48
LANGUAGE AND MIGRATION

Tanmoy Bhattacharya

There are two broad themes that inform the relationship between language and migration, one historical and the other contemporary: how the evolution of language resulted in migration, and how migration affects language. In the context of Northeast India, the peopling of the region is intimately related to the current situation of people-speaking languages belonging to different families and subfamilies of cohabiting languages.

An undeniable connection between language and migration must refer to the Recent Out of Africa (ROOA) thesis, which establishes a causal link between the two. But how exactly are they related? It is well established (Corballis 2014) that about 75,000–100,000 years ago (YA), a sudden spurt of complex symbolic and technological activities like art, superior toolmaking, social arrangement, etc. took place. This is called the 'great leap forward', that is, an unprecedent explosion in creativity. This indicates, in evolutionary frame, a 'sudden' acquisition of conceptual abilities by modern humans (*Homo sapiens sapiens*) that is quite likely to have been a result of the development of language around the same time. Not surprisingly, therefore, within 50,000–75,000 YA, migrations of modern humans out of Africa took place via the southern coastal route starting from East Africa through the Arabian Peninsula, Persia, India, and then to Southeast Asia and Oceania. Clear genetic evidence exists in the Haplogroup L3 that originated in East Africa around 70,000 YA, participating in the ROOA event and giving rise to the derivative M (and N) variant(s) that populated all of Eurasia but most dominantly South and Southeast Asia, including Northeast India. In short, the most significant human migration took place because of the development of language by the modern human.

A range of language phenomena is affected because of migration, most prominently language diversity or multilingualism and language maintenance and loss. Migration has been one of the key driving forces that leads to contact-related language changes. For example, the reason the register of the common vegetable sellers in Delhi, the capital of India, for the last two decades or so, includes Meiteilon (Manipuri language) words like *hangam* for mustard greens (instead of the common Hindi–Urdu term *sarson*) and *nakupi* for specific chives-like leaves because of the migration of students from the Northeast to the capital.

Northeast India as a Linguistic Area

The German word *Sprachbund* indicates a linguistic area where a group of languages with some common features are found, which may have developed such features due to their coexistence.

DOI: 10.4324/9781003285540-49

Within the Indian linguistic context, Murray Emeneau (1956), a Canadian linguist, coined the phrase 'India as a linguistic area', highlighting the common features mostly across two out of three 'major' language families, namely Dravidian and Indo-Aryan. The third major language family that Emeneau briefly considered in comparing with the other two is Austroasiatic or Munda. Incidentally, the Tibeto-Burman language family does not fall within Emeneau's demonstration of India as a linguistic area. In retrospect, this omission turned out to be costly for him, as the only new feature that Emeneau himself pointed out in that paper was the 'classifiers' or a word or an affix used with a noun that classifies the type of entity the noun stands for. This feature is found extensively in many Tibeto-Burman languages. For example, in an Indo-Aryan language like Bangla, an expression like *æk-**ṭa** boi* (one book), where the generic classifier *ṭa* is used for most nouns, in Bodo, a Tibeto-Burman language, the classifier *phang* is used for trees and *gang* for flat things like leaves of trees, books, etc. as in *thalir **phang**-se* (a banana tree) and *bilai **gang**-se* (one leaf), respectively.

Emeneau's conclusion with regard to classifiers that they have developed exclusively in Indo-Aryan languages and have impacted their growth in Dravidian and Austroasiatic ones is, therefore, based on incomplete data and incorrect. If only he had taken interest in Tibeto-Burman languages as well, he would not have claimed what he did about classifiers (Bhattacharya 2016).

The Diachronic Account

In the context of the migration of different groups of people speaking different languages to India, the mainstream Indic archaeological studies show that the Tibeto-Burman speaking people were the last ones to arrive. However, if one looks at the archaeological findings from the region, it is established as the home to a typical eastern Neolithic population (Hazarika 2016), where the most common tool types found were shouldered or flat axes/celts and corded pottery (Figure 48.1).

These tools have been found all over Assam and its adjoining Garo, Khasi, and Jaintia Hills, Naga Hills, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, and to a lesser extent in Mizoram and Tripura as well. But pottery or potsherds have been found only in the North Cachar Hills of Assam, Garo Hills of Meghalaya, and Manipur.

