

A Sociolinguistic Study of Children's Registers in the Myanmar Language

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Abstract

Children speaking the Myanmar language vary their speech as to register they use according to their social classes. Various words and expressions of register can be found in terms of religion, food, and behavior. In addition, register also varies depending on dense or sparse network of social communication, individuals and groups.

Key words: register, food-related, religious, ways of living and behaving, social communication network, social class

Aim

This study is aimed at registers depending on social situations in which children speaking Myanmar speak differently. This paper studies introductory sociolinguistic theories by Dr. Aung Myint Oo and subject-related data provided by the Myanmar Language Commission and overseas linguists. In addition, interviews are made to children and their parents from several social classes. From these observations and studies, children-related registers in Myanmar are presented.

Introduction

When speaking, children use words and expressions to communicate with their surroundings. Depending on their social classes belong to, they learn and say their respective registers. They bear in mind many of the words and expressions spoken by adults in social communication, and they use them in their own speech on the basis of their imagination, knowledge, and experience. Generally speaking, children, when they use language arbitrarily, speak depending on the convenient movement of their speech organs, thereby creating their own registers.

1. Children's ages and basic causes of their registers

In Myanmar society, the age mostly focused on is children's age, at which they use different registers. Their age ranges from one and a half year to seven years.

The three basic causes of registers can be found:

- (1) their simple speech depending on their knowledge and experience in their social sphere;
- (2) their social class belonging to their parents different from others, and
- (3) their parents' lack of caring for their children's linguistic behavior due to their attention on daily earnings.

These three factors led to the emergence of registers resulting from using the words and expressions for communication, which become deviant from standard Myanmar language.

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2. Registers used by all the children

Registers arise depending on their interaction by using simple words they all understand for their activities in their respective social classes. Although adults and children interact within the same speech community, their language varies.

From language in everyday use, religious registers, food-related registers and registers relating to ways of living and behaving are found.

2.1. Religious registers

Children's words and expressions, as regards religious belief, are of the two found: "u: do" (literally meaning "worship") and "tha du." (literally meaning "well done"). These two have two different references.

The first one deals with pictures of Buddha images, pagodas, Buddhist monks, and visits to pagodas.

The second one deals with persons, parents and heads of families.

Adults mostly use directive function when addressing children. An adult's utterances made at a pagoda or at home such as "hpa ja: wu' pju. do. lei", "mashi'khou:thei:bu:la:", "hpaja:shi'khou:oun:", "u:cha.lai' lei" (whose meanings share: "why don't you worship the Buddha?") cannot be understood by a child. However, when the adult uses such utterances as "u: do lou' lai lei", "u: do", etc., the child easily understands the adult's instructions. Besides, the use of the utterance "tha du." (literally meaning "well done" but in this case it refers to the pagoda or Buddha image) is twofold. If a pagoda is high, it is referred to as "tha du. kji: dji:" (big or large pagoda), and a small-sized pagoda is addressed as "tha du. thei: dhei:" (small pagoda).

2.2. Food-related register

Food for children varies depending on their social classes. Examples include "man man" meaning "rice", "ko ko" meaning "coffee" "pu pu" meaning "hot", "chou chou" meaning "sweet", "nou. nou." meaning "milk", "sa' sa'" meaning "hot and spicy" that can be observed in their utterances that serve as medium between children and adults.

When an adult is eating rice or some snack, a child shows his or her desire to eat it or asks for it, but when the adult says "htamin: ga. nga jou'thi: dwei pa de masa:ne." (don't eat it because it has pepper!), "sa: lou. maja.bu: ngajou'thi:hmoun.dwei ne." (you can't eat it because it is with power of pepper!). The child, however, does not understand what these utterances mean. Then, the adult opens his or her mouth, and says "shu: she: shu: she:" (indicating it's hot and spicy), or "sa' sa'" (shortened form of hot and spicy), and the child easily understands the meaning of these utterances, thereby creating the special register for children.

2.3. Register relating to ways of living and behaving

Children express their feelings and emotions and what they want to do through simple words and expressions so that adults can easily do what children want them to do for them.

