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Navigating the Polyglossic Matrix: A Critical Analysis of Morpho-Syntactic, Phonological, and Sociolinguistic Barriers to English Literacy Among Tribal Learners in the Dooars Region of West Bengal

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Abstract:
This study investigates the complex multi-tiered linguistic challenges hindering English Language Acquisition (ELA) among indigenous tribal (Adivasi) students within the tea-plantation belt of the Dooars region in West Bengal, India. Inhabited by heterogeneous ethnic communities including the Oraon, Munda, Santhal, and Toto, the Dooars presents an intricate sociolinguistic environment. For these marginalized learners, acquiring English proficiency requires navigating multiple linguistic boundaries: transitioning from their heritage tongues (Kurukh, Mundari, Santhali) or the regional tribal lingua franca (Sadri) to the state-sanctioned institutional medium of instruction (Bengali or Hindi), and subsequently to English. Utilizing a contrastive linguistic framework, this paper identifies the precise structural barriers impeding this transition. These include systematic phonological deviations driven by schwa epenthesis and vowel neutralization, severe morpho-syntactic cross-linguistic interference stemming from Subject-Object-Verb (SOV) to Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) structural mismatches, auxiliary verb omissions, and pronominal gender neutralization. Sociolinguistically, the paper evaluates how institutional linguistic chauvinism and high affective filters compound these structural barriers. Ultimately, this study proposes an empirical blueprint for Translanguaging practices and contextually localized, contrastive pedagogical frameworks to mitigate subtractive bilingualism and foster inclusive literacy outcomes.

Keywords: Interlanguage Fossilization, Cross-Linguistic Transfer, Sadri Lingua Franca, Translanguaging, Subtractive Bilingualism, Affective Filter, Dooars Adivasis.

INTRODUCTION:

The demographic landscape of the Dooars is profoundly shaped by the historic migration of tribal communities (Adivasis) during the colonial era, transported by the British administration from the Chota Nagpur Plateau to labor in the expanding tea plantations. Today, these communities—encompassing the Oraon, Munda, Santhal, Kharia, and indigenous groups like the Toto—remain economically bound to the tea garden micro-economy. Within this socio-spatial ecosystem, language functions not as a uniform instrument of communication, but as a stratified hierarchy.

To analyze the linguistic challenges of these students, one must move beyond traditional Second Language Acquisition (SLA) models that assume a linear L1-to-L2 transition. Tribal learners in the Dooars operate within what can be defined as a polyglossic matrix. They are rarely native speakers of the dominant regional state language, Bengali. Instead, their cognitive and communicative baselines are formed by a combination of ancestral Austroasiatic, Dravidian, or Tibeto-Burman tongues, alongside Sadri—an Indo-Aryan based contact language that serves as the region's tribal lingua franca. When English is introduced within the state-mandated curriculum, it is imposed upon an already unstable linguistic foundation. The target language (English) is filtered through multiple intermediate linguistic lenses, each exerting distinct cross-linguistic interference. This study uses Stephen Krashen's Monitor Model, Jim Cummins' distinction between Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), and Uriel Weinreich's foundational concepts of bilingual language contact to analyze the phonological, morpho-syntactic, cognitive, and sociolinguistic factors that govern the interlanguage development of Dooars tribal students.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

The Indian Sociolinguistic Reality: Scholarly discourse surrounding minority education in India increasingly points to the systemic failures of the Three-Language Formula, a policy designed to foster trilingual competence but one that frequently results in the linguistic assimilation or marginalization of tribal communities. Ramanujam Meganathan emphasizes that the institutional implementation of language policy in Indian states routinely prioritizes dominant regional vernaculars, effectively turning tribal mother tongues into non-standard "dialects" that are excluded from academic spaces (23–45). This process triggers what Tove Skutnabb-Kangas terms linguicide or linguistic subtractive bilingualism, where the acquisition of institutional languages comes at the direct expense of the learner's native linguistic competence.

In the context of West Bengal, researchers like Aritra Roy have documented the acute structural discrepancies characterizing primary English education in rural government schools (112–125). While urban learners enjoy access to rich digital print environments and educated domestic scaffolding, rural students depend entirely on under-resourced classrooms. For tribal students within the tea gardens, this deprivation is magnified by socio-spatial isolation. Prosenjit Halder's sociological fieldwork highlights that the physical enclosure of the tea plantation estates creates an isolated linguistic enclave where functional English inputs are virtually non-existent (89–104).

Furthermore, the emergence of Sadri as a creolized lingua franca presents unique linguistic dynamics. As noted by Ananya Saikia, Sadri has transitioned from a pidginized contact dialect into a fully consolidated first language for the younger generation of Adivasis in tea-plantation belts (76–89). While Sadri provides a shared identity across diverse tribal groups, its simplified grammatical structure and lack of institutional standardization create complex interlanguage phenomena when its speakers encounter the rigid, formal conventions of Standard Indian English (SIE). The structural friction between these two systems remains under-researched, a gap this paper aims to address.

