

# The Growth and Development of Khasi Language: A Linguistic Perspective

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## Introduction :

Language has always fascinated man since, it is a medium by which he can think within himself and by which he can communicate with other members of his speech community. This may perhaps be the reason why speculation about the origin of language was the concern of philosophers and social thinkers of the past, as is reflected in folklore of many communities. Turning back a little bit to the past history of language study, one notices how Darwin's Theory of the Evolution of Species has influenced linguists of the nineteenth century to think of languages in terms of the evolution process. August Schlcicher, a noted historical linguist, was of the opinion that languages as types, grow and mature in a process of development. This opinion has been based upon the fact that languages as types are traditionally classified into three types : (a) isolating or analytic type of languages (b) agglutinative or affixing type of languages and (c) inflectional or synthetic type of languages. This typological classification has been upon the morphological complexity of a language. These days linguists do not take seriously the view that language of (a) type would grow into languages of (b) type or that language of (c) type, nevertheless, the typological characteristics of a language determine the way it grows and develops as need may arise for it to grow and develop. Secondly, languages do not remain static if they are living languages. That is to say if a language is the mother-tongue of certain speakers then it is a dynamic phenomenon. It is dynamic because it has to change and modify itself to suit the needs of its speakers. Changes in the society, particularly with regard to interaction with speakers of other languages, to advancement in education, science and technology influence a language to develop, in order to accomodate these changes.

Turning to the genealogical classification of languages, there is no doubt at all that some languages are genealogically related to some others. That is why this particular classification of languages takes into account the relationship of languages within a language family. Khasi is claimed to be a Mon-Khmer language that belongs to the Austro-Asiatic language family. However, a detailed and careful phonological, morphological and syntactic reconstruction is needed to show languages of this family to be cognates. This is especially the case with Khasi which is separated from the languages of this language family by a large distance and also apparently by a very great number of years. Linguists have poetically pointed to the fact that Khasi, an Austro-Asiatic language is an island in the sea of languages belonging to Tibeto-Burman and Indo-Aryan language families. This distance from its close relative and the closeness with languages of other language families has affected the growth and development of Khasi language particularly in the last two centuries.

It is not a very easy task to trace the growth and development of any language. Historical linguists have usually taken two approaches to undertake this task. One, by making a diachronic study of one particular language, to examine how it has developed through the passage of time. When a language has been documented for a long time such as the case with English, it is easier to trace the changes that have taken place in it. Two, historical linguists have turned to comparative linguistics in order to examine the development of a language. They can do this by comparing related languages or related dialects to understand they have developed throughout the centuries.

### Growth and Development of Khasi Language :

As stated above, a living language cannot remain static, it has to develop itself according to the speaker's needs. Spoken language of any community is as old as the community itself but the written form of that language may emerge at a more later stage. This was a case with Khasi, where prior to the advent of the missionaries to these hills, the different Khasi varieties were of the spoken form only. The present written form of the language, which was based on

the Sohra dialect, came into existence in 1841 when Thomas Jones a Welsh Calvinistic missionary started his mission in Cherrapunjee. From that time onward, this variety was standardized through the process of selection, codification, elaboration of functions and acceptance.

Standard Khasi, like many other languages, has adopted certain strategies in order to enrich itself and to meet the needs imposed upon it. This paper will attempt to examine only three of these strategies.

I. Borrowing of vocabulary items from other languages to enlarge its own inventory.

II. Coinage of new words.

III. Productivity of derivational morphemes.

I. Borrowing of vocabulary items from other languages to enlarge its own inventory : Borrowing is a very common strategy by which a language can enlarge its vocabulary. English, for example, has borrowed extensively from other languages. It has borrowed from French words like 'council', 'government', 'king', 'queen', 'army', 'navy', 'war', 'court', 'justice', 'garage', 'restaurant' etc. It has borrowed 'piano' from Italian, 'robot' from Czech, 'Zebra' from Bantu, 'pyjama' from Hindi and many other words from many other languages. Khasi has also borrowed extensively from Indo-Aryan languages such as Hindi, Bengali, Assamese etc. It has also borrowed from English as well after its contact with that language in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. These are words such as follows :

1. Trade and Commerce

Indo-Aryans Language : Pisa, tyngka, hajar, pawa, shetak, mon, kuri, ser, shalan etc.

English : Kilo, ton, kwintal, bang (bank) etc.

2. Administration

Indo-Aryan Language : dorbar, myntri, jylla, patsha, muluk, riti, ujour, muhor, dakhol, ilaka etc.

English : Ophis, elekshon, komiti, blok, bud (vote), president, district etc.

3. Philosophy and Religion

Indo-Aryan Language : dujok, niam nusip, hok, pap, sot, duwai, duk, nurok, ijot etc.

English : phadar, pastor, angel, krismas, hosana, haleluia, kolshor etc.

A vocabulary item borrowed in this way has to adapt itself to the phonological system of the recipient language. That is the reason why Khasi has words such as *ketli* (Kettle), *bek* (bag), *ben* (bench), *pulit* (police) etc.

Sometimes an item is not borrowed 'lock, stock and barrel' from the donor language but it is translated in the recipient language. Such items are called calques or loan translation. Examples from Khasi are as follows :

Korsuhjain (Sewing machine)

Narsdeh (Frying pan)

Jainsiang thiah (Bed sheet)

Jainsiang miej (Table cloth)

Mynsiem Bakhuid (Holy spirit)

Tymmen basan (Church elder)

These days, we see words coming directly from other languages into Khasi. These are words for martial arts such as :

Japanese : Judo, Karate

Chinese : Kungfu

Korean : Taekwondo

II. Coinage of new words : A language may also enrich its vocabulary by coining new words. Though this strategy is not fully exploited in Khasi at present, yet it is becoming more and more prevalent in the example found in the language at present :

Shongknor (Chairman)

Kongsan (Chief Guest)

Rangbah Balang (Deacon)

Sengbhalang (Social welfare organisation)

Recently, mass media reporting in Khasi have started coining new words such as :

Namding (missile)

Dheng Kali (Traffic jam)

Lad Pathai khubor (Media)

Father H. Elias employed this strategy in an attempt to develop the language in the field of literature. He coined words as follows:

Khriang (Rhythm)

Jiamdien (Iambic metre)

Jiamphang (Trochaic metre)

Skit lymphiang (Subjective poetry)

Shit Lympiar (Objective poetry)

Duitara (Lyric)

Lapalang (elegy)

Kyud.(ode)

Ksan thma (epic)

Sawangka (Drama)

Shemlanot (Tragedy)

Biria (Comedy)

H. W. Sten first coined the term *Bishar Bniab* for "literary criticism".

### III. Productivity of language through bound morphemes :

Derivational morphemes such as jingong etc. are prefixed to many existing words not only do these words add more to the vocabulary of the language but they enable it to derive new items extensively. Even borrowed words in verbs can be changed into norms such as:

Jingujor

Pynsaja

Nongbishar

And many other such items.

There is no doubt at all that a study of the growth and development of a language such as Khasi will enable scholars to understand how dynamics this language is. It will also give a proper understanding of how it has coped with the demands that the society has made upon it.