Language Scenario in the North-east

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It is a major objective of Ishani to acquaint its readers with different aspects of the land and the people of the region. The distinguished author of this article in response to our request acquaints us with the language scenario in the North-east. He is eminently suited to handle this job. Though he studied and taught Chemistry, he also took keen interest in other branches of knowledge. He holds a Master's degree in Hindi and a doctorate in Anthropology.

He served in Nagaland for many years and retired as the Principal of Government Science College, Kohima. While in Nagaland, he also managed a voluntary organization, wedded to the spread of Hindi and also to undertake study of different languages used in Nagaland as well as the neighbouring states. The organization carried the name as, “Nagaland Bhasha Parishad”. His painstaking work resulted in the publication of more than thirty dictionaries of tribal languages of all north-eastern states, Sikkim and of some tribal languages of Bihar. He also was able to prepare almost equal number of word books of a large number of tribal languages.

The most important feature of this article is that almost all languages prevalent in the North-east region have found place here. It has therefore become a rare document. The languages are not simply listed, but these are also classified in different linguistic groups and the observations of different eminent researchers have also been mentioned. In addition to this, a valuable annexure is added where the numbers of the speakers of each language have been given. The figures relate to 1970 census as the author had access to 1970 figures only. However, they do give an idea of the numerical strength of the speakers of different languages.

We are grateful to Professor Kumar for his contribution. I am sure the students of languages of the North-east would be greatly benefited by the data and the analysis contained in this article.

Introduction

India is a multi-lingual country and a language zone. This trait of the country is shared by the North-east region also. All the four language families of the country are represented by the languages of the region. Assamese in the Brahmaputra valley and Bengali in the Surma valley and Tripura are Indo-Aryan languages. Nagamese/Naga-Pidgin follows Assamese syntactical pattern and has the Assamese, Hindi and English lexemes. Khasi is an Austric language. The largest number of the languages of the region belonging to the Indo-Mongoloid group are spoken in various hill states. Dravidian language family is represented by Tamil settlers in the border town of Moreh in Manipur and Kurukh speaking Oraons in the tea-gardens. The migrant people, like
other parts of the country, speak their respective languages in their homes. Hindi and Assamese are widely understood and spoken in the region.

**India: a Language Zone**

As mentioned above, India is a language zone. Indian languages except Khasi and Kashmiri follow 'subject-object-verb' (sov) pattern. The lexical similarities defy the national and linguistic boundaries and extend far and wide.

The study of the Tibeto-Burman languages was initiated by the Norwegian scholar Sten Konow and George Abraham Grierson. Sample vocabularies and texts were collected from about 113 languages and 82 dialects of the Tibeto-Burman sub-family for the Linguistic Survey of India by Grierson. It needs mention that Grierson's work, though pioneering, suffers from many limitations. His work was of a very preliminary nature. The survey was conducted mainly for the languages within the boundaries of India and the reliable data for a large number of the languages of the border areas remained unavailable. Our knowledge about these languages got enriched only afterwards when linguistic data of more than 300 Tibeto-Burman languages of India and other languages was gradually published. As the linguistic diversity in the North-Eastern region is mainly due to Tibeto-Burman languages, the paper deals mostly about them.

**Tibeto-Burman Languages: Grierson's classification**

According to Grierson, Tibeto-Burman languages are a sub-family under the Indo-Chinese family of the languages. The languages under this sub-family were classified under (i) Tibeto-Himalayan (ii) North-Assam and (iii) Assam-Burmese branches. Grierson classified Tibeto-Himalayan languages into three groups. Tibetan or Bhoti constituted the first group. Laddakhi, Balti and Purik spoken in Jammu & Kashmir formed the western sub-group and the Tibetan or Bhoti, the Central one. Lhoke (Bhutia), Danjongka (Sikkimese Bhotia) and some Tibetan related languages of Nepal, Uttarakanchal and Himachal Pradesh. Pronominal (Kanawari in Uttarakanchal; Limbu, Rai, Dhimali, Khambu, Thami etc. in Nepal and Sikkim) and non-Pronominal (Gurung, Murmi, Sunwar, Newari) groups of the Tibet-Himalayan languages were spoken by certain people migrating from Nepal, Sikkim and Darjeeling speak these languages in the North-Eastern states. Now, they mostly speak Nepali. Lepcha (Rong) is spoken in Sikkim. Mompa and Khamba spoken in Arunachal Pradesh are the dialects of Tibetan.

