



Language Interrelations: The Degeneration of Socio-Cultural Values in Khasi and Hmar

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Abstract

In this paper, an attempt has been made to discuss about the intensity of language interaction, diversity and interrelations and their impact on indigenous languages that have been subject to changes over time. An ecolinguistic perspective on the issues of cultural and traditional words relevant to the indigenous and traditional knowledge that have been lost in cultural translation and cultural transition from one's own to some others' has been the

main focus of this paper. The present paper is a preliminary study and provides scope for further research.

Keywords: Ecolinguistics, Socio-Cultural Terminology, Translation and Transition, Khasi, Hmar

1. Introduction

Khasi with a population of just about 1, 28, 575 speakers (2001 Census) belongs to the Mon-Khmer branch of the Austro-Asiatic language family and is mainly spoken in Meghalaya. The language adopted the Roman script in the 1840's and since then literary writings started flourishing gradually. Khasi is mostly isolating in nature with SVO as the basic word order.

Hmar belongs to the Kuki-Chin sub-group of the Tibeto-Burman language family. The Hmars with a total population of 10,8000 (2001 Census) mostly inhabit the state of Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Tripura, Cachar and North-Cachar Hills of Assam. However, they are considered to be mainly concentrated in the Churachandpur, Tipaimukh and Jiribam subdivisions of Manipur (Dena, 2008). According to Dena (2005), there is a difference in opinion regarding their identity. Some opine that they are called Hmar because they live to the north of the Mizo people. Etymologically, Hmar means 'north' in both Hmar and Mizo languages. The other opinion is based on the local tradition, that is, the word Hmar originated from 'hmarh' meaning 'tying of one's hair in a knot at the back of the head'. Dena (2008) states that the Hmars were known by different clan names before the term 'Hmar' came into popular use and this can be seen in their migration and settlements based on clan



considerations. The Hmars speak a common language also called Hmar which closely resembles the Lushai, Paite and other Kuki languages. According to Varte (2011), the language was reduced to a written form in the 19th Century by the Christian missionaries. Hmar does not have a script of its own but has adopted the Roman script. Hmar is a tonal language and is mostly agglutinating in nature. It is a verb final language with SOV as the basic word order.

2. Issues concerning threat of Endangerment

The increasing interrelation and interaction of linguistic communities day by day has led to the threat of endangerment of our indigenous culture and tradition. Urbanization and modernization- the two main issues that everyone is running after to be at par with the rest of the world, have pushed our present generation to upgrade themselves to a more acceptable norms of social style of living, therefore, adapting in terms of language to the changing world. This is a serious concern as this generation of language speakers no longer consciously think about what, where and how they speak. Naturally, the language that would serve them best in the context is opted for. These issues have been echoed in Sapir (1912) and Steiner (1975) when they emphasize on the increasingly urgent problem of language endangerment due to linguistic diversity.

Metaphorically, North Eastern India is like a beautiful and colourful urn where linguistic and language concoction are well brewed in. The diversity, spanning from the three language families that are coexisting alongside for a long period of time to the different ethnicity and indigenous tribes and even to the different belief systems of religions have made this region more eye-capturing in terms of



academic research especially in terms of language and socio-cultural studies. Needless to say, this situation itself allows for languages to permeate each other's boundaries without much hindrance. Therefore, language speakers naturally and unconsciously merged their thoughts to the surrounding contexts and their demands, and submit themselves to the needs of the situations. Therefore, language choice is a natural process in such a linguistic environment. Indigenous communities are moving rapidly towards change (in vocabularies as well as structures), and during this transitional phase, they are caught unaware of the impact of the change that seem to have degenerated the choice of using one's own language consciously. It is in these contexts that the questions of endangerment and mother tongue degradation dwell in. The two varieties chosen in this study are not endangered varieties, but are in the line of being engulfed by neighboring contact languages or State official languages/ associate official languages that are in use in the States where they are spoken/ or by situational choice of any language suited best for the required contexts.

The focus of this paper is on the issues that concern the threat of endangerment. The factors of change include urbanization, modernization, technology, fashion trending and others. The subjects of change are considered from the following perspectives.

2.1. The implication of Concrete Buildings

As concrete structures creeps in alongside urbanization, causing eco-friendly houses and house structures to disappear, that eventually lead to the disappearances of the native words that refer to them, there seem to be a



reflection of a shadow looming over our indigenous languages, allowing one to exchange one's own comfort living zones to pave way to urbanization and to other words best suited for reference. Losing words referring to indigenous house structures also means losing all items that are within the structures.

The following words in Hmar and Khasi are found to have been completely ignored or used scarcely and minimally by language users of the varieties.

2.1.1. Traditional Household items

The consequence of concrete structures due to urbanization and technological advancement in the Khasi and Hmar societies is the gradual loss of household items that were once associated with the traditional house structures, resulting in the loss of words that were used to refer to these items. The following words are household items in both the languages are either rarely or no longer used.

