North East Indian Linguistics

Edited by

Stephen Morey • Mark Post

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Introduction

The North East Indian Linguistic Society (NEILS) was formed in 2005 by Dr. Jyotiprakash Tamuli, Head of Linguistics at Gauhati University, a specialist in Assamese and Mark Post, a PhD scholar at the Research Centre for Linguistic Typology (RCLT) at La Trobe University, Australia, who is working on the Tani languages of Arunachal Pradesh. They were soon joined by Dr. Stephen Morey, also of the RCLT, who had been working on Tai and Singpho languages in Assam since 1996. It was decided between them that a forum should be provided for the growing number of international and local scholars working on the languages of the North East, with a focus on typological and descriptive linguistics. The first international meeting of the newly constituted NEILS was thus held at the Phanidar Dutta Seminar Hall, Gauhati University, Assam, India on the 6 and 7 February 2006.

This volume presents a selection of the papers that represent work from both established scholars and students who are starting out in their linguistics careers. The contributors hail from North East India, as well as from elsewhere in India and across the world.

Each paper in this volume was anonymously peer reviewed by linguists with expertise in the particular languages or subject areas of the papers. All the papers then underwent revision and improvements as a result of the review process and in consultation with the editors. Our aim has been to produce a volume of quality, containing work on a variety of languages and from a variety of approaches, representing the current state of research in the field.

In the field of descriptive phonology, Gwendolyn Hyslop presents the first ever detailed study of the core phonology of Kurtöp, an almost completely undescribed Tibeto-Burman language spoken in Eastern Bhutan within a stone's throw of the border with Arunachal Pradesh. She then further situates Kurtöp phonology with respect to the phonologies of many North East Indian languages. Another important first is Stephen Morey's description of tones in the Numhpuk Singpho language of South Eastern Arunachal Pradesh, which is shown to differ in some respects from that of the closely related (and better-known) Jingpho language of Burma. Morey also includes notes relating to field investigation of North East Indian tonal languages in a more general sense, which are supported by instrumental findings. In 'Tonality and the Analysis of Sub-Minimal Words in Ao', T. Temsunungsang finds cause to question prevailing theories of word minimality on the basis of data from Mongsen and Chungli, both dialects of the Ao language of Nagaland; Temsunungsang also supports his analysis with clearly-illustrated instrumental findings. Rounding off the phonology papers, Robbins Burling presents a fascinating account of changes in the history of Bodo-Garo phonology which have been "undone", often through the effects of loanword assimilation. Mysteriously, it appears that Bodo-Garo languages conspire to return, over time, to a characteristic phonological profile despite sporadic forays into other phonological realms!

Turning to the lexicon, Shobha Satyanath and Nazrin Laskar present a corpus-based analysis of the lexicon of Bishnupriya, a language of Indo-Aryan and Tibeto-Burman parentage spoken primarily in Southern Assam. As a result of their analysis, they are able to shed light on some important aspects of the history of this fascinating language and culture forged through intense contact. We hope that this will be the first of many NEILS papers to address the important topic of contact and language mixing in North East India head-on. In 'Shafer's "parallels" between Khasi and Sino-Tibetan', Gerard Diffloth revisits the mystery of shared vocabulary in Khasi and Sino-Tibetan, adding a provocative new chapter to the ongoing interdisciplinary discussion concerning the precise nature of historical relations between Austroasiatic and Sino-Tibetan language populations. Turning to the Tai languages, Bishakha Das presents a study of kinship terms in Khamti, working from primary field data collected by the author herself. Finally, a paper by Mark Post discusses intransitive verbs of position, existence, location and possession in the Tani languages,

focusing in particular on the Galo language of Arunachal Pradesh. He also includes some discussion on the reconstruction of these verb types to Proto-Tani, as well as some of the grammaticalization pathways taken by them in the Galo language.

Five papers in this collection address morphosyntactic and semantic topics. In 'Causatives in four Bodo-Garo languages', U.V. Joseph describes the current status and distribution of several now unproductive causative prefixes in Bodo, Garo, Rabha and Tiwa, all overwhelmingly suffixing languages on which he has conducted original fieldwork. In the same area, Seino van Breugel presents the first ever published descriptive paper on the Atong language of Meghalaya, focusing particularly on the intriguing topic of morphology functioning both within the nominal and verbal areas of the grammar. Returning to Bishnupriya, Nazrin Laskar addresses the broad topic of temporality, analysing the tense, mood and aspectual system on the basis of natural speech data collected in the field. Finally, two papers address the perennially interesting topic of non-finite verbs in Assamese (aka "explicator compound verbs"); while Dipima Buragohain presents a comparative analysis of similar types of structures in Kashmiri, Runima Chowdhary attempts a comprehensive analysis of the Assamese system, including forays into other related syntactic phenomena.