As the name of the 'North-Assam' branch indicates, it is a geographical grouping, rather than based on the philological considerations. The reason of the same was that the Linguistic Survey of India has very scanty data only of four dialects of the branch at that time out of about 30 of the Arunachal Pradesh. The only publications in the languages of Arunachal Pradesh upto that time included vocabularies of the Aka language prepared by Robinson (1841), Hesselmeyer (1868) and Enderson (1896); grammars and dictionaries of Abor-Miris by Needham, Lorrain and Hamilton.

Grierson classified the Assam-Burmese branch of the Tibeto-Burman languages into (i) Bodo, (ii) Naga, (iii) Kuki-Chin, and (iv) Kachin groups. The Bodo group of languages, which include Bodo, Kachari, Dimasa Kachari, Lalung, Koch, Rabha, Chutiya, Moran, Garo and Tripuri, are spread over Brahmaputra valley, North Cachar Hills, Garo Hills of Meghalaya and Tripura. The Naga languages are spoken in Nagaland, Tirap and Changlang districts of Arunachal Pradesh, and the hill districts of Manipur, except Chirchandpur district. Sixteen major languages spoken in Nagaland are Ao, Angami, Chokri, Kheja, Pochury, Rengma, Zemi, Liangmei, Sema, Lotha, Konyak, Chang, Sangtam, Yimchunger, Phom and Khiamnang. Nocte, Wangcho and Tangsa are spoken in Arunachal Pradesh. Mao, Tangkhul Rongmei, Liangmei, Khoirao, etc. are spoken in Manipur.

Kuki-Chin group of languages are spoken in Mizoram, South and West Hill districts of Manipur, North Cachar Hills district of Assam, parts of Tripura Hills and in pockets of Peren area of Nagaland. Singpho is the only Kachin language of India spoken in parts of Tirap and Changlang districts of Arunachal Pradesh.

The languages of Nagaland, except Zemi and Liangmei, are divided into Western, Central and Eastern sub-groups. Zemi, Liangmei, Rongmei (Kabui) and Khoirao languages form link between
Naga and Bodo groups of languages. These languages are grouped under Naga-Bodo sub-group of the Naga group of languages. Similarly, Mao (Sopvoma), Tangkhul, Maram and Maring languages of northern and eastern hill districts of Manipur and Karbi language of Karbi Hills District of Assam, classified under Naga-Kuki sub-group of the Naga group of languages, form link between Naga and Kuki-Chin languages.

Meithei and Mizo (previously known as Lushai) are important Kuki-Chin languages. The other languages of the group are Paithe, Hmar Thadou (known as Kuki in Nagaland), Gangte, Simte, Zou, Kom, etc. The speakers of some of the Kuki-Chin languages, as in the case with some Naga languages, are also found across the border in Myanmar.

**Linguistic Phylum or Macro Family**

A recent development in the case of Tibeto-Burman languages has been to consider them to be a linguistic phylum or macro family, rather than a sub-family of Indo-Chinese languages. According to the concept developed, a linguistic phylum or macro family is a major division of languages, whose member families have common ancestral language, which may or may not be reconstructible. The Sino-Tibetan linguistic phylum consists of nine linguistic families, namely, Chinese, Tibetan, Burmese-Lolo, Miao-yao, kam-Tai, Karen, r-Gyarung-Mishmi, Bodo-Tangsa-Kachin and Naga-Chin.

