

North East Indian Linguistics

Volume 3

Edited by

Gwendolyn Hyslop
Stephen Morey
Mark W. Post

North East
Indian Linguistics Society

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BOOKS

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Published by
Cambridge University Press India Pvt. Ltd.
under the imprint of Foundation Books
Cambridge House, 4381/4 Ansari Road, Daryaganj, **New Delhi** 110002

Cambridge University Press India Pvt. Ltd.
C-22, C-Block, Brigade M.M., K.R. Road, Jayanagar, **Bengaluru** 560 070
Plot No. 80, Service Industries, Shirvane, Sector-1, Nerul,
Navi Mumbai 400 706
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Hyderabad 500 029
Agarwal Pride, 'A' Wing, 1308 Kasba Peth, Near Surya Hospital,
Pune 411 011

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First Published 2011

ISBN 978-81-7596-793-9

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Typeset at Sanchauli Image Composers, New Delhi.

Published by Manas Saikia for Cambridge University Press India Pvt. Ltd.
and printed at Sanat Printers, Kundli, Haryana

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Foreword

Chungkham Yashawanta Singh
Manipur University

1. Linguistic diversity in India

It is a fact that India is one of the most linguistically diverse countries in the world, with seven language families; namely: Indo-Aryan (of Indo-European), Dravidian, Austroasiatic, Tibeto-Burman (of Sino-Tibetan), Tai (of Tai-Kadai), Andamanese and Great Andamanese which is newly added by Abbi (2006). The North East can be described as a mini-India because there are so many different communities having various cultures and speaking various mother tongues. For example, from the Dravidian language family, particularly Tamil but also Malayalam from Kerala are spoken by inhabitants in Moreh in Manipur, a small Indo-Myanmar border trade town 109 km from Imphal. They were driven out from Mandalay in 1960 by the Burmese Army. The North East is a garden of various languages and dialects with more than one hundred various mother tongues, especially Tibeto-Burman (TB) languages – most of which are neither fully documented nor scientifically described.

Manipur has officially recognised 33 tribal languages. Besides these, Manipuri (also called Meitei) itself has six dialects, namely, Sekmai, Khurkhul, Andro, Phayeng, Koutruk and Kwatha. All these tribal languages are not yet fully and scientifically described; of these some are endangered, namely, Tarao, Monshang, Moyon, Koireng, etc. Documentation of these languages is, of course, felt to be very necessary; loss of a language goes with the loss of beliefs, culture, ecology and medicinal herbal knowledge. In Manipur there was a language called

Chakpa, spoken in Andro and Phayeng; now it was extinct. Documentation was not properly done.

2. Linguistic situation

There are some extremely complex linguistic situations in the North East. One is in the Churachandpur district of Manipur where the young Hmars understand Paite, Mizo, Vaiphei, and Thadou while the old folks understand three more speech forms, namely Simte, Zou and Gangte. These speech forms are mutually intelligible to some extent and share a great number of common features in phonology, morphology and syntax. It remains to be demonstrated which of these should be treated as separate languages, and which as dialects of the same language. The situation is complicated by other facts. Whereas the Hmars of Churachandpur understand Paite, the Thadous of Sajik Tampak in Chandel district, know Paite only a little.

Opposite to this is Ukhrul district where there are more than 200 villages, each with a distinct speech form. They are mutually unintelligible. When they talk to each other (e.g. between Hundung and Toloy villages) they automatically use either the Ukhrul dialect, the standard variety of the headquarters of the district, or Manipuri as their lingua franca (Singh 1995).

Unlike the linguistic situations of the above two districts, there is a peculiar linguistic situation that may be found in the small border town of Moreh, on the Indo-Myanmar border. There, three language families co-exist, viz. Indo-Aryan (Hindi and Punjabi), Dravidian (Malayam and Tamil) and TB languages. Many ethnic groups speaking different speech forms are concentrated in this small town. They are Hmar, Thadou, Paite, Gangte, Tiddim-Chin, Tezang, Mizo and Meitei. These various groups use Manipuri as their lingua-franca.

