
Pidginization and Creolization of Languages in Northeast India: A Sociolinguistic Study

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Abstract:

The question of communication within diverse linguistic groups through the medium of language is intricately associated with the idea that all languages have descended from one primeval and universal language. Noam Chomsky's theory of universal grammar (UG), as introduced in the book *Chomsky's Universal Grammar: An Introduction* (1988) by Vivian J. Cook and Mark Newson, states that all human languages share fundamental similarities. So, when speakers of varied linguistic and cultural origins interact, there often arises a rudimentary contact language called pidgin, an unsophisticated speech consisting mainly of gestures and a limited syntax that renders basic communicative functions like trade and commerce possible. Over time, when a pidgin, which is devoid of any grammar and formal structures, is adopted by the subsequent generations of native speakers as their first language, it evolves into a creolized tongue, acquiring richer vocabulary, stable grammar, and complex syntactic devices. This process not only facilitates communication but also reflects the complex interplay of linguistic and social factors. In this regard, the intermixing of Sino-Tibetan languages and Eastern Indo-Aryan languages in the hills and plains of Northeast India also presents a unique display of pidginization and creolization of languages. This paper therefore aims to examine the sociolinguistic dynamics of pidginization and creolization in the Northeast, shedding light on how languages like Nagamese and Bishnupriya Manipuri function as lingua franca among ethnolinguistically distinct communities. By analyzing the social uses of these languages, this study also seeks to uncover the reasons behind their prevalence in the region, while contributing to a deeper understanding of how linguistic diversity shapes communication in cosmopolitan spaces and serves as a means of identity creation, with a particular focus on the linguistic landscape of Northeast India.

Keywords: Pidgin, Creole, Language, Culture, Syntax, Sociolinguistics, Northeast.

Introduction

The Northeastern region (NER) of India unequivocally bags the status of being one of Asia's most linguistically and culturally diverse regions, and a vibrant mosaic of ethnicities, languages, and traditions. Home to over 220 languages belonging to multiple families, including Sino-Tibetan, Tibeto-Burman, Indo-Aryan, Austroasiatic, and Tai-Kadai, Northeast is a microcosm of linguistic richness and complexity. This diversity is not merely a product of geographical isolation but also a consequence of historical processes of migration, invasion, and cultural assimilation. In precolonial times, the region was a crossroads of cultural exchange, frequently influenced by invasions and migrations from the east, which brought with them new languages, customs, and social practices. The colonial era further transformed the linguistic landscape, as the introduction of indentured labour and the resultant influx of populations from mainland India led to new patterns of interaction and language contact. Over time, these interactions gave rise to unique linguistic phenomena, including the emergence and evolution of pidgins and creoles, which often served as bridges between ethnolinguistically distinct communities. Today, Northeast India is a hotspot for such contact languages, reflecting the region's dynamic sociolinguistic history and its role as a crucible of linguistic innovation.

The sociolinguistic diversity of NER is not only a sign of its multicultural heritage but also a reflection of the complex interplay between language, society, and ecology. In this regard, the region offers a fascinating case study for the field of ecolinguistics, which examines the relationships between languages and their environments, including social, cultural, and geographical contexts. Drawing parallels between linguistic dynamics and natural ecosystems, ecolinguistics views languages as species that survive, decline, or become endangered depending on their interactions with other languages and their broader ecological and social settings (Haugen, 1972). In Northeast India, the emergence of pidgins and creoles can be seen as a natural response to the need for communication in a multilingual and multicultural environment, where languages adapt and evolve to meet the demands of their speakers. This process of linguistic adaptation is not merely functional but also deeply tied to identity formation, as contact languages often serve as markers of shared cultural and social experiences.

This paper thus seeks to critically examine the sociolinguistic dynamics of pidginization and creolization in Northeast India, with a particular focus on languages such as Nagamese, Bishnupriya Manipuri, and the language of the tea gardens of Assam which function as the lingua franca among historically and ethnolinguistically diverse communities. In doing so, it also aims to clarify the distinctions between pidgins, creoles, and dialects, particularly in the context of select languages in Northeast. The objectives of this paper are threefold: first, to trace the historical and sociolinguistic

processes that have led to the emergence of pidgins and creoles in Northeast India; second, to analyse the role of these languages as tools of communication and identity formation in a multicultural setting; and third, to contribute to the broader understanding of ecolinguistics by examining how linguistic diversity is shaped by social, cultural, and ecological factors. In pursuing these objectives, the paper also aims to shed light on the intricate processes of linguistic adaptation and innovation in Northeast India, offering a nuanced understanding of how pidgins and creoles emerge, evolve, and function in a multilingual and multicultural context.

