

North East Indian Linguistics

Volume 2

Edited by

Stephen Morey • Mark Post

North East
Indian Linguistics Society

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B O O K S

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Foreword

North East India: 1954

I first came to North East India in 1954, but as I write, it is 2008, 54 years later. 54 years in the other direction would take us back to 1900. In my imagination that early period seems much longer than the mere 54 years that have rushed by while I've been watching. Can North East India possibly have changed as much in the last 54 years as I imagine it to have changed in the previous 54?

In 1954, it was already possible to fly into Guwahati from Calcutta, and probably from Delhi. Buses already stopped for a rest at Nongpho on the way to Shillong, so that first-time visitors from other parts of India had the chance to be astonished to see Khasi women, rather than men, presiding at the shops and stalls that lined the road. Shillong was the capital of Assam, then. Assam was a larger state then than now, but Shillong was a smaller place. I don't even remember taxis in Shillong, certainly not the long lines that we find today. Arunachal was still NEFA, and I believe Gauhati University was the only one in the North East.

My family and I lived in the Garo Hills for most of the two years we spent in India. Even Shillong was too far away for a visit except on the way in, and again on the way out, when we had to deal with paper work. I never went further up the valley than Jorabat on the road to Shillong. To go by bus from Guwahati to Tura in the Garo Hills required an overnight in Goalpara. It was possible to make the trip by jeep in a single day, but only by leaving from Guwahati early enough to make the last 'timing' on the road up from the valley. That road was unpaved and had only one lane, so traffic could move in only one direction at a time. At three or four set times during the day, as many as a dozen trucks, buses, and an occasional jeep, would collect at the upper gate in Tura and at the lower gate, in Phulbari.

The gates were opened for just long enough to let the two clutches of vehicles through, and a couple of hours later they met at the middle gate. Travellers usually had enough time for a cup of tea, but when everyone had arrived, the third (middle) gate was opened briefly to let the vehicles pass in both directions.

There were not many other motorable roads in the Garo Hills in those days. High school boys thought nothing of a four day walk from their homes in the centre of the Garo hills to reach their school in Tura. I once walked for four or five days to get from Tura to Baghmara in the southeastern part of the district. With the exception of a few hours in a dugout canoe on the Simsang (Someswari) River, I then walked for several additional days north across the mountain ridge to a small and isolated village called Simsanggre, now transformed into the city of Williamnagar, and then east to reach the border between the Garo and Khasi Hills. Much of my walk across the district was through forest, some of it secondary growth, but much was graced with serious trees. Real forest is harder to find in the Garo Hills now. The population has more than doubled, the 'jhum' cycle has grown shorter, and the land is less productive. The spread of wet rice into areas where there had been none in the fifties has helped to prevent, or postpone, disaster.

I remember no Garo in the fifties who had a radio. Not even Tura had the electricity to run a radio. I remember no Garo who owned or drove a car or jeep, and I remember no motorcycles at all. No telephone line connected Tura to the rest of the world, but telegrams came and went. Packaged nibbles such as the chocolate bars and the chips that hang today in every *dokan* were unknown. Chloroquine was still such a safe and reliable cure for malaria that we hardly took a bout of 'fever' more seriously than a bad cold.

Only about a third of the Garos were Christians in the fifties. Most of these were Baptists, though the Catholics had sent their emissaries. Garos explained the difference to me – Catholics could drink rice beer; Baptists could not. Perhaps that helps to explain the more rapid expansion of the Catholic church in the last 54 years. I never managed to reconcile myself to American Baptist hymns floating out of bamboo churches that lay more than a day's walk from a motorable road, but for many Garos, Christianity came associated with modernity. It was a way of joining the larger world. Garos were also fully capable of recognising the benefits of modern medicine, and they were not likely to remain content with sacrificing to the spirits when there were better ways to treat disease.

I chose to work in an area where there were no Christians, no wet rice, no schools, and where no one could speak more than a few words of any language but Garo. The village of Rengsanggri, where I lived, was the kind of traditional place sought out by romantic anthropologists of the fifties. By 1996, when I was finally able to return to the Garo Hills, most Rengsanggri villagers had become Christians. A dwindling handful still resisted the new religion, but the rest were divided among three Christian denominations – Baptists, Catholics and ‘Pull Gospel’ (Full Gospel). I am content that Christianity did not, after all, change my friends in Rengsanggri so very much. They retain their same joy in life, their resilience in the face of awful hardship, their utter honesty, and their wonderful sense of humour. They can laugh at themselves, so they can laugh at one another. They accept my reciprocal teasing with great good cheer. They also retain, with astonishingly little change, their complex matrilineal kinship system, the aspect of their culture that first drew me to the Garo Hills.

