

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

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It is often claimed that a holistic view of language must take into account the cultural aspects of the community. However, most formal subdisciplines of Linguistics like Phonetics/Phonology or the study/science of sounds of languages, Morphology or the study of words and their compositions, Syntax or the study of the structure of sentences, and Semantics or the study of meaning, do not generally make any claim with regard to the cultural aspects of a language or linguistic community. Ethnolinguistics, which is the study of the relationship between language and culture, on the other hand, does not consider it important to incorporate the formal properties, like sound, grammar, and meaning of expressions of a language in ethnolinguistic studies.

The relation between language and culture has thus remained both central and peripheral to the field of language studies. The centrality comes forth when culture is revived without language, as in the case of Deuri, Ahom, or Tai in Assam or when language is revived without culture, as with the indigenous American languages. There is always a fear that without the rootedness the language of a community provides, its culture cannot be sustained. Education in the language of the community thus seems essential to cultural sustenance. The peripherality of culture obtains because it cannot be formalised the way language can be and therefore cannot find a place in the biolinguistics perspective of language, which views language as a biological property of human beings.

Often, this language–culture ‘mix’ determines the popular understanding of the languages of a region. In the case of Northeast India, the presence of an elaborate clan system within a speech community is taken to determine different ‘lects’ within a dialect continuum. This understanding is often advanced by a functionalist view of language, where different geographical terrains or methods of cultivation are, among others, considered to leave their imprint on the languages concerned. While this is true to an extent with regard to the vocabulary of a language, it is certainly not true with regard to its structure, as demonstrated by modern linguistic studies on the languages spoken in the region (Achom 2021; Chelliah 1997; Subbarao 2012), that is, Tibeto-Burman (most languages spoken in Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura), Austro-Asiatic (Khasi spoken in Meghalaya), and Indo-Aryan (Assamese spoken in Assam) groups of languages.

Theoretical Issues in Language and Culture

The debate outlined above (in)directly touches the heart of the innateness hypothesis. Influenced by behavioural psychology, language as a behaviour was the dominant theoretical framework

in the first half of the 20th century, of which the most authoritative view was represented by Skinner (1957). The well-known and definitive critique of Skinner's book, and idea, by Chomsky (1959), demonstrated convincingly that language as a behaviour thesis is not sustainable. Instead, the innateness thesis, which espouses that human children are born with a universal language acquisition ability, gained prominence in linguistics through the works of generative linguists in the second half of the twentieth century and beyond. Language as innate capacity implies its essential universal character and is thus not likely to be subjected to cultural or social variations.

One of the dominant themes that intersects with the relationship between language and culture is the concept of 'linguistic relativity' without an understanding of which the language–culture debate remains incomplete. Linguistic relativity refers to the idea that culture through language influences thought. This thesis is often associated with the so-called Sapir–Whorf hypothesis. Both Edward Sapir (1884–1939) and Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897–1941) independently subscribed to a softer version of linguistic relativity theory, which says that language restricts certain cognitive processes but never jointly proposed a hypothesis. In fact, their independent views never emphasised on the 'culture to thought' route. Instead, Sapir was interested in the relation between language and worldview, while Whorf was interested in the relation between culture and language. However, they both rejected the stronger version of linguistic relativity, known as 'linguistic determinism' or the thesis that claims that language exclusively determines thought and other cognitive processes.

In many Tibeto–Burman languages, it is common to avoid the second-person pronoun 'you' in conversations with elders or persons ranked socially higher than the speaker. Instead, a kinship term like *idhau*, meaning 'grandfather' in Manipuri, or a relational term like *oja*, meaning teacher in the same language, is employed while addressing such persons. This is a distinct politeness strategy, which is culturally embedded in the language, providing a clear example of linguistic relativity in operation.

The Western scholarship in this domain goes only so far back as to the German Romanticism of the 18th to 19th century, wherein a connection between the 'national character' and ethnic groups was first propounded, most popularly, by the Prussian philosopher Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835). However, what the Western scholarship does not recognise is the much deeper and subtler precedent of the idea of the dependence of knowledge on language expounded by the Golden Age Indian grammarian and philosopher Bhartṛhari (440–510 CE). In his most well-known text, *Vākyapadīya*, Bhartṛhari clearly establishes the unmistakable connection between language and cognition, thus: 'In the world there is no cognition without the pervasion of language. All knowledge shines as if pierced by language' (Ferrante 2020, 148).

