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Liangmai: A Minority Language of Manipur

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Liangmai dance troupe

Abstract

This paper discusses how Meitei, the dominant language of Manipur, is influencing the Liangmai language. A lot of lexical borrowings from Meitei has taken place in Liangmai because of language contact with Meitei for a very long time. But still Liangmai is surviving

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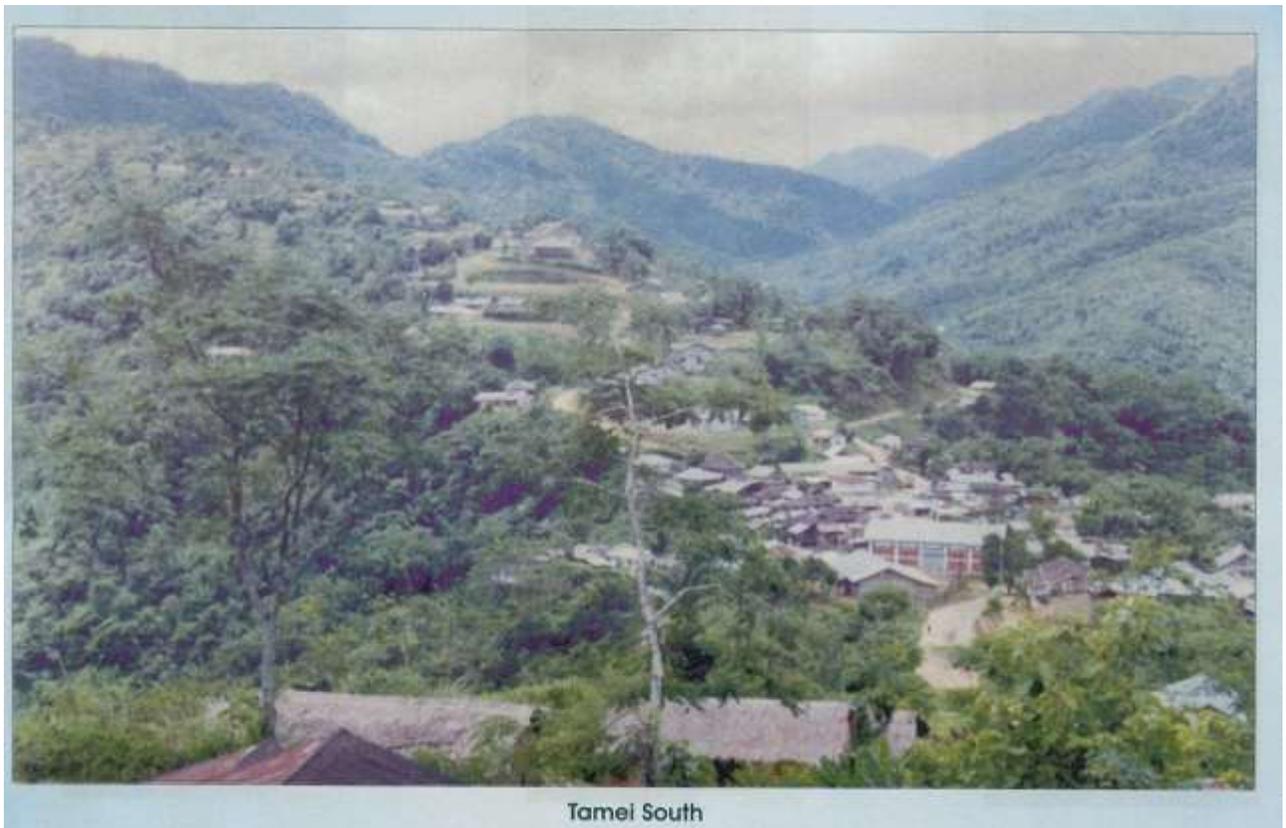
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Liangmai: A Minority Language of Manipur

the impact of Meitei even though it is a minority language in Manipur. The Indian Constitution adopted several safeguards to protect linguistic minorities in the country. Thus minorities are allowed to secure state funds for their educational institutions. Article 347 allows the use of minority languages for official purposes. But in Manipur, most of the tribal languages are not yet introduced in government educational institutions even at the primary level.

A lot of lexical borrowing from Meitei has taken place in Liangmai because of language contact in day today life. Borrowing of Meitei words become a necessity in day today life. This leads to language endangerment. Most of the borrowed words belong to the category of nouns. The large domain or proportions of the Loan vocabulary from Meitei words have entered the Liangmai lexicon. This sometimes leads to language endangerment.

Introduction



A Liangmai Village

It is widely believed that the Tibeto-Burman people came to the northeast India via the northeastern route from the Yangtze Kiang and the Hwang-Ho river valleys. Nevertheless, the fact is that different groups of this language family came from different routes. Liangmais are mongoloid stock who, for a considerable period, lived in South-west China and migrated to Northern South East Asia and East India around one thousand years before Christ. Liangmai names such as Suang, Hu Wang Liu San, Kiang, etc., are some names which are identical to the Chinese names. Ethnically and linguistically Liangmai people belong to the mongoloid group of race and speak Liangmai, a Tibeto-Burman language under the Naga Bodo section family (G.A. Grierson in *Linguistic Survey of India*).