I was too isolated in the Garo Hills to have much contact with other scholars but they were few in any case. I did get to know a handful of anthropologists and linguists in Guwahati, including the anthropologists M. C. Goswami, and D. N. Majumdar, and the linguist P. C. Bhattacharya. The only foreign scholar I met while I was in the North East in the fifties was Chie Nakane from Japan who passed briefly through the Garo Hills while I was there. When I returned to the United States in 1956, area studies were getting started, but I belonged neither with the Indianists nor with the Southeast Asianists. The Indianists were busy with things like the Jajmani system and the great and little traditions, neither of which had any relevance for my experience in the Northeastern hills. The southeast Asianists thought that Southeast Asia stopped at the Indo-Burma border. I was left alone.

In 1956, when I left North East India, I asked myself seriously whether I would ever have a chance to return. Travel was so difficult, and so expensive, that another trip could not be taken for granted. Now, a half-century later, it seems strange that I could have had such a thought, but the very ease of travel changes the way one feels about a place, and it changes the kind of people who travel. I stayed in North East India for two years and it was an overwhelming experience. Can it ever be such an experience for someone who pops in for a month and then pops out again?

The first North East Indian Linguistic Society conference in Guwahati in early 2006 came to me as an astonishment. Here, suddenly, of scholars, both local and foreign, all fascinated by the part of the world

that had fascinated me for so long. It is true that I could not entirely escape a slight sense of crowding. The anthropologist in me cannot deny my earlier pleasure in having so much so nearly to myself. But my stronger emotion is not that of crowding, but it is, rather, the joy of companionship. That conference, and the conferences that have followed each January, have fostered a sense community among linguists who are interested in the North East. Of course I welcome the many foreigners who have joined me in North East India, but I must confess to being even more pleased that so many speakers of so many Northeastern languages are now able to contribute to our growing knowledge of their languages and to share in our excitement at discovery. The volumes of papers from the NEILS conferences, of which this is the second, will be an enduring testament to what we are learning.

I am delighted, at last, to have colleagues who share so many of my interests. Thank you for joining me.

Robbins Burling
University of Michigan

A Note from the Editors

It is with great pleasure that we present this volume of papers resulting from the annual International Conferences of the North East Indian Linguistics Society (NEILS). The majority of the papers in the volume were presented at the Second NEILS Conference, held in February 5–9, 2007 at the Don Bosco Institute in Guwahati, Assam, hosted by the Department of Linguistics of Gauhati University. In addition, the volume contains four papers (1, 9, 12 and 13) which were presented at the Third NEILS Conference, held in January 18–22, 2008, at the same venue.

We are especially pleased to report that the papers selected for this volume reflect both the richness and diversity of North East Indian languages, and also the diverse backgrounds of the many researchers who are now working in the area. The present volume includes papers produced by both students and long-established scholars, by scholars from both India and from six other countries of the world (Australia, Bhutan, Burma, France, Thailand and the United States of America), by scholars who are veterans of the region and by those whose work reflects their first experience with area languages, and by native- and non-native-speaker linguists alike. The papers submitted for this volume were anonymously peer-reviewed by an international panel of linguists with specific expertise in the languages and/or subject areas under discussion. The accepted papers then subsequently underwent revision in close consultation with the editors, and were finally subjected to approval by the editorial staff of Cambridge University Press India Pvt. Ltd. Our aim has been to produce a volume of quality which closely reflects the current state of research in the field.

The present volume carries a Foreword by Robbins Burling, the longest-serving and still one of the most active and productive researchers in the North East Indian region. The first paper is a field report by Gwendolyn Hyslop and Karma Tshering. Temporarily leaving their ongoing Kurtöp

field site across the border in Bhutan, the authors present phonological and grammatical data and analysis from Dakpa (Tawang Monpa; Arunachal Pradesh), one of the least well-understood of East Bodish languages. Although very much a preliminary report, we think it most important that this kind of data be included in the book because little work is being done, or is planned to be done, on this language in the near future and any such work will be greatly valued when a more complete linguistic study of Dakpa/Tawang Monpa is eventually undertaken, something we sincerely look forward to.

The first major section includes five papers treating the topics of ‘Tonology and Phonology in the Assam Floodplain’ – where many languages, despite relative accessibility, remain relatively poorly documented and understood. Priyankoo Sarmah and Caroline Wiltshire first present an instrumentally-supported acoustic study of Dimasa tones. As a result of their analyses, the authors are able to demonstrate the existence of three lexical tones in Dimasa, which appear to count as properties of the (monosyllabic or disyllabic) lexical word (rather than the syllable, as in some of the better known tone languages of South East Asia like Chinese or Thai). With this solid foundation in hand, it is hoped that additional research may yield insight into the behaviour of Dimasa tones at the level of the derived or inflected word and/or phonological phrase. Staying with the topic of Bodo-Garo tonology, Robbins Burling and U.V. Joseph present an analysis of Bodo Tones, finding Bodo to quite stubbornly fail to conform to the relatively more straightforward tonal analyses of closely-related languages Tiwa and Rabha. Here too, the authors are led to conclude the Bodo tone to be a word-level property (also interacting with coda segments and word context), and set the stage for a more comprehensive analysis including the tonality of words with different constituent types, as well as word-word interaction at the phrase level. The next two papers by Stephen Morey and Zeenat Tabassum treat various aspects of North East Indian Tai languages, whose tone systems are relatively much better understood. The first paper by Morey thus approaches the tricky topic of tonal realisations in Tai Phake songs. Following an instrumental analysis, the author finds that despite the simultaneous existence of a distinct song melody, lexical tones are in fact realised in songs as ‘contours within the melodic structure.’ Tabassum and Morey then present an account of ongoing work on heritage manuscripts of the Ahom Bar Amra – a late eighteenth century Ahom-Assamese lexicon – and review both continuities and discontinuities with earlier research on the same manuscripts, as well as their consequences for the reconstruction of some aspects of Proto-Southwestern Tai onset