The final two papers reach out to two more general, but absolutely critical, topics in the study of North East Indian languages. In 'Doing fieldwork on the Singpho language of North Eastern India', Palash Kumar Nath presents a rare first-hand account of the experiences of a local fieldworker, reporting both on the joys and fascinations as well as the many hurdles and challenges encountered in his work. Happily, Mr. Nath's work continues apace. The volume is brought to a close by Madhumita Barbora and Mark Post, who argue for the uniqueness and intrinsic value of certain linguistic features of the Tani languages of Arunachal Pradesh, the potential endangerment faced by these languages by virtue of the rapid spread of lingua francas, and the necessity for steps to be taken to stem the tide of loss. In particular, it contains an up-to-the-minute report on ongoing efforts being made by the Galo community in their 'Quest for a script'.

The editorial duties in this volume's preparation were shared equally between Stephen Morey and Mark Post. As co-editors, we would like to extend our sincere thanks to the members and students of the Department of Linguistics, Gauhati University, whose tireless efforts made the

international meeting both enjoyable and very productive. We thank all the participants and in particular those whose papers appear in the volume. We also thank the editorial unit of Cambridge University Press India Private Limited for their efforts in preparing this volume.

Stephen Morey   **Mark Post**
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Foreword

Jyotiprakash Tamuli
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The North East Indian Linguistics Society (NEILS) was set up in order to address several local concerns with global implications. The foremost among these concerns is undoubtedly to provide an indigenous forum where students of language and linguistics and researchers working on one or more of the numerous languages of the region could regularly meet and exchange ideas.

The potential relevance for a forum of this kind hardly needs to be laboured. Every year, especially during the winter season, linguists from home and abroad spend a few months or weeks in various parts of the North East, documenting languages and collecting linguistic data before analyzing, describing and writing up the results in the tranquility of their home institutions. However, there has been virtually no context or opportunity for meetings with local academic faculty or researchers. To some of us, this was an extraordinary situation, given that there are advantages for visiting and local researchers alike to be able to meet and to explore and develop areas of mutual concern: for the various universities located in the North East, field visits by international researchers represent a potential opportunity to build capacity among their own researchers through creating an ambient environment for both sides to meet. For the international researchers, meetings with local scholars create opportunities for database-expansion, collaboration, and enrichment of their project's perspective.

Personally, I see capacity building as an essential component of any effort that would seek to address the wide gap that seems to currently exist between the linguistic richness of the North East and the state of readiness on the part of the local scholarship (in terms of the requisite mind set and theoretical knowledge as well as methodological skills) to explore this richness. In this context, I am reminded of what Kenneth Pike told V.R. Prabodhachandran Nair, a veteran linguist from the University of Kerala during a visit there when the latter asked him why so little data from the Indian languages found place in the literature of linguistics. Pike reportedly cited the scarcity of reliable and well-articulated data as the prime reason, and suggested that Indian linguists could be more proactive in addressing this imbalance. In my view, creating contexts such as NEILS, where beginning students and local scholars have an opportunity of exposure to a range of good practices followed by experts on a data-rich and descriptively-oriented approach to the study of the languages of the North East is an important strategy for promoting the visibility of the indigenous languages in the larger linguistics scenario and ensuring an increased participation of the local scholarship in such efforts through imbibing some of these good practices.

From our personal experience we can confirm that such initiatives can lead to mutually beneficial results. We've had instances where local students initially trained on-site in standard practices of data collection and transcription by visiting scholars have realized at subsequent stages that they could utilise their local knowledge and insights as well as communicative ability and rapport with the local communities, and thereby contribute to the quality of research output. Going by recent trends in the areas of field research in linguistics and language education in multi-lingual contexts which seek to accord the community and their language aspirations a greater importance than has been the practice in the past, such perceptions constitute an important learning experience for these local scholars.

