

The register system of the ‘Mishmi’ languages, Idu, Tawra and Kman and the problem of a unitary concept of language

Linguistics seminar

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The significance of register in linguistics

- 'Register' is a form of a language used for a specific purpose or in a defined social setting.
- Most languages have a great or lesser cline of formality marking the nature of an interaction
- And they have special purpose speech forms, such as cockney in English or various forms of military slang
- But registers are typically bounded entities with speakers aware of content
- And they are usually 'up-down' registers, marking sharp boundaries in strongly hierarchical societies
- For example Japanese or Javanese
- Hierarchical societies with greater access to social mobility, for example England, is marked by more fluid, less well-defined registers
- But all of these are characteristic of large-scale pluralistic societies

Hyper-complex register systems in NE India

- However, among some minority groups in Arunachal Pradesh, NE India, there are hyper-complex register systems.
- But.. these societies are *without* rigid social divisions and social hierarchies. In fact they are classic segmentary lineage societies in the social anthropological sense
- Moreover, strikingly, these registers have been maintained in the world of mobile phones
- Modernity so often having the effect of 'flattening' complex nuanced speech
- Moreover, speakers of 'everyday' language in Arunachal Pradesh engage in constant 'register-flipping', i.e. introducing lexemes from one register into another
- Apparently compromising the unitary notion of 'language' in which linguists have a heavy investment

Unitary notions of language I

- Language is the main object of linguists' investigations, whether we write dictionaries or grammars, study phonology or syntax, or even study code-switching
- Language is thus encoded as a unitary object of investigation because it makes the whole edifice of publication possible and clarifies agreement between academic linguists
- But real speakers are not always so easy to pin down, they tend to behave in ways not always amenable to laboratory style approaches
- Though we make them behave in this way using the power dynamic of the relationship through unconscious prompting
- This particularly true of syntacticians who impose pre-existing structures on oral languages
- Where an exchange relationship exists. Money is exchanged for tidy seminar papers.

Unitary notions of language II

- But this *cannot* be a true description of how actual speakers behave
- A simple example might be when we code-switch to speaking a sentence in imitation of a foreign language, sometimes using phonology and syntax distinct from our home language
- Pretend foreign accents are not registers or socially codified, but they are a real part of linguistic behaviour
- Taking this a step further, a language can have registers that are so strongly embedded speakers frequently do not realise they are changing register
- This compromises the concept that we are dealing with a unitary language

Background to research

- Research has been undertaken in Arunachal Pradesh on yearly visits since 2011
- Research with the 'Mishmi' communities since 2015
- The objectives are to undertake basic anthropological research
- To write a dictionary, grammar and develop a practical orthography in connection with text collection
- This has proven practical in the Idu and Kman communities with the support of the local Language Development Committees
- However, for the reasons outlined in this talk, completing these tasks is proving to be non-trivial

Structure of the talk

- To illustrate these points the ethnographic section of the talk will be structured as follows;
 - ❖ Basic description and anthropological characterisation of societies in Arunachal Pradesh
 - ❖ Overview of everyday speech
 - ❖ Characterisation of registers
 - ❖ Description of 'register-flipping'
 - ❖ Hypotheses to explain this situation
 - ❖ Consequences for a unitary notion of language

Background to Northeast India

- Northeast India consists of seven states joined only to the rest of India by a thin strip of territory, an accident of colonialism
- Culturally and phenotypically speaking the region resembles Southeast Asia
- Except for Assam, in the valley of the Brahmaputra, which was colonised by Indo-Aryans from the tenth century onwards
- The terrain is characterised by extremely steep mountains, leading up to the Tibetan Plateau on the west and north
- And hilly areas contiguous with Myanmar and Bangla Desh
- The hill populations, including the Naga/Kuki-Chin on the east and the diverse 'North Assam' peoples in Arunachal Pradesh were regarded by the colonial authorities as difficult to govern and officially classified as 'unpacified'