According to this classification, only three language families, namely, r-Gyarung-Mishmi, Bodo-Tangsa-Kachin and Naga-Chin, are represented in India. Of course, some Tibetan dialects are also used on our bordering areas with Tibet. This scheme of classification makes Grierson's classification questionable. One more divergence from Grierson's scheme of classification, which needs mention, is the delinking of Thai from the "Sino-Thai". Now Thai is considered to be "Austro-Thai". The 'Ahom' language, once spoken in Assam by the ruling family of Ahoms, thus has no link with the Chinese or even Tibeto-Burman.

**Scripts**

The Assamese and Bengali scripts, derived from Brahmi, only slightly differ. Manipuri and Tripuri are also written in Bengali script. The old Meithei (Manipuri) script, which was different from Bengali script, was also derived from Brahmi. Khampti, Rong (Lepcha) and Limbu (Kiranti) languages (last two from Sikkim) have also their scripts. Bodo and some dialects from Arunachal Pradesh are written now in Devanagari script. Most of the tribal languages have adopted Roman script now.

**Literature**

Assamese, Bengali and Manipuri are rich literary languages. Khasi, Mizo, Bodo, Tenyidie (Angami) and some other languages are developing their literature fast. Christian missionaries and the British administrators initiated the study of the languages of the North-eastern region, especially that of the tribal languages. They prepared their dictionaries/word-books, grammars and the textbooks.

The missionaries, especially the Bible Society of India, published the translations of the Bible and the tracts in different languages. The State Education Departments and their Textbook Committees also published books in these languages. The same was done by voluntary literature societies, such as Assam Sahitya Sabha, Bodo Sahitya Sabha, etc. Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore published Phonetic Readers, dictionaries, grammars, folklore, etc. of different languages. Initiative in this direction was taken by Central Hindi Directorate and Central Institute of Hindi also. Nagaland Bhasa Parishad, Kohima has published 62 dictionaries, 16 grammars, 15 self-teachers and four folktales mostly in the tribal languages. Christian missionaries and British administrators prepared dictionaries/word-books of Ao, Tangkhul, Dimasa Kachari, Lushai (Mizo), Aka, Miri and some other languages. Similarly, they published the grammars of Ao, Angami, Lotha, Sema, Mikir (Karbi), etc.

**Linguistic Characteristics**

Some linguistic traits of the Tibeto-Burman languages are given below:
1. Tone is an integral part of the phonetic syllable of the Tibeto-Burman languages. There is change in the lexical meaning with the change of the tone. The tonal contrasts are observed from simple two level systems of the Tibetan dialects to complex three-four level systems as in most of the Naga languages. In rare cases, as in the case of the Angami Naga, it goes up to six.

2. Most of these languages are agglutinative and they show varying degrees of inflection usually expressed by affixes without changing the roots. They exhibit a much lesser degree of monosyllabism and isolating structure.

3. The Naga-Chin, Mishmi and Tibetan dialects show pronominal agreement expressed within the verb-affixual structure.

4. The primary or head word-noun and verb-is preceded by modifying words, phrases and clauses with affixual particles following. Categories of voice, mode, direction and aspect are usually included in inflectional affixes with verb forms.

A peculiar tendency visible among the Kuki-Chin tribes of Mizoram and southern Manipur is that their clans claim of tribal status. They claim their dialects to be distinct languages ignoring the similarities between them. This tendency is also visible in Central Arunachal Pradesh, especially among the Adis. Another tendency among some tribes of Manipur is to claim themselves to be Nagas, although they speak Kuki-Chin languages. Linguistically, Naga inhabited areas are the most diverse ones. Except for Angami and Chokri in the Southern Nagaland and between Konyak and Wancho in the North-East, there is hardly any similarity among the Naga languages. In reality, there is even much intra-tribal linguistic difference among the Nagas.

* Born in 1941, Professor Kumar had a distinguished academic career. He came out of his college with the M.Sc. degree in Chemistry. Later on he also earned his Master’s degree in Anthropology and later obtained doctorate in the same discipline. He served as Professor of Chemistry in Government Science College, Kohima and retired as the Principal of this college. Prior to this he also had a brief stint as the Principal of Sao Chang College, located in the district of Tuensang bordering Myanmar in Nagaland.