Understanding Pidgins and Creoles

The study of pidgins and creoles offers a fascinating window into the world of contact languages, adaptation, and evolution. These languages, which are often born out of necessity in multilingual and multicultural spaces, provide valuable insights into the human capacity for linguistic innovation and creativity. In order to understand the role they play in shaping communication and identity, we must first examine the nature, etymology, evolution, and distinguishing features of pidgins and creoles, with a particular focus on their manifestations in Northeast India.

A pidgin is a simplified contact language that emerges as a means of communication between groups of people who do not share a common language. The term 'pidgin' is believed to have originated from the Chinese pronunciation of the English word 'business,' reflecting its early use in trade contexts (Mühlhäusler, 1986). Pidgins typically arise in situations of sustained contact between linguistically diverse groups, such as during trade, colonization, or labour migration. They are characterized by reduced grammatical structures, limited vocabulary, and a focus on functional communication, often relying heavily on context, gestures, and non-verbal cues to convey meaning. The evolution of a pidgin is a gradual process that begins with imitation and simplification. In the initial stages, speakers of different languages attempt to communicate by borrowing words and phrases from one another, often stripping away complex grammatical features in the process. This results in a rudimentary form of speech that prioritizes clarity and utility over grammatical precision. For example, the Nefamese pidgin is spoken by various indigenous groups in Arunachal Pradesh, including the Nyishi, Adi, Apatanai, Khampti, Hill Miri, Idu Mishimi, and Bugun people. It features a simplified syntax, and a lexicon derived primarily from Assamese, but it lacks the grammatical complexity of its parent languages (Bhattacharjee, 1994). One of the defining features of pidgins is their lack of grammar and scripts. Unlike fully developed languages, pidgins do not have fixed rules for tense, aspect, or agreement. Instead, they rely on pragmatic strategies such as word order, repetition, and gestures to convey meaning. For instance, in many pidgins, adverbs of time like 'now,' and 'later' are used to indicate temporal relationships, as the language lacks formal tense markers (Holm, 1988). This reliance on adverbs and contextual cues underscores the functional and adaptive nature of pidgins, which prioritize communication over grammatical

complexity.

When a pidgin is adopted by a community as their first language, it undergoes a process of creolization. This transition marks a significant shift in the linguistic and social status of the contact language. Unlike pidgins, which are auxiliary and lack native speakers, creoles are fully developed languages with complex grammatical structures, expanded vocabularies, and native speaker communities. The process of creolization involves the nativization of the pidgin, as children acquiring the language as their mother tongue introduce systematic rules and innovations, leading to greater linguistic complexity (Bickerton, 1981).

The etymology of the term "creole" reflects its historical roots in colonial contexts. Derived from the Spanish word *criollo*, meaning native to the locality, creoles originally referred to people of European descent born in the colonies. Over time, the term came to be associated with the languages spoken by these communities, which often emerged from the contact between European colonizers and indigenous or enslaved populations (Mufwene, 2001). Today, creoles are recognized as distinct languages with their own grammatical rules and cultural significance. They differ from pidgins in several keyways. First, creoles have a stable grammar that includes features such as tense, aspect, and modality markers, which are typically absent in pidgins. For instance, Nagamese, an Assamese-based creole spoken in Nagaland, exhibits a more complex grammatical structure than its pidgin predecessor, including the use of tense markers to indicate past, present, and future actions (Sreedhar, 1985). Second, creoles have a broader range of functions than pidgins, serving not only as tools of communication but also as vehicles for cultural expression and identity formation. Finally, creoles are native languages to communities that transmit them across generations, whereas pidgins are typically learned as second languages.

While creoles and dialects are both varieties of language, they differ in their origins, structures, and sociolinguistic functions. A dialect is a regional or social variety of a mainstream language that is mutually intelligible with other varieties of the same language. Dialects typically emerge through processes of geographical or social differentiation and retain strong structural similarities to their parent language (Chambers & Trudgill, 1998). In contrast, a creole arises from the contact between mutually unintelligible languages and undergoes significant restructuring, resulting in a new language with distinct grammatical and lexical features. For example, Bishnupriya Manipuri, a Bengali-based creole spoken in Manipur and some parts of Assam and Tripura, exhibits significant differences from standard Bengali in terms of phonology, morphology, and syntax. These differences reflect the influence of Manipuri and other local languages, as well as the unique historical and social context in which the creole developed (Bhattacharjee, 1994). In contrast, regional dialects of Bengali, such as Sylheti or Chittagonian, remain mutually intelligible with standard Bengali despite their

distinct phonological and lexical features.