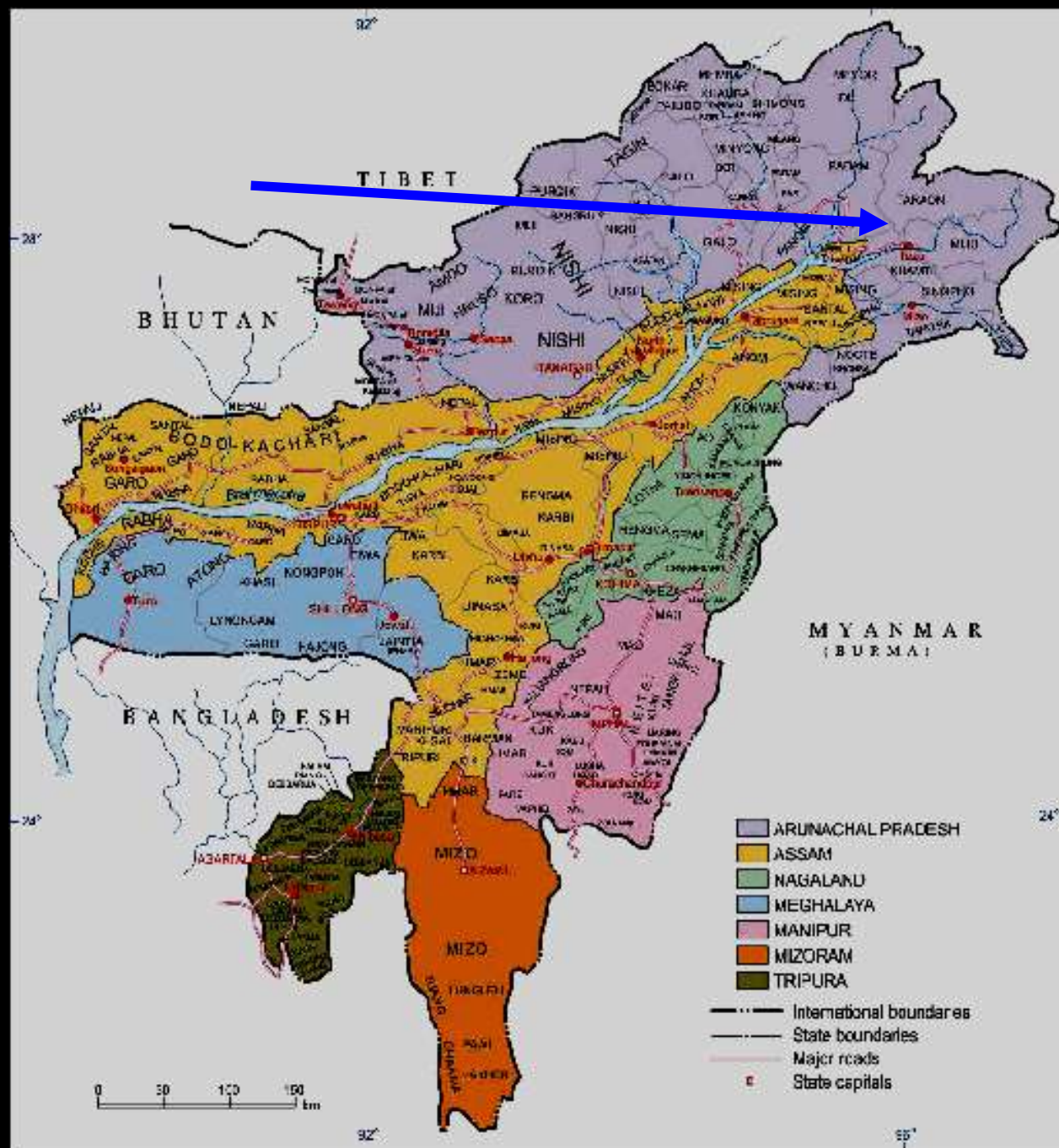
Ethnolinguistic diversity in Arunachal Pradesh

- Arunachal Pradesh (and NE India in general) is a remarkable area for ethnolinguistic diversity (probably due to the mountainous terrain)
- Due to its special status in colonial times, and more recently proximity to China, its languages have been very little studied
- The region is an interface of three global religions, Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity and their interaction with local religious traditions
- The societies are also structurally very diverse
- There is now a strong urge for local peoples to document their own language, culture and customs
- This talk will focus on three languages and peoples, the 'Mishmi', who live in the extreme northeast, on the borders of Tibet

An early view of Arunachal Pradesh

❖ The preceding remarks will have shown there is considerable difference between the North Assam dialects...The home of the North Assam tribes may be considered a kind of backwater. The eddies of the various waves of Tibeto-Burman immigration have swept over it and left their stamp on its dialects.