The influence of the Manipuri language is great. Myanmarese traders also speak Manipuri and the various ethnic groups inhabiting this small town have borrowed many day-to-day words both from Manipuri as well as Burmese. Since the town is a business centre, interaction – especially between the Manipuri and Myanmarese – is via a trade language. It is conceivable that a new pidgin may emerge ultimately from the three predominant languages of the area – Hindi, Manipuri and Burmese (Singh 1995). It is also noticed that there are many Manipuri-Burmese

bilinguals along the Myanmar border, as well many Tamil-Burmese bilinguals.

It is also a fact that in every district of Manipur, communities live together and are in constant contact with each other. From such contact there may arise new speech forms, as is the case in, for example, the border areas of Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina. On the Iberian peninsula, as is well known, there is a geographical dialect continuum where dialects of Catalan, Spanish and Portuguese merge gradually into one another, and where the number of languages recognized as being spoken depends on the autonomous, standard varieties that have succeeded in raising themselves over the dialect continuum (see Kurath 1972). Similar dynamics may be found in our region.

The opening of Department of Manipuri Language and Literature in Jawaharlal Nehru Post Graduate Centre, Imphal in 1972, has made a turning point in the scientific study of language in Manipur. Some unpublished PhD theses have come up, viz., M. S. Ningomba's *Maring Grammar* (1976), P. C. Thoudam's *A Grammatical Sketch of Meiteilon* (1980), P. Madhubala's *Manipuri Grammar* (1979), Ch. Y. Singh's *Some Aspects of Manipuri Syntax* (1984), Nilamani Singh's *An Outline of Meiteilon Interrogative* (1985), U. Chetan's *Structural Analysis of Manipuri Language* (1976), and Nonigopal Singh's *A Meitei Grammar of Roots and Affixes* (1987). Scientific studies on various aspects of a variety of languages of Manipur have grown in significance since 1986, when the Department of Linguistics was established in Manipur University. Studies on various aspects and on various languages have started, namely, on the Manipuri language and others, for instance, Aimol, Kom, Hmar, Tangkhul, Lamkang, Chothe, Zou, Rongmei, Chiru, Sizang, Sukte, etc. These studies are on the descriptive front.

The second and third fronts of linguistic research are on Sociolinguistics and Lexicography. Many MPhil. dissertations and many PhD theses on various aspects are made; MA field reports on various tribal languages have been completed since 1986.

Studies on TB languages of Manipur by the Department are remarkable. Some of the projects worth mentioning are as follows. Dr N. Pramodini is undergoing "Development of NE Languages: Manipuri, Nurturing NE Languages on Digital Medium"; Dr S. Imoba's "Dictionary Project on Manipuri to English (2002-03)"; "Dictionary Project on Manipuri-Hindi-English (2006-09)" and another project on "Survey of Surnames in Manipuri" (ongoing). Prof. Madhubala is

investigating a project on “Manipuri Verbal Lexicon” (2006–09). Prof. Yashawanta Singh had completed two projects: “Studies of endangered tribal languages of Manipur” and “Studies of tribal languages of Manipur”, which has now stepped into the Northeast WordNet Consortium. Significant works have come up from many scholars, namely Thoudam’s *Remedial Manipuri Grammar* (1988), Ningomba’s *Meitei Lonmit* (1981), D. N. S. Bhatt and Ningomba’s *Manipuri Grammar* (1997); Ch. Y. Singh’s *Manipuri Grammar* (2000) and *Tarao Grammar* (2002); N.S. Singh’s *A Grammar of Paite* (2006); Madhubala’s *Manipuri Phonology* (2002), Imoba’s *Manipuri to English Dictionary*, (2004); Surmangol Sharma’s *Learner’s Manipuri-English Dictionary* (2006), Hidam Dolen’s *Structure of Manipuri Meaning* (2004), and H. Singh’s *Chothe Grammar* (2008). Manipuri has also been studied at the University of Northern Texas by Shobhana Chelliah, producing *A Grammar of Meithei* (Chelliah 1997). Chelliah and Harimohon Thounaojam Singh then wrote *Lamkang Grammar* which was published in *Linguistics of Tibeto-Burman Area* (Chelliah and Singh 2007).

