

# BILINGUALISM AMONG THE MISING SPEECH-COMMUNITY OF ASSAM

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## **ABSTRACT:**

*Bilingualism is a natural phenomenon in North-East India. This region has a multi-linguistic feature i.e. each of the community has different languages and cultures, which means different languages are spoken. This language situation helps the people to become bilingual. Similarly, in Assam one of the many states of North-East various speech-community are residing. The Misings are one of the many tribal speech-community, co-existed in this heterogeneous language situation. They speak in Mising language with the native speakers of Mising and in Assamese with the people speaking in other languages. Moreover, some of the Mising people also use Hindi and English besides Assamese for educational, economical and vocational purpose. In this paper we have tried to analyze the various definitions of bilingualism, which are developed by the linguists and an attempt has been made to understand the concept. It also discusses the various types of bilingualism and examines the nature of bilingualism of the Mising speech-community of Assam in light of the types of bilingualism identified by the researchers in linguistics. In the perspectives of language situation of Assam it also concentrates to study the real scenario of the Missing language. In the end of the study we have found various characteristics of bilingualism among the Mising speech-community i.e. they have together the characteristics of Stable bilingualism, Societal bilingualism, Folk bilingualism, Compound bilingualism, dominant bilingualism and Sequential bilingualism.*

**KEYWORDS:** Bilingualism, Speech-community, Language situation, Mising language, Assamese Language, Language use, Language acquisition, Language skill.

## **1.0 INTRODUCTION:**

The North-East India is the abode of innumerable tribes speaking different languages and using diverse dialects. They also practice different customs, rituals and following different traditions. The Mising is a major speech-community of North-East India and second largest tribe in Assam. As per, the census report 2011, in Assam the total number of Mising population is 6,80,424. They are found mostly in Upper Assam in the districts of Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Sonitpur, Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sivasagar, Jorhat, Majuli and Golaghat. Linguistically they belong to the North-Assam branch of the Tibeto-Burman family and ethnically they belong to the Mongolian group. They were earlier called Miris in Historical time and the Constitution of India still refers to them as Miris. The Assam inhabitant Mising people generally speak their own language and as Lingua-Franca or as second language they speak mainly in Assamese.

Many branches of the Mising community like Chamaguriya, Bihia, Bankoal and Temar can't speak in Mising. They use Assamese as the first language. People of other branches of Mising community use both Mising and Assamese for personal and social communications. Generally in the intimate, private and family related communication or with the Mising speaker they speak Mising and with the Assamese or other Non-Mising speaker they communicate in Assamese. Regarding this communicative behaviour, the Mising speech-community of Assam can be called as Societal Bilingual. Many socio-economic causes are related behind the bilingualism of Mising people. Moreover, in the recent days the evolution of science and technology, rapid expansion of the transport and communication, wide spread of mass media, the mutual relation, mutual dependence and momentums are raised between various nations, societies, linguistic and ethnic groups. For

these reasons the Mising people have come in contact with various languages i.e. Bodo, Nepali, Deori, Bagania, Hindi, Bangali, Bhojpuri, English etc. As a result, maximum numbers of Mising people are using various speech-repertoire in their present communication.

### 1.1 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

- To highlight the language situation of Assam as well as North-East India.
- To find out the causes of evolving the bilingual situation of the Mising speech-community.
- To understand the concept and meaning of bilingualism with the help of various definitions developed by the linguists.
- To discuss the various types of bilingualism and examine the nature of bilingualism of the Mising speech-community of Assam.

### 2.0 METHODOLOGY

This study is based on preliminary data from large scale study of the theoretical background of socio-linguistic varieties, pattern of language behaviour and language use and the inter group relations among the speech-communities of Assam. To unvestigate the bilingual scenario of Mising speech-community Questionnaire method and Participant observation method is applied for the collection of data in this study. A sample of 600 respondents was taken for the study. Simple random sampling method is used to select the sample and the discussion is presented through the analytical approach.

### 3.0 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Few books highlighting the language varieties and language situations of different ethnic and linguistic groups of North-Eastern region as well as Indian context and few articles discussing about the Mising language with various aspects. Some of such books are *Linguistic Situation of North-East India*, Miri, Mrinal (Ed.) (2003), *Multilingualism in India*, Pattanayak, Debi Prasanna (Ed.), (2007), *Studies in Bilingualism*, Abbi, Anvita (Ed.), (1986), *Tribes of North-East India*, Sengupta, Sarthak (2003).