❖ Konow in Grierson 1909:572



Ethnolinguistic map of NE India

Mishmi: three peoples, one name

- The Mishmi peoples of Arunachal Pradesh consist of three different groups, speaking three distinct languages
- These are the Idu [also Keraa], the Tawrã [=Taraon] and the Kman [=Miju]
- Two of these languages are said to be related, Idu and Tawrã, but the third, Kman, is quite different
- These languages are usually classified as Tibeto-Burman, i.e. together with Tani and Chinese, but the evidence for this is very weak
- They are probably language isolates
- A fourth language, Meyor, spoken in Walong and Kibitho, has many common features with Kman, but is probably not related genetically

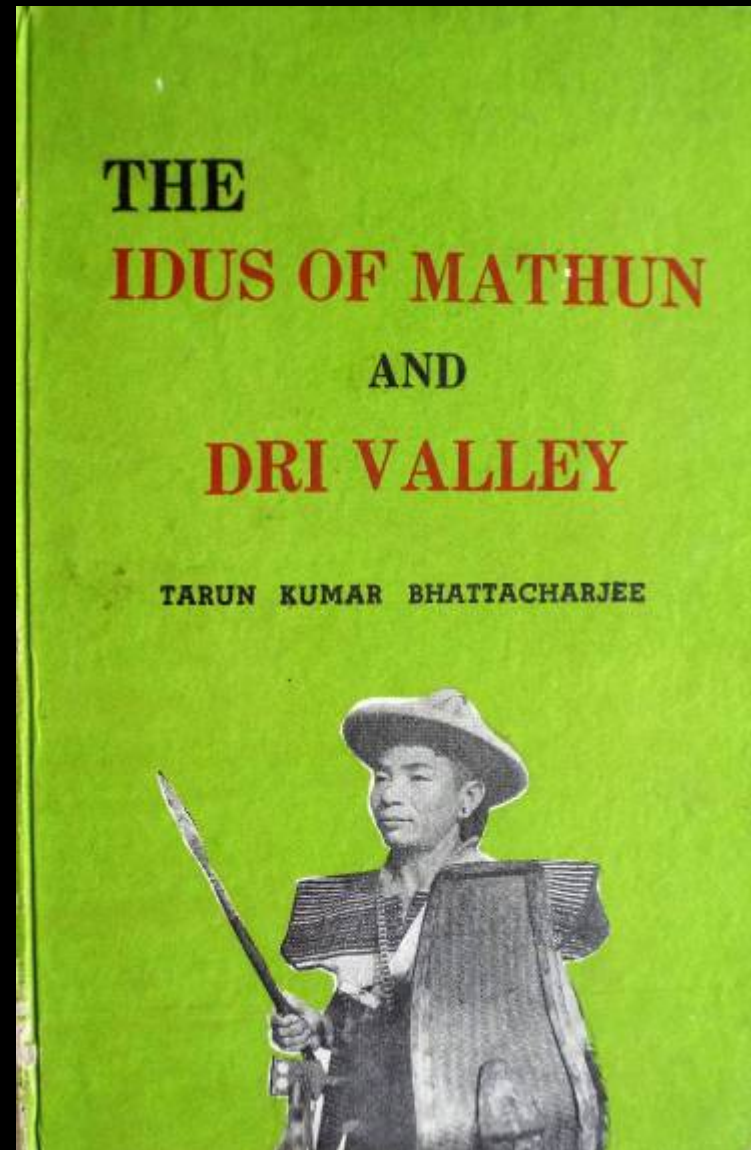
The Mishmi peoples



Mishmi: three peoples, a common culture

- The Mishmi peoples also share many common cultural features which make them distinct from other peoples of Arunachal Pradesh
- The most important of these is polygamy, which is reflected in the distinctive house form, the longhouse
- In this, each wife had her own space, with associated pig-rearing and the rooms were joined by a long internal corridor
- Headhunting was also (formerly) practised as the custom of displaying the skulls of sacrificed animals
- Multiple language registers (including poetic, hunting and shamanistic)
- All of this suggests centuries of common interaction, although we know almost nothing about the long history of the Mishmi

