

Literature development in minority language: Case study of Gutob-Gadaba Language Revitalization Project in India¹

Herold Rajan
Asha Kiran Society, India

Abstract

During the past several years linguists have become very concerned about ethno-linguistic groups that are either shifting from their original language to another more opportunistic one, or whose population is diminishing to the extent that the language is in danger of dying. In India, a many tribal languages are in the process of becoming extinct. Users of these languages are losing confidence and pride in their mother tongue as a result of the onslaught of what they consider 'superior' languages. They do not feel that their language can be written or that it is valuable enough to attempt reviving and/or saving. As a result of this language shift, rich information related to tribal culture is also vanishing, having survived so far solely through oral media.

Gutob-Gadaba is one such dying language in Southern Orissa. Approximately eighty percent of the original speakers have shifted to Desiya, the lingua franca of Koraput district. This paper focuses on the process by which an NGO has encouraged Gutob-Gadaba speakers to develop a written literature in their language in an attempt to revitalize the language and document cultural practices. The paper describes how the literature produced is being used and the perspectives of local community towards literature production in their own language. It presents the promotional activity involved and the challenges faced. It concludes with lessons learnt in the process of the project and plans for changing the strategies of literature production.

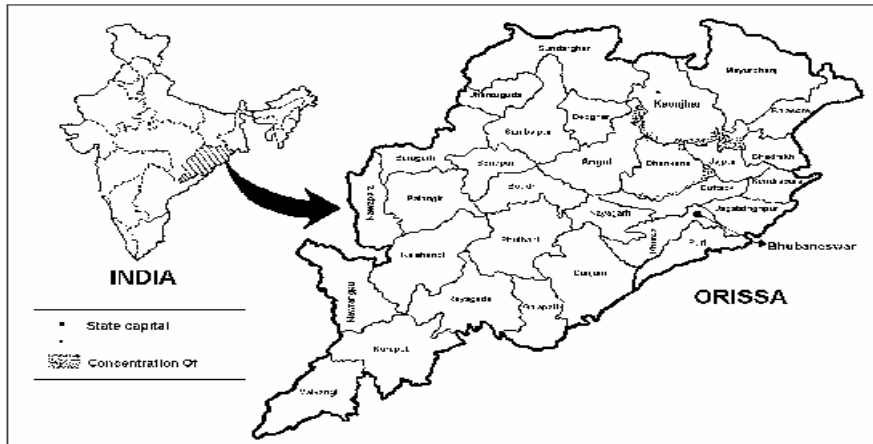
The Gadabas—Population profile

The Gadabas are largely an agricultural society. They are concentrated mostly in the Koraput District of Orissa, and are found in large numbers in Lamtaput Block. In 1981, the total population of all Gadaba in Orissa was 56,911 according to the census of India. A number of the Gadaba were displaced by two major hydroelectric power projects in the district. Thus they became a minority in the places they were displaced to and have been gradually shifting to the Indo-Aryan 'Desiya' language.²

Today, most of the Gadabas live in Lamtaput block of Koraput District. The demographic survey of Lamtaput Block (Asha Kiran Society, 1998) identified 5065 Gutob speakers. Only forty villages in Lamtaput still maintain their Gutob-Gadaba language.

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² Desiya is lingua franca spoken by many tribes in Koraput District. It is classified as a member of the Indo-Aryan language family. Desiya is related to the state language Oriya, which is the official medium of instruction in Orissa State.



The Gadaba literacy rate is 8.5%. There is considerable motivation among the people to go to state run schools but most of them fail in their 10th grade.

Gadaba language: Classification

Gutob is classified as Austro-Asiatic, Munda, South Munda, Koraput Munda, Gutob-Remo-Geta, Gutob-Remo (Grimes 1992:540). An alternate spelling is Gutop. Other names include Boda Gadaba and Boi Gadaba. The name Gadaba, which is widely found in books, is also used for the Dravidian Gadaba language (Ollar Gadaba & Gutob). In this paper, the name Gutob-Gadaba will be used when referring to the Munda subgroup of Gutob.

According to the Sociolinguistic Survey conducted by Asha Kiran Society in 1995, there are four dialects found in Gutob-Gadaba. These dialects are Kinda Raji, Lamtaput, Koraput and Birong Raji. Lexical similarity among these dialects is over 90% and in spite of some other differences, the dialects are mutually intelligible. Most of the books described in this paper have been produced in the Lamtaput dialect.

Language shift

There are many ways of defining endangered languages, the most simplistic being those having below a given critical number of speakers. Size is important, there are a variety of social, economic, political and religious factors that influence whether or not parents will continue transmitting their language to their children.