As yet, no joint venture with any foreign university has been made. However, the Central Institute of Indian languages, Mysore (CIIL) has taken a magnificent step in the study of the TB languages of the Northeast including the languages of Manipur. CIIL has taken up a grand project/programme called North-East Language Development (NELD) since 2003. Under this programme some languages have started to be described, for instance, Kom, Thangal, Chothe, Aimol, Hmar, Sukte, Mao, and Tangkhul, in Manipur; other languages of the Northeast under this programme are Adi, Nocte, Ao, Dimasa, Tiwar, Mishing, Riang, Karbi, Pnar, and Galo, etc.

Other Indian scholars working on languages of the North East include U. V. Joseph, whose mammoth grammar of Rabha has now been published (Joseph 2007), Shobha Satyanath, who has worked on Bishnupuriya, and A. K. Mishra.

The contacts built between scholars from Manipur University and those from outside India have been strengthened by the NEILS conferences and volumes such as this, giving Manipuri linguists a great opportunity to share their knowledge with overseas scholars and interact with them. Languages of the North East, such as Tai Phake and Aiton, Boro, Garo, Meitei, Mongsen Ao, Deuri, Karbi, Khasi, Deuri, Kok Borok, Tai Ahom, Singpho, Galo and Atong have been the source of substantial language descriptions by scholars like Banchob, Burling, Chelliah, Coupe,

Grüssner, Jacquesson, Morey, Post and van Breugel, from Thailand, USA, Australia, Germany, France and the Netherlands. In addition, scholars like Jackson Sun from Taiwan and Alfons Weidert from Germany added very much to our knowledge of historical and comparative linguistics in the North East.

3. Points of relationship

The TB languages of the Northeast have some common lexical items, especially in body parts, numerals, and heavenly bodies. For example, the words *mi[k]/[t]* 'eye', *sam* 'hair', *lu (kok)* 'head', *panga/nga* 'five', etc. are common amongst the TB languages of North East India. Not only this, the occurrence of a velar nasal [ŋ] is found in all the languages of Manipur as well as in the TB languages of North East India, and also in Burmese and Lai (Hakha and Falam) for instance, *ngaa* 'fish'. Morphologically there are usually only two major categories, namely, noun and verb; suffixes are more prevalent than prefixes. Syntactically, functional types of sentences are formed by the addition of the respective markers to the verb.

Manipuri has some peculiar linguistic features, such as semantic reduplication; for instance, *paamba kei* 'tiger' (*paamba* 'tiger' is the word for tiger found at the time of the Khuman principality (14 century) and *kei* is 'tiger' in the speech of the Ningthouja clan of the Meitei. Another feature is of polite forms, or honorifics: for example, a polite form of the second person pronoun *nang* 'you' is *asom/adom*; and, polite sentences can be formed by addition of *-bi/-pi* to the verb as well as by use of a lexeme *canbiduna/ thoujanbiduna* 'kindly'. Expressions can be made even more polite by use of an archaic alternant such as *cep-pi-ro* (instead of the more common *tum-bi-ro* 'please sleep' (*cep* = *tum* 'sleep')).

4. Conclusion

Many things remain to be done; the scope of study of TB languages of North East India is very vast. A scientific and systematic study of the TB languages of North East India may lead to new challenges to our current linguistic theories. The study of the more than 100 TB languages of this region may weaken or may strengthen Greenberg's Universals in

the field of phonology, morphology and syntax, for example (Singh 2000). Detailed research can be conducted on the following points:

- a) the descriptive study of TB languages,
- b) sociolinguistic study of each ethnic group,
- c) the historical and comparative study of grammars, and
- d) re-examination of sub-grouping of TB languages.

This book and the papers herein take modest but important steps in these directions. We all look forward to more.

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A Note from the Editors

The papers collected for this volume were initially presented at the Third International Conference of the North East Indian Linguistics Society (NEILS), held on January 18–22, 2008 at the Don Bosco Institute in Guwahati, Assam. The conference was ably hosted by the Department of Linguistics of Gauhati University, in collaboration with scholars from the Research Centre for Linguistic Typology of La Trobe University (Melbourne, AU) and from the Department of Linguistics of the University of Oregon (USA). As the third such volume in the North East Indian Linguistics series, this collection offers plentiful evidence that North East India is not only one of the richest and most diverse cultural-linguistic areas in all Asia, but is quickly becoming one of the richest and most diverse research areas in the field of descriptive linguistics as well.

