

CREATING FAVOURABLE CONDITIONS FOR THE GROWTH OF THE IDU MISHMI LANGUAGE OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH

Ruth Michichi^{1,2}, Dr. Krushna Chandra Mishra³

¹Asst. Professor, Tadar Taniang Government College, Nyapin, Arunachal Pradesh

²Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English, Rajiv Gandhi University, Doimukh, Arunachal Pradesh

³Professor, Department of English, Rajiv Gandhi University, Doimukh, Arunachal Pradesh

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ABSTRACT

Idu Mishmi language is considered a definitely endangered language according to the records of the UNESCO 'Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger', (2009). Therefore, effective efforts are necessary to preserve the language which is the main source of culture, identity and the mainstay of the Idu Mishmi people of Arunachal Pradesh. Languages are dying every day and the efforts to save them are made by various societies in different ways. Referring to the initiatives and measures taken to stop the language death that are globally practised, some practices which can be used for the Idu Mishmi language are discussed here. The options for the Idu Mishmi speakers to use some such methods for the growth of the Idu Mishmi language form an important discussion in the present paper.

Keywords: Idu Mishmi, language death, endangered language, efforts for saving, options of saving methods

Introduction

Arunachal Pradesh is a homeland to 26 major tribal groups and various sub-tribes whilst being a part of the greater Indian union. It is located in the eastern most part of India, roughly between 26°28' N to 29°31' N latitude and 91° 31' E to 97° 30' E longitude, extended over an area of 83,743 sq Km with a population of 13,83,727 only (Census, 2011) and is the largest state of the North East India. Among the districts, the Lower Dibang Valley and Dibang Valley Districts, the homelands of the Idu Mishmi tribe, form the area of study for the present paper. The Idus Mishmis is mainly concentrated in two districts viz, Lower Dibang Valley and Dibang Valley District of Arunachal Pradesh. They also inhabit in small pockets in East Siang District

(Aohali village), Lohit District (Tezu), and Upper Siang (Singa, Semo villages) Districts of Arunachal Pradesh. They are included as a part of the larger group of the Mishmi tribe which includes Taraon and Kaman Mishmis also¹.

Idus are mongoloid in race and speak Idu Mishmi, a non-bodic Tibeto-Burman group of language. Brown (1837) shows the earliest known reference to the Idu Mishmi language. Other language data can also be found in Campbell (1874) and Konow (1902). Many other known publications include the attempts at vocabulary and phrase books by the authors such as Pulu (1978, 2002), Jatan Pulu (1968), P.C. Dutta (1962), Roger Blench and the ILDC (2018) etc. Apart from these language-intended publications, books on the culture and society of the Idu Mishmis have also been published.

Mithu and Midu are the two prominent dialects of the Idu language. These two dialects were the basis of their division which culminated to become Idu and Bebejiya. Mithus were called Bebejiya and in course of the time Midu is stated to become Idu. In the later stage the whole tribe came to be known as Idu. The population structure as per the 2011 census shows that Dibang valley thrives with just 4827 total schedule tribe population and the lower Dibang valley with 25974 total schedule tribe population. But these numbers do not guarantee that the speakers would equal the population number. We would be wrong if we guaranteed a language's safety depending on just the number because lower Dibang valley includes both the Idu and the Adi tribes and as such the population number would be divided between the tribes. Secondly the population number does not indicate the speaker's number. Not all of them speak the language. Therefore, relying on the population number would lead to a false assumption of the security of the language.

UNESCO's Atlas of the world's languages in danger, Moseley, Christopher (ed.). (2009), shows that the Idu Mishmi language falls under the category of a definitely endangered language. This tag is not something to be proud of as this endangerment would mean a lot of other losses, indicating traditional knowledge and cultural loss etc. Concerning such an alarming revelation, relentless efforts should be made so that this heavy catastrophe involving the Idu Mishmi language could be avoided. The ways of making the language survival bear fruit being quite diverse, it is in the context of Idu Mishmi that multi-pronged measures should be put to practice. It is in this context that this paper seeks to deal with the issue at hand by going over the following in some detail – observations on Language Death, endangerment level, seriousness of the issue, preserving and conserving the language, revitalization; views of the relevant authorities on endangered languages; relevant practices followed elsewhere to save dying or endangered languages; practices to be adopted by the Idu Mishmi language speakers to effectively avert the ultimate ill-consequences.

