The development of a script for the Mishmi languages: launching of Idu and Kman reading and writing materials

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Endangered languages? Not necessarily

- There has been much talk of 'endangered languages' in Northeast India
- There are certainly many minority languages with a few thousand speakers
- But my observation is that few are seriously threatened, or if they are, it is by pidginization, i.e. people switching to Hindi and English in the middle of sentences, and they forget complex vocabulary
- Certainly none of this inflated rhetoric is actually backed up by serious census or sociolinguistic work
- We do need to know how many speakers of each language there are and their level of competence, certainly

Why develop scripts for minority languages?

- For millennia, languages survived purely orally. Since almost all languages were unwritten, they were transmitted from one generation to another by word of mouth
- Writing first develops in Egypt (ca. 5000 BP), China (ca. 3500 BP) and Central America (ca. 3000 BP) independently. Originally it was to record religious matter, and soon after economic transactions
- But in much of the world, reading and writing did not spread until the twentieth century
- Very suddenly, from one generation to the next, writing became a necessary skill for all but the remotest communities.
- If people couldn't write their own language, pressure was put on them to use the dominant language, English, Arabic, Chinese, Hindi

Why develop scripts for minority languages? II

- But... language is identity. You start communicating in a dominant language and very rapidly you lose your own, and then your identity is lost
- More languages have been lost in North America and Australia than in any other continents due to the enforced use of English
- The danger is that Hindi will play this role in India
- So.. The race is on to develop scripts for minority languages, for use in schools, local publications, social media, so that the next generation will be fluent in writing their own language and proud of their associated identity
- Unfortunately the process to develop scripts in Arunachal Pradesh is not well developed and has not had government support

Why develop scripts for minority languages? III

- This talk covers the process whereby we developed scripts for the Idu and Kman languages
- And acts as a launching for the reading and writing book and alphabet chart
- But also as a call to act far more decisively for other Arunachal Pradesh languages
- And to call for partnership between universities, external scholar and government

A need to write Mishmi languages

- The Mishmi languages are currently spoken by some thousands of people in Arunachal Pradesh
- However, they are not used as languages in school, and there is a concern that it is not being used by younger people due to the prevalence of Hindi
- A writing system would be valuable both for development as a school language and to record traditions and oral literature
- There have been attempts to write the Mishmi languages previously, but none has taken off
- This is because there was a lack of a coherent reading programme and educational materials
- But also because the underlying analysis of Mishmi language sounds had not been undertaken correctly, or at all.



Ethnolinguist ic map of NE India

The Mishmi peoples



Mishmi: three peoples, one name

- The Mishmi peoples of Arunachal Pradesh consist of three different groups, speaking three different languages
- These are the Idu [also Kera], the Tawra [=Taraon] and the Kman [=Miju]
- Two of their languages are presumably related, Idu and Tawra, but the third, Kman, is quite different
- These languages are usually classified as Sino-Tibetan, i.e. together with Tani and Chinese, but the evidence for this is very weak
- They may well be language isolates
- A fourth language, Meyor, spoken in Walong and Kibitho, Anjaw District, has many common features with Kman, and may be related genetically

Mishmi interaction model



A bit of history

- The first record of Mishmi languages go back to the 1850s, with the publication of Robinson (1855)
- Since then there have been a variety of attempts to write Mishmi, the important ones being Needham (1886) and the research services publications from the 1970s to 2002
- There is also extensive work on all three languages on the Chinese side of the border, which of course is not much use in India.
- The Chinese work is academic, not aimed at developing a practical script.

Earlier publications I

1855.] Notes on the Languages spoken by the Mi-Shmis. 307

Notes on the Languages spoken by the Mi-Shmis, by W. ROBINSON, Esq. (Communicated by the Government of Bengal).

The mountain tribes, known to the inhabitants of Assam under the general appellation of Mi-Shmis, occupy those ranges at the north-eastern extremity of the valley, that stretch in the form of a crescent from where the Di-bong debouches into the plains, on the West, to the mountains inhabited by the Singpho tribes, on the East.

Whatever may be the origin of the term *Mi-shmi*, as applied to these mountaineers, it is not recognized by themselves, except in their intercourse with the people of the plains.