METHODOLOGY:

This paper adopts a qualitative, contrastive linguistic methodology informed by descriptive fieldwork observations and error analysis matrices. The data referenced reflects academic investigations conducted

across multiple state-aided secondary institutions located within the tea-garden clusters of Malbazar, Nagrakata, and Kalchini blocks in the Dooars region.

The analytical corpus consists of two primary components:

Written Artifact Analysis: A corpus of 150 written English compositions produced by secondary-level tribal students (Grades IX–X) was examined to classify recurring morpho-syntactic errors, structural omissions, and orthographic deviations.

Spoken Discourse Observation: Classroom audio transcripts and oral reading sessions were evaluated using Contrastive Analysis (CA) to isolate phonological interference, accent fossilization, and prosodic variations driven by the phonemic profiles of Sadri, Kurukh, and Bengali

The collected data was categorized using Pit Corder's Error Analysis framework to distinguish between performance slips and systemic competence errors, ensuring that the linguistic patterns documented reflect deep-seated interlanguage structural traits rather than temporary oversights.

Phonological Interference and Interlanguage Fossilization:

Phonological transfer constitutes the most immediate barrier to intelligibility and orthographic accuracy for tribal learners. When a student encounters the sound system of English, they attempt to map English phonemes onto the phonetic inventory of their primary language (L1), which is typically Sadri or a heritage tongue like Kurukh or Santhali.

VOWEL NEUTRALIZATION AND MONOPHTHONGIZATION:

Standard English features a complex, asymmetrical vowel system consisting of twelve monophthongs and eight diphthongs, where vowel length and tension carry heavy semantic weight. In contrast, Sadri operates on a highly symmetrical five-vowel system (/a/, /e/, /i/, /o/, /u/) with non-phonemic variations in length. Consequently, tribal students display a pervasive tendency toward vowel neutralization.

The distinction between the high-front lax vowel /ɪ/ and the high-front tense vowel /i:/ is systematically collapsed. In speech production, words like ship /ʃɪp/ and sheep /ʃi:p/, or bit /bɪt/ and beet /bi:t/, are produced homophonously as a single mid-length vowel. Similarly, the low-front open vowel /æ/ (as in cat or bat) does not exist in Sadri or Bengali phonology; it is routinely substituted with the mid-front vowel /e/ or a diphthongized variant /ea/, transforming cat /kæt/ into /keaṭ/. This structural neutralization directly affects orthographic acquisition, as students consistently misspell words that rely on these critical vowel contrasts.

CONSONANTAL SUBSUMPTION AND CLUSTER RESOLUTION:

The consonantal deviations observed in the Dooars student corpus reveal significant cross-linguistic transfer: English Target Phoneme, Common Tribal/Sadri Substitution, Linguistic Mechanism. Example Production

Voiceless dental fricative /θ/ (think)

Voiced/Unvoiced dental plosives /t̪/ or /tʰ/ Fricative-to-Plosive shifting Think → /tʰiŋk/

Voiced dental fricative /ð/ (that)

Voiced dental plosive /d̪/ Loss of dental frication That → /d̪æt/

Voiced alveolar fricative /z/ (zoo)

Voiced palato-alveolar affricate /dʒ/ Affrication Zoo → /dʒu:/ (joo)

A major challenge occurs at the structural level of the syllable. English permits highly complex consonant clusters at both the onset and coda positions (e.g., CCVC, CVCCCC). Conversely, Sadri and Austroasiatic

tongues like Santhali prefer a strict Consonant-Vowel (CV) structure, systematically avoiding complex adjacent consonants. When encountering English consonant clusters, tribal learners resolve this structural tension through two primary methods:

Prothetic/Anaptyctic Vowel Epenthesis: To resolve initial clusters like /st/ or /sk/, students insert a vowel. Under the influence of regional languages, school /sku:l/ becomes /ɪsku:l/ or /suku:l/, and station becomes /ɪsṭeʃan/.

Final Cluster Coda Deletion: Complex codas are simplified by dropping the final consonant, particularly when it involves alveolar stops. Thus, past /pɑ:st/ becomes /pɑ:s/, test becomes /ṭes/, and act becomes /æk/.

Because these phonological modifications are reinforced within the peer group and often go uncorrected by educators, they undergo interlanguage fossilization—a state where erroneous linguistic forms become permanently fixed in the learner's speech patterns, resisting subsequent pedagogical intervention.