As regards register relating to ways of living and behaving, such words and expressions as "kha: kha: lein: me" (let's apply thanakha!), "awa:pei:lai" (give a kiss!), "hpa' hpa' si:" (put on your slippers!), "shu shu: pau" (piss off!), can be observed. While adults teach

children simple words and expressions that can be easily understandable to them, they become the special register used by or for children.

3. Registers used by children individually

The individual use implies personal style. Therefore, individual registers emerge depending on the child's social situation, his or her surroundings, social network.

Children whose social network is sparse include orphans and those from juvenile training schools. As they are kept under several guardians, and they can only live in their enclosed compounds, their social network can be said to be limited: their social relations are a few, their religious knowledge is a little, they have no close relatives, they are not familiar with economic matters, they do have money in their hands, and they do not have a chance to study other subjects rather than what is taught in such schools. They have a little knowledge and experience. The teachers there only speak to those who learn. Such children do not have strong thinking and creative skills. Such weaknesses are due to their existence in a less dense social network.

A few words of register are found due to the weak network. Example words include "kje' ma. ga. hla.nei de" meaning (kjet' ma. is beautiful now), "hsei:htou:hsajama. jau'neide" (the female doctor is here now), etc. In the first example, the expression "kje' ma." is different in meaning from the common slang expression meaning "a prostitute". Here in this case, the children simply refer to "a mother" making analogy with what they see in their surroundings as a hen is likened here to a human mother!

Such children call the headmaster "hpei hpei gji:" meaning "big daddy", and their female guardian "mei mei" meaning "mum". Female guardians include both married and unmarried ladies. When a married lady scolds some children, she is referred to as "kje'ma." (literally meaning "hen", but here "mother") as they think a hen looks after her chicks, and in the same way the married female mother, who also has her own children, is compared to the hen in a sense "the mother of children".

Such an utterance is a well-used expression of register common to such a social class. Children whose social network is dense can be found together with their parents. They have to learn the social classes they are exposed to. They can create their own register as they can freely deal with others around them. The registers from various social classes are different from the uses in the standard language. Here there are two main social classes roughly classified: service-giving persons and manual workers.

3.1. Register used by children of the social class of service-giving persons

Service-giving persons include education staff persons and sea-men persons. In the social class of education staff persons, utterances of register arise depending on the fact that the children from such a social class have more social relationships, higher intelligence, more access to social paraphernalia, a wide range of places they go to.

Discourse: Speaker (1) – "ai'lai' ... pu lai'ta ajan:be ... jeidabu: jug e."

(I feel so hot ...just give me a bottle of water.)

Speaker (2) – "tha: gou le: ... apojei pei:no"

[Speaker (1)'s son] (Give me also ... the water from above.)

Speaker (3) – Yes.

In the above discourse, speaker (1) is the mother of the child. Speaker (2) is her son. Speaker (3) is a house-maid. As the child thinks that the water in the upper compartment of the refrigerator is colder, he says “a po jei” (the water from above referring to the water in the upper compartment of the refrigerator. The child uses such an utterance of register as he simply feels or knows the sense of the register.

In addition, they also say “in ta ne’ chou chou thau’ me” (I want to drink coffee from the Internet café.) as they know and have the experience that they often go to such a place where they drink coffee. In addition, they tend to say “ma. ma. ga. IC m̄kaun:bu:” meaning “Ma Ma is something wrong with her IC” as they think and feel that IC refers to “something wrong” although they do not know the actual meaning of the term which is used in electrical or electronic stores. Children often hear the expression used in such utterances “IC pje’ nei de” meaning “IC is not working”. In the same way, the utterance “ma. ma. ga. IC m̄kaun:bu:” refers to the sense that Ma Ma is not generous as she does not buy food!

When a child from the social class of sea-men, it is found that he can use a lot of words and expressions of register. As the social environment around the child involves a large number of young people and better economy, the meanings and functions of the utterances used by the child are investigated. Examples include “hpu hpi thau’ me” meaning “I’ll drink coffee”, and “shin shin u: do lou’me” meaning “I’ll worship the Buddha image.” When the child sees in her class another student wearing fine clothes and new stationery materials, she tends to say “lug a. tha a lan:za: lou’ nei da ba a mei je sa m̄ to bu:” meaning “she’s in such a proud manner, but she’s not intelligent” as she feels and thinks that the expression “alan:za:” refers to “be in a proud manner”, and she uses this as she does not like by nature another one to be better than herself!