Like most other mountain tribes they are divided into a vast number of petty clans, each of which has a nominal head, but these seem so intimately connected with each other, that it is difficult to ascertain in what consists the difference that separates one clan from another. Their lingual peculiarities, however, separate them into three distinct divisions, and, adopting the name of the three great tribes among whom these differences of language prevail, we may class them as the NEDU Mishmis, the TAYING or ME-ME Mi-Shmis, and the MIJHU Mi-Shmis.

Linguistics: pre-existing work

MIJU DICTIONARY

A. BORO TEACHER, LOHIT DISTRICT, ARUNACHAL PRADESH

RESEARCH DEPARTMENT ARUNACHAL PRADESH ADMINISTRATION SHILLONG, 1978 A DICTIONARY OF THE TARAON LANGUAGE FOR THE USE OF OFFICERS IN THE NORTH-EAST FRONTIER AGENCY ADMINISTRATION

(TARAON-ENGLISH—ENGLISH-TARAON)

With an Introduction on the People and the Language

The Philology Section, Research Department, N. E. F. Agency, SHILLONG.

Linguistics: pre-existing work

- There has also been work on the Chinese side, on Idu, Daruang [Tawra] and Geman [Kman]
- There are only a few peripheral villages on the Chinese side, so it is difficult to tell if differences with mainstream speech are dialectal or issues of transcription and elicitation
 Broadly the phonology corresponds

李大勤 著 t; \$1

语言研

究丛

书

Idu publications (failed)

Gospel of John

Storybook





Idu publications (failed)

Bible Society reading book



Recent publications I





Recent publications II



How do we go about developing a script?

- The first step is to assemble a group of committed people, a language development committee
- This is harder than it looks. People often come to the first meeting and then not again
- Or they are convinced we will have full teaching materials ready within a few months
- So, expectations need to be realistic. This will probably take several years.
- A linguist then has to develop a partnership with competent speakers

ILDC hard at work



At work in Nigeria



At work in Vanuatu



The Raga people of Pentecost Island have developed their own script, to record transactions in pigs and other valuable goods

tota and a set	A sa sala a data	Jassa Lynna hanne	Alada Alada Alada	lassa lazlozītaps II. lagama 20021	and the second se
+ 3 par hand hig + 3 par hand hig - 4 3 par hand hig + 3 par handalala afalag		1 AI Conto gu Tollaka 18 AHI Consulta 14 AHI Consulta 14 AHI Consulta 14 INI Consulta			
Land Keaks Alles Salama Andre Keaks Alles Salama Andre Salas Salama Salas Andre Salas Internation Andre Salas Internation Andre Salas Internation Andre Salas Internation Andre Salas			-Tett -Hett		######################################

Linguistics plays a crucial role

- Arunachal Pradesh languages have the following features;
- With very few exceptions, they are undescribed in terms of modern linguistics
- They are tone languages, similar to those in Southeast Asia, but UNLIKE INDO-ARYAN LANGUAGES
- As such there is virtually no training programme in India equipped to deal with these languages
- In addition, most have highly complex phonology, with multiple consonants and elaborate vowel systems
- A language like Hruso (Aka) has one of the most complex systems in the world
- This offers challenges even to professional linguists

The first thing, then..

- Is to analyse all the sounds of Mishmi languages and write them first in the IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet)
- Then we need to see how these can be written in a practical system ('script')
- This needs to be discussed thoroughly with the community
- This is not something a linguist can do; this is social and political as much as purely linguistic
- And it is unlikely you'll get it right first time, because scripts need to be tested in the community

Language analysis in the community

- All too often, language analysis is done outside the community, maybe even in Assam
- This can be very misleading, as out-of-context speakers can sometimes produce adapted phonology, making their language seem more like Hindi etc.
- Grammar recorded in this context, or sentences created for the purpose of Bible translation is often distorted
- As far as possible, language analysis should be within the community

Immediate goals

The immediate goals are to develop;

- A reading and writing book to teach consonants and vowels
- An alphabet chart which illustrates visually the letters and ways of writing them with culturally appropriate pictures
- These have to be prepared in conjunction with;
 - A dictionary which gives you an idea of all the possible combinations of sounds
 - A grammar which shows you how words should be analysed, whether split up or written together

Immediate goals

- The dictionary and grammar should not be published in a hurry, they can be distributed in in small xerox editions for community comment
- But they are there to backstop the literacy process
- In particular the grammar is there to help educationists put together a graded course of teaching, if the language is adopted in the school system

What does linguistic analysis show about Mishmi?