The issue of linguistic relativity also impinges upon the concept of grammar formalisms. For example, if cultural and social aspects of language are deemed not to affect grammar, then one grammatical framework is expected to apply universally across languages. However, in practice, grammar formalisms used to describe new languages are often based on patterns of dominant European language groups, namely Germanic and Romance, making grammatical categories such as basic parts of speech (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and prepositions), tense, deixis, etc. apply universally. However, the existence of these categories is often highly problematic in non-European languages. For example, in many Tibeto–Burman languages, adjectives and adverbs are not basic but derived categories. These languages are also 'Mood-prominent' languages and have a reduced function for tense. Deictic categories like demonstratives, determiners, and pronouns have a much more complex system than in Romance and Germanic languages.

However, taking care of every language-specific categorical difference in language may lead to a chaotic grammar formalism. As the research in the generative grammar tradition for the last half a century has shown, there is an unmistakable universality across languages in how they organise their grammars. How does one then reconcile these two opposing forces of relativism and universalism?

These are in fact the two well-known descendants of American and European structuralism, which carved out their own separate paths in the 1960s, namely, generativism and functionalism, respectively. Although generativism retained the basic dictum of structuralism that sentence is the basic unit of language, functionalism went beyond the limits of a sentence to study discourse and textual paragraphs, bringing the sociocultural context of a language into play, as well as the role of information structure in the organisation of a text. However, cultural underpinnings are also visible within smaller units like phrases and words. For example, throughout Northeast India, the expression 'Rice Hotel' or *cak hotel* in Manipuri is common. Similarly, enquiring about whether someone has eaten food or not is commonly expressed as 'eaten rice?' or *cak ca-ra-bra?* in Manipuri. This is expected, since rice, and not wheat, is the staple food in the entire region. Similarly, in many Tibeto-Burman languages, the word for 'mother' has the reduced morpheme for the first-person (possessive) pronoun 'I (/my)', which is grammaticalised as a part of the word. Thus, the word for mother in Manipuri *i-ma*, or my mother, is used irrespective of whose mother is being spoken about.

Language–Culture Relation in Northeast India

The kind of grammar imperialism referred to above left its marks on many grammars of Tibeto-Burman languages written during the colonial period. For example, Pettigrew's Tangkhul grammar (1918) contains many examples of this attitude. While describing the basic consonantal phonemic inventory of Tangkhul, the dental phonemes are listed as 'as in English', but English has only the alveolar versions of these phonemes. Furthermore, the dental aspirated stop *th* is said to have pronunciation as in English combinations 'hot-hose' and 'fat-hen', which again only refer to alveolar sounds and not dental. The velar and bilabial aspirates, on the other hand, are relegated to a footnote which states that '*kh* and *ph* are also used'; this is so because appropriate English equivalents could not be found for these phonemes.

With regard to the basic categories in, for instance, the Mao Naga language spoken in the Senapati district of Manipur bordering Nagaland, a typical adjective is a deverbal one, that is, adjectives derived from verbal roots. For example, *cicu* is the verbal root meaning 'be true', the expression *oko a-cicu* means 'true story', *a-* being an attributive prefix. Similarly, adverbs too are derived from the verb roots: *zhü* or 'be good' derives *ma-zhü* or 'well'. Similarly, in the Tangkhul Naga language spoken in the Ukhrul district of Manipur bordering Myanmar, the adjective *kəcuγγə* 'tall' is derived from *cuy* or 'be tall', as in the expression *kə-cuy-γə thinroy* or 'tall tree', where *kə-* is a nominalising prefix and *-(γ)ə* is an attributive suffix. Similarly, an adjective can be turned into an adverb by the addition of a verbal participle *-tə*, as in the sentence, *a (he) mətha-tə* (nice-ly) *mətusay* (spoke) 'he spoke nicely' (Arokianathan 1987).

Another basic category that displays a complex system in Tibeto-Burman languages is the category of deixis, determined by the functional and cultural aspects of space carried by deictic pronouns and/or deictic markers on verbs marking the location and orientation of an event/state with respect to the location of the speaker. Thus, in Mao Naga, spatial distance is

categorised into speaker-proximate, listener-proximate which is further divided into absolute and relative, and interlocutor-proximate which is further divided into proximate and distant. Accordingly, the different forms of the bases for *hihi* or 'this' are as follows:

Spatial Distance		Singular
Speaker-proximate		<i>hihi</i>
Listener-proximate	Absolute	<i>ḥiti</i>
	Relative	<i>loḥi</i>
Interlocutor-proximate	Proximate	<i>lohi</i>
	Distant	<i>loohi</i>

Source: Giridhar (1994).