Nagamese

Northeast provides a rich tapestry of languages for studying the processes of pidginization and creolization, with languages such as Nagamese serving as prominent examples. Nagamese, an Assamese-based creole, occupies a unique position in the linguistic landscape of Northeast India. As a contact language that emerged out of necessity in a multilingual and multicultural society, Nagamese serves as a vital medium of communication between the diverse groups. The genesis of Nagamese is particularly fascinating and can be traced back to the historical interactions between the Naga tribes of the hills and the Assamese-speaking communities of the Brahmaputra Valley. These interactions were primarily driven by trade, as tribals exchanged goods such as bamboo, spices, and handicrafts with the vendors of the plains (Sreedhar, 1985). In the absence of a shared language, a simplified contact language like Nagamese emerged to facilitate communication. Over time, this pidgin evolved into a creole as it was adopted by subsequent generations as their first language, acquiring more complex grammatical structures and a stable lexicon. The development of Nagamese was further solidified by the colonial rule in the NER, which facilitated the standardization of Assamese in order to counter heterogeneity of speech and texts that prevailed at that time. This historical context reinforced the role of Assamese as the substrate language, while the Naga languages contributed to the creole's unique phonological and syntactic features.

Nagamese exhibits a simplified grammatical structure that distinguishes it from its parent languages. Its lexicon is primarily derived from Assamese but also incorporates elements from various Naga languages such as Ao, Sema, and Angami. Its phonological system is relatively simple, with a reduced set of vowel and consonant sounds, as opposed to Assamese. For instance, Nagamese lacks the aspirated consonants found in Assamese, and its vowel system is less complex. This simplification reflects the functional nature of the creole, which prioritizes ease of communication over phonetic precision. Nagamese also has a reduced morphological system, with limited inflectional and derivational markers. For example, it lacks the complex verb conjugations found in Assamese and instead relies mainly on auxiliary verbs and adverbs to indicate tense, aspect, and modality. Its syntax is characterized by a fixed word order (Subject- Object-Verb), which is typical of both Assamese and the Naga languages. However, Nagamese simplifies syntactic structures by omitting redundant elements such as case markers and agreement markers.

Although Nagamese plays a significant role as a lingua franca in Nagaland and the adjacent states, its widespread use also poses a threat to the indigenous languages of Nagaland. As Nagamese becomes the dominant language in urban centres as well as public domains of the state, younger generations are increasingly shifting away from their native languages, leading to language endangerment and loss. This phenomenon is

particularly concerning in a region where linguistic diversity is a cornerstone of cultural identity.

Bishnupriya Manipuri

One of the most prominent creoles of the NER, Bishnupriya Manipuri emerged from the contact between Bengali and Manipuri, with additional influences from Sanskrit and other regional languages. The origins of Bishnupriya Manipuri can be traced back to the medieval period, around the 15th to 16th centuries, when Bengali-speaking Vaishnavite missionaries migrated to the Manipur region. These missionaries, who were followers of the Bhakti movement, settled in the area and interacted extensively with the local Meitei population. Over time, this sustained contact led to the emergence of a contact language that blended elements of Bengali and Manipuri, with Sanskrit serving as a liturgical and cultural influence. The sociopolitical factors of the time also facilitated the development of the it to evolve from a pidgin-like contact language into a stable creole, eventually becoming the mother tongue of the same community.

Bishnupriya Manipuri exhibits several linguistic features that align with the characteristics of creole languages. These features reflect its dual ancestry in Bengali and Manipuri, as well as the simplification and restructuring typical of creolization. The phonological system of Bishnupriya Manipuri is a blend of Bengali and Manipuri sounds. For instance, it retains the Bengali distinction between aspirated and unaspirated consonants (e.g., /p/ vs. /ph/), while also incorporating the tonal features characteristic of Manipuri. The grammar of Bishnupriya Manipuri demonstrates simplification and regularization, which are the hallmarks of creole languages. It employs a fixed Subject-Object-Verb (SOV) word order, similar to both Bengali and Manipuri, but with reduced inflectional morphology. Verbs are marked for tense and aspect using particles, a feature common in creoles.

Bishnupriya Manipuri serves as a vital marker of identity for the entire community of Bishnupriya Manipuris, which is primarily concentrated in the states of Assam (Cachar), Manipur, and Tripura. Despite its limited number of speakers, the language plays a crucial role in communication, cultural practices, and religious rituals. The cultural significance of Bishnupriya Manipuri cannot be overstated. It is deeply intertwined with the community's Vaishnavite traditions, which are reflected in its rich repertoire of devotional songs, folktales, and oral literature. The language also serves as a symbol of resilience and cultural continuity, embodying the community's historical struggles and adaptations. Moreover, Bishnupriya Manipuri also functions as a unifying force within the community, fostering a sense of belonging and shared heritage. Its use in religious and cultural ceremonies reinforces its role as a vehicle for transmitting traditions across generations. While challenges to its preservation persist, the efforts of this community to document and promote their language offer hope for its continued

vitality.

