

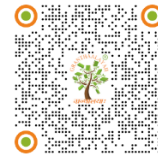
Original Article

LOCATING ASSAMESE, MEITEILON AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE AMONG THE DIASPORA MEITEILON SPEAKERS OF ASSAM: A CASE STUDY AT UKHAMATI TARAJAN

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ABSTRACT

In the linguistically diverse region of Northeast India, the intersection of cultural identity, social mobility, and economic opportunity is often negotiated through language. The primary objective of this study is to locate the functionality and social attitudes assigned to Meiteilon, Assamese and English within the Meiteilon-speaking community in Ukhamati Tarajan, Assam. The study examines the sociolinguistic roles of these three languages in a multilingual diaspora community, where English is an associate official language, Assamese is the language of administration, and Meiteilon is an associate language. The research methodology combines a case study design with semi-structured interviews for primary data collection. Through the interviews with Meiteilon speakers across three generations of settlers, the research reveals a complex hierarchy of language use, where Meiteilon is confined to expressive and cultural domains, Assamese serves as the language of mobility and social status, and English symbolizes aspirational opportunities. Primary findings of the study indicate a high level of multilingualism, wherein all respondents spoke three or more languages. The findings also highlight the strategic negotiation of language choices among respondents from second, third, and fourth generation settlers. The study, as a whole, contributes to the understanding of language contact, language maintenance, and linguistic identity in multilingual settings, with emphasis on the complexities of language use in diaspora communities.

Keywords: Multilingualism, Sociolinguistics, Diaspora, English, Meiteilon, Assamese

INTRODUCTION

Northeast India is a zone of linguistic diversity, with different communities speaking different languages reflecting centuries old pattern of cultural exchange and migration. This linguistic wealth consists languages from different families, mainly Tibeto-Burman (Manipuri is a part of it) and Indo-Aryan (Assamese is an example), and few speakers of Austro-Asian (example is Khasi). This wealth also showcases a distinct yet vulnerable linguistic ecosystem. This diversity of language exists within a linguistic framework governed by power and stratification at times, leading to the marginalization and endangerment of smaller communities.

This present study focuses on the Meiteilon speakers settled in Ukhamati Tarajan village, Dhemaji district, Assam, constituting an example of existence of minority language within the sociolinguistic domain of a dominant regional language. The Meitei community in Ukhamati consists primarily of second and third generation settlers who migrated from various parts of Assam and Manipur. This situates them not only as a linguistic minority vis-à-vis the regional majority language but also within a highly pluralistic environment alongside Atoms, Misings, Bodos, Chutiyas, etc.

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The primary objective of this article is to locate the functionality and social attitudes assigned to Meiteilon, Assamese and English among this diaspora community. It aims to understand the patterns and competence of language use in social and economic spheres, and to identify the social and political influences shaping the utility of English in this multilingual setting.

This article focuses exclusively on the language practices and subjective attitude of thirty three Meiteilon speakers residing in Ukhamati Tarajan village, Upper Assam. The goal is to identify the ecological domain occupied by the three languages within this composite multilingual setting. The primary data are drawn from a semi-structured interview administered to the participants, concerning their language acquisition, competence and language use.

Ukhamati Tarajan, located in the Gogamukh sub-district of Dhemaji, Assam, reflects a broader demographic phenomenon found across the region: the migration and settlement of Manipuri (Meitei) speakers who have maintained their linguistic and cultural identity even while assimilating into Assamese society. Detailed academic and government sources reveal that Manipuri has been officially recognized as an associate language in several districts due to the substantial and enduring presence of Meitei people throughout Assam. A recent government notification in April 2025 further formalized the use of Assamese as the compulsory official language statewide [Government of Assam \(2025\)](#), while acknowledging the roles of local languages such as Manipuri in specific regions. The historical migration of Manipuris—from Manipur and other valleys—has created layered communities such as those in Ukhamati [Singha \(2020\)](#) with a composite identity marked by high rates of bilingualism and cross-cultural exchange. These developments highlight both the diversity and complexity of language relations, administration, and identity among Assam's diaspora populations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Locating a language in a linguistically complex region such as Assam cannot be complete by a simple geographical mapping of languages present in the region. It demands a sophisticated lens that can interpret the sociolinguistic dynamics of South Asia. Here, languages coexist in a fluid, overlapping system and does not follow rigid classification. This review synthesizes the scholarship of three components of the language ecology of the region. First, it recognizes the foundational idea of Indian multilingualism as 'organic pluralism'. Second, it defines the hierarchical power structure at play within that language ecology. And third, it explores the performance of the speakers who shape their environment through the use of language.