Hmar

1. *puonri* 'thick cotton blanket made of unspun cotton and cotton threads'
2. *meitawk* 'firelighter'
3. *funki* 'mithun's horn used for keeping gunpowder'
4. *tuithei* 'long bamboo piece hollowed from one side used for carrying water'
5. *herawt* 'wooden ginning machine'
6. *rel* 'basket brought by a bride to the husband's house'
7. *buhak* 'mat like structure used for spreading rice for drying'
8. *heri* 'axes'



Khasi

1. *Thlong-synrei* ‘
2. *Tyngier* (a place hung over the fire in order to dry fish, meat etc.)
3. *Tympan* ‘place of heating above the fire’
4. *Tyllaw ding* ‘firewood’
5. *Tlieng* ‘cane mat’
6. *u sup* ‘basket like a box to keep things’
7. *Knup* ‘worn on the head to protect rain’
8. *Prah* ‘winnowing tray’
9. *Pdung* ‘winnowing tray’
10. *Traw* ‘hay’
11. *U Sup u thiar* (barn...to keep rice’
12. *Palong* ‘bed’
13. *bthap* ‘shelves-like structure’

2.1.2. House structures

This section deals with words in Khasi and Hmar describing traditional house structures and types that are no longer used especially in urban areas.

Hmar

1. *khumthol* ‘bedroom’
2. *namthlak* ‘downside of a house’
3. *sawngka* ‘open porch’
4. *sumphuk* ‘enclosed verandah’

Housing types in Khasi



1. *Ing-trep* 'thatched houses'
2. *Ing jain* 'houses made of cloths' (Tent House)
3. *Ingdara* 'podium'
4. *Ing paki* 'mansion'
5. *Ing sad* 'palace'

Parts of the house in Khasi

1. *Khalki* 'window'
2. *Phalor* 'verandah'
3. *Ka phrah* 'gate'
4. *Atoskhana* 'chimney'
5. *Dpei* 'fireplace'
6. *Byrthap* 'wooden wall made of plank'

2.2. Fashion trending

Many of the traditional dress and attires of both the Hmar and Khasi communities have been replaced by fashion trends influenced by the western culture. It would suffice to say that most of the traditional attires listed below have lost their significance and are no longer worn except in cultural functions and events. Therefore, the terminologies referring to them are gradually becoming obsolete.

Hmar

1. *tawmkuoi* 'hairpin'
2. *samkhim* 'types of hairdo identifying the Hmar women'

3. *nemrangpuon* 'shawl made of cotton white or saffron colour by joining two pieces together lengthwise down the middle.'
4. *tlangdungvel* 'design worn by ladies on special occasions covering the breast part below the armpit upto the knee.'
5. *samlukhim* 'headgear used by women made of woolwork'
6. *tawnsawn* 'tail hair of wild cliff goat put on the head gear'

Khasi

1. *Jainkyrshah* 'apron'
2. *Painkhyllong* 'bun'
3. *Jainboh* dhoti
4. *Slieng* 'wrap around'
5. *Sopjat* shoes made out of cloths used by villagers during winter'
6. *Putoi* 'waistcoat'
7. *Iarong* 'bag'
8. *Shlim dih дума* 'hookah'
9. *Thylliat* 'used to grind betel nut'
10. *Tyndong siej* 'cane tubes used for many purposes'

2.3. Social upgradation Implication

Urbanization and modernization brings about a rapid change in the socio-cultural practices and values of speech communities. The attempt to socially upgrade and adapt themselves to a more acceptable norm or standard of living directly influences and impacts the language of these communities.

2.3.1. Kinship relations implications

The word forms traditionally describing kinship relations in Hmar and Khasi are given below. These words have gradually been shortened or lost over time.

Hmar

1. *zuo-pa* 'father'
2. *chuon-nu* 'mother'

Khasi

1. *Meirad* 'grandmother'
2. *Meipun* 'grandmother'
3. *Pamen* 'grandfather'
4. *Parakher paramer* 'neighbours'
5. *Ni* 'uncle'

2.3.2. Traditional Transition implications

Most of the indigenous language communities in North-East India including Khasi and Hmar have given up or are in the process of giving up their age-old traditional practices owing to the advent of Christianity, education, change in political administration, influence of western culture. In abandoning these traditional practices, the speakers have eventually discontinued using terminologies referring to such practices as seen in the words listed below.