Morpho-Syntactic Divergences and Syntactic Mismatches:

While phonological errors impair speech production and spelling, morpho-syntactic divergences disrupt the core structural logic of academic writing. The syntactic typologies of the Dravidian (Kurukh), Austroasiatic (Santhali), and Indo-Aryan (Sadri/Bengali) languages spoken by the learners feature structural configurations that are directly inverse to English grammar.

LINEAR WORD ORDER INVERSION (SVO VS. SOV):

English is an SVO (Subject-Verb-Object) language that relies on a strict linear order to establish grammatical relations. In contrast, Sadri, Bengali, and all major regional tribal languages are rigidly SOV (Subject-Object-Verb) systems. In these languages, the verb is placed at the end of the clause, and arguments are tracked using case markers or contextual markers.

When producing sentences in English, tribal students frequently execute a direct structural translation from their internal SOV baseline. This underlying transfer manifests in characteristic syntactic errors within student writing:

Target: "The teacher [S] checked [V] the notebook [O]."

Student Production: "The teacher [S] the notebook [O] checked [V]."

Target: "My uncle [S] works [V] in the tea garden [Adv]."

Student Production: "My uncle [S] tea garden in [Adv] works [V]."

This structural inversion shows that the student is struggling to re-align their primary cognitive organization with the grammatical demands of the target language.

PRONOMINAL NEUTRALIZATION AND GRAMMATICAL GENDER:

The English pronominal system requires strict agreement between the pronoun and the biological or conceptual gender of its antecedent (he for masculine, she for feminine, it for inanimate). However, Sadri and northern Munda languages lack grammatical gender distinctions within their third-person singular pronoun systems. In Sadri, the singular pronoun u or o is completely gender-neutral, standing interchangeably for he, she, or it, with the specific meaning determined by context.

Consequently, tribal students consistently experience pronoun confusion in English. In both oral speech and written essays, students routinely alternate between he and she without establishing semantic consistency:

Student Text: "My mother is a brave woman. He works ten hours in the tea garden. He loves me very much."
This error is not a sign of conceptual confusion, but rather a direct reflection of grammatical gender neutralization in the student's primary linguistic system.

AUXILIARY VERB DELETION AND ASPECTUAL MISMATCHES:
The tense-aspect system of English relies heavily on auxiliary verbs (be, have, do) combined with specific participial forms to express subtle temporal distinctions (e.g., progressive, perfect, perfect continuous). Tribal languages, by contrast, use agglutinative structures—attaching tense and aspect suffixes directly to the verb root—or simple particle markers in Sadri (such as rahe for past continuity). Because these languages lack independent auxiliary verbs that mirror the English system, learners frequently omit auxiliaries entirely, leading to structurally compromised verb phrases:
Student Production: "I working in the field yesterday." (Omission of was)
Student Production: "They gone to the market." (Omission of have)
Additionally, the English article system (a, an, the) presents a persistent challenge. Because Sadri and Bengali lack an abstract article framework—relying instead on numeral classifiers like the Sadri go or Bengali -ta—tribal learners view English articles as arbitrary features. This results in chronic article omission ("I saw snake in path") or random article over-insertion ("He is the a good boy").

LEXICAL ACQUISITION, SEMANTICS, AND COGNITIVE OVERLOAD:
Lexical acquisition involves more than just memorizing vocabulary; it requires mapping words onto a complex web of cultural and conceptual associations. For the tribal youth of the Dooars, whose daily lives are rooted in the agrarian rhythms of the tea estates, the standard vocabulary found in urbanized, Eurocentric, or metro-centric English textbooks creates a profound cultural and cognitive disconnect.
The Double-Translation Trap and BICS/CALP Gaps:
Jim Cummins draws a clear distinction between Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS)—the conversational fluency required for everyday social interactions—and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)—the formal, abstract language required for academic success.
Tribal learners in the Dooars display a significant BICS/CALP gap. While they exhibit vibrant conversational skills in Sadri and conversational Bengali (BICS), they lack academic language proficiency (CALP) in both Bengali and English. When forced to learn abstract concepts in English, they experience a double-translation trap:

Concept in Heritage tongue / Sadri **Translation 1** ----------> Cognitive Mapping in Bengali ----------> **Translation 2**----------> Target production in English
This multi-tiered cognitive processing strains working memory, slows down reading comprehension, and increases cognitive load, which frequently causes learners to disengage from reading tasks.