These surface finds bear remarkable resemblances to the ones found in the well-known Neolithic sites in Southwest China and Southeast Asia, dating variously between 9500 and 5000 BCE. The first excavation by an Indian team was done in Daojali-Hading in the North Cachar district of Assam in 1961–63, which yielded shouldered and ground axes of various types and over 600 corded or incised potsherds. Daojali-Hading is, therefore, considered to be an extension of the 'Corded Ware Zone' of south and Southwest China and Southeast Asia, as far as pottery is concerned. Also, in the Naga Hills and in Arunachal Pradesh, Neolithic axes made

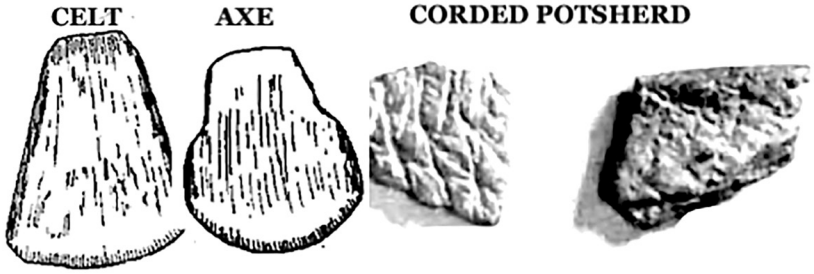

Figure 48.1 Surface finds of celt, axe, and corded potsherd in Daojali-Hading (1961–63). Source: Roy, 1977.

of jadeite – a material which is locally unavailable – were found, which indicates the import of tools/raw materials from Neolithic cultures in China, most probably from the Sichuan region of south China (Van Driem 1998).

Regarding the origin of paddy, roughly three sources have been proposed: Yangtze Valley in China, Southeast Asia, and Northeast India. Wild rice husks and phytoliths have been found in caves in Yangtze Valley in China, indicating wild paddy collection in the region during the terminal Pleistocene period (9700 BCE). There is also independent evidence to show that there was a movement of Austroasiatic tribes up and down the Mekong Valley from Southeast Asia to China (Blust 1996). Such dispersals relate to the early entry of people into Northeast India along with their rice cultivation and domestication skills.

As far as genetic evidence is concerned, though O3-M122 is the signature Haplogroup of the Tibeto-Burman population (see Figure 48.2 of Shi et al., 2005, available at https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1226206/ accessed on 13.06.21) – like the O2-M95 being the signature Haplogroup for the Austroasiatic group – the Tibeto-Burman population of India carries both the O3-M122 and O2-M95, indicating admixture with the Austroasiatic population.

Table 48.1 further shows that the Khasi people – and the Mundaris to some extent – have the Tibeto-Burman specific O3-M122, as shown by a much higher percentage frequency among the Garos, a Tibeto-Burman-speaking population living in the state of Meghalaya, Assam, and Bangladesh. The presence of M122 haplogroup in Khasis indicates admixture between Tibeto-Burman and Austroasiatic populations in the distant and near past.

There is also linguistic evidence that shows that all branches of Proto-Austroasiatic languages have a large list of reconstructible roots representing rice, which qualifies the speakers of the languages as original cultivators of rice (Table 48.2).

