Assessment of Language Vitality of Mathura Labhan

Authors: Guguloth Arjun Naik, IIT Kharagpur
Bornini Lahiri, IIT Kharagpur
Abstract ID: 454
Event: Linguistics 2026 Paris
Subject: 3. Application linguistics
Presenter Name: Guguloth Arjun Naik

Abstract

Mathura Labhan is an indigenous lesser known language of Indo-Aryan group spoken in northern and north-western Telangana, India, by a community whose population is around 80,000 to 1,00,000. It has no script, and its speakers live alongside Telugu, Marathi, Kannada and Banjara (Lambadi). Because earlier literature treats it as a dialect of Banjara and the Census of India gives no separate figure for it, nobody has assessed its vitality. We grade the language on UNESCO's nine vitality factors, compare younger and older speakers, and ask whether a single endangerment label can describe such a language.

We followed UNESCO's (2003) Language Vitality and Endangerment framework. A 22-item questionnaire in English and Telugu was developed and obtained responses from 107 community members, those below 35 were classed as younger speakers and the rest as elders. The items covered intergenerational transmission, language choice at home, in religious practice and at school or work, digital media, and mother-tongue education. Some factors, policy and documentation among them, were beyond the reach of a questionnaire, so we graded these from field observation and informal interviews with elders, many of whom cannot read. Each factor received its own grade from 0 to 5. Men make up 85% of the sample and most respondents are literate, which limits how far the results generalise.

The grades are divided into two sets. Where a factor depends on the community, the grade is high: 5 for transmission, 5 for proportion of speakers, 4 for domains of use and 4 for community attitudes. Every respondent speaks the language, and 94.4% use it with friends from the community at school or work. Where a factor depends on institutions, the grade is low: new media and official policy are at 1, educational materials and documentation at 0. Signs of shift appear among younger speakers who have moved to towns and they report using Telugu with siblings and in religious practice. Of the 73 respondents who answered the social-media question, 58.9% chat in Mathura Labhan despite its lack of a script, and 39.7% chat in Telugu. Most would choose films and songs in Mathura Labhan, but none exist, and 90.6% want the language taught at primary level.

The authors names this a split vitality profile. Inside the community the language is safe and outside it the language is almost invisible, so one label cannot describe it. The transmission would say "safe" and documentation would say "undocumented". We suggest reporting the nine factors in two tiers, community-internal and institutional, and reading the gap between them as a sign of risk. Here the risk lies with the young people who leave for towns. They are the next generation of parents, and they find no schooling, books or media in their language. The study also shows that a language can go unassessed when it is counted under a larger neighbour. Since younger speakers already use Mathura Labhan online, a community-agreed orthography and recordings of oral literature would be sensible first steps, and the recordings could later support speech technology.

Keywords: Mathura Labhan, language vitality, UNESCO vitality factors, language endangerment, language attitude survey.