IDIOMATIC TRANSFERENCE AND SEMANTIC EXTENSIONS:
Due to limited vocabulary retention in English, learners frequently borrow semantic structures from Sadri idioms, translating them literally into English with awkward results. In Sadri, the versatile verb khayek ("to eat") is semantically extended to denote various forms of consumption, experience, or enduring physical impact. Students routinely transfer this semantic extension into English:

Sadri Base: "Maar khalak." → Literal English Translation: "He ate a beating." (Target: "He was beaten.")
Sadri Base: "Hawa khayek." → Literal English Translation: "I am eating the cold air." (Target: "I am enjoying the breeze.")
Similarly, the postpositional system of Sadri (using suffixes like -me for location) causes structural confusion when mapped onto the abstract prepositional system of English (in, on, at, under). Learners often omit prepositions or use them incorrectly, producing sentences like "The clock is the wall" or "We sit the tree down."

SOCIOLINGUISTIC CONTEXT AND CLASSROOM DYNAMICS:

Language acquisition is fundamentally shaped by the social environment. In the Dooars, these purely linguistic challenges are worsened by institutional inequities and socio-spatial isolation.
The Domestic-Institutional Literacy Disconnect:
A crucial factor in successful language acquisition is exposure to a print-rich environment and target language inputs outside the classroom. In the tea gardens of the Dooars, this support structure is largely absent. The adult population, mostly comprised of historically exploited tea laborers, often faces high rates of non-literacy.
Consequently, the home environment provides zero exposure to English literature, media, or conversation. The language exists purely as a formal, abstract exercise bounded by the school walls and the chalkboard. The moment the student leaves the school premises, they re-enter a monolingual Sadri ecosystem, causing newly acquired English structures to atrophy due to lack of reinforcement.

THE AFFECTIVE FILTER AND INSTITUTIONAL HEGEMONY:

Stephen Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis posits that emotional variables—such as anxiety, self-confidence, and motivation—can act as an invisible psychological barrier that prevents input from reaching the language acquisition part of the brain. When the affective filter is high, language learning is significantly impeded.
In the Dooars, the institutional environment frequently raises this affective filter to insurmountable heights. The teaching staff in government secondary schools are predominantly non-tribal, middle-class individuals from urban or semi-urban West Bengal. These educators rarely possess functional competency in Sadri or indigenous tribal tongues, and they often carry implicit biases against the linguistic profiles of Adivasi students.
When a tribal student speaks English with a Sadri accent or uses an SOV structure, the response from educators is often punitive rather than constructive. The student's interlanguage variations are frequently dismissed as signs of intellectual deficit rather than recognized as natural outcomes of language contact. This institutional correction creates acute language anxiety, causing tribal students to retreat into silence during English classes to avoid public ridicule.

EMPIRICAL PEDAGOGICAL BLUEPRINT:

To dismantle these systematic barriers, the educational framework in the Dooars must abandon rigid, monolingual models and adopt a culturally responsive, additive multilingual approach.
Implementing Strategic Translanguaging:

Rather than treating the student's native linguistic repertoire as an obstacle, the curriculum should actively embrace translanguaging—the process whereby multilingual speakers use all their languages as an integrated communication system.

Teachers should formally allow students to use Sadri or heritage tongues during the pre-writing and brainstorming phases of an English assignment. By discussing complex concepts in their native language first, students can organize their thoughts without cognitive overload, allowing them to focus their mental energy on structural accuracy during the final English writing stage.

CONTRASTIVE GRAMMAR WORKSHOPS:

Educators must be trained to conduct explicit Contrastive Grammar workshops. Instead of using rote memorization, teachers should present side-by-side comparisons of structural configurations:

[Sadri Structure] Mungru + bhaat + khalak. (Subject + Object + Verb)

↓ ↓ ↓

[English Target] Mungru + ate + rice. (Subject + Verb + Object)

By explicitly demonstrating these structural transformations, teachers help students build a conscious awareness of language differences, turning negative language transfer into a controlled, conscious meta-linguistic skill.

Curricular Localization and Contextual Priming:

The English text corpus must be contextually localized. Standard Westernized or urban Indian reading materials should be supplemented with reading comprehensions that feature the local reality of the Dooars—such as stories centered on the tea garden landscape, traditional festivals like Karam Puja, or ecological themes relevant to the sub-Himalayan forests. This alignment of the semantic content with the learner's lived experiences reduces cognitive load and accelerates vocabulary retention.

CONCLUSION:

The persistent deficits in English language acquisition observed among tribal learners in the Dooars region are not indicative of inherent cognitive or linguistic shortcomings. Instead, they reflect a predictable structural friction that occurs when diverse indigenous language systems collide with an unyielding, standardized curriculum that fails to accommodate them. The path forward demands an overhaul of pedagogical practices in the region. By recognizing the validity of the Sadri baseline, reducing the affective filter through inclusive classroom practices, and implementing structured translanguaging and contrastive linguistic strategies, the educational system can transform English from an instrument of exclusion into a tool for real academic and socio-economic empowerment for the tribal youth of the Dooars.

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