*Bilingualism and North-East India*, Baishya, Ajit Kumar (Ed.), (2008) – the book has analyzed the real bilingual scenario of North-East India and the government policies of language education system in India with bilingual perspectives. *Bilingualism in a Multilingual Society: Psycho-Social and Pedagogical Implications*, Mohanty, Ajit Kumar (1994) – these books focus on the dynamic characteristics of bilingualism and have taken the initiative of theoretical implications upon various languages in India. These two books have provided extensive ideas about the analysis of bilingualism. *Asamar Mising Bhasa-Sampradayar Dvibhasik Sthiti: Samaj-Bhasabojnjanik Adhyayan*, Gogoi, Gakul (2017), an unpublished Ph.D. thesis has focused the bilingual situation of the Mising speech-community by analyzing three important dimensions i.e. language use, language competence and language attitude of the Mising speech-community of Assam.

### 4.0 CONCEPT OF BILINGUALISM

#### 4.1 DEFINITIONS OF BILINGUALISM

In general meaning the concept of ‘bilingualism’ is the proficiency in or use of two languages. But it is not so simple to understand bilingualism in one sentence or in a single definition. There are many definitions raised by the scholars in this field. But one definition can not express the whole characteristics of this term. In the popular view, being bilingual means being able to speak two languages perfectly; this is also the approach of Bloomfield (1933:56) who considers bilingualism as ‘native like control of two languages’. But being a social phenomenon, in bilingualism ‘native like control’ is hardly present in a bilingual society and it is taken at the individual level, still in a bilingual person, with very few exception, native like control is not seen.

Oestreicher (1974) suggested that bilingual speaker has 'complete mastery of different languages'. Regarding this sense question may arise that many persons do not have complete mastery even their first language too. In this situation, complete mastery in the second language does not express the actual meaning of bilingualism.

Macnamara (1967) proposes that a bilingual is anyone who possesses a minimal competence in only one of the four language skills viz. listening, speaking, reading and writing, in a language other than his mother tongue.

Crystal (1992) defines that bilingualism means 'a speech situation where an individual or community control two (or more) languages; less usually called polyglottism (though the term polyglot for someone who speaks several languages is common enough)'.

According to Haugen (1953), his view on bilingualism is quite contrastive as 'bilingualism begins when the speaker of one language can produce complete meaningful utterances in other language.' Haugen confesses in his views that a bilingual person is able to speak in a second language.

Weinreich (1974) added a more relevant and reasonable definition. He noted that 'bilingualism is the alternative use of two languages'. This definition may consider all skills of language learning.

Mackey (1962) observes that 'bilingualism is a relative phenomenon' and proposes defining bilingualism 'as a usage of two or more languages alternatively by one individual.' This definition may apply all skills of language learning (viz. understanding, speaking, reading and writing). Because an individual may not speak fluently in a second language, but can be express his feelings by writing with some words or sentences.

Grosjean (1989) defines the specific characteristics of the bilingual is 'someone who can function in each language according to given needs.'

Bernard Spolsky (2003) also has mentioned his own opinion about bilingualism. According to him 'the simplest definition of a bilingual is a person who has some functional ability in a second language'. He also says that 'while it is the case that even speakers of a single language (putative monolinguals) control various styles and levels of that language, it is very common that people develop some knowledge and ability in a second language and so become bilingual'.

From the definitions or statements, it can be observed that, to be proportionally skillful in two languages or when a bilingual person achieves the skill of speaking fluently in a second language, that skill has been accepted as bilingualism. In this regard, Bhatia and Ritchie (2004) have put forwarded a reasonable viewpoint as 'acknowledge that any meaningful discussion must be attempted within a specific context and for specific purposes.'

On the basis of the above mentioned definitions, about bilingualism, it can be said that the main aim of bilingualism is the minimum language skill of two languages. The skill which with time develops at the highest level and the speaker becomes capable of speaking and writing in his own way in the second language just like a native speaker of the language. Infact, when a person of a particular speech community acquires the skill of speaking in other language, that person or constituency is known as bilingual. Well, on the various stages of the acquisition of the language, the linguistic ability of the person may vary.

It is notable that, the majority of the derived definitions, the viewpoints are expressed about the bilingualism of individuals. In none of the definitions, the expression is found about societal bilingualism. In fact, we can say a society to be a bilingual society, when every member of the society uses more than one language in their daily activities. Generally, the geographical area in which multilingual people reside together or people of two speech-community are co-existed near to each other and their life becomes obsolete, without the use of both the languages, such society have to be bilingual by accepting both the languages. In such case, both the languages are used based on the language situation or domain.