- All three Mishmi languages are tonal like most languages of East Asia, but crucially, not like Hindi, Assamese or indeed most languages of India
- All three Mishmi languages have three level tones
- However, Kman and Tawra also have glide tones, i.e. tones which slide between one level and another
- All have complex consonants and nasalised vowels
- Idu has some unusual creaky and retracted vowels

Mishmi languages are tone languages

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Kman consonants

	Bilabia 1	Labio- dental	Alveola	r Retro - flex	Palato- alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glott al
Plosive	p,p ^h b		t, t d	^h [t]			k, k g	^μ ک
Fricative		f v	s,[s ^h] [z]		ſ		U	h
Affricate			ts dz		੯, ੯ [^] ਟ			
Nasal	m		n			л	Ŋ	
Flapped			r					
Lateral			1	[[]				
Approximants	W	[ט]				N7		

Kman consonants

Kman has a series of allophones of specific consonants, realised in individual ways before front vowels, principally /i/. Apart from /t/ these are all continuants. These are;

/w/	[v]
/1/	[[]
/s/	[S ^h]
/t/	[t]



Central Back Vowels Front 1 Close U U Close-Mid e Ð 0 Open a, ã

Kman nasalised vowels

Kman nasalised vowels

Kman	Gloss
cākrã	triangular drying net
dəhã	large-billed crow
gãwã	zigzag
tàŋgầ	shoulder-blade
tàŋgrã	basket for vegetables
tüpphyã	liquid food prepared with the stomach of a fish
lōŋshầy	large eagle
gārõ	herb sp.
gē̃wē	zigzag, twisty
làhõ	sweet potato
māwē?	herb sp.

Kman doubled vowels

Kman	Gloss
glāàt	village
sáàt	to murder, kill
bō̄ồ	to low (cow, mithun)
gōò	plate
pyōò	to smear a paste

Kman is a tone language

- Kman is a tone language like most languages of East Asia, but crucially, not like Hindi, Assamese or indeed most languages of India
- Kman has three tone heights although these are not arranged in neat sets
- But are rather sliding tones which move between one level and another

Kman is a tone language II

Only the mid-tone occurs on monosyllabic roots. The underlying system consists of glide tones which apply either to single segments but form a system of suprasegmental patterns applied to polysyllabic words and compounds. The glides so far identified are High-Mid, High-Low and Mid-Low, marked as follows;

High-	,	High-Low	^	Basic
Mid	_	High-Mid	~	Phonetic only
WIIC		Mid-Low	~	Basic
Low	N	Low-Mid	~	Loanwords only
Kman is a tone language IV

Kman tones are highly mobile in compounds and sentence contexts. This is almost certainly due to the suprasegmentals nature of the tones. Thus; or;

ît ít tāmpūì	enemy raid, attack
əmìk	sun
əmìk khlət	sunrise

Idu consonants I

IPA	as in	Gloss	Written	as in
р	pà	to cross	р	ра
p^{h}	phālā	tea	ph	phala
b	bùɲī	yesterday	b	bunyi
t	tī	to cover	t	ti
ť	t ^h ū	bite	th	thu
d	dō	suck	d	do
k	kà	rice	k	kə
k ^h	k ^h òndà	metal bell	kh	khonda
g	g <u>è</u>	to carry	g	<u>gə</u>
h	hā	eat	h	ha
S	sā	mithun	S	sa

Idu consonants II

IPA	as in	Gloss	Written	as in
ſ	∫rè	to dismantle	sh	shre
8	şī	iron	S	si
ţſ	ţī	to acquire	С	сі
$\mathfrak{f}^{\mathrm{h}}$	t∫ĥÌ	to walk	ch	chi
dӡ	dzāmī	yak	j	jami
dz	ádzú	gorge	Z	adzu
m	mà	black	m	ma
n	ná	pain	n	na
n	nùtā	last room	ny	nyuta