Anthropology of the Idu: existing publications



Common cultural features of the three Mishmi peoples I

Feature	Commentary
Longhouses	All groups build extensive longhouses, traditionally housing multiple wives each with individual hearths. The internal architecture of these houses is very similar, with a long internal corridor lined with the skulls of hunted or sacrificed animals.
Negative imagery of flowers	Unusually, all three Mishmi peoples consider flowers to be ill-omened and will not plant them around the house. This is particularly striking on the borders of Tibet, where flowers in pots are considered one sign of a well-kept house
Slavery/enservment	Rather unusually, for societies with segmentary lineage structures and little social hierarchy, the Mishmi peoples practised slavery, most commonly of their own people. Slavery was legally abolished during the late 1970s, but discrimination against slave ancestry persists. Sex with slaves was considered so unacceptable that a layer of the underworld was reserved for those who committed this offence.

Common cultural features of the three Mishmi peoples II

Feature	Commentary
Ecozonal deities	All three groups share a common system of ecozonal deities which are responsible for different ecological zones from the snowline to the plains. In each the rivers and lakes are looked after by a deity with a name which is a variant of Bruu. The snowline is deemed to be the most sacred area, where shamans must travel to acquire their powers
Complex afterlife	When the soul leaves the body it becomes a ghost and must travel through a complex series of underworlds, partly reflecting the type of death an individual has undergone. To reach the final abode of ghosts, the spirit must cross a river. Similar elements are also recorded among some Tani
Rẽ Festival	A festival held on or around early February. [Idu name Rẽ, Tawra, Kman Tamaladu]
Ethnometrology	A complex system of weights and measures, involving finger measurements, bamboo tubes, baskets, distance a pig can be carried and numerous other common features. Some aspects also recorded among Tani

Architecture

- The three Mishmi peoples all share the tradition of the longhouse, reflecting polygyny

Idu longhouse



Kman longhouse



Shamanism

- Shamans are known as *igu* in Idu, *gwak* in Tawra and *katowat* in Kman
- They are called upon to recite chants and conduct sacrifices for sick persons, sometimes with drumming and gongs
- Pigs, chickens and mithuns are sacrificed
- The chants are in a special language which is only fully known by shamans