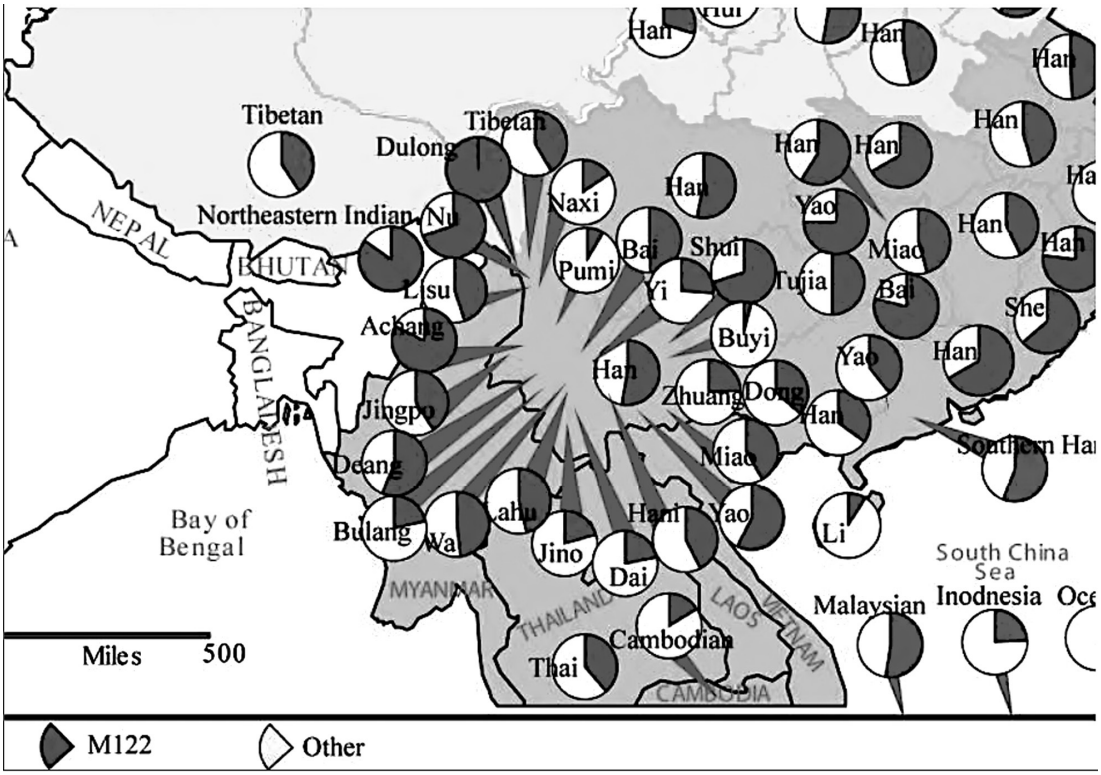

Figure 48.2 The frequency distribution of the O3-M122 haplotypes.

Table 48.1 Frequency of O-M122 in Austroasiatic and Tibeto-Burman Populations

Population	*O-M122*
Mundari	0.13
Khasi	29.35
Garo	54.55
Nicobarese	0

Source: Kumar et al. (2007).

Table 48.2 Roots of Paddy/Rice-related Expressions in Proto-Austroasiatic Languages

**(kə)ɓaːʔ* 'rice plant'	**kəndək* 'rice inner husk'	**jənreʔ* 'pestle'	**jərmuəl* 'dibbling stick'
**rəŋkoːʔ* 'rice grain'	**pheːʔ* 'rice bran'	**jəmpiər* 'winnowing tray'	**kəntuːʔ* 'rice complement'
**cəŋkaːm* 'rice outer husk'	**təmpal* 'mortar'	**guːm* 'to winnow'	

Source: Diffloth (2005).

Thus, archaeological, genetic, and linguistic evidences support the existence of a Neolithic culture in Northeast India that was peopled by two major linguistic groups, namely Tibeto-Burman and Proto-Austroasiatic.

The Synchronic Account

The 2011 Census of Indian language data show that most of the Tibeto-Burman languages are spoken in Manipur and Nagaland, making these two states linguistically the most diverse of all in the entire region. Thus, these two states were presumably the most preferred destinations for many tribes over time. But such a conclusion is not supported by the data on the percentage of people who have come from other states, which raises a doubt about the possible impact of migration on language.

Table 48.3 clearly shows that Arunachal Pradesh ranks number one with 12.24%, followed by Sikkim with 11%, in terms of the people who were born outside the state. It may be remembered here that Arunachal Pradesh was granted full-fledged statehood in 1987, and Sikkim merged with the Union of India as the 22nd state in 1975. A lot of development activities started there after that, resulting in the migration of a large number of people from outside the state. Such people would still be declared as born outside those two states today, which perhaps explains the very high percentage of people there who were born outside the state. On the other hand, Assam's position as the second lowest in ranking of such people with only 1.78% who are born outside the state is unexpected.

On the other hand, in each of the other seven states, excluding Sikkim, the largest percentage of people out of all people born outside the state, is from Assam, which is however not surprising at all given the fact that five out of the seven states were carved out of Assam in the 1960s and 1970s. Hence, many of the elderly population being counted would have been technically born in Assam Province. Table 48.4 shows that this is very high even in Manipur

Table 48.3 Rankings of States by Percentage of People Born Outside the State

Ranking	*States*	*Percentage of People Born Outside the State*
1.	Arunachal Pradesh	12.24
2.	Sikkim	11
3.	Nagaland	5.8
4.	Mizoram	4.17
5.	Meghalaya	3.98
6.	Tripura	3.69
7.	Assam	1.78
8.	Manipur	0.71

Source: Census of India (2011).