Understanding the term 'Endangered Language'

UNESCO's ad hoc expert group on endangered languages offers this definition of an endangered language, '...when its speakers cease to use it, use it in an increasingly reduced

¹ "Idu" and "Mishmi" terminologies find no concrete and specific meaning in Idu language. Baruah (1960:98) mentions that "the word 'Idu' is most probably a distortion of the word Midu which means inhabitant of Idu valley and refers this name to only one section of the people".

number of domains, and cease to pass it on from one generation to the next. That is, there are no new speakers, adults, or children' (<http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/doc/src/00120-EN.pdf>). Various factors have contributed to this growing condition of the language. The speakers' preferences over a language, existing differentiation between a minor language and a major language (socially, economically and politically), unavailability of suitable conditions for its growth, modernisation, evolution of a society in terms of developmental prospects which forces the people to abandon their own tongues and adopt and relearn a foreign tongue etc., have contributed to the decreased use of a language.

Bhattacharjee (1988:38-39), in his 'The Idu Mishmis' (1983), makes a distinct note on the language. He states that, 'the dialect has not received the attention it deserves, considering the importance of the tribe'. He further says that naturally the researchers seem to have avoided it as a difficult language and has also neglected its study. This lets us question the amount of importance being given to the Idu Mishmi language. What could have prevented its growth? Has it been able to remain culturally and linguistically intact with the community? Are they giving it the status that it deserves? Probably the answer would be no. Looking at the status and the tag of a critically endangered language, it is obvious that the language is in a pathetic condition and requires the care and nurture that it deserves. What prevents its preservation and revitalization? Is the unavailability of resources, lacking consciousness among the people or unavailability of help from the government among the main causes which hinders its nurturing? Is it being pushed under the weight of an imperial effect, or has it been crushed down under the majority language preference? All of these queries are valid, and an effective level of measure should be undertaken before the language shifts from being moribund to a dead language. Since the level of endangerment is already known, the up gradation of working on the preservation and revitalization is also the utmost necessity of the times that we are in.

It is widely agreed that language and culture are closely related, and it has been stated that 'cultures have evolved in a particular environmental context, so they have an extraordinary amount of traditional ecological knowledge — knowledge of the local species, plants, animals, the medicinal uses of them, the migration patterns of animals behaviour' (Rosenthal, 2014). This relationship can be given further credence when observing countries such as India, which is said to be home to over 100 million English speakers (*The Times of India*, 2010). The rise of English in India has paved the way for the rise of Western culture alongside it, with some Indians blaming Westernisation for the increase in single families and a decrease in the showing of respect amongst Indians (Khirbawhani, 2005). Ultimately, language death could be seen as a form of evolution. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, due in part to economic and cultural trade as well as increasing access to technology, some things are bound to be lost in the transition. Whilst some languages will inevitably be killed off in the process – resulting in the loss of valuable cultural information – the huge array of opportunities that could potentially be accessed by those in possession of an international auxiliary language such as English is too big to ignore.

Possible Measures to save the Idu Mishmi Language

What would actually determine the vitality of the dying language? How can the spoken tongue be facilitated and sustained? Is it feasible and will it be realistic to support this dying language?

