

North East Indian Linguistics

Edited by

Stephen Morey • Mark Post

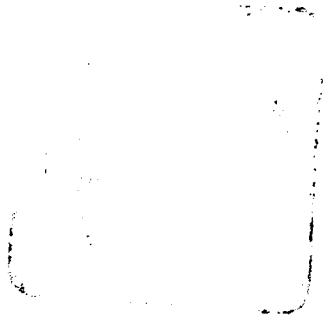
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North East
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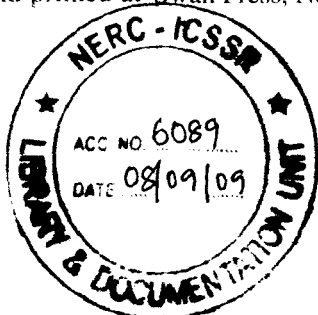
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Introduction

The North East Indian Linguistic Society (NEILS) was formed in 2005 by Dr. Jyotiprakash Tamuli, Head of Linguistics at Gauhati University, a specialist in Assamese and Mark Post, a PhD scholar at the Research Centre for Linguistic Typology (RCLT) at La Trobe University, Australia, who is working on the Tani languages of Arunachal Pradesh. They were soon joined by Dr. Stephen Morey, also of the RCLT, who had been working on Tai and Singpho languages in Assam since 1996. It was decided between them that a forum should be provided for the growing number of international and local scholars working on the languages of the North East, with a focus on typological and descriptive linguistics. The first international meeting of the newly constituted NEILS was thus held at the Phanidar Dutta Seminar Hall, Gauhati University, Assam, India on the 6 and 7 February 2006.

This volume presents a selection of the papers that represent work from both established scholars and students who are starting out in their linguistics careers. The contributors hail from North East India, as well as from elsewhere in India and across the world.

Each paper in this volume was anonymously peer reviewed by linguists with expertise in the particular languages or subject areas of the papers. All the papers then underwent revision and improvements as a result of the review process and in consultation with the editors. Our aim has been to produce a volume of quality, containing work on a variety of languages and from a variety of approaches, representing the current state of research in the field.

In the field of descriptive phonology, Gwendolyn Hyslop presents the first ever detailed study of the core phonology of Kurtöp, an almost completely undescribed Tibeto-Burman language spoken in Eastern Bhutan within a stone's throw of the border with Arunachal Pradesh. She then further situates Kurtöp phonology with respect to the phonologies of many North East Indian languages. Another important first is Stephen Morey's description of tones in the Numhpuk Singpho language of South Eastern Arunachal Pradesh, which is shown to differ in some respects from that of the closely related (and better-known) Jingpho language of Burma. Morey also includes notes relating to field investigation of North East Indian tonal languages in a more general sense, which are supported by instrumental findings. In 'Tonality and the Analysis of Sub-Minimal Words in Ao', T. Tamsunungsang finds cause to question prevailing theories of word minimality on the basis of data from Mongsen and Chungli, both dialects of the Ao language of Nagaland; Tamsunungsang also supports his analysis with clearly-illustrated instrumental findings. Rounding off the phonology papers, Robbins Burling presents a fascinating account of changes in the history of Bodo-Garo phonology which have been "undone", often through the effects of loanword assimilation. Mysteriously, it appears that Bodo-Garo languages conspire to return, over time, to a characteristic phonological profile despite sporadic forays into other phonological realms!

Turning to the lexicon, Shobha Satyanath and Nazrin Laskar present a corpus-based analysis of the lexicon of Bishnupriya, a language of Indo-Aryan and Tibeto-Burman parentage spoken primarily in Southern Assam. As a result of their analysis, they are able to shed light on some important aspects of the history of this fascinating language and culture forged through intense contact. We hope that this will be the first of many NEILS papers to address the important topic of contact and language mixing in North East India head-on. In 'Shafer's "parallels" between Khasi and Sino-Tibetan', Gerard Diffloth revisits the mystery of shared vocabulary in Khasi and Sino-Tibetan, adding a provocative new chapter to the ongoing interdisciplinary discussion concerning the precise nature of historical relations between Austroasiatic and Sino-Tibetan language populations. Turning to the Tai languages, Bishakha Das presents a study of kinship terms in Khamti, working from primary field data collected by the author herself. Finally, a paper by Mark Post discusses intransitive verbs of position, existence, location and possession in the Tani languages,

focusing in particular on the Galo language of Arunachal Pradesh. He also includes some discussion on the reconstruction of these verb types to Proto-Tani, as well as some of the grammaticalization pathways taken by them in the Galo language.

Five papers in this collection address morphosyntactic and semantic topics. In ‘Causatives in four Bodo-Garo languages’, U.V. Joseph describes the current status and distribution of several now unproductive causative prefixes in Bodo, Garo, Rabha and Tiwa, all overwhelmingly suffixing languages on which he has conducted original fieldwork. In the same area, Seino van Breugel presents the first ever published descriptive paper on the Atong language of Meghalaya, focusing particularly on the intriguing topic of morphology functioning both within the nominal and verbal areas of the grammar. Returning to Bishnupriya, Nazrin Laskar addresses the broad topic of temporality, analysing the tense, mood and aspectual system on the basis of natural speech data collected in the field. Finally, two papers address the perennially interesting topic of non-finite verbs in Assamese (aka “explicator compound verbs”); while Dipima Buragohain presents a comparative analysis of similar types of structures in Kashmiri, Runima Chowdhary attempts a comprehensive analysis of the Assamese system, including forays into other related syntactic phenomena.

The final two papers reach out to two more general, but absolutely critical, topics in the study of North East Indian languages. In ‘Doing fieldwork on the Singpho language of North Eastern India’, Palash Kumar Nath presents a rare first-hand account of the experiences of a local fieldworker, reporting both on the joys and fascinations as well as the many hurdles and challenges encountered in his work. Happily, Mr. Nath’s work continues apace. The volume is brought to a close by Madhumita Barbora and Mark Post, who argue for the uniqueness and intrinsic value of certain linguistic features of the Tani languages of Arunachal Pradesh, the potential endangerment faced by these languages by virtue of the rapid spread of lingua francas, and the necessity for steps to be taken to stem the tide of loss. In particular, it contains an up-to-the-minute report on ongoing efforts being made by the Galo community in their ‘Quest for a script’.

The editorial duties in this volume’s preparation were shared equally between Stephen Morey and Mark Post. As co-editors, we would like to extend our sincere thanks to the members and students of the Department of Linguistics, Gauhati University, whose tireless efforts made the

international meeting both enjoyable and very productive. We thank all the participants and in particular those whose papers appear in the volume. We also thank the editorial unit of Cambridge University Press India Private Limited for their efforts in preparing this volume.

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