Each of these five forms also has dual and plural number versions. As can be seen, a simple bipartite division like *this/these* and *that/those* is not sufficient to understand this system. In Manipuri, deictic information can be encoded in the verbal domain. The usage of the four deictic suffixes *rə*, *ru*, *rək*, and *khi* can be seen in the following paradigm for the verb *ca* or 'eat', where each expression implies a different motion/orientation of the event (towards or away from the speaker), place of occurrence of the event (near or away from the speaker), and the relative position of the two (event preceding/following the motion):

- carəy* 'came and ate'
- caruy* 'went and ate'
- carəkhi* 'ate and came'
- cakhi* 'ate and went away'

Source: Bhat and Ningomba (1995).

Manipuri also has four directional suffixes (*sin* 'in', *thok* 'out', *thə* 'down', and *khət* 'up') that indicate directions of movement of the events or states:

- pi-sin* 'give in'
- pi-thok* 'give out'
- pi-thə* 'give down'
- pi-khət* 'give upwards'

Language and Culture in a Multilingual/Multicultural Setting

A diverse classroom is an ideal laboratory for observing the operation of universalism and relativism in language. In the domain of universalism, the spirit of sameness in spite of differences can be gleaned in object-naming exercises in a multilingual/multicultural classroom. With regard to relativism, specific cultural artefacts as represented in the languages of the region can be used to reconstruct a folk protoform that reveals the universalistic patterns in languages, and therefore culture, and by doing so, inclusion of other languages/cultures can be achieved.

