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DEURI and TIWA: Endangered languages in the Brahmaputra valley.

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1.i. Introduction:

Languages along with culture, society and history are integral in nationality formation. The functional and symbolic value of languages is one of the great significance in the transitional continuum from community to ethnicity to formalized nationality. The Brahmaputra valley in Assam is a very heterogeneous linguistic and cultural area, and it comprises languages belonging mainly to the **Boro-Garo**, **Kuki-Chin** and the **Tani** (previously known as **North-Assam**) groups of the **Tibeto-Burman** stock, **Indo-Aryan** represented mainly by *Asamiya* and *Bangla*, **Siamese-Chinese** represented by various *Thai* groups like *Khamyang*, *Khamti*, *Turung*, *Phakyal*, *Aiton*, and *Nora*, and some **Dravidian** and **Munda** languages represented by the tea tribes. It is worthwhile to mention that **Indo-Aryan Asamiya** and the languages belonging to the **Tibeto-Burman** stock have co-existed here since time immemorial. *Bangla*, some **Dravidian** and **Munda** languages came here only after the British annexed the state of Assam from the Burmese in 1826 A.D. The **Siamese-Chinese** groups mentioned above entered the valley from Myanmar only in the 18th century.

These languages are used in a complex and wide-ranging ethno and socio-linguistic configuration. This ethnic spectra of this valley encompasses both the non-tribal and tribal population, where the *Asamiya* language is a dominant majority among non-tribal and tribal languages and can be termed a well-formed majority nationally. On the other hand languages like *Boro*, *Rabha*, *Mishing* and *Karbi*, belonging respectively to the **Boro-Garo**, **Tani** and the **Kuki-Chin** groups within **Tibeto-Burman** sub-family of languages are fast emerging as minority nationalities in the valley. Again in the other extreme there are minor languages like *Deuri* and *Tiwa* of the **Boro-Garo** group which are struggling to emerge as minority nationalities. It is worthwhile to mention that *Asamiya* has been serving almost as a lingua franca among such speech communities in the valley over a long span. Hence large-scale diffusion at the social, linguistic and cultural levels have been taking place between these even across genetic boundaries through the medium of bilingual speakers and have resulted in an *Indo-Aryanisation* of

non **Indo-Aryan** languages and also in a *Tibeto-Burmanisation* of non **Tibeto-Burman** languages. (Moral, 1996; Monkhemer Studies: *Northeast India as a Linguistic area*).

Deuri and *Tiwa* belong to the **Boro-Garo**ⁱ group of languages, which constitute one of the principal divisions of the Tibeto-Burman stock and are spoken primarily in the Brahmaputra valley in Assam. At one time there must have been a fairly continuous Boro-Garo distribution throughout the entire valley, but over the centuries, Asamiya, an Indo-Aryan language, has disrupted this continuityⁱⁱ. Asamiya is used by all as a common lingua franca for inter group as well as intragroup communication. It is worthwhile to mention in this context that *Moran*, once upon a time the eastern most member of this group has now become extinct as all the speakers have adopted Asamiya as their first language, resulting in a total language shift.

For the present paper two threatened **BG** languages namely *Deuri* and *Tiwa* have been taken for consideration and an attempt has been made to analyse the sound systems and highlight some salient grammatical features.

Though a very important group within the **Tibeto-Burman** language sub family it is still a largely unstudied group of languages where apart from *Boro Garo* and *Rabha*, sketchy linguistic descriptions has been attempted by a very few scholars on the rest of the languages particularly *Deuri* and *Tiwa*.

1.ii. SCHOLARLY SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PRESENT STUDY

Linguistically such languages are still unexplored and linguistic features, are they phonological or grammatical, are hardly known in detail. This study will therefore go a long way in meeting the academic hiatus of these languages.

How is a study of sounds and grammars of certain indigenous languages of the Brahmaputra Valley relevant to an understanding of the society of that region? The study attempted here is essentially a micro level one. However, such micro linguistic study has important implications for wider issues:

At the level of particular languages, for the individual communities served by each of the languages, a well articulated description of their language is associated with a sense of prestige; such a description is seen as inextricably linked with their self perception as a vibrant community. Sociologists of language have frequently pointed out how the claim for a status of a variety as standard language crucially rests on its codification in terms of formal descriptions. Thus, the phonological, and grammatical descriptions of *Deuri*, or *Tiwa* are an essential part of their definition as standard languages.

Apart from such socio psychological and socio political relevance, codifications of such linguistic norms have important contributions to make in the academic and administrative spheres of the respective communities. The status of standard language puts a heavy burden on its terms of the various kinds of researches such as dictionaries, pronunciation guides, reference grammars etc. which the concerned communities would naturally expect to be made available for their use. When a relatively codified and constitutionally recognized major language like *Asamiya* continues to face a considerable dearth of such material, the situation

with regard to such minority indigenous languages can easily be imagined. Therefore this paper is to be viewed in this light as a contribution to micro level language planning (complementing macro level) that every standard language must undergo if it is to serve its community effectively. Moreover this would definitely act as a catalyst in preserving such endangered languages.