Theoretical models of Indian multilingualism talks of a system which is inherently different from the models of Europe. Lachmann M. Khubchandani's idea of organic pluralism capture the reality of the subcontinent, a system defined by its 'fuzziness of language boundaries' and 'fluidity in language identity' [Khubchandani \(1991\)](#). This reality sharply contrast with the rigid, nationality-based language ideology that treats identity based on language as an exclusive category. Within this pluralistic environment, languages are organised into what E. Annamalai terms as a stable 'functional network', serving complementary roles in different domains like home, commerce and rituals [Annamalai \(2004\)](#).

This functional coexistence is structured by asymmetrical powers. Ajit K. Mohanty propounded the concept of 'hierarchical multilingualism' where we can observe this functional network being shadowed by a double divide of power [Mohanty \(2010\)](#). This structure of functional yet hierarchical multilingualism makes an ecological footprint where the language user navigates their linguistic encounter accordingly.

Within this plural yet hierarchical framework, language contact is a dynamic process where the speakers negotiate and reinvent their identity. As theorized by Kramsch and Whiteside, language ecology approach views speakers as agents navigating a system. There exists a sustained pressure on the use of space, a concept central to Emano's idea of India as a 'language area'. This pressure leads to linguistic convergence. The creation of hybrid lingua franca like 'Nagamese', a mixture of Assamese and Naga languages is one such convergence which can also be viewed as creating an ecological niche by its speakers [Chakraborty \(2025\)](#).

This perspective highlights the role of "symbolic competence," which Kramsch & Whiteside define as the ability not merely to perform an identity but to "shape the very context," and "create alternative realities" [Kramsch and Whiteside \(2008\)](#) Language choice becomes a strategic act of shaping one's environment. Sunipa Ghosh Dastidar illustrates, indigenous words from Northeast India—such as the Mizo term 'tlawmngaihna' (representing selflessness and community duty) or the Ao word 'jhum' (a sustainable agricultural practice)—serve as unique repositories of cultural values [Ghosh Dastidar and Kumar Saha \(2025\)](#). This performance, however, operates within unequal power relations.

METHODOLOGY

The Meitei settlement in question is a cohesive community of 44 households. The participants represent second, third and upcoming fourth generation settlers. Their major reported occupation include farming, carpentry, driving and small businesses. The case study is built upon qualitative data derives from semi-structured interview with thirty three Meitei individuals (eighteen females, fifteen males) ranging in age 12 to 76 years. The interview focused on the origins, competence in local and regional languages, transactional language use and perceived status of languages. A primary finding of the study which is consistent with the broader tradition of organic pluralism in India as propounded by Khubchandani is that all the participants were multilingual,

speaking three or more languages. This highly intrinsic multilingualism is the basis of analysing their negotiation strategies within a language hierarchy.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The linguistic double divide Mohanty (2010) identifies two linguistic power positions relevant to the participants' lives. The first divide is the English-Vernacular divide which places English, an elite language of formal education, higher education and global economy Annamalai (2004) above major regional vernaculars (like Assamese). The second is the Vernacular-Other divide which places the dominant regional language over marginalized languages like Meiteilon. Vernaculars gained status locally after linguistic state reorganization of India, making competence in the language desirable for socioeconomic functioning.

As speakers of dominated language, the Meiteilon speakers of Ukhamati Tarajan go through domain shrinkage, where their mother tongue is restricted to the expressive, intimate and cultural sphere, thereby preserving ethnic identity while conceding instrumental power to the dominant language.

DATA

Demographic info:

The respondents span a wide generational range, with the youngest recorded age being 12, while the oldest respondent being 76 years of age. The sample has a higher representation of women respondents, with 54.55% female respondents and the remaining 45.45% male. Respondents cover a range of typical rural occupations, with 24.24% of them being farmers, 21.21% homemakers, 18.18% students, 12.12% weavers, 9.09% running small businesses, 6.06% driver and the remaining 9.09% involved in other activities. Occupational backgrounds are varied, mostly in the manual or small enterprise sectors such as farming, carpentry, driving, etc.