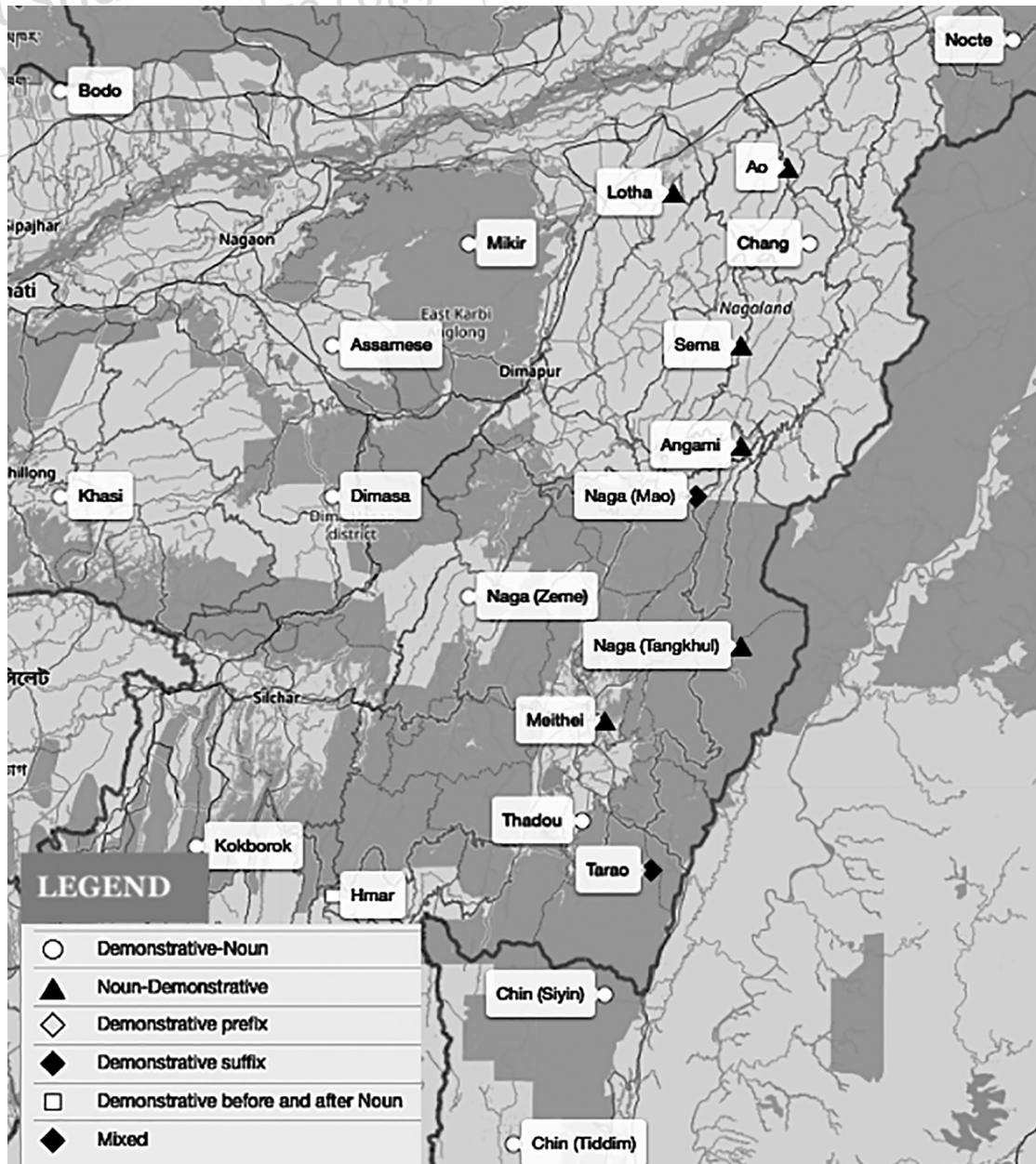


Figure 47.1 WALs Atlas for Northeast India for Noun (N) and Demonstrative (DEM) order.

Linguistic Artefact

The coexistence of universalism and relativism can be illustrated by taking the following extract of a map of Northeast India from the World Atlas of Language Structures (WALS) (Siewierska 2013): Figure 47.1.

The different shapes indicate different orders of the Noun and Demonstrative (N and DEM) sequence in about 19 languages of the Tibeto-Burman language family. The order of N and DEM can also be more closely examined if we carve out a smaller area surrounding one of the major Tibeto-Burman languages of the area, namely, Manipuri: Figure 47.2.

In Figure 47.2 Manipuri or Meiteilon is surrounded by four other languages, which are from the Naga and Kuki sub-families of the Tibeto-Burman family. Their relative order of N and DEM is represented below, which also includes Mao, a Naga language, not visible in Figure 47.2:

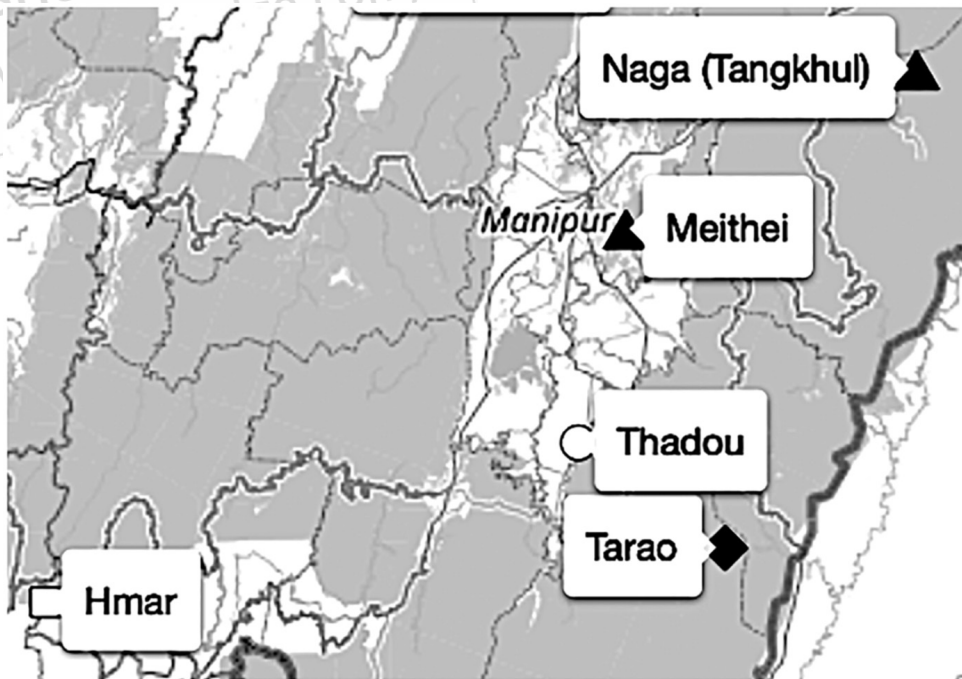


Figure 47.2 WALS extract for languages surrounding Manipuri (Meitei).