Kman Shaman

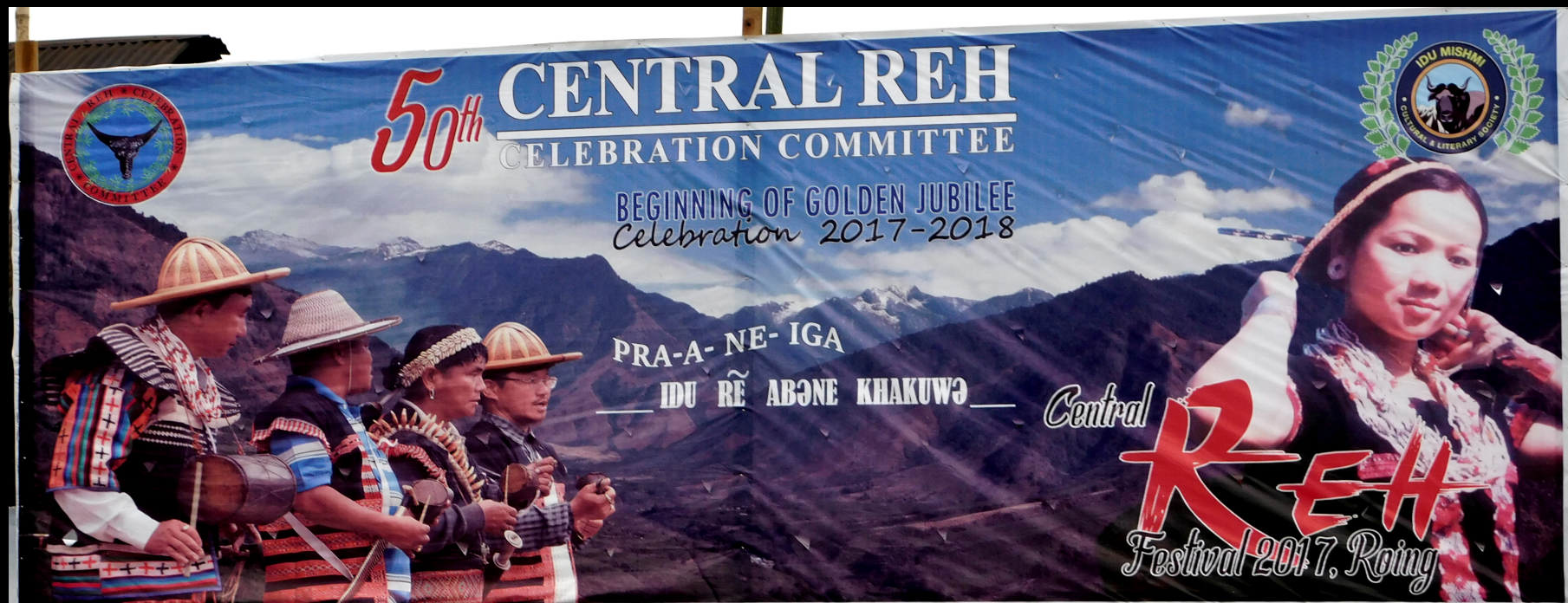


Sociolinguistics

- Each language has a few thousand speakers; estimates of levels of competence vary widely
- The main competing languages were formerly Tibetan and Assamese
- However, today Hindi is the most important language; schooling is in Hindi as is much of the media
- Hence there is a widespread local perception that these languages are very threatened and that young people are losing their language
- My own observation is that the situation is not as bad as is locally feared, but there is a significant loss of specialised vocabulary, for example plant and animal names
- Fortunately, world religions have not made much impact

Documentation project

- Since 2015, I've been working with the ILDC (Idu Language Development Committee) and the KLDC (Kman Language Development Committee) on a documentation project
- As well as practical orthography
- Two dictionaries have been prepared and presented formally at the Re Festival in February



ILDC hard at work



Idu Dictionary

Presented to the
community, February
1st, 2017

A DICTIONARY OF IDU

ANGA AZOPÓ



ROGER BLENCH

**MITE LINGI
YONA MELE
APOMO LINGGI
HINDU MEME**

Trial Edition

Roing, January 2017

Published by the authority of the Idu Mishmi Cultural and Literary Society

MISHMI PUBLISHING HOUSE, ROING

The Kman dictionary

- Presented to the community, February 14th, 2017

A DICTIONARY OF KMAN

KMAN LAY PIT



ROGER BLENCH

SOKHEP KRI

Draft First Edition

Tezu, January 2017

Common typological features of Mishmi languages I

Feature

Commentary

Three tone-heights

Typical of Naga languages

Voiceless aspirates only

Common throughout the region

SOV syntax

Common throughout the region

TAM marking through verbal suffixes

No marking of number or gender on nouns

Common throughout the region

Distinctive gender suffixes for domestic animals

Question markers clause-final

Interrogatives clause-initial or following the head noun

9-15 numeral classifiers

Strongly focused on shapes of plants and animals

Adverbs precede verb they qualify

Four-term comparative adjective paradigm

Adjectives show free positioning in relation to head noun

Register systems

- Idu, Tawra and Kman all share a system of multiple language registers
- These are;
 - a) ordinary speech (*àṇá'līyā*)
 - b) hunters' speech
 - c) shamans' speech (*īgù àṇá'pīyā*)
 - d) poetic/lyrical register
 - e) Mediation register
 - f) Cursing register
 - g) Babytalk register