Table 48.4 Percentage Ranking of People Out of All People Born Outside the State

Ranking	*State*	*Percentage of People Born in Assam Out of Those Born Outside the State*	*Percentage of People Born in States Other than Assam Out of Those Born Outside the State*
1.	Arunachal Pradesh	63	1.08 (Manipur)
2.	Meghalaya	57	5.79 (Manipur)
3.	Nagaland	48	13.04 (Manipur)
4.	Sikkim	42	1.05 (Manipur)
5.	Manipur	40.89	7.34 (Nagaland)
6.	Mizoram	38.88	31.96 (Manipur)
7.	Tripura	22	12.39 (Mizoram)

Source: Census of India (2011).

(41%) and Tripura (22%), which were princely states but within the Assam Province. But how it was as high as 42% of all those born outside Sikkim, ranking fourth highest in the region, is difficult to explain.

This hugely complicates the relationship between language and migration within the region. It seems that for whatever reasons, there has been one-way migration – from Assam to other states. The migration from other North-eastern states to Assam or to other North-eastern states has been much less significant except in the case of Manipur. In fact, there are only three cases of more than 10%. Out of those three cases at least two are expected, namely, Nagaland having 13% of people born in Manipur and Tripura having 12% of people born in Mizoram. This is because a large population of Naga and Kuki people live in Manipur and migration of, among others, Kuki-Chin tribes to Tripura from adjoining Mizoram is common. However, 32% of the people of Mizoram being born in Manipur is strange and hence deserves to be analysed.

One must remember that migration figures do not always help one to know the number of speakers of a language within a state. For example, as far as migration figures are concerned, 628 people in Tripura were born in Manipur, yet the number of Manipuri speakers in Tripura

is 23,779. This is quite in line with the 100-year-old history of a series of Tripuri kings marrying Manipuri princesses or commoners, starting in the 1790s (Sanajaoba 2005, 110). On the other hand, although the second-largest percentage of settlers from outside the state of Mizoram are born in Manipur, there are only 2242 speakers of the Meitei language, implying therefore that a vast majority of those who are born in Manipur but settled in Mizoram are speakers of languages other than Meiteilon; they are in all likelihood speakers of the Kuki-Chin group of languages, given the proximity of the Chin groups in south-eastern Myanmar. Thus, it is no wonder that Mizoram has 22,214 speakers of Paite, a Kuki language of Manipur. It is spoken in 30 villages of the Champhai and Khawzawl districts of Mizoram. Similarly, there are 35,722 speakers of a Tibeto-Burman language called Mogh (Mog or Marma in Bangladesh) in Tripura. They have a long and painful history of being persecuted and tortured. They had migrated from the northern Arakan Valley in South-east Myanmar to Chittagong Hills Tract of Bangladesh during the 14th to 16th centuries. But they had to flee Bangladesh and settle in Tripura on account of persecution and torture meted out to them while they were in Chittagong Hills.

Contemporary Developments

Linguistically, one of the known shadows of language on migration is in the domain of multilingualism. Given that Manipur and Nagaland are linguistically the most diverse states in the region, or for that matter anywhere in the country, contact situations exist most naturally in these states. In fact, Nagaland is the first instance of state formation, which is based not on linguistic principles but on the basis of ethnicity. But language contacts have had little effect on the linguistic groups in Nagaland, where there is no Naga language as the state language. Instead, the situation gave rise to the development of a pidgin language called Nagamese, which is used as a lingua franca across the state by the speakers of different languages. Nagamese developed as a lingua franca since the time of interaction between the Ahom rulers of Assam and the various Naga tribes from the 13th century onwards. This contact intensified during the Burmese rule from 1816 to 1826 when many Assamese fled their villages and sought refuge in the Naga hills to save themselves from the Burmese atrocities. Although Ahom is a Tai language, with their conversion to Hinduism early on, the Ahoms adopted Assamese as their language and therefore Nagamese developed as the lingua franca between the Assamese-speaking Ahoms and the Naga tribes living in the hill areas of the then Assam. Nagamese became a convenient vehicle for communicating for purposes of trade and joint operations between the British, Assamese, and the Nagas in the 19th and 20th centuries. It is a pidgin by virtue of being a grammatically simpler language, as it has a reduced number of personal pronouns compared to Assamese (Table 48.5).