Meiteilon	N DEM
Thadou	DEM N
Hmar	N DEM/DEM N
Tangkhul	N DEM
Mao	Mixed
Tarao	N-DEM

The above pattern clearly shows that there is something which is central (the N) and something which is peripheral (the DEM). This shows the importance of the structural similarity between the languages in spite of the differences. With the help of appropriate student-centric activities, knowledge about the commonality among the languages can emerge in a multilingual classroom.

Cultural Artefact

The same lesson can be brought home even more effectively if one includes a culturally salient artefact. In Northeast India, the baby-sling is one such cultural artefact. The following is a sketch of a child being carried in a baby-sling (Figure 47.3).

A comparative lexical analysis of this cultural artefact can reinforce the linguistic artefact of noun phrase discussed above:

Meiteilon:	<i>nahon</i>
Thadou:	<i>nao-púʔ</i>
Hmar:	<i>nao-pante puk</i>
Tangkhul:	<i>chaykom</i>
Mao:	<i>nao-cha apoi</i>



Figure 47.3 A Manipuri mother is carrying her child in a baby-sling.

Except in Tangkhul, the word representing the baby-sling starts with *na(o)*. The root morpheme *na(o)* means ‘the little one’ across these languages. This shows that there are systematic structural similarities across the above five languages in spite of certain surface differences. In short, it again highlights the point about universalism in the face of difference.

The usefulness of reconstruction is brought home through a different door in relation to the creation or origin myths of different linguistic communities in the region. In the absence of written texts, in both Anthropology and Folkloristics, it is common to consider folk material as evidence for constructing the narrative of a community. A cultural reconstruction of the creation myths of different linguistic communities of the region will bring to the surface the cultural narrative of the communities.

Most of the creation myths in Northeast India have something to do with the idea of a cave. The location of the cave is not fixed; it is either in the Yunnan of China or in North Myanmar. Further, the door of the cave is guarded either by a huge flat stone slab, which humans cannot lift because of its weight and also because of the presence of wild animals on the other side of the door, or by a tiger, which is quite common as well. The stone can be moved by an animal like a Mithun (*Gayal* or *Bos frontalis*), or birds could lure away the animals on the other side of the cave. If the cave is guarded by a tiger, the situation can be dealt with in two ways: either the tiger is killed by a brave clan member, or the clan member wears a particular kind of cloth with a pattern typical of the community, which the tiger realises to be no different from the stripes on its own body, indicating an interspecies relationship based on mutual respect.

However, what is of interest are the words for the lexeme for ‘cave’ in different languages, a fraction of which is shown below:

Chothe	<i>khul</i>
Kabui	<i>khol</i>
Koireng	<i>khurpee</i>
Kom	<i>khurpui</i>

Lamkang	<i>khor</i>
Moyon	<i>khur</i>
Tarao	<i>tukleikhur</i>
Vaiphei	<i>khul</i>

Avenues for Further Research

The Sapir–Whorf hypothesis has remained insufficiently investigated. Having seen that culture leaves its shadow on the formal imprint of language and that it is certainly important while dealing with education, there is a theoretical need for formally incorporating culture in the architecture of grammar. For example, even a simple structural analysis of interrogative sentences in the language would demand an explanation of a supposedly cultural element in them. Taking an example from Manipuri, one can see how a direct form of a question like ‘Who did you see?’ (*naŋ kəna ukhi-ge?*) is disfavoured in contrast to a more indirect way of asking the same question – called a cleft-question – as in ‘Who was it that you saw?’ (*naŋ-nə ukhi-bə ədu kəna-no?*).

The indirect form being more common is guided by a cultural norm of ‘avoid rising intonation’ resulting in a complete lack of any rising question intonation where the question word itself (*kəna* or ‘who’ above) lacks the focus pitch contour completely, showing a steady fall in pitch. Thus, the development of the syntactic strategy of clefting is a direct result of the manifestation of culture in language. However, a detailed formal relationship between the two will have to be investigated in the future for many other languages of the region in relation to frameworks available for structural analysis of languages.

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