We are especially pleased to note that the present volume both continues the existing trend of diversity – papers are included here from well-known scholars based in Australia, in several states of the USA, in Japan, and throughout North East India – and extends this by introducing several committed young researchers who are now making their first enduring marks on the field. All papers appearing here, as in previous volumes of the series, were anonymously peer-reviewed by leading international specialists in the paper subfields, underwent a rigorous revision process in close consultation with the editors, and were finally subjected to approval by the editorial staff at Cambridge University Press India Pvt. Ltd. Our aim, here as in previous volumes, has been to bridge the longstanding gaps between local and international researchers and readerships, and to produce a volume of the highest quality obtainable while reflecting the current state of research in our field.

An important focus of the third NEILS conference was on the languages of Manipur. One of the tiniest of Indian states, Manipur is also among the richest and yet least well-understood cultural-linguistic areas in Asia. Home to an untold number of mainly Kuki-Chin languages – most of them practically unknown to the outside linguistic world – Manipur is also home to a dedicated and active network of indigenous linguists working on such fascinating and little-known languages as Aimol, Anal, Inpui, Koirang, Kom, Chothe, Moyon, Monshang, Sukte, and of course, Meithei (Manipuri) the language spoken by a majority of the people of Manipur. We are very pleased to be able to bring some of the work from this group of scholars to the attention of a wider international audience.

Three papers from this group were finished quite early and were thus included in the second NEILS volume (Aimol 2010; Betholia 2010; Singh 2010). The present volume begins with a foreword by Yashawanta Singh, senior most and one of the most active of Manipuri linguists, and is followed by a special section dedicated to the Languages of Manipur. Surmangol Sharma and Gopendro Singh open this section with a paper on pronominal proclitics in the little-known Kuki-Chin language Purum, also comparing them with similar forms in Manipuri. Thounaojam Harimohon, another indigenous linguist of Manipur, then presents a rare and fascinating insight into the evolution and development of Meitei script, a Brahmic-type script whose story provides a glimpse into aspects of the historical diffusion of South Asian orthographies across South East Asia.

Branching away from Manipur, the next section focuses on the “Sal” group of languages, a hypothesized genetic meso-grouping within Tibeto-Burman of Bodo-Garo, “Konyak Naga” and Jinghpaw first proposed by Robbins Burling (1983). Burling himself first sets the scene with a background discussion of three meanings of the terms “language” and “dialect” in North East India. Speaking from decades of experience of interacting with linguists and non-linguists in the North East who often use these terms with different goals and meanings, Burling helpfully provides an analysis of each usage in an attempt to increase mutual understanding. Dan Wood follows with a preliminary reconstruction of the Bodo-Garo noun phrase, one of several recent advances in comparative-historical Bodo-Garo studies emerging from the University of Oregon, others of which will be included in the next NEILS volume. The next paper by Scott DeLancey, also of the University of Oregon,

focuses on one corner of the “triangle” of the Sal hypothesis. Arguing that morphological correspondences among Nocte and Jinghpaw in the tense-agreement complex provide strong evidence of a relationship at the Proto-Sal level, DeLancey speculates that the absence of such structures in Proto-Bodo-Garo may owe to partial creolization of the latter (a hypothesis also anticipated by Burling 2007). In the same geographical, genetic and typological area, Stephen Morey rounds off the Sal group papers with a discussion of a very complex system of portmanteau agreement markers in Tangsa varieties, some of which here receive their first ever descriptive treatment.

Turning to the perennially fascinating topic of nominalization and nominalization-based constructions in Tibeto-Burman, two papers add important new genetic and typological dimensions to the discussion. While most past studies have focused either on relatively isolating languages like Lahu (Matisoff 1972) or strongly agglutinating languages of the Eastern Himalaya like Athpare and Belhare (Bickel 1999), Keisuke Huziwara here presents a historically well-backgrounded discussion of nominalization in Marma, an almost completely undescribed dialect of Arakanese spoken in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Linda Konnerth follows with an analysis of nominalization in Karbi (Mikir), a relatively more accessible but still severely undescribed Tibeto-Burman language of Assam.

