

The Challenges of Translating Tai Ahom Copper Plate Inscription of Auniati Satra and its Web Hosting

Dr. Dhruvajyoti Baruah
Associate Professor
Dept. of Computer Application
Jorhat Engineering College,
Assam, India.
dhrubaghy@gmail.com

Satya Ranjan Phukon
Research Assistant
Dept. of Computer Application
Jorhat Engineering College,
Assam, India

Kamal Gayan
Software Developer,
Dept of Computer
Application,
Jorhat Engineering
College,
Assam, India.

Abstract

Translation of ancient scripts has always been a challenging task. If the language is extinct, it is even more difficult to translate the old manuscripts. Such manuscripts get damaged due to unwanted physical and biological factors. Such damages make it more difficult to understand what is actually written on it. Tai Ahom language is an extinct language once used by the Ahom people of the North East India. In this paper, we are presenting the challenges faced while translating an Ahom language manuscript engraved on copper plate, now preserved in Auniati Satra of Majuli, Assam. The translation effort is the initial part of a bigger goal to place the Tai Ahom Language manuscripts in web based technology platform.

Keywords

Tai Ahom language, Assamese language, extinct language, Copper plate, Manuscript, Natural Language Processing.

1. Introduction

The copper plates and manuscripts are parts of historical evidence of existence of the Ahom language. Copper plate was used by the kings and other ministers as an evidence of their work. The writing materials of Ahom periods were Sachi tree bark, Copper plate, Stone pillar, Cloth, Bamboo stick, Coins, Surface of cannon etc. During the early period of Ahom reign, the mother tongue was naturally Tai Ahom whose evidence is hold by the manuscripts. Most of the copper plates provide a brief information of land donation to the institutions and individuals. The text in ancient copper plates are not easy to decipher. The translation of Tai Ahom copper plate writing is a challenging task which is described in this paper.

2. Tai Ahom Language

The Ahoms are the western most Tai group of North-East India. Ahom people migrated to Assam from Mong Mao, which is now in Yunnan province of China[1]. While migrating from China, the Ahom people brought with them a rich cultural and literary heritage. Ahom language was used as the sole language of the Ahom kingdom until the 15th or 16th century, when it started to be replaced by Assamese. By the early 19th century Ahom was no longer used as a spoken language, although it continued to be used in religious

ceremonies throughout the 19th century, and since 1920 efforts have been made to revive the Ahom language and culture[2]. Since the early 18th century, there have been no native speakers of the language, though extensive manuscripts in the language still exist today. The tonal system of the language is entirely lost. The language was only partially known by a small group of traditional priests of the Ahom religion and it was being used only for ceremonial or ritualistic purposes.

3. The copper plate of Aauniati Satra

One of the historical evidence of Ahom Language is the copper plate which is conserved in Aauniati Satra. The Aauniati Satra was established in Majuli in 1653 A.D. by the Ahom King Sutamla alias Jayaddhaja Singha after he adopted the Hindu Religion from the first Satradhikar of Aauniati Satra Sri Sri Niranjan Deva[3]. This Copper plate is the grant issued by King Gaurinath Singha about the donated land to Aauniati Satra in the year 1789 [3]. In order to rule well the king donated village to the Aauniati Satra Gohains. This copper plate is of sixteen lines, written in Ahom script.

4. Our Study and the challenges we faced

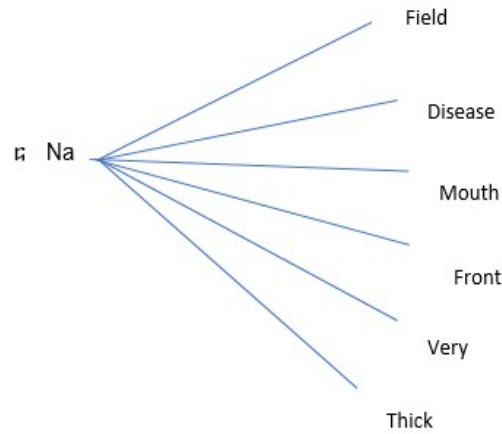
Now we are going to discuss one of the historical evidence of 18th century, that is the copper plate which is conserved in Aauniati Satra. This Copper plate is the grant issued by King Gaurinath Singha about the donated land to Aauniati Satra in the year 1789 [4]. In order to rule well the king donated land to the Aauniati Satra Gohains. This copper plate is written in Ahom language and has sixteen lines. The translation of Tai Ahom copper plate is a challenging task, and in this section, we will detail the reasons for that, which are related to the structure of the Tai language.