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Liangmai is an indigenous and minority language in Manipur. Liangmai is one of the 33 recognized tribes by the government of Manipur which includes Aimol, Anal, Hmar, Maram, Mao, Paite, Simte, Thangal, Thangkhul, Thadou, etc. In Nagaland Liangmais are recognized as Zeliang which comprises of Zeme and Liangmai. The language spoken by the people of Liangmai is known as Liangmai language. It is mainly spoken in Manipur and Nagaland. In Manipur, Liangmai speakers are found in Tamenglong headquarter, Tamei sub-division and in Senapati district. They are also found in Tening sub-division, Jalukie of Peren district, Dimapur and Kohima of Nagaland.

According to 2001 census report, the total population of Liangmai in Manipur was estimated to be above 34,232 with 17,477 males and 16,755 females. According to 2001 census report, the total population of Zeliang in Nagaland was 36012 (2315 Liangmai). This language is linguistically closer to Maram, Poumai, Thangal, Rongmei and Zeme which are spoken in the same region.

The vast majority of Liangmai groups are agriculturist and still live in villages. As their village is on the top of the hills, it provides a proper habitat for cultivation. They practice shift cultivation. Accessibility to some of these villages is difficult because of the slope mountain. Some villages are accessible only by foot. Some of the Liangmai villages in Manipur are still not yet connected with electricity.

Liangmai religion was traditionally animism; however, they have converted to Christianity even before India's independence and it is due to the influence of the Christian missionaries.

Southern Liangmais living near Tamenglong Headquarter especially Tharon, Namtiram, Marongpa, etc., hesitate to speak their mother tongue due to some unknown reason. Their Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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language may become extinct in near future. Liangmai language is also included in UNESCO Atlas on Indian endangered languages in 2009.

Language spoken

It is mainly spoken in Manipur and Nagaland. In Manipur, Liangmai speakers are found in Tamenglong headquarter, Tamei sub division, Senapati district and scattered over near Imphal. They are also found in Tening Sub-divission, Jaluke of Peren district, Dimapur and Kohima of Nagaland.

Liangmai language belongs to Tibeto-Burman language under Naga-Bodo section. Liangmai language is mutually intelligible in Manipur and Nagaland even though the language has slight variation from place to place and village to village.

Position of Language

The Indian Constitution adopted several safeguards to protect linguistic minorities in the country. Articles 350(A) and 350(B) were adopted in addition to the earlier Articles 29(1), 30, 347 and 350 in order to safeguard the interests of minorities. Article 29(1) notes: “Any section of the citizens residing in the territory of India or any part thereof having a distinct language, script or culture of its own shall have the right to conserve the same.”

This clearly guarantees the right of minorities to conserve their cultural as well as linguistic traditions. . The second clause of Article 30 prohibits the state from discriminating against minority educational institutions in giving financial aid on the grounds that they are under the management of minorities. Thus minorities are allowed to secure state funds for their educational institutions. Article 347 allows the use of minority languages for official

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purposes. But in Manipur, majority of the tribal languages are not yet introduced in government educational institutions even at primary level.

Liangmai has very few written pieces of literature such as songs, hymns, etc. Liangmai has not got its own script; therefore Liangmai people use Roman script for writing. Liangmai language has not been introduced for teaching-learning in any government educational institutions except in some mission schools in Manipur. As a result of it, Liangmai remains more or less a spoken language.

There are some private and governmental schools in Liangmai villages but so far there is no college in Liangmai dominated areas in Manipur. The medium of instruction used in schools is English. But one compulsory Manipuri subject was taught at the primary level of Manipur. So far, most of the Liangmai people do not have any formal institutions to mould their children to meet the challenges of modern world. It is for the state government to introduce Liangmai language in primary level so that this community is given their rightful privileges.

Borrowed words in Liangmai

It is natural for languages to adopt words from other languages and make them part of the vocabulary. Borrowing is the process of incorporating into one language elements which originally belong to another. 'It is common for one language to take words from another language and make them part of its own vocabulary: these are called loanwords and the process is called linguistic borrowing' (Campbell 57). However, not only the content words can be borrowed but also sounds, grammatical morphemes and syntactic patterns.

Borrowing requires language contact, it implies at least a certain degree of bilingualism for Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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some people in the 'donor language' and those of the 'recipient language', so that loanwords can occur. 'A loanword is a lexical item (a word) which has been borrowed from another language, a word which originally was not part of the vocabulary of the recipient language but was adopted from some other language and made part of the borrowing language's vocabulary' (Campbell 58).

Code-switching and Code-mixing

Another way in which different languages may become mixed up with each other is through the process of borrowing (Heath 1994). At this point, however, we are shifting our view from speech to language systems. The code-switching and code-mixing involved mixing languages in speech, borrowing involves mixing the systems themselves, because an item is borrowed from one language to become part of the other language. There are reasons why languages borrow words. The main reason is that the word is needed, it happens when a new word for a new concept from abroad enters the language.