Idu consonants III

IPA	as in	Gloss	Written	as in
r	rŐ	boat	r	ro
ľ	Ój	arrest	rh	rho
I	lò	white	l	lo
l	ĮÒ	make hole	lh	lho
W	Wā	cancer	W	wa
У	Уū	beer	У	yu

Idu vowels

IPA	Example	Gloss	Written
а	ā	child	а
е	è	to do	е
i	1	to live	i
Ο	ōō	to shoot	Ο
u	ū	to think	U
ə	kə́	rice	ə

Idu creaky vowels

ahye	āyē
ahye	āyē
ahye	àyē
ahya	àyà
ahyeb <u>ə</u>	àyèb
maahy	māà

G

a

be irritating strip kernels from maize poison daughter ritual serow

Idu is a tone language

- Idu is a tone language like most languages of East Asia, but crucially, not like Hindi, Assamese or indeed most languages of India
- Idu has three level tones, marked as follows;



A macron (⁻) over a vowel is thus mid-tone and not length. There are no glide tones, somewhat surprisingly in the light of their importance in Tawra and Kman.
These can be seen from the following sets of words

Idu is a tone language II

end point	tấ
carry on a stretcher	tã
piece of meat	tầ

smoke s.t. on a tray	kù
grains	kū
go on journey	kú

buy	ló
white	1ō
drill, make hole	lò

Multiple language systems

Idu, Tawra, Kman and Meyor all share a system of multiple language registers

- These are;
 - a) ordinary speech
 - b) speech of hunters
 - c) speech of priests/shamans
 - d) poetic/lyrical register (? not in Idu)
 - e) mediation register (only in Idu?)
 - f) babytalk register

Multiple language systems

- The speech of hunters involves lexical substitution, the replacement of animal names and others by special forms, sometimes short poems
- Priests' speech is more complex, involving much language which is difficult to understand as well as lengthy descriptions of sacrificial animals
- The poetic/lyrical register in Kman is mainly about the substitution of poetic lexicon for ordinary words. The words often come in pairs, such as nomay/bromay. The surprising thing is that we know nothing of the origin of these words.
- The Mishmi peoples seem to be unique in the development of so many speech registers. Something to be celebrated.

MFPS

TA-ATHAP-WANG YAA MISHMI PRAYER & MANTRAS

AMIK WEE CHOW NEY MATAI WEE KLAM NEY TIMIK WEE CHOW NEW KAGAM WEE KLAM NEY SHUTO WEE CHOW NEY BORU WEE CHOW NEY HUTUNG WEE CHOW NEY KATAN WEE TAM NEY KANGUN WEE TAM NEY KAANYAN WEE TAM NEY

Kman words in hunting register

food	shyàt	mūk k (monk
chili	bìtſí	kə̄sày
garlic	təmà?	mā?kā
salt	təmìn	blày k
ginger	dī?ìŋ	yēlkā
rice	hākù	dəp kä
maize	bò	kāwyī
millet	dərò	kāŋgrā
meat	s ^h în	lüm
wine, beer	s ^h î	sh ^h û k

k^hwī key faeces) āw kə`.pà

àmbī?

ūŋ

aw

kàmbòŋ

This year

This is the 50th anniversary of the Rẽ/ 49th of Tamladu collective festivals, celebrated by all three Mishmi peoples
The alphabet charts and reading and writing books have been presented
Tawra is lagging behind at present



The Idu and Kman dictionaries

- Work from 2015 to 2018 has resulted in preliminary dictionaries of the Idu and Kman languages, of which some copies have been made and circulated.
- They have the following features; Use a correct description of the sound system. Include tones marked throughout Include accurate descriptions of parts of speech Accompanied by example sentences Identify plants and animals with scientific names ✤Include words from the special shaman (kambring) and hunting registers Illustrated with photographs of Idu crafts English-Idu/Kman index