## 4.2 TYPES OF BILINGUALISM

Language situation plays an important role in the acquisition of language of individual as well as the society. Dissimilarity is seen in case of language-skill use of language among most of the native speaker of a language due to the reasons the method or process acquiring language, the difference of language contact and location of residence etc. among the members included in the same society. On the basis of such differences or features, behaviour or type of the bilingual individual or society can be decided.

### 4.2.1 STABLE BILINGUALISM VS UNSTABLE BILINGUALISM

On the basis of the nature of bilingualism, Fishman (1976) has divided it into two categories – stable bilingualism and unstable bilingualism. For multiple reasons, the speech-community of one language comes in contact with other language and has to acquire that language. Various reasons like social, political, geographical, educational, economical etc. can be collateral with this. In this case, the necessity of the language which is more in that society, that language spread its supremacy and gets recognition as means of communication. In such language situation, the bilingual people or constituency remains as a proprietor of bilingualism for long. As a result, such socially acknowledge bilingualism called as stable bilingualism. In case of the tribal community of Assam, their bilingualism can be termed as stable bilingualism. On the other hand, a person has to learn a second language besides his mother tongue specially for education, job, business, personal reputation etc. As such, some people have to stay in a circumstance of the second language by going away from the area where his mother tongue is in use. But whenever such person returns to his area, the person may not remain as a bilingual. Because, the need of the second language vanishes after returning to the circumstance of the mother tongue. As a result, such bilingualism is called as unstable bilingualism.

Generally, it is seen that, the consistency of bilingualism is less which is acquired for personal need as individual have to move on place to place based on the need of livelihood. On the other hand, societal bilingualism is consistent. Because when a society acquires bilingualism, the future generation of the society also acquires bilingualism from their ancestors. Keeping view on such nature, bilingualism is divided as individual bilingualism and societal bilingualism. In case of societal bilingualism a state of diglossia is observed.

### 4.2.2 COMPOUND BILINGUALISM VS CO-ORDINATE BILINGUALISM

In discussing bilingualism, Weinreich (1974) has divided bilingualism into two categories – compound bilingualism and co-ordinate bilingualism. In compound bilingualism, an individual acquires two languages from the different environment. For which the individual acquires the language or the knowledge of the language distinctly. As a result, the speaker can use both the languages distinctly and guards communication. On the other hand, in co-ordinate bilingualism an individual acquires the knowledge of both the languages in the same environment. As a result, the individual communicate by mixing the elements of both the languages.

### 4.2.3 BALANCED BILINGUALISM VS DOMINANT BILINGUALISM

Based on language skill and language competence, bilingualism is divided as balanced bilingualism and dominant bilingualism. According to Spolsky (2003) when a bilingualistic have function and equal skill in both languages, he is known as balanced bilingual. But it is necessarily important that he must have similar skill or competence like his mother tongue or native language. On the other hand, in dominant bilingualism, the language skills or competence is more in one of the two languages. Generally, such bilingual state is seen at the initial state.

### 4.2.4 ELITE BILINGUALISM VS FOLK BILINGUALISM

On the basis of social status and social behaviour, bilingualism is divided into elite bilingualism and folk bilingualism. In elite bilingualism, everyone is not bilingual. Only the learned elite are bilingual. In 1997, the 'Encyclopedia of Bilingualism and Bilingual Education' has acknowledged the elite bilingualism as prestigious bilingualism. Such bilingualism are generally family centric. There is no influence or role of social

reasons in such bilingualism. The language which acquired as a second language by such bilingual person is perceived as a dignified language by the general people of the society and the language is not used comprehensively in other society. On the other hand, in folk bilingualism, the bilingual person acquires the knowledge and skill of two languages naturally as well as socially. In such bilingualism, the second language is not acquired formally or by learning in any educational surrounding, rather, each community acquires it by listening only.

#### **4.2.5 SIMULTANEOUS BILINGUALISM VS SEQUENTIAL BILINGUALISM**

On the basis of the differences of the time period, bilingualism is categorized mainly as simultaneous bilingualism and sequential bilingualism. Crystal (1992) said that in simultaneous bilingualism, the bilingual person acquires both the languages at the same time. On the other hand, in sequential bilingualism, the knowledge of the second language is acquired only after mastering the first language. It has been mentioned in 'Encyclopedia of Language and Literacy Development', that in simultaneous bilingualism, the bilingual person acquires both the languages based on his birth place or within a year of the birth. On the other hand, in sequential bilingualism, a person acquires the second language after mastering the first language based on the need of the situation. According to Lightbown and Spada (2006), if a child acquires or learns more than one language at the initial stage, he is known as simultaneous bilingual and if he acquires the second language after acquiring the first language, he is known as sequential bilingual.