If so, then we must embrace measures that could sustain and revitalize the dying soul of a community that is represented through their language which is alarmingly at the downfall. The linguistic records dealing with the health status of languages has shown quite an alarmingly large number of world's languages that are either extinct or gravely threatened. Labelled as dying or endangered languages, these minority / minor, languages/dialects, have engaged the attention of several language revitalisation groups that are devoted to saving those languages in all the possible ways. Whereas documentation largely constitutes the strategy to prevent such languages from further deteriorating and being exposed to aggravation, pedagogical approach, textbook approach, media-based approaches, technological approaches etc., are among the other prominent ways in which efforts are undertaken to avert crisis of language endangerment. When the basis of language endangerment-related confirmed inferences are with regard to the size of the population actively speaking the language concerned in all varieties of language use situations, the major practices adopted in case of most critically diagnosed language cases on the global level are summarised here below to lead to an awareness of how and what kind of measures are in implementations and to what effect. Accordingly, practices with references to Cherokee (Oklahoma), Igbo(Nigeria), Maori (New Zealand), Kamilaroi (Australia), Dgernesians (Guemsuy/Afghanistan), Wukchumni (yokuts tribe of California), etc., have been thus put together for arriving at vital conclusions on the kind of a revitalisation measures that must be adopted so that in the context of the present Idu Mishmi language of Arunachal Pradesh, effective guiding and saving lessons can be usefully derived. Tom Belt, a native of the state and other concerned Cherokee speakers in the Eastern Band with their concerns for saving their language began to devise ways to save the language. Belt volunteered to teach Cherokee lessons at a local school, for example, and eventually the tribe decided to create a language immersion school for children, where core classes –including science and math – are taught in Cherokee. Cherokee language is also offered at the local university, where Belt teaches².

In the essay, *Encouragement, Guidance and Lessons Learned: 21 Years in the Trenches of Indigenous Language Revitalization*, Darrell Kipp, shares his 21 years of experience in the trenches of indigenous language revitalization. His experiences of how he and his team tried to revive the Blackfoot language, is indeed commendable. He shares what he did when the haunting questioned knocked at his door almost 20 years ago and also makes sure to share the results of the efforts that were made to save the Blackfoot language from completely dying out. While trying to approach a way they reviewed every dictionary, grammar, study and document about their language. They thoroughly reviewed countless textbooks and methodologies related to their work and also consulted the linguists. Whatever the consequences they remained loyal to one rule, one rule only: teach their children to speak the Blackfoot language. The influential method that they enacted was a full day immersion school. He points out various challenges that they faced over the years, such as no fund, no teachers and no classrooms. Another very ingrained negative mindset of the people has been pointed out by kipp. He says that; “ in our tribe, the negative conditioning was so successfully ingrained that the taboo against speaking our language remained fresh in the minds of even second and third generation non-speakers of the Blackfoot language”. An important facet of language revitalization is to de-program this ingrained conditioning for no other reason than to eliminate one more reason for hating

² See <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20140606-why-we-must-save-dying-languages>.

ourselves for being Indian³. He makes note of the following that the history of tribal languages oppression is well documented, but not enough credence has been given to the effectiveness of the eradication process that all the language workers in the society have tried to do. But in the end he adds a winning statement; In summary, I share this reality with you: “In 1994, none of the children in our tribe could speak the Blackfoot language and now there are those who can”.

In another essay, “*Wenesh Waa Oshkii-Bmaadizijig Noondamowaad?, What Will The Young Children Hear?*” by Margaret Noori, University of Michigan she speaks for *Anishinaabemowin*, a language shared by people living within, or connected to, over 220 separate sovereign nations that surround the Great Lakes in Canada and the United States. She notes the shifting nuances in the way the language is used, but she also says that this change is inevitable and fear of change is not a good reason to become defensive and inactive. With this fear, it certainly is not a reason to let a language die. History has proven it is incredibly difficult to maintain ethnic identity without the language running like lifeblood through every daily act. This act of tearing apart a child from his language must be put to an end and for this to happen, she says that we cannot depend solely on education, and neither the politics, policy or pedagogy alone. She is all for finding the answer in practice and action. To reverse the damage, the language must be returned to the children and the home. As she strives to revitalize a language, she brings about the importance of considering what is known about producing proficient bi-lingual adults. This essay discusses the practical realities of creating a bi-lingual home, specifically with an endangered language. It describes the language activism at several levels—from informal community instruction to full-credit post-secondary courses⁴.