Dorian (1980) lists three signs of language shift: fewer speakers, fewer domains of use, and structural simplification. Krauss (1992), comparing endangered languages to endangered biological species, defines three categories of languages:

moribund: 'languages no longer being learned as mother-tongue by children' ;

endangered: 'languages which, though now still being learned by children, will--if the present conditions continue--cease to be learned by children during the coming century' ; and

safe: languages with 'official state support and very large numbers of speakers'.

The process of language shift within the Gutob-speaking Gadaba population can be illustrated through the following figure.

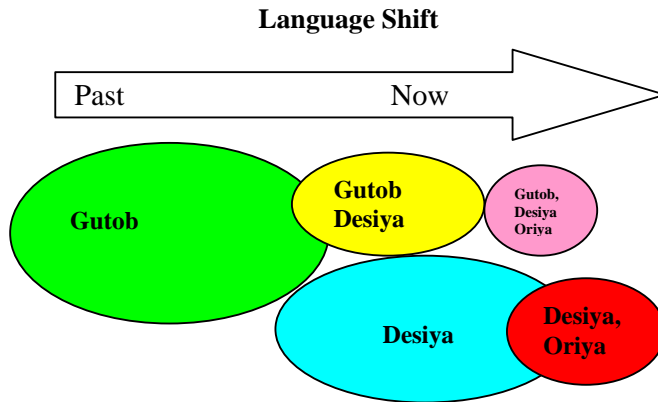


Figure 1. Language shift in Gadaba

The Gutobs started shifting to the Desiya language about six decades ago and approximately 80% no longer speak their heritage language. The situation of the Gutob language is between Kraus’ “moribund” and “endangered”, since few children learn Gutob and more children learn Desiya as their mother tongue. From our observation, Gutob is used in the home; both languages are used when Gutobs converse in their own village and Desiya is spoken with non-Gutobs in their own villages. People sing traditional Gutob songs in some Gadaba festivals but in general, religious and other types of songs learnt from neighboring tribes are sung in Desiya. Young people feel superior when they speak Desiya and look down on Gutob speakers.

The large majority of children are now learning Desiya as their mother tongue. The Gutob lexicon has a large number of borrowed words from the Desiya language so there are complex situations in various domains of language use. Educated men prefer to speak Desiya in the village and Oriya outside the village situation. Most Gutob people are bilinguals. Generally they have a negative attitude towards their language and most of them aspire to reach proficiency in the state language, Oriya. Children go to the state-run school where Oriya is taught and used as the medium of instruction.

Therefore in order to revitalize the language, there is a large need for promotion as well as documentation of the language.

LITERATURE PRODUCTION

Linguistic analysis and historical background

Asha Kiran Society’s Guto-Gadaba language development project began with a socio-linguistic survey in 1995. The phonemic analysis of Gutob - Gadaba was completed in 1997 and the grammatical analysis was completed in 2000. This became the foundation for literature production in Gutob.

Literacy primers were produced and a pilot literacy program was launched in three adult groups but all were discontinued. It was strongly felt that the reason for this failure was twofold. The first problem was that the program was initiated and run by non-Gutob people and there was no real motivation or demand for the program within the community. The second problem was that the material produced may not have been culturally relevant .

At this point it was felt that it was necessary to mobilise the Gadaba to take leadership in their own language development. In 2001, Asha Kiran Society facilitated the formation of a Gutob - Gadaba Language Development Committee to give overall direction for the language development project. At present the committee is composed of 30 members from various villages—village headmen, a community health worker, an old woman, teachers, individuals who have been through formal school

and others who are respected within the community. The committee was responsible for selecting the 'register dialect' in which their language was to be standardized. They also decided the orthography and helped in the standardization of the spelling convention. Further, the committee has played a significant role in reviewing the various literacy materials.

This began the new mother tongue literacy project that was launched in 2002. The project was planned in phases. After the first phase of initial literacy classes, it was felt that it was essential to establish ongoing production of culturally relevant reading materials to help the new learners build fluency in their newly acquired skill. It was felt that the most appropriate material production could be done only by the Gadaba speakers themselves. Thus began the current literature production process.

Goals of literature production

Following are the goals for literature production:

- To produce more than 400 books in the Gutob language
- To train 50 writers through the Gutob language development committee so that people may have the capacity to produce literature in Gadaba.
- To distribute books in Gadaba villages.
- To build capacity for ongoing literature production.

Types of literature

The purpose of literature production was to develop reading materials for adult literacy classes as well as to document the rich oral culture. To cultivate the habit of reading, it was necessary to build positive attitudes toward the language and to address the socio-economic needs of the Gadaba people through the literature produced.

Literature has been developed under the following headings: folk stories, jokes, poems, riddles, proverbs, songs and real life experience stories. To address socio-economic issues like health and agriculture, books on these topics have also been produced.