2.3.2.1. Traditional institution

Hmar

1. *Buonzawl/sier* 'youth/bachelors' dormitory

2.3.2.2. Traditional political system



Hmar

1. *thiempu* 'village priest'
2. *khawnbawl* 'village council'
3. *siehmang* 'advisers to chief'
4. *ramhuol* 'class of successful cultivators/farmers'
5. *thiemrau* 'diviners'
6. *busung* 'tax for the produce of land'
7. *sadar* 'tax when a wild animal is killed in a hunt'

Khasi

1. *Bishar ngam um* a particular practice of judgment'
2. *Ringsaiphla* 'bring witness'
3. *Bam smai* 'oath taking'

2.3.2.3. Marriage

The traditional marriage practices and customs are not adversely affected by urbanization as compared to the other traditional practices. However, some of the traditional characteristics of marriage customs no longer exist resulting in the loss of the native word.

Hmar

1. *kawnghlaw* 'marriage by service. Believed to be the oldest method of acquiring wife among Hmars'

Khasi

1. *Synjat* 'engagement'

2.3.2.4. Religious beliefs

Traditionally, the Khasi and Hmar religion was animistic. With the advent of Christianity, the animistic belief was given up. This led to the loss of their traditional religious practices and beliefs and consequently to the gradual disappearance of words that refer to them.

Hmar

1. *khuonu* 'God'
2. *pielral* 'paradise/resting place for souls of warriors and successful hunters'
3. *pi-pu-rau-biek* 'worship of ancestors' soul/ancestor worship'

2.3.2.5. Ceremonies of birth and death

The Khasi and Hmar, due to their animistic belief, had a number of age-old rituals and ceremonies of birth and death which have gradually lost their importance and are no longer observed. The disappearance of such practices entail that the words describing them are no longer used.

Hmar

1. *khawduop* 'thanksgiving ceremony performed every year for children born on the same year to ensure sound health of the children'
2. *sepei* 'removal or farewell rite in a child's death'
3. *famzar* 'rite performed on the following day of a person's death'
4. *thleirielkhang* 'rite performed after three days of death as a symbol of demarcation between the living and the dead.'
5. *thi tin* 'rite performed to bid final farewell to the departed soul'

Khasi

1. *Ka jer ka thoh* ‘rituals performed for naming of newborns’
2. *Ka phur ka siang* ‘rituals for the dead’
3. *Iam meikak iam pakha* ‘a song of lamenting the death of paternal parents performed by the grandchildren’
4. *Thep mawbah* ‘rituals of bone-keeping of the dead’

2.3.2.6. Festivals

In this section, we provide words describing the traditional festival and activities that were observed by the Hmar community. With the coming of Christianity and modernization, these cultural activities have gradually lost their significance and are not observed any longer. The words referring to the indigenous festivals and activities are therefore lost in transition.

Hmar

1. *inchawng* ‘festival organized by an individual family by giving a feast. Believed to be a celebration or family worship of the rich and wealthy’
2. *sielsun/sesun* ‘piercing of mithun by the maternal uncle of the host in celebrating inchawng’
3. *sa-inei* ‘festival connected with the success and victory over killing of a wild beast/animal’
4. *khuongchawi* ‘a festival where a public feast is given by the chiefs and the prominent rich people’

2.3.2.7. Indigenous sports

The indigenous sport or game that was once a form of entertainment for both the Khasi and Hmar have gradually lost their importance and are no longer practiced, especially in the urban areas resulting in the loss of its referring vocabulary.

Hmar

1. *pawiinkap* ‘a significant game played mostly by girls using a large bean like seed of entada-scandems.
2. *lamving* ‘a game played by boys using a pawi bean perforated at the centre in which a stick is tightly inserted for a handle’

Khasi

1. *Sohtyngkok*
2. *Mawkynting*

2.4. Environment Implication

In this section, we present some of the words that the Hmar and Khasi communities used to refer to their physical environment. However, the terminologies expressing these environmental concepts are no longer used, especially by the younger generation. The loss of vocabulary may be attributed to the change of the physical environment they live in or due to urbanization. Some of the native terms that were earlier used have also been simplified in forms and referece so as to allow present generations to understand them. One such example is the term ruo ‘rain’ in Hmar which has now replaced the terms for specific types of rain that is described in (94) and (95).



Hmar

1. *airuo* 'rain that mark crab season'
2. *pawl del ruo* 'rain during harvest'
3. *phalbi* 'winter'
4. *lengkir* 'deep water formed by waterfall'
5. *tuivamit* 'oasis'
6. *thralthli* 'dry seasonal winds'
7. *phaivuo* 'cyclone'

Khasi

1. *Ka ksaw ka kpong ba beh mrad*
2. *Tyrsok*

Conclusion

While urbanization, technological development and globalization have a positive impact on our societies, it also leads to the gradual degradation of our culture and traditional values which in turn cause the gradual loss of terminologies that refer to these traditional and cultural practices. This is the case seen in Khasi and Hmar, two indigenous languages in North-East India. There is therefore a call for documentation to preserve them since language plays a vital role for the survival and understanding of culture and traditions.

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