Ancient copper plates are not easy to decipher the text written on it. Most of the copper plates are deteriorated due to various unwanted physical and biological factors. Some are fragmented, some are unreadable, some are brittle, some are faded; sometimes, some portions (folios) are already lost, or sometimes damaged by rodents, insects, fungus, or acid. Therefore, sometimes it is very difficult to find a complete continued text from an old Ahom copper plate.

Writing system changes in due course of time. For Example, the script of 18th century is different from the script which we are using now. It may be possible for an expert in old Ahom script, but it is very difficult to decipher all old handwritings because the handwriting of each and every scribe is somehow different.

While translating the old Ahom copper plate, sometimes it is felt necessary to have the familiarity ,acquaintance and over all knowledge on the traditions, customs, beliefs, rituals, and history of Tai Ahoms. This kind of traditional knowledge plays a vital role as one of the pre-requisites, because such knowledge will help a translator to understand Ahom text better.

The Ahom language is a tonal language[5]. Translation of the written text of a tonal language is difficult, especially when there is no tone marker. In a tonal language, one word may have many meanings. For example:









The above word 'Na' has six meanings. Hence, sometimes it is very difficult to determine the proper meaning from written texts, if the context is not clearly understood. Translators have to face lot of difficulties while translating.

It is again very difficult to distinguish which is Ahom language and which is native language because of the use of combination of Ahom language with native language. Even though the language is Ahom but all the words are not Ahom. Such words do not fall within the characteristics of Ahom language. In Ahom, to form a word, that is a combination of two letters, can be done only with eight letter of the twenty-four letters of script. These letters are - **𑜀, 𑜢, 𑜤, 𑜰, 𑜱, 𑜲, 𑜳 and 𑜴**.

In the Copper Plate there are some words of native language which cannot be found on any other Ahom documents. For that, we had to search words in Ahom as well as in native language. Here all the native words are the name of places of that time and still being used. These words are:-

Aau ni na ti	-----	𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰 𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰 𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰	
Samdhora garh	-----	𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰 𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰 𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰	
Kolong	-----	𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰 𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰	
Gandhalijan	-----	𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰 𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰 𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰	
Bebejiya	-----	𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰 𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰 𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰	
Mitharam	-----	𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰 𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰	

Along with the above mentioned words there are a lot of Assamese words used in the copper plate. Again, it was very hard to signify and map some writing to the actual letter. These letters are given below:

NA -----	ꠘ	
HA -----	ꠕ	
SA -----	ꠗ	
KA -----	ꠙ	
Kha -----	ꠛ	
RA -----	ꠜ	

The above mentioned Ahom letters (clip images) are written differently in the copper plate. If we see the second letter “HA” ꠕ , it has been written differently in the copper plate. On the basis of the complete sentence semantic, we can signify the letter. In this case we also needed to take help of old Ahom sasi bark manuscript.

In the copper plate we saw that combination of two languages is used to form a sentence. It is not easy to say whether the word in this sentence is in Ahom or other language. If we try to translate the sentence using only ahom words then a different and irrelevant meaning is found. This leads to meaningless result. In this case we have included native language to translate these sentences. While translating we depend on the complete meaning of the context. Below is an image of Copper plate sentence:-



ꠕꠘ	ꠕꠛ	ꠘ	ꠕ	ꠙꠕ	ꠘꠛ	ꠕ	ꠕꠛ
Tun	Rung	Dam	Ru	Pit	Duon	Pet	Po

We have already mentioned that Tai ahom language is a tonal language. In a tonal language, one word may have many meanings. At first, we will try to translate like - ‘Tun Rung Dam’ which means Koliabor (a Place), ‘Ru Pit’ means the knowledge take and ‘Duon Pet’ means eight month and ‘Po’ means people.

And combining these words below sentence is generated: - “Koliabor people with knowledge take eight month”.