Two papers present new studies of aspects of the Tani languages of Arunachal Pradesh, Tibet and Assam. In the context of a broader study of the environmental shaping of language in Tibeto-Burman, Mark W. Post presents a treatment of the interaction between different terrain types and the semantic evolution of “topographical deixis” (up/down/same-level directionals) in the Tani languages, focusing especially on Apatani, Galo and Mising. In the first ever comparative study of Mising dialects, Jugendra Pegu then presents a paper on the behaviour of the ubiquitous Tani article-cum-copula *-ə*. On the basis of his study, Pegu helpfully suggests a broad division of Mising dialects into *geminating* (more Galo-like) and *non-geminating* (more Adi-like) morphophonological types. It is likely that Pegu’s findings will eventually prove to be of real significance for our understanding of the areal and genetic shaping of Mising, as well as, perhaps, the Tani languages more generally.

The final two sections turn to two of the remaining three genetic groups represented in North East India, namely Eastern Indo-Aryan and Austroasiatic. In addition to the expected papers on Standard Assamese,

in which Jagat Kalita presents a study of NP referential marking and modification and Runima Chowdhary works through a detailed analysis of copula constructions, Virginia Phillips reminds us of the underlying (and little-studied) diversity of Eastern Indo-Aryan languages in her study of case marking in Hajong. In the tradition of Satyanath and Laskar (2008), Phillips attempts to unravel diverse layers of Tibeto-Burman and Indo-Aryan origin in a language which is obviously a product of intense and enduring population contacts. Finally, Hemanga Dutta adds significantly to the existing literature on Austroasiatic languages of North East India – which has been overwhelmingly dominated by studies of Standard Khasi – in his study of derivational morphology in Pnar, a little-known and highly endangered Austroasiatic language of the Jaintia Hills.

Editorial duties for the present volume have been equally shared among the alphabetically-listed editors, who engaged in long-term collaboration among a large group of geographically-dispersed people – most of whom, to make matters more difficult, are almost constantly on the move! Paper drafts often went through four or five revisions, shuttling between authors who might be in Imphal, Tezpur, or Ann Arbor, reviewers who might be in Delhi, Paris or Canberra, and editors who might be in Pasighat, Bangkok, or Thimphu on any given day of the week. It goes without saying that the patience and hard work of many people – together with the twin modern-day godsend of email and mobile telephones – were required to bring it off successfully, and we thank them most sincerely. As always, our greatest thanks go to the staff and students of the Department of Linguistics at Gauhati University, both for hosting the 3rd NEILS conference and for doing so much to provide a local and international nexus for the study of North East Indian languages. Thanks also go to Father Thomas of the Don Bosco Institute for once again extending use of the beautiful Don Bosco conference facilities – replete with expansive views of the mighty Brahmaputra! – to Gauhati University's ex-Vice Chancellor Prof. Amarjyoti Chowdhury for enabling financial and logistical support for the conference, and to the staff of the Research Centre for Linguistic Typology of La Trobe University – in particular Ms Siew-Peng Condon – for logistical support including periodical maintenance of the NEILS website (<http://www.latrobe.edu.au/rc/lt/Neils/Neils.htm>). We also thank the editorial staff of Cambridge University Press India Pvt. Ltd., both for continuing to support the NEILS endeavour to build and maintain international bridges of quality research

and publications in linguistics and for, shall we say, keeping us on our stylistic toes. One of the distinct pleasures of writing and publishing in English in India is that one often encounters so-called “non-native speakers” of English who are both quite prepared to instruct an American or an Australian on the rules of “proper” English phrasing and entirely equal to the task! We also thank the dozens of contributors and anonymous peer-reviewers who worked so hard to make this volume as good as it could be.

But finally, we would like to take this opportunity to thank the dozens and possibly hundreds of native-speaker consultants who provided the database for every paper in this volume, and who continue to maintain that database by speaking their languages and teaching them to their children. Everyone who comes to the North East, it seems to us, ends up wanting to stay, and this is clearly just as much due to the fascinating opportunities for research and study that exist here as it is due to the wonderful human-cultural environment in which one is privileged to be able to reside for a time. So, people of the North East, we thank you, and to you we dedicate this volume.

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