

The linguistic situation in Manipur

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From the linguistic point of view, Manipur can be treated as a Mini-India. There are many mother tongues and there are places where as many as three different language families interact with each other, e.g. in Moreh, a small Indo-Burma border town. Officially and according to Grierson, in Manipur as a whole there are 29 'dialects' besides Manipuri itself. This figure is of course only an approximation. Some regions have still not been surveyed at all, and other areas have not yet undergone scientific linguistic analysis. For example, Teizang and Tiddim Chin (spoken in some parts of Moreh and Churachandpur) were not included in Grierson's "29 dialects".

In this state, Manipuri is an official language as well as a lingua franca among the various speech communities. Manipuri has been adopted as the medium of instruction and examination from the primary to the high school stage. Some Naga and Kuki students are pursuing Manipuri as a subject of study in the High and Higher Secondary Schools and Colleges.

Manipuri has been the state language of Manipur since the 8th century A.D. Coins were struck, royal chronicles were recorded, royal firmances and edicts were issued in this language. During the British regime (1819-1947) its status as a state language continued. It was decided by the Manipur State Constitution (Act 1947, section 58) that the court language of the state would be Manipuri or English. Deliberations of the Darbar (the Highest Executive Judicial and Legislative Body) were held and judgements of law courts were delivered in the language. Its status as a state language was definitively recognized in the relevant provisions of the Manipur State Court Act of 1947. Since August 20, 1993, Manipuri has been recognized as the 8th Scheduled Language in the Indian Constitution. In the Legislative Assembly questions and answers are also expressed in Manipuri. Such are the important roles of this language in the state.

But still the language needs standardization, especially as regards the spelling system. Different writers use different spellings. Standardizing the orthography is a burning problem which remains to be solved. For example, phonetically in the modern language there is only one sibilant /s/, but in written form there are three or four other sibilants. Similarly, five retroflexes, namely /ɬ ʈ ɖ ɟ ɳ/ are maintained in the writing, but not in speech. This is of course very interesting for the historical study of the language. It is generally accepted that Modern Manipuri is the result of the mixture of 9 groups, viz., CHENGLEI, LUWANG, KHUMAN, MOIRANG (KEGE), ANGOM, KHABA, MANGANG, HEIREM, and NINGTHOUJA

(MEITEI). During the process of state formation all the groups merged into one and became the Meitei. The language of the Meitei is called "Meiteilon" locally, and "Manipuri" officially. Each group has its own mother tongue. A few lexical items can be mentioned here though a large number are not traceable.

Moravcsik in his paper "Reduplicative Constructions" (1978) expresses the opinion that in semantic reduplication the synonymous words may derive from different languages. This is true in the case of Manipuri also. One word in such expressions belongs to one clan while another word belongs to another clan.

1. nembi-sinṇəŋ 'grass'
 | |
 | |_____[Meitei clan]
 | |_____[Khuman clan]
2. ucek-səwa 'bird'
 | |
 | |_____[Moirang clan]
 | |_____[Meitei clan]
3. ərak-əkhəŋ 'suddenly'
 | |
 | |_____[Meitei clan]
 | |_____[Moirang clan]
4. pambə-kəy 'tiger'
 | |
 | |_____[Khuman clan]
 | |_____[Meitei clan]
5. tawtek-nəw 'ore'
 | |
 | |_____[Meitei clan]
 | |_____[Khuman clan]
6. taipəŋ-mi 'man'
 | |
 | |_____[Meitei clan]
 | |_____[Moirang clan]
7. tərəŋ-layjə 'water'
 | |
 | |_____[Moirang clan]
 | |_____[Khuman clan]
8. ciŋŋu-lay 'God'
 | |
 | |_____[Meitei clan]
 | |_____[Moirang clan]

Regarding semantic reduplication two questions arise: "Why was semantic reduplication more extensively used in Old Manipuri by comparison to Modern Manipuri?" The second question is "Why is semantic reduplication regarded as having high literary value? The first question can be answered in terms of a gradual attrition of vocabulary over the generations. Even more important perhaps is the great number of loanwords that have been incorporated from the Indo-Aryan languages. The answer to the second question is to be sought in the fact that archaic forms are more difficult to master, and thus reflect credit on those who can use them correctly. Speakers may take pride in their subtle felicities of language. The study of Old Manipuri along with the other languages and dialects spoken in Manipur, will help a lot in the reconstruction of proto-forms.

It is commonly accepted by linguists that Manipuri has four major dialects: ANDRO, PHAYENG, SEKMAY¹ and KAKCHING. One can study the differences among the dialects, and the differences between standard Manipuri and the other dialects. It is also agreed that in the olden days, in PHAYENG and ANDRO areas, a now extinct dialect called Chakpa was spoken.

There are some speech forms in Manipur, viz., THADOU, PAITE, HMAR, VAIPHEI, SIMTE, KOM, GANGTE, etc. which are mutually intelligible to some extent and share a great number of common features in phonology, morphology and syntax. These are mostly concentrated in Churachandpur district.