#### **4.2.6 ADDITIVE BILINGUALISM VS SUBSTRUCTIVE BILINGUALISM**

Sometimes, when there is a continuance of two languages in the same society, one language may reduce the practical acceptability of the other language by compressing the area of its application. With the view of such perspective, the bilingualism is divided into two categories viz. additive bilingualism and subtractive bilingualism. In additive bilingualism, the second language is acquired as a form of surplus language. The first language is not influenced much for it. On the contrary, subtractive bilingualism does not establish any relation with other language, rather it leads to its demise. In case of subtractive bilingualism, the newly acquired language vanishes the area of the use of mother tongue or the first language by reducing its value. In the online 'Encyclopedia of Language and Literacy Development', it has been said that additive bilinguals are those who 'learn another language in a formal setting; typically as an additional course credit at school, while continuing to use L1 most of the time.' As a synonym of the additive bilingualism, 'elective bilingualism' terminology is also used. On the other hand, subtractive bilinguals are also known as circumstantial bilingual. Because, they are encouraged to acquire the second language based on the need of situation and environment. Subtractive bilingual person "requires to do so to attend school or to find work. There L1 skills usually decrease or are lost in favour of the majority language. Subtractive bilingualism is particularly common in children of immigrants.

#### **4.2.7 INSTRUMENTAL BILINGUALISM VS INTEGRATIVE BILINGUALISM**

Sometimes, a person learns the second language to effloresce in high social status or for a good profession. It is called instrumental bilingualism. This bilingualism is mainly associated with the individual. On the other hand, sometimes a few people learn and acquire the second language to integrate their own language, culture with foreign or other language and culture. Such bilingualism is called integrative bilingualism.

#### **4.2.8 ACTIVE BILINGUALISM VS PASSIVE BILINGUALISM**

When an individual or constituency can speak, read and write in both the languages, it is called as active bilingualism. On the other hand, when an individual or constituency can have the skill to only understand and read, is called passive bilingualism. Such bilingualism is also synonymors to the terminology of 'complete bilingualism' and 'partial/incipient bilingualism' respectively. Based on the linguistic symptoms, bilingualism again divided into 'productive bilingualism' and 'receptive bilingualism'. In case of receptive bilingualism, the speaker can understand and read the second language. On the other hand, the proprietor of all the strategies of a second language is known as productive bilingualism.

## 5.0 LANGUAGE SITUATION IN ASSAM

The linguistic demography of Assam is heterogeneous. Currently, various speech-communities are living in unitedly both at Brahmaputra and Barak valley. Among the speech-communities residing on the Brahmaputra valley, Bodo, Mising, Deori, Rabha, Tiwa, Karbi, Dimasa, Garo, Hajong; Tai origin Khamti, Fake, Aiton, Turung, Khamyang etc. are mentionable. These languages are mainly limited among the same speech-communities. On the other hand, besides Barak valley, in some of the districts of middle Assam, various speech-community like Bangali, Sylheti, Manipuri etc. are residing. Moreover, for the purpose of trade and business of preffession, various language speakers come to Assam and settle here permanently or temporarily. Amongst these, Tea tribe, Hindi speaking Marwari, Bihari etc. are mentionable. Therefore, in case of Assam like its demography, the diversity of language has been acknowledged as a natural phenomenon. It can be observed that, the diversity of languages do not close way of natural communication, bilingualism or multilingualism has been recognized as an important reason. In such bilingual or multilingual case, the people of various speech-community use Assamese mainly as a lingua franca. On the other hand, in domestic or among the surrounding of the same community they use their own language. Moreover, in some of the cases of daily life like marketing, trade and business, education and for professional purpose, the people varied languages of Assam use Hindi, Bengali, English etc. other than Assamese or own language based on the communicative situation. When the tribal people of Assam use Assamese as a lingua franca, a distinct linguistic form is expressed on their way of communication. In the meantime, that distinct form has been recognized as ethnolect (Upen Rabha Hakacham: 2009).