Mother Tongue:

Despite a complete ethnic identification as Manipuri, some language shift for home use is reported. 84.85% of respondents selected Manipuri as their mother tongue, while 15.15% of them opted for Manipuri but confided that they were more comfortable using Assamese.

Migration and Settlement:

The community is predominantly migrant in origin with 81.82% of respondents stating migration histories from Manipur, Sibsagar, and Cachar. Having migrated there, most families have established long-term settlement in the region ranging from 30-70 years, while a few (18.18%) of the younger respondents were uncertain in regards to this.

LANGUAGE PREFERENCES AND MULTILINGUALISM

Multilingualism is seen as the norm, where all respondents listed speaking at least two languages; 72.73% listed three or more (Manipuri, Assamese, Hindi/Bengali/English, etc.).

The local/regional language is recorded by all respondents as Assamese with some noting it as "Tekhao" dialect. Assamese dominates as the lingua franca, with 81.82% using it for communication. The youngest respondents included English alongside Assamese.

English is far less commonly spoken, with 72.73% of respondents stating that they did not speak the language. The use of English is concentrated mostly among youth or students, possibly because English learning is, for many, limited to primary or secondary school, with 36.36% of respondents stating that they had never learnt it in a formal setting. In addition to this, 69.70% of respondents expressed discomfort conversing in English.

Assamese is recorded as the main language for business transactions in the region, with all respondents stating how business is conducted almost exclusively in Assamese. Some also mention use of Hindi. Interestingly, despite all respondents positioning Hindi as a relevant language and expressing positive inclinations towards learning it, it remains a less dominant language in the region.

The social realities are heavily reflected through the opinions on multiple languages being seen as economically useful. The responses on this varied with 27.27% claiming that Assamese and English provided best opportunities for economic mobility, 36.36% offering that status to English and Hindi, 18.18% distributing that significance among the aforementioned three languages, and 18.18% finally listing English as the best language to do so.

Code-switching is frequent, usually between Manipuri and Assamese, with 87.88% of respondents doing so. A small faction, particularly the youngest respondents practice code-switching with English. Most (75.76%) respondents adjust language by situation and social settings, making use of their multilingualism to adapt as required. In regards to formal institutions, the settings demand Assamese, with some English for documentation. 63.64% of respondents use Assamese, while the remaining 36.36% use a mixture of Assamese and English.

A significant section acknowledge interference from L1 when they speak a different language, resulting in having accents. 66.67% of respondents have accents while 33.33% of them do not.

CASE ANALYSIS: LOCATING THE THREE LANGUAGES

Meiteilon (Manipuri): The Language of Identity.

The findings state that all the participants identify Meiteilon as their mother tongue. However its functional use is limited where it is utilised only at home and among the same community. The six younger participants had no access to their mother tongue in their educational environment.

This restriction of Meiteilon to private domains conform the Vernacular Other divide and sets an example for domain shrinkage. For the thirty three diaspora speakers, Meiteilon functions as an entirely integrative language essential for their 'rootedness and cultural or emotional needs' [Annamalai \(2004\)](#). It functions as a crucial element to maintain a distinct identity in a culturally diverse environment. This reliance on their mother tongue in terms of the expressive domain is to ensure the survival of their language and cultural heritage in the face of pressure from the more powerful regional language. The willingness of these participants to confine their mother tongue use talks about their awareness of the linguistic hierarchy and practicality to prioritize other languages in public life. The potential of Meiteilon as a lingua franca is negated by its non-substantive role in public life.

Assamese (Tekhao): The Language of Mobility.

Assamese or Tekhao (as called by the Meitei settlers in Ukhamati Tarajan) is identified by the thirty three participants as the dominant regional language. Their assessment confirms Assamese as the language instrumental to the functioning of the community. It is the primary language of communication among the various communities. It is primarily used for business transactions. This language is also perceived to give the highest social mobility and social status.

This high regard for Assamese confirms that within the local sphere of Ukhamati Tarajan, the Vernacular-Other divide is visible. The participants recognise that proficiency in Assamese is the highest form of linguistic capital required for economic mobility and social integration. Since they reside in a composite setting with diverse groups, Assamese becomes indispensable as the link language.