Language of the Tea Gardens of Assam

The tea gardens of Assam, established during the British colonial era, are not only centres of economic activity but also sites of remarkable linguistic and cultural diversity. The migration of labourers from regions such as the Chota Nagpur Plateau and Santal Parganas in the 19th and early 20th centuries brought together people speaking a multitude of languages, including Santali, Kurukh, Mundari, Odia, and others. In such a multilingual environment, contact languages like Sadri in the Brahmaputra Valley and Deshoali in the Barak Valley emerged as vital tools for intercommunity communication. Over time, these languages evolved from simplified pidgins into complex creoles, becoming the lingua franca of entire communities.

The establishment of commercial tea plantations in Assam during the precolonial era triggered one of the largest labor migrations in South Asia. Workers were recruited from drought- and famine-affected regions such as Chota Nagpur, Santal Parganas, and other parts of eastern India. The recruitment process, facilitated by contractors, arkattis (native recruiters), and sardars (labor leaders), ensured a steady influx of workers into the tea gardens. However, this migration was not merely a temporary movement; it represented a permanent relocation of entire families, who settled in the plantation enclaves. The resulting linguistic diversity necessitated the development of a common medium of communication within the heterogenous groups inhabiting the tea estates of Assam, leading to the emergence of contact languages like Sadri and Deshoali.

Sadri, also known as Nagpuri or Sadani, emerged as a creole in the tea gardens of Upper Assam. It is primarily based on Indo-Aryan languages, with significant influences from Santali, Kurukh, and Mundari. Sadri's grammar is characterized by simplification and regularization, typical of creoles. For instance, it employs a fixed Subject-Object-Verb (SOV) word order and uses particles to indicate tense and aspect. Today, Sadri serves as the lingua franca for a heterogeneous community of tea garden workers, transcending ethnic and linguistic boundaries. It is not only used for daily communication but also plays a vital role in cultural practices, such as folk songs and festivals in the Brahmaputra valley. However, in the Barak Valley region, Deshoali emerged as a contact language among tea garden workers, which was particularly of Sylheti and Bengali origin. Like Sadri, Deshoali developed as a pidgin and later evolved into a creole, blending elements of Bengali, Assamese, and tribal languages. Despite its lack of formal recognition, Deshoali plays a crucial role in the daily lives of tea garden workers, serving as a marker of community identity and solidarity.

Conclusion

The study of pidgins and creoles in Northeast India reveals the profound interplay between language, culture, and history. Pidgins, as simplified contact languages, emerge out of necessity in multilingual settings, facilitating communication between diverse groups with no shared linguistic heritage. Whereas, creoles transcend their utilitarian origins, evolving into full-fledged languages that create and sustain the cultures and identities of entire communities.

The emergence of pidgins and creoles in Northeast India is inextricably linked to historical processes such as trade, colonization, and the migration of indentured laborers. The British colonial establishment of tea plantations in the 19th century, for instance, triggered one of the largest labour migrations in South Asia. Workers from regions like Chota Nagpur and Santal Parganas brought with them a multitude of languages, creating a fertile ground for the development of contact languages like Sadri and Deshoali. Similarly, the cultural and religious interactions between Bengali-speaking Vaishnavite missionaries and the Meitei-speaking population of Manipur gave rise to Bishnupriya Manipuri, a creole that embodies the region's history of cultural synthesis. Apart from this, the region's languages are deeply rooted in its ecology, a concept central to ecolinguistics. Ecolinguistics emphasizes the relationship between languages and their environments, highlighting how geographical, cultural, and social factors shape linguistic features. This is another important reason for the shared similarities between languages in the NER.

In the of modernization and globalization, where linguistic diversity and cultural roots are increasingly under threat, the study of pidgins and creoles in Northeast India offers valuable insights into the dynamics of language contact and change. It reminds us that languages are not static entities, but dynamic systems shaped by historical, social, and ecological forces which continue to evolve. By documenting and celebrating these languages, we not only preserve a vital part of human heritage but also affirm the intrinsic value of linguistic diversity in fostering understanding and coexistence. By embracing the richness of Northeast India's linguistic tapestry, we can ensure that these languages continue to thrive, enriching the region's cultural and ecological landscape for generations to come.

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