2 Following is a brief introduction of the speech communitiesⁱⁱⁱ taken for study:

2.i. Deuri.

The *Deuri* language is the easternmost member of the **Boro-Garo** group of languages and is spoken mainly in the districts of Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Jorhat, Tinsukia and in certain parts of Sonitpur district.

The *Deuri* speech community could be broadly divided into four main groups, viz: *Dibongia*, *Tenga pania*, *Patorgoyan* and *Borgoyan*. This classification is based on religious grounds as each group has its own deity for worshipping. Deuris are Hindus and they follow the *SANATAN* faith and are followers of Siva and Parvati. It may be mentioned here that the *Deuris* inhabited fertile lands near the rivers. The *Dibongias* inhabited the fertile areas near the Dibong river and hence are called Dibongias and their chief deity is called *gira girasi* also called *burha burhi* (the old couple) and sometimes also referred to as *kundil mama*. Those settled near the Brahmaputra or the *bor luit* were called *Borgoyans*. Their chief deity was called *pichachi dema* or *Tameswari devi* (the daughter). The *Tengapanias* settled near the Tengapani river and hence were referred to as the *Tengapanias*. Their chief deity was called *pecha dema* or *balia baba* (The elder son or the mad one). The *Patorgoyans* settled in a place called pat Sadiya in the extreme eastern corner of Assam and their main place of worship was known as *pator sal*. Out of these four groups, only the *Dibongias* have retained the *Deuri* language and the rest of the groups have all shifted to *Asamiya*, which has become their first language over the years. It may be useful to note that the *Dibongias* are essentially bilinguals with equal command over *Asamiya* as well. The population as recorded in the 1991 census is 15,955. The *Dibongias* are found scattered in the eastern Assam districts of Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Jorhat, Lakhimpur, Dhemaji and Tinsukia.

The name **DEURI** is of Indo-Aryan origin meaning belonging to the house of priests (Kakati 1941). However they traditionally call themselves *zimasayan* or *dimasayan* which has its roots in the *Tai Ahom* language (now extinct) where *zim* refers to the past and *sai* denotes man which could be semantically realized as the *early man*^{vi}.

2.ii. TIWA

Semantically the word *Tiwa* has two components {ti} meaning water and {wa} denotes belongingness. Hence the *Tiwas* are by and large, barring a few hill *Tiwas* are essentially inhabitants on the banks of rivers. The river Khoirang originating from the hills of the Khasi and Jaintiya hills of Meghalaya have reached the plains where it has taken the name of Gobha and Kiling, before merging with the Brahmaputra. The *Tiwas* have

thrived on the banks of these rivers for many centuries. The migration of a lot of Tiwas from the hills of Meghalaya has also followed the course the river Khoirang to the plains. The *Tiwa* language is spoken mainly in central Assam particularly in the district of Morigaon and in some parts of the bordering districts of Nagaon, Karbi-Anglong and Kamrup. The *Tiwa* speech community has two types of speech varieties, in the hills and in the plains, which are known as *Hajowali* and *Datiyali* respectively. But the dialect of the plains has gradually made way for *Asamiya*, which has almost replaced *Datiyali*. However in the hills *Tiwa* is still being retained even though they are essentially bilinguals with competence in *Asamiya* as well. For this study the *Tiwa* of the plains have been included. The plain *Tiwas* are Hindus and are worshippers of Siva and Parbati, but the hill *Tiwas* are by and large Christians and the Missionaries now have taken the initiative to write grammars and dictionaries in this dialect thereby initiating the process of codification to attain standardization. The 1991 census shows the *Tiwa* population (hills and plains) as 32633.

3. Following is a phonological and a brief grammatical sketch of the Deuri language.

3.i. Phonology:

a. Consonant Phonemes^{iv}:

	Bilabial		Alveolar		Palatal		Velar		Glottal	
Stop	▶	▶	▶	▶	▶	▶	▶	▶		
Nasal		▶		▶		▶▶		▶		
Fricative			▶	▶			▶		▶	
Affricate(Aspirated)						▶▶				
Roll				▶						
Lateral				▶						
Semi Vowel		▶				▶				

b. Vowel Phonemes:

	Front		Central		Back	
High	▶	▶▶			▶	▶▶
Mid	▶	▶▶			▶	▶▶
Low			▶	▶▶	▶	▶▶

c.

There are three tones^v in the Deuri language, which are phonemic.

The High tone is marked as- / ▶ ▶

The Level tone is unmarked-

The Low tone is marked as- / ▶▶▶

The following examples show the tonal system operating in the language.