Borrowing from Meitei

Borrowing of Meitei words has become a necessity in day today life of the Liangmais as a result of daily exposure to and contact with the Manipuris. Liangmai language is changing day by day as far as lexical items are concerned. The villagers and older generation use original Liangmai words while younger generation and educated people's speech is full of borrowed words from dominant Meitei as far as lexicons are concerned. A lot of lexical borrowing from Meitei has taken place in Liangmai because of

language contact in day today life. Most of the borrowed words belong to the category of nouns.

The large domain/proportions of the Loan vocabulary from Meitei words have entered the Liangmai lexicon. This sometimes leads to language endangerment. They are listed below:

a) Material words

- | | | |
|-------|---------|------------|
| i. | /likli/ | ‘glass’ |
| ii. | /sətin/ | ‘umbrella’ |
| iii. | /səpon/ | ‘soap’ |
| iv. | /puŋ/ | ‘time’ |
| v. | /nouri/ | ‘catapult’ |
| vi. | /thou/ | ‘oil’ |
| vii. | /ceək/ | ‘brick’ |
| viii. | /jubi/ | ‘coconut’ |

b) General words

- | | | |
|------|----------|------------------|
| i. | /səkhi/ | ‘witness’ |
| ii. | /cəmpɾa/ | ‘lemon’ |
| iii. | /kehɔm/ | ‘pine apple’ |
| iv. | /khəmen/ | ‘tomato’ |
| v. | /louwai/ | ‘uncivilized’ |
| vi. | /ŋəri/ | ‘fermented fish’ |
| vii. | /pəɾa/ | ‘lesson’ |

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- | | | |
|-------|----------|------------|
| viii. | /ojah/ | ‘teacher’ |
| ix. | /bənan/ | ‘spelling’ |
| x. | /khəbar/ | ‘news’ |
| xi. | /Pukhri/ | ‘pond’ |

Of course, some of the above-mentioned words are of Indo-Aryan origin. Meitei has borrowed these from Indo-Aryan as a result of the adoption of the religious sect of Vaishnavism. From Meitei, through contact, Liangmai borrowed these items.

c) Numerals

From thousand onwards, they are borrowed from English, Hindi eg. Lak, crore etc. are borrowed words. Eg. /Lak khat/ ‘one lakh’ /core khat/ ‘one crore’ etc.

d) Kinship terms

So far loan words have not been able to enter the domain of kinship terms. Hence, most of the kinship terms are purely original native Liangmai words.

Indo-Aryan loan words in Liangmai

The available of lexical records indicate that large proportion of English and Hindi loan words have been incorporated and assimilated in varying degrees in Liangmai lexical inventory. Some of the Indo-Aryan loan words are listed below:

- | | | |
|----|---------|---------------|
| 1. | /əlu/ | ‘potato’ |
| 2. | /əŋka/ | ‘mathematics’ |
| 3. | /bən/ | ‘strike’ |
| 4. | /bətin/ | ‘bucket’ |
| 5. | /bhəra/ | ‘fare’ |
| 6. | /cəmas/ | ‘spoon’ |

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7. /cini/	‘sugar’
8. /cithi/	‘letter’
9. /dukən/	‘shop’
10. /gari/	‘vehicle’
11. /gee/	‘butter’
12. /haptə/	‘week’
13. /mozə/	‘sock’
14. /pap/	‘sin’

As we have mentioned above, these words have entered Liangmai vocabulary through Meitei.

Multilingual

Educated Liangmais are multilingual. They have the ability to speak at least three languages - English, Manipuri and the mother tongue; apart from this they have the capacity to speak Hindi to some extent. However, uneducated Liangmais are bilinguals - they know at least two language - the mother tongue and Meitei whereas in Nagaland uneducated people can speak at least two languages, i.e., the native mother tongue and Nagamese.

Conclusion

1. Educated Liangmais use more loan words than illiterate Liangmai speakers.
2. Liangmai language is changing day by day as far as lexicon is concerned.
3. A lot of lexical borrowing from Meitei has taken place in Liangmai because of language contact. But still Liangmai is surviving the impact of Meitei, even though it is a minority language.

4. At all the levels of linguistic structures, especially in the lexicon, but also in phonology, (for example, Liangmai does not have /gh/ but it has borrowed a word like /ghəri/ ‘watch’ from Meitei. Liangmai borrowed the word along with the phoneme /gh/), Liangmai has been highly influenced by the dominant languages - English, Hindi and Manipuri.
5. The villagers and older generation use original Liangmai words while younger generation and educated people’s speech is full of lexical words from dominant language Meitei and it is influencing the Liangmai language. A lot of lexical borrowing from Meitei has taken place in Liangmai because of language contact in day today life.
6. Borrowing of Meitei words becomes a necessity in day today life. If language is not in contact, the lexical changes discussed above would not have taken place.

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