Writers' workshop

The external linguist trained two local people who are now key leaders for the project. Following this initial training, the Project Team conducted two writers' workshops in the language area. The writers were mostly school dropouts from non-literate backgrounds and new literates from the literacy project. Elderly people from the community were invited as consultants to provide information for the young writers about the traditional culture. A local artist was identified to illustrate the reading materials. Since the person is from the local community, the pictures are culturally relevant and well accepted by community members. Through these workshops the material from the oral culture is being developed in written form.

Progress towards the goals

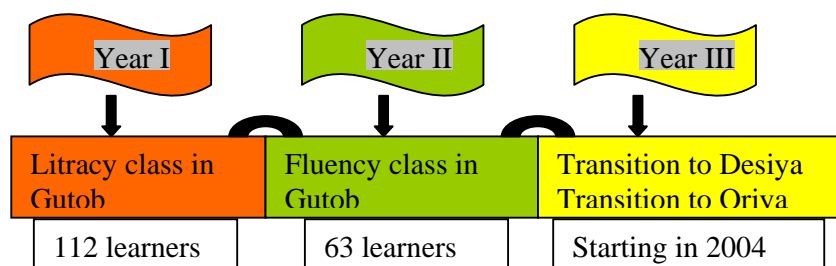
At this point, the community has achieved the following goals for their program:

- 30 Gadaba post literacy books have been produced.
- 23 titles have been distributed.
- Another 25 post literacy books are in the process of being published
- 20 writers have been trained in basic level literature production
- One artist and two people from local villages have been trained in conducting writers' workshops.
- More than 350 people have used the materials produced.

CURRENT USE AND PROMOTION OF LITERATURE

Literacy classes:

So far, more than 350 learners in local literacy classes have used the primers and post literacy books. In villages where literacy classes have been conducted, people's attitudes are slowly changing. They are excited to see books written in their language. The following figure shows how the classes are introduced in four villages with different languages being introduced in phases.



Village library

Village libraries have been formed in 4 villages to give people access to the Gutob books being produced. These libraries have books from Gadaba as well as from Oriya, the state language.

Market display

The books have also been displayed in the weekly market. This is an opportunity for the Gutobs to be aware of developments in their language. One villager commented that 'our language was disappearing, now it is slowly getting life'. However, the general response has not been very affirmative. One of the comments made was, "We know our language, so why do we need this book?" So far very few have purchased the books.

Gutob 'Mela'(fair)

In the year 2002 a Gutob mela (fair) was organized on a market day. The Gutob books were introduced and cultural songs were sung. This was the first fair organized exclusively for the Gutob-Gadabas. Several Gutob-Gadabas who came for the market were exposed to the new books produced in their language. Some purchased the books and seemed excited to see them. The local block developmental officer released the books for the community. It provided a good boost for the educated youth who have been involved in the project and for others, it was an eye-opener that their language could be written and actually have books produced in it.

Gutob Language Development committee

The Language Committee has become instrumental in language standardization and orthography decision-making. The committee reviews the books that have been produced, decides the spelling system, and it incorporates the original Gadaba words.

The literacy books have also been distributed through language committee members to different villages. They have also been having reading sessions of the new books for those interested.

Conclusion

Through implementing the program to this point, the Project Team has learned several lessons:

- People have higher motivation to learn Oriya as they feel it is more prestigious to speak in Oriya and Desiya.
- The committee does not yet associate their language revitalization program with empowerment of their community. They feel the need for more socio-economic programs and don't feel that literacy programs on their own will bring about community development. The Project Team is wondering how this need can be addressed.

- The orthography used in Gutob literature is a simplified version of the Oriya orthography. However, educated people prefer to write the same way Oriya is written.
- Language revival will not take place through the intervention of the State on behalf of Gutob–Gadabas. However, affirmative language policies as well as state resources are needed to help the community in their efforts to reverse language shift.

To meet the challenges and help ensure program sustainability, the Project Team has identified the following objectives:

- Produce more literature that incorporates traditional knowledge from different domains.
- Introduce vernacular materials in the Lamtaput Dialect to test their acceptability across the four dialects of Gutob-Gadaba.
- Encourage speakers of other dialects to produce books in their dialects; encourage them to take ownership of the language development process.
- Produce more diglot and triglot materials that incorporate Desiya and Oriya. This should motivate Gutob-Gadaba speakers to learn to read in their own language as it will help them bridge to the more ‘prestigious’ languages of Desiya and Oriya.
- Use electronic media to record traditional songs, stories and chanting. This can accompany the written literature.
- Do more awareness-raising to increase positive attitudes to their language among the Gutob-Gadabas.
- Explore the possibility of getting government support for bilingual education in primary school and high school.

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