Table 48.5 Simplification of Personal Pronouns in Nagamese

Person	*Assamese*	*Nagamese*
I	*moi*	*moi, ami*
II	*toi; tumi; apuni*	*toi; apni*
III	hi 'he'; tai 'she'	tai 'he/she'

Further, while the Assamese has five plural markers (*bor*, *bilak*, *hat*, *lok*, and *hakal*), Nagamese has only one, i.e. *khan*. While there are 13 classifiers in Assamese (*ʒən*, *ʒəni*, *gəraki*, *ta/to/ti*, *khən*, *dal*, *pat*, *khila*, *kosa*, *dom*, *zak*, *zopa*, and *pah*, Nagamese has only one, i.e. *tu/du*.

Conclusion

The presence of Austroasiatic languages in the predominantly Tibeto-Burman Northeast India is related as much to the diachronic story of their common origin in Southeast Asia and China, respectively, as to their migration into Northeast India from eastern India during the 1860s to the 1890s as indentured tea-plantation labour, resulting in the presence of a high concentration of various Austroasiatic speakers like Santali, Kharia, Mundari, and Soara (Savara) in the region.

At present, a major Austroasiatic language of the region is Khasi, spoken by about 1.4 million people in the state of Meghalaya, yet it has not been included in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India, despite demands for the same since the early 1970s. In fact, among the 22 scheduled languages recognised by the Indian Constitution, there is only one Austroasiatic (Santali) and two Tibeto-Burman languages (Bodo and Manipuri) included. Thus, the two most important language families of the region remain officially neglected so far.

References

Bhattacharya, T. 2016. To be human: The introduction. *neScholar*, 2(3), 66–73.

Blust, R.A. 1996. Beyond the Austronesian homeland: the Austric hypothesis and its implications for archaeology. In W.H. Goodenough (ed.). *Prehistoric Settlement of the Pacific*, Vol. 86, Part 5. Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 117–60.

Census of India. 2011. *Language (Table C-16) and Population Classified by Place of Birth and Sex (Tables D-1–13)*. New Delhi: Office of the Registrar General.

Corballis, M.C. 2014. The gradual evolution of language. *Humana: Mente Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 27, 39–60.

Diffloth, G. 2005. The contribution of linguistic palaeontology to the homeland of Austroasiatic. In L. Sagart, R. Blench and A. Sanchez-Mazas (eds). *The Peopling of East Asia: Putting Together the Archaeology, Linguistics and Genetics*. London: Routledge, 77–80.

Emeneau, M.B. 1956. India as a linguistic area. *Language*, 32(1), 3–16.

Hazarika, M. 2016. Neolithic culture of Northeast India: A recent perspective on the origins of pottery and agriculture. *Ancient Asia*, 1, 24–43.

Kumar, V., A.N.S. Reddy, J.P. Babu, T.N. Rao, B.T. Langstieh, K. Thangaraj, A.G. Reddy, L. Singh and B.M. Reddy. 2007. Y-chromosome evidence suggests a common paternal heritage of Austro-Asiatic populations. *BMC Evolutionary Biology*, 7, https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2148-7-47.

Roy, S.K. 1977. A Study of Ceramics from Neolithic to Mediaeval period of Assam: An Ethno-Archaeological Approach. PhD thesis, Gauhati University, Guwahati.

Sanajaoba, N. (ed.). 2005. *Manipur: Past and Present*. Volume 4. New Delhi: Mittal Publications.

Shi, H., Y.L. Dong, B. Wen, C.J. Xiao, P.A. Underhill, P.D. Shen, R. Chakraborty, L. Jin and B. Su. 2005. Y-chromosome evidence of Southern origin of the East Asian–specific haplogroup O3-M122. *American Journal of Human Genetics*, 77, 408–19.

Van Driem, G. 1998. Neolithic correlates of ancient Tibeto-Burman migrations. In R. Blench and M. Spriggs (eds). *Archaeology and Language II*. London: Routledge, 67–102.