors of linguistic and cultural understanding, the youth, particularly those who have exposure to formal education, are currently moving into the realm of Sinhalese and, to lesser degree, English. This change of language is not simply an issue of communication preference but has been part of a general change in cultural identity and memory practices.

The study illustrates that formal education, along with the predominance of Sinhala in civic life and media, is at the heart of indigenous languages marginalization. Children interviewed were not only ignorant about traditional songs and rituals but most did not get exposure to important oral genres as vital media of cultural transmission. Conversely, the unschooled retained more of the ancestral linguistic beliefs implying that traditional uses of language excelled in an informal, community odyssey.

Importantly, despite the apparent willingness of some elders, such as Uruvarige Wannila Aththo and the Upanayaka Aththo to write down their language, they never received external support. They are hurt by the knowledge of the symbolic representation without the structural visibility, being presented as cultural icons without having the means to actually survive as a culture with its resources.

Recommendations

1. Community based Language Documentation Projects: Projects should be implemented in partnership with the Vedda elders and young people to document oral traditions, kinship terms, rituals and songs, with the use of videoaudio tools and linguistic software.
2. Classroom Teaching of Indigenous Knowledge: School curricula where Vedda children study (e.g., Mahiyanganaya Kanishta Vidyalaya) must intersequence duplicate into school knowledge that reflects a sense of relationship with indigenous context/identity.
3. Training Vedda Youth: Train Local Vedda youth on Documentation tools (such as ELAN and FLEEx) so that they become active participants in the documentation of their linguistic heritage.
4. Government Policy and Protective Measures on Indigenous Languages: The Sri Lankan government should not only provide financial and institutional and technical backing on language protection, but also give recognition to Vedda speech forms as national heritage.
5. Public Sensitization and Moral Practice: Stop going through the motions of indigeneity. Rather, give indigenous peoples the opportunity to express themselves honestly in culture and academia.

References

- Annamalai, E., 2001. *Managing multilingualism in India: Political and linguistic manifestations*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Brenzinger, M., 2007. *Language endangerment throughout the world*. In: M. Brenzinger, ed. *Language Diversity Endangered*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, pp. 3–6.
- Gair, J. and Paolillo, J.C., 1997. *Sinhala*. Munich: Lincom Europa.
- Hock, H.H. and Joseph, B.D., 2009. *Language History, Language Change, and Language Relationship: An Introduction to Historical and Comparative Linguistics*. 2nd ed. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Lewis, M.P. and Simons, G.F., 2010. *Assessing Endangerment: Expanding Fishman's GIDS*. *Revue Roumaine de Linguistique*, 55(2), pp.103–120.
- Miller, C., 2007. *Endangered languages*. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 36, pp.339–360.
- Perera, B.M.A.O., 2009. *Indigenous people in Sri Lanka: The Veddhas*. *Human Biology*, 81(5/6), pp.675–681.
- Silva, K.T., 2002. *The Vedda Villages of Anuradhapura: The Historical Anthropology of a Community in Sri Lanka*. Colombo: Social Scientists' Association.
- UNESCO, 2003. *Language Vitality and Endangerment*. Paris: *UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages*. [online] Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000183699> [Accessed 30 Jul. 2025].
- Wanninayake, M.B., 2007. *Culture and Identity of the Indigenous People of Sri Lanka (Vedda)*. Colombo: Godage International.