The efforts of UNESCO can be witnessed through the various policies meant for saving the endangered languages of the world. UNESCO has recognised many languages of the world to be endangered which includes languages from even the most remote parts of the world. It has tried to enhance the life-expectancy of the so called dying languages through various sector improvement policies. In the education sector, UNESCO supports policies promoting multilingualism and especially mother tongue literacy. It supports the language component of indigenous education and raises awareness of the importance of language preservation in education. In the cultural sector, UNESCO collects data on endangered and indigenous languages, develops standardized tools and methodologies, and builds capacities of governments and civil society (academic institutions and speaker communities). In communication and information, UNESCO supports the use of local languages in the media and promotes multilingualism in cyberspace. In science, UNESCO assists knowledge.

The Indian list of ‘endangered languages’, for the North-Eastern states include among others, Manipuri (Meitei), Karbi language of Assam, and Khasi in Meghalaya, Idu Mishmi and Aka in Arunachal Pradesh. The Union Government of India, having taken a serious note of the concerned list expressed in the UNESCO list with an 8 member experts panel, sought to study the situation with a detailed survey of dying languages in Arunachal Pradesh and other North-Eastern states with less than 10,000 speakers each, thus labelling them as ‘endangered’. Among

³ See Kipps, Darrell. *Encouragement, Guidance and Lessons Learned: 21 Years in the Trenches of Indigenous Language Revitalization*. 2009:6

⁴ See Noori, Margaret. *Wenesh Waa Oshkii-Bmaadizijig Noondamowaad? What Will The Young Children Hear?*(p. 11-22) 2009:11

many things that were proposed, schemes to get employment and earning opportunities for the speakers of minority language were to be drawn up. The panel also recommended for introduction of short courses in endangered languages at primary school levels. The proposal also recommended setting of libraries or museums with audio and video materials showing the oral traditions of these languages with the concentration that 'documentation' could be a fit measure to help preserve these tongues. Audio tapes for purposes of use as teaching tools, is to be developed during and with documentation work. Thus the 'central government devised measures' to save endangered language from falling into the messy trap of extinction are to be seriously taken where the respective state governments would have to adequately and efficiently play out their own proper roles well within time. The CIIL study with Professor O.N. Koul, highlighted three domains of language use- as mediums of instructions in educational institutions, use of threatened languages in government transactions and the increasing encouragement of appearance of the local tongues in the media-both print and electronic. Thus, the CIIL emphasis on use of endangered languages for education and governance purposes came as a vital strategic contribution to grant these languages longer survival lease. CIIL suggestions also led significant emphasis on preparation of instructional material in the languages concerned and making the same part of the study programmes. Citing the instance of the migrant Kashmiri Pundits, the CIIL study has closely linked the identity of the forced migrant Kashmiri Pundits to their language and their culture. CIIL observation also invoked the constitutional provisions protecting the rights of the children to learn through their mother tongue and under the provision the continuing practice of discouragement of the minor languages in schools was to be condemned and contained to arrange for proper teaching of all minor or minority languages in schools having at least 10 students who speak these languages as their mother tongues, failing which gives English a mileage over indigenous languages because after primary level, the students opt for other studies leaving behind mother tongue studies/instruction⁵. The educationist Tabu Ram Taid closely associated with the preservation and development of tribal language also stresses on the need for developing a writing system along with the speaking.

Transformative strategies for adoption by the Idu Mishmi speakers

The Idu Mishmi language is a non-scripted language and is listed in the Non-Scheduled languages of the state and therefore that is more vulnerable as it is definitely heading towards extinction in case appropriate immediate measures are not expeditiously put into exercise. The number of people speaking the language is not at par with the number of the Idu Mishmi people. The younger generation speakers are scarcely using the language and therefore the rich heritage of the language is getting degraded. The elders of the community in many cases, who are speaking the language is not aware that the valuable language should be passed on. Thereby the language is getting eroded and is in want of an urgent action that will enable the language to be safely archived as well as the usage largely enhanced. The degree of the Idu Mishmi language in becoming extinct is rising even though the population is increasing because the usage of the Idu Mishmi language is less preferred compared to the other dominant languages as the younger generation speakers are opting for other Pidgin and Creole languages. Until and unless the awareness does not come from within the community itself, the fact of the language dying cannot be controlled. The language is not dead fully and there are speakers of the community