Characteristics of register systems I

- Mishmi register systems can be characterised structurally as follows;
- Their main feature is lexical substitution; words are replaced by other words or phrases
- The replacement words may have no discernible source, or the meaning may be clear but distinct
- Words may also be replaced by phrases, again sometimes transparent, sometimes opaque
- Many replacement words come in pairs, with ideophonic characteristics, e.g. English hocus-pocus. This is highly typical of SE Asia
- Syntax is less often divergent, except in the shamanic register
- In mediation registers, there is a focus on set phrases, poften incuding characteristic allusions to clan names
- In the poetic register (Kman) almost all replacement terms have paired words or expressions. 'The word does not feel complete'

Characteristics of register systems II

- The speech of hunters involves lexical substitution, the replacement of animal names and others by special forms, sometimes short poems
- Shaman speech is more complex, involving much language which is difficult to understand as well as lengthy descriptions of sacrificial animals
- Even satirical and baby-talk is remarkably codified compared with European languages

Idu Shaman

- The language of shamans is not a 'secret' language, and people are quite willing to teach it to you if you have a command of the base language



Shamanic register - Idu

English	Idu	Shaman
agriculture	pàkū	khònjé ēndō
bad	ě̀lè	āpūmīrù
child	ā	īdūmīrī
daughter	aya	ìdūmīlī
son	ameya	ìdūmētā
dead body	īthũ̃	īpōthūtá
deer	mānjō	àthí ījīdō
dog	ìkū	àbrí ànà, àbí tòmbō, kùbū mēyī
earth	ìlīkhə̀	ètō yí dèbàlà ‘deep inside the earth’
father	nàbā	jìnù mētā

Hunting register - Kman

Hunters who go up to the snowline and hunt large and spiritually dangerous animals such as the takin, can only speak to one another in a special register

takin	khyām	brī mā kāyōŋ
goral	sâl	brê
serow	rāʔa · y	sék kâlēŋ
bear	kūm	hōm wōrtōŋ
gun	sīŋshūl	khūŋzèʔ
trap	tāŋgām	tāsìl
rain	ōwàŋ	rēhām
snow	so · ʔ	khram khàw
star	ŋāʈī	yāwkràŋ
ginger	dī ʔiŋ	yēlkā
rice	hākù	dāp kām̄bīʔ
maize	bo ·	kāwyūŋ

Cursing register – Kman I

The Kman cursing register, *athap*, contains multiple unusual substitutions, drawn from shamanic and mediation registers

kamaw	g.lat	hi	phyil	cion
ghost	village	there	go	he/she

Go to Hell!

phyil	alternative word for go
cion	alternative 3rd person pronoun

t.pow	kə	k.tham	ra
tiger	that	eat	let

Let a tiger eat you!

Cursing register – Kman II

shyat kə tawk shyā.shu

food that be poisoned you.IMP

May your food be poisoned!

shya alternative pronoun

Poetic register - Kman

addict, alcoholic	yā	phāve · y
book	pât	nyūpī t yūkà y
brother	cāpmi ·	cīplām
child	sa ·	ākhrī àpàn
cloud	kāmə̀y	nyūtūŋ kāmə̀y
courtyard	hāŋlu · ŋ	za · p ga · y, tōwā ga · y
friend	kēshī k ro · ?	ākhrī āpān
girl/woman	kāmà y	nūma · y ~ brōma · y
Goddess	Mētà y	shyāktā y
means of transport	b.lòŋ k ´ .to · ŋ	rùŋsì ~ pàŋsì
rice	māŋ	kāmphrìt

Babytalk register - Kman

Babytalk is very elaborated and is a lexical substitution register

Gloss	Kman	Babytalk
Baby	sa□	ŋǎ?
Beat	dʌ□m	màamá?
Don't do it!	áy.kèt	tyàtyá?
Eat	shya□	hǎm
Food	shya□t	càcá
Meat	shi□n	cìcík
Mother	na□w	nūnū
Sister (by a older female)	c̄m̄p̄m̄āy	māmāy
Sleep	ŋí	shìshínk
Sweet	tīm	tìtimp

Humorous register *álánū àshṛèè* - Idu

The humorous register is more like abuse. Typically heard as part of joking relationships

Mītācō	prā krāyā	cī	āyītò	yá	ànà
clan name	crow	with	host of <i>igu</i> performance	group	clan

The Mitaco clan uses a crow for its ceremonies

It is normal to use the chicken for these ceremonies but one time the M. clan used a crow and this event is recalled humorously.