From the above-mentioned examples, it can be assumed that there are a wide range of words and expressions depending on social relations in different social classes.

3.2. Register used by children from the working social class

When observing the utterances of the children from the working social class including sellers, carpenters, iron grille workers, trishaw drivers, and bus or taxi drivers, it is found that they also have their own registers. It is found that some children like the common culture and others do not. Therefore, some utterances they say are rude and others are polite. However, whatever they say is loveable and acceptable.

Adults do not have time to correct their manners and behavior from which their registers deviate from standard language. They are thus free to use whatever they hear around them. They are sent to the nearest child-care centers, which are some houses doing such a business, where they often hear and use in their utterances what is commonly said by adults in such places. Such words and expressions become their registers.

Discourse:

Speaker (1) : ma: ma: pou: ha’kai’ te

Speaker (2) : ei:ei: hsei:tai’me

Speaker (3) : nila shu:tau’mahpjan:bu:la:

Speaker(2) : pou:ha’kai’tagou pjo:da mahou’hpu: pou:sa:neide.thwa:dwei achousa:lou. thwa:kai’ta gou pjo:da

In the above discourse, there are three participants in it. Speaker (1) is a child, Speaker (2) her mother, Speaker (3) a guest from afar. The child uses “pou: ha’ kai” meaning “pou:ha’ (literally, a roach) is biting me.”, but in this case “pou:ha’” here refers to “her bad teeth” with her utterance meaning “I have bad teeth which are broken and black” comparing to the fact that some roach is biting. Speaker (3) is not a person familiar to what the child says as she has come from afar, and thinks that the child means literally that some roach is biting the child, and asks the mother of the child to spray the place with roach killer. This is a good example of individual register used only in that environment which is different from other individual registers used by other children in their own social environments.

3.2.1. Health-related register

As regards children’s health, some registers can be observed. Examples include: “thwa: i de” for “thwa: kai’ de” meaning “have a toothache”; “pa: kjou: de” for “thwa: kjou: de” meaning “have a broken tooth”; “gaun: de: hma hlou’ si. hlou’ si. he.” for “goun: kai’ goun: mu: de” meaning “have a headache”, etc. These are some of the health-related register utterances used as children think and feel.

3.2.2. Register relating to parts of the body

When asked about the parts of the body, the children use some different words or expressions of register. Although their guardians teach them what to say about the parts of the body, they say what they think is convenient to their organs of speech, as can be seen in the following utterances.

They say “paun” (literally meaning “thigh”) for “le’maun: (meaning “arm”), “paun” or “le’loun:” for “cheithaloun:” meaning “calf of the leg”, “htain thi. ha” meaning “thing used to sit” for “paun”, “chei dau’ lei: dwei” (meaning small legs) for “chei gjaun: lei: mja:” meaning “small toes”, etc.

3.2.3. Food-related register

There are also registers relating to food children eat and drink. The names of some snacks are used in their own registers. If a child from a social class celebrating his birth day party wants to eat some cake, he tends to say “I’ll eat the snack of happy-birth-day-to-you” referring to any cake he has eaten instead of saying “Pussi Cake” or “Shwebazun Cake”. Children tend to compare things they see and experience around them and say figuratively using the things they often see around them. For example, if they see some sweets in the form of pills, they say “sei:moun.sa:me” meaning “I’ll eat medicine(pill) snacks”.

Overview

Language and society are interrelated as to social matters. Languages are used as media of communication for making purposes successful. In using language at a child’s age, there are such social purposes as religious beliefs, body parts-related terms, food-related terms, etc.

When learning language, children can speak it, but they compare similar things or items as they see them. Those who teach language to children, they choose words and expressions easy enough for children to recognize. However, such language items are found to be deviant from standard language. Such deviant language is chosen to be studied as children’s registers.

It is found that when using such registers, children are not criticized for making mistakes, but they are even encouraged with love and care, and these social registers provide warmth to both two social groups: children and adults.

Conclusion

Children's registers are mainly studied from the point of view of social environment existing around children and their performance. The study, however, does not focus on their words and expressions.

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