The language use pattern among the thirty three multilingual speakers is visibly fluid, where language mixing/code switching with Manipuri and Assamese is observed. This is characteristic of India's fluid nature and a pluralistic communication pattern [Khubchandani \(1991\)](#). This is the communication strategy adapted by the speakers to pragmatically incorporate Assamese into their verbal repertoire to achieve local success.

ENGLISH: THE LANGUAGE OF ELITE OPPORTUNITY

The positioning of English (and Hindi) within the participants discourse reflects the wider global and national language stratification, especially the English-Vernacular divide.

The case study found that the use of English is confined to educational and formal official use. Most of the participants have little to no proficiency in English, particularly due to lack of English learning in their formative years of education. The six participants that belongs to the younger fourth generation have good proficiency in English. They occasionally use English outside their educational environment while communicating among themselves. They are also continually exposed to English in other forms such as media consumption, television, etc.

Nevertheless, this specialized functional domain aligns perfectly with English's long standing role as a sociolinguistics transplant that maintains its status as the language of wider opportunity in post-colonial India [Kachru \(1983\)](#). For the participants, English symbolizes the aspirational link to modernization and opportunity outside their immediate environment.

The thirty three participants perception of English as a necessary and highly specialized language perpetuates the structural dilemma noted by Mohanty: the need to acquire English for advancement, despite its inadequate provision in school systems (especially those belonging to low socioeconomic strata). This maintains the English-Vernacular divide where access to genuine opportunity is limited to those with high English proficiency. The success and access is thus class dependent rather than merit.

DISCUSSION

The micro level data collected from the thirty three Meitei participants validates the sociolinguistics model of linguistic hierarchy in India. The experience of these individuals is defined by maintenance between preserving cultural identity and realising material opportunities.

NEGOTIATION OF IDENTITY AND PRAGMATISM

The participants demonstrate the reality of language use as a process of strategic negotiation. They prioritize the pragmatic utility of Assamese and aspirational value of English. This pragmatic response is driven by the unequal distribution of power among the codes. The preservation of Meiteilon as an undisputed marker of ethnic identity, comes at the cost of limiting its scope, minimising its influence outside of the home environment thereby contributing to its systemic impoverishment. This condition is primarily due to the marginalised location of the Manipuri speakers.

For the thirty three participants who are inherently multilingual, this proficiency is a cognitive advantage, as given by previous research showing positive consequences of bilingualism/multilingualism. However, the hierarchical structure is a perceived and expected burden for these multilinguals. The social and educational systems demand proficiency in languages distant from the home environment (Assamese, English) while their mother tongue is often sidelined in formal education. This can potentially lead to capability deprivation if school resources are inadequate for the marginalised learner or if proficiency targets are unattainable. The participants high regard for Assamese as the language for social mobility and social status influences the language socialisation they practice, where the vernacular is given more weightage than their mother tongue.

EVIDENCE OF SYSTEMIC INEQUALITY

The compartmentalised nature of language use in Ukhamati Tarajan by these participants suggests that the experience of multilingualism is 'multilingualism of the unequals' [Mohanty \(1990\)](#). Their situation explains the dual challenges faced by minority speakers in India: marginalisation by the regional majority (Assamese), enforcing language shift and accommodation: and exclusion from elite circles by English. The lack of widespread, non-institutionalised English use makes access to English limited and tied to formal and privatised school education.

CONCLUSION

The case study of the thirty three diaspora Meiteilon speakers in Ukhamati empirically maps the functional distribution of their trilingual repertoire onto the existing theoretical framework of the linguistic double divide.

The participants engage in strategic language management, assigning Meiteilon a constrained symbolic role for cultural rootedness (the dominated tier); elevating Assamese to the critical instrumental role for local mobility and transaction (the vernacular tier); and reserving English (and Hindi) for the aspirational, non-local domains of power (the elite tier).

The collective experience of this participant group demonstrates that while India's linguistic pluralism ensures language maintenance [Khubchandani \(1991\)](#), the accompanying hierarchy imposes structural burdens, forcing minority speakers to continuously negotiate identity maintenance against the pragmatic need for the dominant linguistic capital. To secure their future socioeconomic advancement, the Meiteilon community in Ukhamati must sustain this linguistic balance, successfully transitioning between their mother tongue, the powerful regional language, and the global language of elite opportunity.

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