Professor Kumar was also associated with number of other universities as a member of one body or the other. Besides this he also established some voluntary organizations and ran it with great success. Chief amongst them are Nagaland Bhasha Parishad, Kohima and Astha Bharati, Delhi. He continues to be the general secretary of Astha Bharati and is the editor of two highly acclaimed journals published by this organization. One quarterly journal is published in Hindi and is named as “Chintan and Srijan”. Another quarterly is in English and is named as “Dialogue”.

Professor Kumar has authored a large number of books, 135 in all. These are dictionaries, grammars, self-teachers and the folklore of the tribal languages. He has also authored impressive books mainly dealing with the North-east in particular and tribal societies in general. He can be contacted at asthabharati@yahoo.com.

**ANNEXURE**

Languages spoken in the North-east

(Population of the language according to 1971 census is given in bracket against the languages)

**Aryan languages:**

(i) Assamese(6803463)

(ii) Bengali(2061533 in Assam)

(iii) Nepali(215213, population in Assam)

(iv) Chakma(40071)

(v) Hajong/Hajong(8858)

(vi) Sadan/Sadari (by tea-garden tribes:20468)

(vii) Bishnupriya/Bishnupriya Manipuri(15182)

(viii) Mal Pahariya (760 in tea gardens of Assam)
(ix) Nagamese (spoken by different language speaking Nagas and non-Nagas for inter community communication; not separately enumerated.)

**Austroic:**

(i) Khasi (289650)

(ii) War (a Khasi dialect; 3854)

(iii) Bhoi Khasi (651)

(iv) Ahom (Austro-Thai; now not spoken),

(v) Khamti (Austro-Thai; 296)

(vi) Jaintia (14673), Pnar/Synteng (55113)

**Tea-garden tribes:**

(i) Santhali (67262),

(ii) Munda (89799),

(iii) Savara (4832)

(iv) Majhi (1339)

**Dravidian:**

(i) Maria (11454)

(ii) Kisan (1461).

**Tibeto-Burman:**

**Naga:**

(a) Nagaland

(i) Angami (34431)

(ii) Ao (56385)

(iii) Lotha (26611)

(iv) Sema (47464)

(v) Konyak (46701)

(vi) Chakhesang (10308; includes three distinct languages, namely, Chokri, Kheja and Sangtam/Poohry also enumerated under these language heads.


(vii) Chang (11329)

(viii) Sangtam (15512)

(ix) Phom (13385)

(x) Yimchungre (19187)

(xi) Zeliang (9460; includes two distinct dialects: Zemi, Liangmei; Zeliangrong includes Zemi, Liangmei and Rongmei/Kabui.

(xii) Rengma (5934)

(xiii) Khamiang (12434; enumerated under the head Shamnyuyangan, 9461)

(xiv) Tikhir (2486)

(xv) Chiru (3059)

(xvi) Makware (& 69)

(xvii) Naga Unspecified (33333)

(b) Manipur:

(i) Tangkhul (44020)

(ii) Mao (21030)

(iii) Rongmei/Kabui (17360; Kabui 12729)

(iv) Maring (7745)

(v) Maram (4928)

(i) Anal (4875)

(ii) Liangmei (1866; Kachcha Naga 4119),

(iii) Paomata (7843)

(c) Arunachal Pradesh:

(i) Nocte (19287)

(ii) Wancho (2713)

(iii) Tangsa (117; dialects: Tikhak 295)

(d) Assam:

(i) Zemi (374).
Kuki-Chin:
(a) Manipur
(i) Meitei/Manipuri(621244)
(ii) Paite(18612)
(iii) Hmar(Total in the North-East 25530)
(iv) Simte(2818)
(v) Gangte(4877)
(vi) Aimol(108)
(vii) Anal(4875; now claim Naga identity)
(viii) Kuki (generic term for Kuki-Chin tribes: Kuki unspecified:27837); Thadous of Nagaland call themselves Kuki)
(ix) Kom (5478),
(x) Koi reng(531)
(xi) Chiru (3059)
(xii) Zou(6761)
(xiii) Thadou(24213)
(xiv) Purum(82)
(xv) Vaiphei(8657)
(xvi) Hallam, (xvii) Hiroi Lamgang (xviii) Hrangkhol/Rangkhol (1517)
(xix) Baite (2964)
(xx) Ralte (170)
(xxi) Khoirao(406)
(xxii)Chote (1035)
(xxiii) Haokeep/Haokup(2676)
(xxiv) Khongzai(4111)
(xxv) Lamgang(1866)
(xxvi) Lemei(xxvii) Monsang/Monsen(1359)
(b) Mizoram:
(i) Mizo (Total in Assam/Mizoram/Manipur: 221985
(ii) Hmar(25530) etc.
Note: Kuki-Chin tribes are also settled in Tripura and North Cachar Hills District of Assam.
Bodo group:
(a) Assam:
(i) Bodo (286339)
(ii) Koch(7698)
(iii) Dimasa Kachari(32507)
(iv) Kachari(65259)
(v) Lalung(10576)
(vi) Rabha(44400)
(vii) Deori/Deori,Chutia (9103) etc.
(a) Meghalaya: Garo (307026)
(b) Tripura: (i) Tripuri (215626), (ii) Reang (65004).
Himalayan Group: Arunachal Pradesh:
(i) Aka/Hrusso (2302),
(ii) Adi (earlier name Abor; dialects: Padam 6988; Miniyong 19523; Bokar 2392; Galong 29876; Ashing 1160; Milang 2428; Pasi 1840; Simong 3412; Palilibo 720; Ramo 676; Tangam, etc)
(iii) Apatani (19793)
(iv) Nishi (earlier called Dafla; 16782)
(v) Miji 2079
(vi) MishmiL279; dialects: Taaron/Chulikata/Idu:7063, Digaru:100; Miju:7611),
(vii) Miri/Mishing,
(viii) Hill Miri/Pangi (5472); Bangni (4450); Sulung (1516); Bangro (1657); Sherdikpen (1144); Simong (3412)
(b) Assam: Mishing/Miri (103188)
(c) Sikkim: Limbu/Kranti (5418; Subba 1257)
(iii) Rong/Lepcha (23706)
A Golden Deed

Eknath was a great saint of Maharashtra. Once he went on pilgrimage to Benaras. From there he brought back with him two pots filled with the holy water of the Ganges slung across a pole. Later on, when he reached Rameshwaram, a place of pilgrimage in the south, he was to offer the holy water to the presiding deity of Rameshwaram as this ritual is ranked highly.

Eknath headed a party of pilgrims, each of whom carried water-pots filled with the holy water. It was summer. The heat was very severe. Not a single tree was visible anywhere. Presently Eknath saw a donkey dying of thirst. His heart was filled with compassion. Immediately he poured out the contents of his water-pots to the dying animal, which straightway lapped up the whole quantity.

Restored to life the donkey got up and went away braying.

After some time Eknath’s fellow-pilgrims arrived there. They were surprised to see the water-pots of the saint empty. Therefore, they inquired of him, “Sir, where is the holy water, you brought with you?”

Eknath replied, “Brothers, I gave it away to a poor donkey which was dying of thirst, since no water was available anywhere in the neighbourhood.”

The fellow-pilgrims exclaimed, “But, sir, you have now nothing left to offer to God Rameshwar! Alas! your pilgrimage will remain incomplete!”

The saint however, observed calmly, “What you say is true. But how could I pass by the donkey, dying of thirst, without giving it water? And as I had some water, though it was of the holy Ganges, I let the creature slake its thirst. But I am quite sure that God Rameshwar will not only forgive me but, on the contrary, will even be pleased with me.”