

International Linguistic Association

Monthly Lecture Series

Saturday, December 3, 2022. 11 AM - 12 PM (EST)

Dr. Usha Lakshmanan
Southern Illinois University at Carbondale

Nepali Migrant Workers' Use of Tamizh in Chennai: Insights into Adult Naturalistic Acquisition in a Multilingual Context

Abstract

The southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu is a favored destination for migrant workers from other Indian states (e.g., Bihar, Jharkand, Orrisa, West Bengal, and Assam) and from the rural areas of the neighboring country of Nepal due to its comparatively better wages and employment opportunities. My presentation builds upon my previous research on children's acquisition of Tamil (e.g., Lakshmanan, 2000, 2006, 2021) and centers on adult Nepali migrant workers who have been employed in the multilingual city of Chennai in Tamil Nadu for 10 years or more in the service industry (e.g., as security guards, cooks/chefs at homes and restaurants, hairdressers/beauticians etc.). Tamil, a major Dravidian language, is widely used in informal and formal contexts in Chennai, along with English, and to a lesser extent, Telugu, Malayalam, Kannada, Saurashtra, Marathi, and Hindi. Furthermore, it is not at all uncommon to find people code-switching to weave in and out of two or more languages. A challenge facing Nepali migrant workers who have typically attended only primary school is how to pick up the complex aspects of Tamil "on the fly" after arriving to the multilingual city of Chennai, without any formal instruction, via limited exposure to spoken input. Drawing upon the case studies I conducted in Chennai in 2018 on adult Nepali migrant workers' use of Tamil, I argue that acquisition of a new language during adulthood, even in uninstructed settings, with access only to spoken input, can indeed succeed. This contrasts with the failure-driven approaches to ultimate attainment in adult second language acquisition. Specifically, I highlight evidence from adult Nepali speakers' use of verb inflections and case morphology in Tamil and explore the sociocultural and psycholinguistic factors within this acquisition context that seems to facilitate successful acquisition of the complex linguistic aspects of Tamil. The results also reveal an unexpected gender difference, with males outperforming their female counterparts which probably stems from differences in the input and type of interactions in the workplace. To conclude, I discuss insights that can be drawn for a deeper understanding of issues central to adult second language acquisition as well as the broader implications for the development of language and educational programs for migrant workers.

Date & Time: December 3, 2022 at 11:00 AM Eastern Time (US and Canada)

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Dr. Usha Lakshmanan

Southern Illinois University at Carbondale



Usha Lakshmanan was born and raised in the city of Chennai (formerly Madras) in Tamil Nadu, Southern India, where she grew up speaking Tamil in a multilingual environment. She received her PhD in Linguistics from the University of Michigan in 1989 and is currently Professor of Psychology and Linguistics at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. Prior to moving to the United States, she completed advanced studies in Linguistics and Language Teaching at the Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages, Hyderabad and taught for several years at Stella Maris College (affiliated with the University of Madras). Her teaching and research expertise encompass the areas of psycholinguistics, first and second language acquisition, bilingualism, multilingualism, and language and cognition. In her research, which focuses on the relationship between psycholinguistic theory and language acquisition, she has addressed several aspects of grammatical development and language processing from a cross-linguistic perspective. Her research on Tamil Linguistics spans many years, with an emphasis on Tamil children's acquisition of morphology, syntax, and pragmatics. Her current research examines Tamil children's comprehension of recursive phrases, Tamil children's narratives, and the second language acquisition of spoken Tamil by adult Nepali and Hindi speaking migrant workers residing in Chennai.

For more information about the speaker, click on the link below:

<https://academics.siu.edu/human-behavioral/psychology/faculty/lakshmanan-usha.php>