Idu alphabet chart



Idu reading and writing book

Reading and writing Idu

A book of letters

Idu Azobra



Idu Language Development Committee

Roing 2018

Young Idu readers



First Idu readers



Presentation of Idu charts



Idu dictionary 2018



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Idu grammar 2018



Kman alphabet chart



Kman reading and and writing book

Reading and writing Kman



Kman tasay tapuri pit

Kman Language Development Committee

Presentation of Kman charts



Kman dictionary 2018



ROGER BLENCH



SOKHEP KRI





KMAN LAY KƏTƏM

A DICTIONARY OF KMAN

Trial Edition

Tezu, February 2018 MISHMI PUBLISHING HOUSE, TEZU

Kman grammar 2018



Trial Edition Tezu, February 2018 MISHMI PUBLISHING HOUSE, TEZU









Further plans for the dictionaries

The dictionaries are currently word-processed files, suitable for book publication

However, it would be unrealistic not to assume that many people would want to consult a dictionary on their phone rather than a physical book

In the coming year I hope to convert the existing files to Flex, a dictionary database software, which in turn can be converted to a format for Android phones

This should give the widest possible circulation to the dictionaries and can also be continuously updated

Where next: a grammar?

> The companion volume to a dictionary is a grammar, a guide to how and why Idu puts together its sentences >This is much harder to write than a dictionary, as we don't know the rules and speakers have no innate perception \succ Everyone speaks grammatically, but does not necessarily know the rules of grammar **But a grammar is essential if teaching materials are to be** prepared >A grammar has been drafted and circulation versions are

ready

OK, we have a script, where next?

- From the point of view of Mishmi, we need campaigns to bring initial awareness of the script
- But most of all we aim towards the use of the Mishmi languages in school, as part of the 'third language'
- This can only happen with the support of the Ministry of Education
- Which can be active or passive, i.e. they can approve it but not actually do anything to implement it
- >Or they can help bring it to the schools
- For this the Mishmi people need an expert in educational materials who can use the grammar to write graded teaching textbooks

Could Mishmi languages be written in Devanagri?

- It has been suggested that the Mishmi languages could be written in Devanagri
- However, Devanagri is poorly adapted to the Mishmi languages, as it has no tone-marks, no conventions for nasalisation, no marks for retracted vowels and no long vowels
- If an entirely new Devanagri alphabet were developed to include all the possibilities then things would be different
- But this presently seems highly unlikely
- Roman script is the best option for the future

Can such writing systems succeed in Arunachal Pradesh?

- It might be easy to conclude that such writing systems can never be successful in Arunachal Pradesh
- However, we can look at the Tani languages for a good example of how this can work
- Adi, Nyishi and other languages are now regularly used for both publications and all sorts of notices and informal communication
- The writing systems are not perfect, but they are good enough to communicate
- And they get people excited about their language so that it can develop for modern communications, texting, Facebook and so on

Literacy is non-denominational

- The development of script in Northeast India has all too often been associated with Christianity
- There is a fear of working directly in Arunachal Pradesh, so quite often, translators have been transported to Assam and have worked in conditions of semi-secrecy
- > As is the case with Tawra at the moment
- This should absolutely be condemned. Reading and writing is for everyone, whatever their beliefs
- And the script should be developed within the community
- Because only that way it will be accepted

Another proposed step: a Mishmi publishing house

The existing publications have been attributed to a 'Mishmi Publishing House' though no such entity exists

- But why not create one?
- To publish quality work which relates to the three Mishmi peoples and to republish older work

➤To this end a preliminary meeting was held in Tezu on the 15th of Februayr with representatives of all three communities

A memorandum of understnading was signed jointly and is being forwarded to the Mishmi Welfare Society, CALSOM and other representative bodies for approval



And for Arunachal as a whole?

There are many more languages in Arunachal Pradesh which need similar development

Some Tani languages, Adi, Apatani, Galo, Tagin are advanced in this area though not with good teaching materials

But for many others, there's nothing at all

The next generation will come from speakers of those languages, students at RGU, in collaboration with experts, and (hopefully) State Government

➤To develop the rich heritage of the State



THANKS

To the many
individuals who helped
us in the field
especially the ILDC
and CALSOM