A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Dzongkha: Variation in Final Nasals and Rhotics

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Abstract

This first quantitative sociolinguistic analysis of Dzongkha (Bhutan’s official language), as spoken by residents of the capital Thimphu, investigates variation and change in two salient and traditional linguistic features: syllable-final nasals (N) and postvocalic rhotics (R). Thimphu is Bhutan’s central location for education, jobs, commerce and social network ties. Both (N) and (R) show variable deletion, as correlated with internal (phonetic environment, tone, grammatical category, phrase position) and external (style, sex, age, region, education) explanatory factors.

Data came from thirty-six participants originating in three regional communities (Eastern native Tshangla speakers, Western native Dzongkha speakers and Southern native Lhotshampa speakers). All were Bhutanese nationals now living in Thimphu, divided amongst school children at seven schools, their teachers and their parents. 3,636 nasal tokens and 2,196 rhotic tokens were analysed using Rbrul to perform multiple logistic regression. The findings demonstrate variation (and suggest change in progress) for both (N) and (R). Low and mid vowels, prepositions and adjectives, preceding and following sonorants, low-toned syllables, and non-initial position favour deletion of (N). Lhotshampa and Dzongkha speakers delete nasals more; speakers with secondary education preferred the traditional form.

For postvocalic (R), among linguistic factors, low-toned syllables, certain grammatical categories, preceding front vowels, non-final positions and following obstruents promote deletion. Speakers with Western Dzongkha backgrounds favoured deletion, as did older adults generally. For both (R) and (N), principal results showed final consonants retained in formal reading tasks, but style could not be included in multiple regression analysis. Variation in Dzongkha reflects external developments and socio-economic changes across Thimphu and the country in recent decades. Qualitative analysis of linguistic attitudes, ideology and identity also contribute towards explaining variation and potential change in the use of these features. A grammatical sketch and history of Dzongkha are provided.