clusters. Finally, Mukul Sarma presents the first ever in-depth account of the phonology of Barpetia Assamese, comparing it to the phonology of much better-known Assamese dialects in the process. Dialects often preserve linguistic information that is otherwise lost in standard languages, and Assamese is no different. Moreover, some of the dialects are in as much danger of extinction as many of the smaller languages of the North East, but their importance is easily overlooked.

A 'Special Section on Numerals' follows, which is introduced from a wide Tibeto-Burman perspective by Martine Mazaudon. In it, Mazaudon shows that while multiplication-and-addition-based decimal systems tend to predominate in Tibeto-Burman, a deeper look often reveals the existence of earlier or even parallel systems of considerable mathematical complexity. Urging researchers not to be content with the discovery of standard decimal systems – but rather to look deeper into variation and into related grammatical sub-systems – the author also reminds us that due to the global prevalence of decimal systems, these ancient and poorly-understood aspects of human cognition are also among the most highly endangered of linguistic sub-systems; their time may well be running out, together with the time which we have to understand them. Turning to the numeral 'one' in Khasi and Karbi, U.V. Joseph provides a fascinating study suggesting that, despite the considerable differences among these languages from quite distinct families, similarities in the form and behaviour of the numeral 'one' in classifier constructions may point to the existence of an earlier linguistic contact area. In the first NEILS paper from the incomparably rich and under-documented world of the tribal languages of Manipur, Chongom Damrengthang Aimol presents a comparative study of Kom and Aimol numerals from the perspective of a native speaker of the severely-undescribed Aimol language.

The final section brings together papers on 'Morphology and Syntax from Tani to Kuki-Chin'. Mark Post presents the first of two papers on topics in Tani grammar, presenting an account of 'predicate derivations' in the Tani languages of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Tibet. Understood quite generally as dependent formatives of a polysyllabic predicate word, the author notes discontinuities among previous researchers' approach to this quite common and unusually rich aspect of Tibeto-Burman predicate structure, and works toward a unified formal and functional framework for their analysis. Madhumita Barbora then turns to non-finite constructions in Mising, providing a data-rich analysis of their composition in this morphosyntactically complex clause-chaining and clause-subordinating language. The next two papers by Chandam Betholia and Brojen Hidam

Singh, originally presented at NEILS 2008, turn to grammatical topics in the languages of Manipur; while Betholia provides an analysis of quantifiers in Manipuri (Meithei), Singh provides a comprehensive account of negation in the severely-underdescribed Manipuri tribal language, Chothe. Both papers present data from native speaker linguists that would be otherwise unavailable to readers outside of Manipur, and their inclusion thus greatly enriches the volume as a whole. Finally, stepping slightly over the border, George Bedell and Kee Shein Mang present an analysis of benefactives in K'cho, a Kuki-Chin language with close affinities to North East Indian languages along the Burma border region, such as Mizo. Focussing closely on the valence-restructuring properties of a 'give' verb-derived predicate suffix *-pe*, the authors (the second of whom is a native speaker of K'cho) provide a rich description supported by a formal syntactic representation.

In preparing this volume, and in various other tasks associated with the mounting of the original conferences, the editors have been assisted in substantial ways by a great number of people, not all of whom can be acknowledged here. However, we particularly wish to thank the staff and students of the Department of Linguistics at Gauhati University – and in particular, Professors Jyotiprakash and Anita Tamuli – for their considerable labour in bringing off these successful events. We also thank Father V.M. Thomas of the Don Bosco Institute for extending use of their beautiful conference facilities, Professor Amarjyoti Choudhury, Ex-Vice Chancellor of Gauhati University, for his role in obtaining financial and other logistical support, the faculty and staff of the Research Centre for Linguistic Typology at La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia – and in particular Ms. Siew-Peng Condon – for assistance with the NEILS website and other logistical support, and the editorial staff at Cambridge University Press India Pvt. Ltd., for continuing to support quality research in one of the richest and yet most severely under-studied regions of the linguistic world. We also thank the many expert reviewers who have provided such good advice about the papers included in this volume, and whose contribution has been most helpful to the editors. Finally, we would like to acknowledge all of the participants of the NEILS conferences, and particularly, those whose papers appear here. Although a vast amount of work remains to be undertaken in North East Indian linguistics, significant steps forward have also been made – and for this, a vote of gratitude is certainly due to all of you.

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