## 6.0 THE BILINGUAL SITUATION OF THE MISING SPEECH COMMUNITY

The mother tongue or the first language of the Mising speech-comminuty of Assam is Mising. They use Mising language as a means of communication at domestic and own community level and outside they use Assamese as the second language. In short, without Assamese language their social and individual life will become obsolete. They acquire both the language in two different environments and can use it distinctly based on the situation of application. On the basis of such symptoms of use of language, their bilingualism can be recognized as co-ordinate bilingualism. In this case, based on the survey of a sample of 600 respondents, 52.8 % people use Mising and Assamese, 24.8% people use Mising, Assamese and Hindi in their daily life. Moreover, it has been observed recently that, besides Assamese, Hindi, English or connection of other tribal languages like Bodo, Bagania, Nepali, Galong, Deori etc. are used by few as a means of communication. In this case, its percentage is 18.5. it means, almost half of the Mising people are proprietor of multilingualism.

In case of acquisition of language, larger number of bilingual Mising has been conceived as sequential bilingualism. Most of them after mastering the Mising language learn the second language based on the situation and necessity. In this case, 96.5% people of the total sample have acquired Mising first and 2.8% people have acquired Mising and Assamese simultaneously.

In case of bilingual skills, though the Mising people can speak in both Mising and Assamese with the same fluency, in case of writing and reading, they have difference in skills. In such case, the Mising are more skilled in Assamese language, as Assamese being the medium of instruction in govt. schools, the Misings are educated in Assamese language. Though Mising is used as a subject in some of the educational institutions at primary level, those education are now not expanded much. As such, 87.3% people can read and write in Assamese adversely only 45.7% in case of Mising language. In such case, Assamese is playing the role of dominant language. Moreover, Mising language is used only in the Mising society, if they come out of their environment, the main medium of their communication is Assamese. Therefore, the characteristic of dominant bilingualism is inherent in the bilingualism of the Mising people. Well, in their daily life, the use of Mising language is more i.e. 67.7%. Moreover, stages of age, gender and the differences of whereabouts etc. have influenced the language skill of the Mising people. The matured people are more skilled in Assamese than the youngsters mainly between 6-15 years. Likewise, the linguistic knowledge of Assamese is more in male as compared to female, and more in urban areas as compared to village people.

The Mising people have acquired bilingualism socially. The illiterate people of Mising can also speak in Assamese skillfully. The Mising people have acquired the linguistic knowledge of Assamese from social and natural environment, not from any formal or educational institution. Their next generation has acquired it from their ancestors hereditary. Based on such features, the bilingualism of the Mising people are recognized as folk bilingualism. On the other hand, as socially acquired bilingualism is permanent, therefore the bilingualism of Mising is stable bilingualism. Well, recently, it is seen that the new generation have shown reluctance behaviour in using the Mising language. As per the collected data from field study, the use of Mising language among the three generations of Mising people: grandparants, parants and grand children are successively 98.9%, 93.7% and 70.7% respectively. On the contrary, their interest is seen more in the use of Hindi and English language. It can be assured that the Mising language is on the verge of danger, for the decrease of practical need of the language. In the report of UNESCO, the chief organization of UNO, Mising language has get the position of definitely endangered languages. In this category, the children generally do not learn longer the language as a 'mother tongue' in at home. Therefore, it can be predicted that their will be a change in the bilingualism state of the Mising speech-community.

## 7.0 CONCLUSION

From the discussion of the bilingualism of the Mising speech-community it can be concluded that:

- Every members of the Mising speech-community uses mainly both Mising and Assamese language alternatively, starting from domestic life to the vast social life. For such features of using language, they are accepted as bilingual. But in the perspective of various socio-economic reasons, for coming in contact with diverse languages, they are transformed from bilingual to multilingual. Contrary to this, the area of practical application of Mising language is seen to be reduced.
- Based on the use of language, language skill, acquisition of knowledge as well as the difference of time period in acquisition of language etc. in the bilingualism of Mising speech-community, the symptoms of various bilingualism like co-ordinate bilingualism, sequential bilingualism, dominant bilingualism, societal bilingualism and stable bilingualism is found.
- It is seen that, currently, the practical need of Mising language is decreased among the new generation of the Mising people. For which in distant future, the language may face great challenge in protecting its existence. For such practice, there might be any changes in the bilingualism of the Mising people and complexities might arise in its maintenance.

As Mising is tribal language lighted in spoken form among a limited number of people, therefore, the Mising people should take proper care in the expansion of the language so that it can holster with the prevailing age.

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