At the same time, to emphasize such efforts at relationship building by beginning students and researchers as a necessary favourable condition for field research is, of course, not to take away from the abiding importance of mastering the two essential prerequisites of language description: data and analysis. Scott Delancey of the University of Oregon had once discussed with one of the organizers of NEILS the importance of ensuring that the student (i) knows what data to record and how to record it accurately and (ii) acquires the appropriate skills of linguistic/grammatical

analysis so as to be able to translate the data, gloss the data, use it as raw material for developing a curriculum, writing a grammar or a dictionary or a lesson plan. He pointed out that if the students cannot do that, then they are always just hired labour, going out and harvesting data for somebody else to process and use. If the kinds of academic interaction between the local and visiting scholars that have been initiated at the instance of NEILS are anything to go by, we have reasons to believe that there is a growing awareness in the relevant circles of what should constitute a sound roadmap for linguistic studies in the North East.

In my view, establishing good practices in linguistic fieldwork that can result from the global-local partnership that NEILS seeks to promote has the potential of uncovering fresh issues and perspectives in linguistic research. Such issues and perspectives may "happen to be not currently on the anvil or not pressing with respect to the language on the anvil, namely English," (Kelkar 1997: viii), and yet well be able to find their way into present-day research concerns. The day this happens would be the day when sound descriptive linguistic insights based on the data from the languages of the North East are able to contribute to and enrich general linguistics in the healthy symbiosis envisioned by Robins (1989: 2).

I have often heard the concern voiced by senior Indian academics in the linguistics conclaves that I have attended at the present moribund state of linguistics in different parts of India. Realistically though, any effort to change such a state of affairs would need to be in the direction of bringing the discipline closer to the concerns of specific individual communities of speakers. Changes in current practices of doing linguistics in a spatio-temporal vacuum in favour of linguistic studies that are more rooted in the social and cultural milieus of specific communities can, in my view, lead to the salutary effect of revitalizing the discipline by changing current perceptions of its relevance in the eyes of the communities. Such changes would, however, need to address some of the ambiguities inherent in the practice of linguistics, including what we mean by doing grammar. In this regard, I am reminded of the late James D. McCawley's remark on Frederick Newmeyer's (1996: 168) statement that virtually all grammarians take a modular approach to the interaction of grammatical principles. McCawley remarked that this statement "is reminiscent of the ecumenical bromide that 'We all believe in the same God': it ignores the wild differences among various schools of linguistics as to what modules there are and how they can interact" (McCawley 1999: 12). An interpretation of the term grammar, and one that is more in accord with a data-based

and descriptively-oriented approach, is likely to follow from the kind of practices that NEILS earnestly advocates and is keen to promote.

The rise in computer-based approaches to language data management and the rise in the significance of statistical statements regarding patterns of language use over the last three or four decades have led to a new kind of empowerment for data-oriented linguistic research practices. There is a growing realization in the Indian academia of the need to plan and create linguistic corpora of various kinds as a preamble to investigating the structure and use of individual languages. I hope that this will be one area in which NEILS is able to play an active role in furthering this goal through appropriate initiatives. It is a cherished objective of NEILS to evolve a model of cooperation between various segments of the academic fraternity, such that they are able, through such cooperation, to form robust and sustainable collaborative linkages on the numerous and pressing linguistic activities in the North East relating to teaching-learning, training and research that need to be initiated and strengthened. As one of its organizers, I see this as a gradual process which can nevertheless come about through a conscious departure from a characteristic us-versus-them syndrome, and through a building of bridges of understanding. Such an understanding would, in my view, need to draw as much from a better realization on the part of visiting colleagues of the linguistic priorities, needs and constraints of local community members and scholars, as from a corresponding realization by the local scholarship of the need to benchmark indigenous academic efforts and practices against international standards, if their efforts are to be taken seriously by the global fraternity. All this, indeed, cannot happen overnight, but an awareness of these issues is a necessary prerequisite for any step in the right direction. I would like to believe that the NEILS initiative has an important role to play in this regard.

The present volume, which is a collection of articles representing the latest research in North East Indian linguistics, is a testimony of cooperation and partnership at various levels. At the same time, without the earnest determination with which the co-editors oversaw the peer-review process, editing and publication of the proceedings, the results of the maiden event of NEILS would quite likely have followed the course that many similar proceedings have followed before. To Stephen and Mark, my NEILS compatriots and co-editors of this volume, I offer my sincere thanks and gratitude.

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