To substantiate this statement, I offer some vocabularies collected from these speech forms, viz. GANGTE (G), PAITE (P), SIMTE (S), THADOU (Th), HMAR (H), KOM (K), and VAIPHEI (V):

1. 'go'	ciə pay/cia cie	V, G, S P Th	2. 'give'	pie pia pi	V, G, S P Th
3. 'liquor'	zu zu	V, G, S, P Th	4. 'flower'	pak pa pan par	G, P, V S Th Hm
5. 'water'	in duy	V, G, S, P Th	6. 'arrow'	thəl səl	G, P, S, V, K, Th Hm

¹ This is apparently the same as **Sengmai**, which along with Andro and Kadu comprise the "Luish" group. [Ed.]

7. 'north'	mal hmar	G, P, Th, S Hm	8. 'dry'	gə tral ken	G, S, Th, V Hm P, V
9. 'land'	gəm rəm	V, G, P, S, Th Hm	10. 'poison'	tul tur	P, Th, V K, Hm
11. 'eye'	mit	G, V, P, S	12. 'face'	mai hmai	G, P, S, Th, V Hm, K
13. 'alive'	hiŋ hriŋ	G, P, S, Th, V K, Hm	14. 'back' (of body)	nuŋ hnuŋ	G, P, S, Th, V Hm
15. 'nose'	nak na? hnar	G, P, V S, Th Hm, K	16. 'neck'	noŋ riŋ	G, P, S, Th, V Hm, K
17. 'louse'	hik hit hrik	G, P, S, V Th Hm, K	18. 'snake'	gul rul	G, P, Th, V Hm
19. 'bone'	gu gu? ru ru?	P, V G, S, Th Hm K	20. 'heart'	luŋ mluŋ	G, P, S, Th, Hm, V K
21. 'good'	pha thra	P, S, Th, V Hm, K	22. 'moon'	thla tha xa	Hm, K G, V P
23. 'chin'	xa khak ŋkha	G, P, S, Th, V Hm K	24. 'tongue'	lai mləi	G, S, Th, V, Hm K
25. 'knee'	xup khup xuk	G, S, Th, V Hm, K P			

Opposite to this linguistic situation in Churachandpur is the Ukhrul district, where there are 300 villages, each with a distinctive form of speech. Some are mutually intelligible while some are mutually unintelligible. When they talk with each other (between the Hundung and the Toloy) they use the Ukhrul standard variety or Manipuri as their *lingua franca*.

Unlike the linguistic situation in the above two districts, there is a small town, Moreh, on the Indo-Burma border, which has a peculiar linguistic situation. There are three language families represented, viz., Indo-Aryan (Hindi and Bengali), Dravidian (Malayalam, Telugu and Tamil) and Tibeto-Burman. In such a small town, many ethnic groups speaking different speech forms are concentrated. They are Hmar, Thadou, Paite, Gangte, Tiddim-Chin, Teizang, Mizo and Meitei. These various groups use Hindi or Manipuri or Burmese as their *lingua franca*; the influence of Manipuri and Burmese is particularly prominent. These various ethnic groups have borrowed many lexical items from Manipuri and Burmese. Since the town is a business centre the degree of interaction of the ethnic groups with one another is very high. It is conceivable that a new pidgin may emerge ultimately from two or more of these coexisting languages.

In every district of Manipur, there are more than five different ethnic groups speaking different speech forms. For instance, in Ukhrul district, there are 9-10 ethnic groups, viz., TANGKHUL (majority), ANGAMI, THADOU, VAIPHEI, PURUM, MARING, AIMOL, KHOIRAO, MONSANG, LAMKANG, etc. In Churachandpur district also, there are more than a dozen, viz., HMAR, GANGTE, PAITE, THADOU, MIZO, RALTE, VAIPHEI, PURUM, ANAL, SIMTE, ZOU, KOM, etc. They are all somehow in contact with one another. From such contact there may arise new speech forms, as in 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 recognised as being spoken depends on the number of autonomous, standard varieties that have succeeded in raising themselves above the dialect continuum (see Kurath 1972).

Like the Spanish/Portuguese hybrid known as *fronteirico* or *fronterizo*, spoken in the Brazil-Uruguay border area, in Manipur also there might have arisen new speech forms because of direct contact with one another. Similarly, it will be interesting to study the linguistic situation of Churachandpur district, in view of the fact that it is home to five speech forms (PAITE, HMAR, THADOU, LUSHEI and SIMTE) which have many common shared features, including many lexical items that are virtually identical in all of them.

It seems highly likely that a sustained and systematic study of the speech forms spoken in this small state may lead to many interesting discoveries.

In the future the authorities in Manipur will no doubt feel it necessary to have language planning, since the various ethnic groups want to be recognized as constituting separate and independent groups. As in certain countries in Africa which have four or five official languages, a citizen of the state of Manipur may well end up with a speech repertoire of four or five languages—Manipuri, English, Hindi and his/her mother tongue.

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