Mīhũ	āndīkhì	àkā	cé
clan name	mucus	granary	bind

The Mihũ clan binds its granaries with mucus

Who knows what?

- In hierarchical register systems, knowledge is socially bounded; in other words, the further down the hierarchy you are, the less likely you are to be able to manipulate registers at the top
- But Mishmi societies are socially 'flat' and there is far less incentive to restrict knowledge. Indeed the main constraint is simply being able to remember so much information
- So people learn what is socially expedient, i.e. if you are a hunter, you need to learn hunting register
- And everyone is exposed to shamanic recitations, so most people pick up parts of it
- Register skills thus vary immensely between individuals
- And when Mishmi mourn language loss among youth, they often mean control over specialised registers, not an inability to communicate in everyday speech

How regional are the registers?

- Mishmi societies are strongly geographically fragmented, so it is reasonable to ask, how unified are the registers?
- The languages themselves show remarkably little internal variation
- And obviously testing knowledge of the registers in a variety of locations is a lengthy task.
- However, the hunting register has been tested for both Kman and Idu and found to be about 80% 'core', i.e. the same for all speakers
- But some animals typically have multiple names with regional flavours

‘Register flipping’ I

- The term ‘codeswitching’ is usually applied to the switching between languages common in situations of intense bilingualism
- Speakers introduce phrases, half-sentences, individual words from another language, or perhaps social niche
- There are many models to explain this; interference, display of familiarity with a prestige language, ludic, playful behaviour
- Usually there are only two ‘codes’ the speaker switches between, but there can be more
- In strongly hierarchical societies, Java or Japan, speakers tend to keep the codes apart

‘Register flipping’ II

- However, where class is involved, register switching is a common method of situating the speaker socially
- In England, for example, it is very common for speakers to adopt the register of another class, or a mock foreign accent for half a sentence
- This is a clear sign to the hearer of the social status of the speaker; i.e. if you imitate a working-class accent it signifies you are not a member of that class
- At same time there is a humorous element; hearers are expected to recognise and be entertained by a faithful rendition of the alien register

Register flipping III

- Among the Mishmi, it is common in everyday speech, to exchange everyday words with words from another register
- Without any apparent sociological subtext, but rather as a demonstration of language skills
- You could compare this with adopting Norman French words in Middle English, or Latinate words in the Renaissance
- Though social context is ideally directly observed
- The test is, for Mishmi, that they often don't even realise they have flipped to another register
- Hence, the use of the term, register-flipping, rather than code-switching

Summary I

- The Mishmi peoples of Arunachal Pradesh have a speech system with up to seven named registers
- These are strongly defined by social and spiritual context; shamanic speech can only be used for chants, mediation register in the appropriate context
- The basis of these registers is lexical substitution, but with some morphosyntax elements, especially in shamanic register
- But also the marked use of iconic speech, paired collocations
- There would be some argument for saying that hunters' speech is a separate language, in the sense that it is not comprehensible to everyday speakers despite using its syntax
- The striking aspect of this complex register system is that the Mishmi peoples are acephalous, economically unstratified societies, Where such a register system would not normally be expected

Why the multiplicity of registers?

- What would explain this?
- My hypothesis is that the Mishmi groups represent a confluence of a highly oral, forager society with learned structural traditions represented by Tibetan culture
- Specialised shamanic registers are widespread in this region and mediation registers are known from other societies
- Hunting registers are known from the Amazon
- Instead of simplifying these they have all been added together

THANKS

- To the Idu, Kman and Tawra communities for interest and support
- Special thanks to Dr. Mite Lingi and the ILDC, Sokhep Kri and Jogin Tamai for patient language work



4. Mishmi tomb at Dening. The body is buried below. On the upper platform under the thatched roof are exposed the dress, arms, pipes and other belongings of the deceased, mostly contained in the big basket shewn in the photo.