When we translate the words of the same sentence into other meanings, we can see that:-

Tun	Rung	Dam	Ru	Pit	Duon	Pet	Po
Family	Bright	Black	Head	take	land	Eight	Blessing

And combining these words below sentence is generated: -“Black bright family head take the eight land as blessing”.

Both translations are not acceptable to us as the previous translation part of the copper plate does not match this translation. So, from the sentence we will take the Assamese or indigenous words along with Ahom language words:-

𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰𑜫 𑜃𑜫𑜤𑜰𑜫 𑜃𑜫 𑜃𑜫 𑜃𑜫𑜤𑜰𑜫 𑜃𑜫𑜤𑜰𑜫 𑜃𑜫 𑜃𑜫

Koliabor Cultivated eight po land.
(po is a land measurement unit).

Break up of the decided final meaning of the sentence:-

Ahom Script	𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰𑜫 𑜃𑜫𑜤𑜰𑜫 𑜃𑜫	𑜃𑜫 𑜃𑜫𑜤𑜰𑜫	𑜃𑜫𑜤𑜰𑜫	𑜃𑜫	𑜃𑜫	𑜃𑜫
Pronunciation	Tun Rung Dam	Ru Pit	Duon	Pet	Po	
Meaning decided	Koliabor	cultivated	land	Eight	Po	

This leads to the sentence “Eight Po cultivated land in Koliabor”. This translation is acceptable to us as the copper plate mainly mentions the donation of land by the Ahom king.

5. Conclusion

Web presence is of vital importance for easy access of findings and results of research. Translation of the Auniati plate is uploaded into web. This was again not very easy like other established languages. We designed unicode fonts, virtual keyboards to type and now hosted in www.ahomweb.in . Such historical sources are the massive treasure of tradition, culture, custom , believes and events that took place during the Ahom reign [6]. But, these valuable manuscripts, copper plate which are a treasure of knowledge and wisdom would serve their relevance only when we scientifically interpret, translate and make it easily available for all through modern platform. However, the above study reveals that the task of translating Ahom copper plate is not easy. There are many

aspects that a translator needs to cater to, before jumping into translation. Proper and systematic study is a must. If we do not study such copper plates properly, then we will never be able to extract the correct meaning of these ancient texts.

6. Acknowledgment

This work is carried out under the project “Web Technology Development for Heritage Tai Ahom Manuscripts” which is funded by Dept. Of Science and Technology (DST), Govt. of India, under Science and Heritage Research Initiative (SHRI) Scheme (sanction no DST/TDT/SHRI-11/2018).

7. REFERENCES

1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ahom_kingdom
2. <https://omniglot.com/writing/ahom.htm>
3. <https://www.Aauniati.org/about.php>
4. https://ahomweb.in/aauniati_copper_plate.php
5. J.N. Phukan, An Introductory Primer & Grammar Of Ahom (Tai) Language
6. The History Of Mediaval Assam(A.D. 1228 To 1603) – Nagendra Nath Acharya
7. Morey, *The Tai Languages of Assam*.
8. Lit Pong Khom Tai, Chao Babul Phukon
9. Metadata and endangered archives: lessons from the Ahom Manuscripts Project, *Stephen Morey* .
10. Compounding in Tai Ahom: A Descriptive Study, Dipima Buragohain
11. Review Of The Tai Languages Of Assam – A Grammar And Texts By Stephen Morey.
12. "Linguists and historians are generally united in the view that the Ahom language has been dead for about two hundred years, and that all Ahom use Assamese as their mother tongue." (Terwiel 1996:283)
13. Borua, Golap C.1930. Ahom-Buranji (with parallel English translation), from the Earliest Times to the End of the Ahom Rule. Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press.
14. Gogoi, Poppy; Morey, Stephen; Pittayaporn, Pittayawat (2020). "The Tai Ahom Sound System As Reflected By The Texts Recorded In The Bark Manuscripts.
15. *Ahom Lexicons, Based on Original Tai Manuscripts* (Guwahati: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, 1964), N. N. Deodhai Phukan.
16. Tai Ahom - Paribhasha (Medini Madhab Mohan, 2013)