▶▶▶▶	'pig'	▶▶▶▶	'tall'
▶▶	'good'	▶▶	'to wash'
▶▶▶▶	'language'	▶▶▶▶	'to burn'

d.

Nasalization is phonemic. All vowels in the language contrast for oral-nasalization distinction and it is marked as / ▶ ▶ .

4. Some salient features of Deuri grammar:

i.The Deuri language follows the Subject +Object+Verb pattern in the formation of sentences in the language, as in

▶▶ ▶▶▶▶ ▶▶▶▶▶▶ (I eat rice)

ii.

Personal pronouns:

Singular		Plural
1st person	▶▶	▶▶▶▶
2 nd person	▶▶	▶▶▶▶

A. Suffixes after the verb roots:

- (i) - (conjunctive); e.g. - *eating* ;
 - *hearing*
- (ii) - (present participle); e.g. -
while eating
- (iii) - (imperative); e.g. *eat* (1 Person)
- (iv) - (past participle); e.g.
 'bitter', *hot*

B. Suffixes after negative formations

- (i) - (in the sense of not performing an act), e.g.
 not eaten
- (ii) indicating the possession of a quality, e.g. *does not hear*,
 .

C. Prefix before a verb root

- (i) indicates prohibition and command, as in
 do not eat.

D. Infixes between verbal roots and terminations

- (i) - - (denotes frequency) - *shall be eating frequently*.
- (ii) - - (indicates the sense of having to) *shall have to eat*.
- (iii) - - (indicates the act of finishing something) -
 eats without leaving anything.
- (iv) - - (denotes causation) *causes to eat*
- (v) - - (denotes ability) *you can eat*
- (vi) - - (denotes finality) *was finally dead*

5. Tiwa

A. Consonants:

	Bilabial		Alveolar		Palatal		Velar		Glottal	
Plosive										
										

6.vi. Verbs: The verbal system in Tiwa show three tenses: - present, past and future. The present and past tenses show four different times of action of the verbs such as indicative/habitual, perfect, continuous, perfect continuous while future shows simple and continuous, only two types. The verbal suffixes of these tenses are given below:

Present tense	1 st person	2 nd person	3 rd person
Indicative/ habitual	-▶	-▶	-▶
Perfect	-▶▶▶	-▶▶	-▶▶
Continuous	-▶▶▶▶	-▶▶▶▶	-▶▶▶▶
Perfect continuous	- ▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶	- ▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶	- ▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶

Past tense			
Indicative/habitual	-▶▶▶	-▶▶▶	-▶▶▶
Perfect	-▶▶ 𐄌	-▶▶	-▶▶
Continuous	-▶▶▶▶▶ 𐄌	- ▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶	-▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶
Perfect continuous	- ▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶	- ▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶	- ▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶

Future tense			
Indicative/habitual	- 𐄌	-▶	-▶▶▶
Continuous	-▶▶▶ 𐄌	-▶▶▶	- ▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶

These verbal suffixes are simply added to the verb stems as shown below : the verb root –▶▶▶▶ ‘to see’

	Singular		Plural	
Present habitual	▶ 𐄌 ▶▶▶▶▶ -▶	I see	▶▶ 𐄌 ▶▶▶▶▶ -▶	We see
	▶▶ ▶▶▶▶▶ -▶	You see	▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶ -▶	You see
	▶▶▶▶▶ -▶	He sees	▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶ -▶	They see
Past indicative	▶ 𐄌 ▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶	I (past) see	▶▶ 𐄌 ▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶	We(past) see
	▶▶ ▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶	You (past) see	▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶	You (past) see
	▶▶ ▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶	He (past) see	▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶	They (past) see
Future indicative	▶ 𐄌 ▶▶▶▶▶ 𐄌	I (future)	▶▶ 𐄌 ▶▶▶▶▶ 𐄌	We (future)

ⁱ The currently prevalent Boro-Garo languages are: Kakborak, Boro, Garo, Rabha, Koch, Dimasa, Tiwa and Deuri.

ⁱⁱ This aspect has been dealt with in detail in the author's paper *North East India as a linguistic area, Mon Khmer Studies, vol:27, 1996.*

ⁱⁱⁱ Unlike other BG languages Deuri and Tiwa are primarily spoken and is yet to develop a written form.

iv In Deuri all the consonants except /p t k l/ occur in syllable final positions.

v In the BG group Garo, Koch and Tiwa are non tonal languages.

vi The Ahoms came and conquered the Deuris in the thirteenth century and ruled over them.

vii Unlike other New Indo Aryan languages Asamiya does not have any Retroflex sounds instead it has a whole series of Alveolar sounds which include stops, fricatives, trills and laterals.

viii Such examples in Asamiya are as follows:

▶▶ ▶▶▶
 ▶▶▶▶▶
two classifier boy

▶▶ ▶▶▶▶▶
 ▶▶▶▶▶
book two classifier

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