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PAPER

Charming the unseen snakes

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The initial documentation of sociolinguistic data of a remote discourse community of Tulu speakers is the essence of this paper. A pilot study to collect first hand experience of documenting evidence of discourse communities⁸ was conceptualized by a team of researchers converging from disciplines such as Language Studies, Linguistics, Musicology, Cultural Studies, Gender, and Disability Studies from the University of Kelaniya. Consultations and briefing with researchers who have worked with discourse communities and similar communities preceded the visit to the community of “Snake charmers”. De-briefing of data collection, critical analysis of literature produced so far on the Tulu language and contextualizing the ongoing research concluded the three day pilot study.

The methodology for the study is the audiovisual recording of the initial meeting with a remote discourse community of the Telegu people. The Ahikuntaka community of Devagama, living in Aligambay in the Akkaraipattu District (Eastern Province) was visited over the Vesak weekend of 2013 to make initial contact and build rapport with the discourse community.

This objective of this paper is to demonstrate the challenges of sociolinguistic or ethnographic research in the 21st century. It pinpoints some issues that are glossed over, or overlooked as being irrelevant to the topic when presenting facts in reports, because they have not been included in the research proposal. It will also record difficulties, disappointments and disenchantments when working in “exotic settings”. The paper highlights the difficulties of data collection with ‘researcher as observer’ in the context of ethical clearance.

In terms of the discourse community, the results of the study show the sociolinguistic issues of identity under threat. The only educated villager calls herself a Tamil speaker and takes pains to hide her Telugu/Tulu roots. Similarly, the villagers identify themselves as Tamils in the official domain, as in filling out electoral register forms, and in claiming that the traditional occupations of snake charming and palmistry are no longer practiced, contrary to the general belief that these are the occupations of the Tulu speaking community.

Keywords: Tulu, Telugu, Aligam Bay, Identity Issues, Pilot Study

⁸ HETC Project on Documenting Evidence of Discourse Communities, Faculty of Humanities, University of Kelaniya