⁵ See Koul, Omkar N.(1983). *Language in Education*. Harnam publications.

who are the elders and there is a risk factor that after the passing of elderly generations who still continue to be the custodians of the once vibrant Idu Mishmi language, the language death will not be far and it will be imminent. Therefore, the saving and nurturing of this language is a very necessary step that has to be taken by the Idu Mishmi people as well as the well-wishers of the endangered languages. Many necessary precautions and activities, including the governmental policies are implemented for this very purpose of saving the language. A very necessary step towards bringing a change in the use of the Idu Mishmi language could be an immersion program for the indigenous Idu Mishmi speaking community. They have been exposed to various harsh realities such as the present generation opting for other languages which have more prominence when speaking in terms of a career, the boarding schools allowing only the usage of English language, where they continue with the school engineered language violence, younger generations shying away from speaking their own mother tongue etc. At this rate an immersion program allowing the use of the language could definitely be of a great help. Among existing alternatives, instructions through the medium of the Indigenous/minority language, in classes with children having the same goal and target language, in which the teacher is bilingual so that children can initially use their dominant language, and in contexts in which that language is not in danger of being replaced by the Indigenous/minority language; an additive language learning context could be introduced.

We must follow a stubborn policy and a determined goal of reviving the language. This goal could be documentation, revitalization and maintenance of the endangered language. Introducing a dictionary in the language in order to help with the students' cognitive skills could be a step towards reviving the language use among the younger generations. The Idu Mishmi areas are at the stage of development and at progress. As such the awareness can be started from the education sector. Learning their own mother tongue at the school level will enhance their capacity for language learning and at the same time save the language from getting further endangered. Like Belt and other Cherokee speakers in the Eastern Band who devised ways to save their language, and where Belt took the initiative to teach lessons at a local school, the Idu Mishmi language can also start at the base. The immersion school for children that the Cherokee speaking community created can also be done for the Idu Mishmi speaking children at the local schools.

The government of India had in the past introduced the three-language formula, but very few states could implement it due TO various factors. But, as the situation of the languages are growing more pathetic, it is very necessary that the states implement it at the earliest. A growing consciousness among the people speaking the language is the first necessary step towards revitalizing the language. Without them growing conscious it would be as if we are pouring our efforts at the wrong thing. At the regional level, a certain sense of consciousness has started among the Idu Mishmi people. We find that there have been certain recent efforts to curb the decrease of the speakers and increase in the use of the Idu Mishmi language. The conscious speakers started developing some phrase books and some compilation of the words in order to archive the language. Shri Jatan Pulu with his '*Idu Phrase Book*', (1978), Shri Jimi Pulu with his '*Idu Mishmi Proverbs and Sayings*', (2002) are endeavours that show a growth towards the desire and necessity to revitalise the use of the language. Apart from the language speakers themselves some concerned individuals and groups have also shown an interest in recording the language so that whatever was possible could be archived. '*The Idu Mishmis*', by Tapan

Kumar Baruah (1988), *The Idus of Mathun and Dri Valley* by Tarun Bhattacharjee, (1983) are some examples. Recent efforts of Roger Blench and the Idu Mishmi Language Development Committee has after some trials and primers been able to develop a proper form of dictionary and an acceptable writing system which could be subject to change but at the present moment it is one of the best that could certainly give a space to the Idu Mishmi language in the linguistic diversity and prevent it from getting extinct. The government of India has made no less effort to uphold the integrity of the endangered languages and the minor languages. Many policies like the three-language formula where one could take up the regional language as one of the languages for study and then the museums and institutes which could serve the purpose of propagating the essence of saving the dying consciousness among the people. But what should be the basic goal of bringing up the subject of the dying language and what are the efforts that could practically bring the language to the people's minds and then to their mouths?

The basic goal in revitalising the languages is to keep in live circulation as many words available in both formal and informal contexts. Thus, newspapers and technology-based communication systems and social media mechanisms should be galvanised which could indirectly be made into active contributors to invisibly give shape to a whole corpus of both vocabulary and living language structures that would die out but make strategic exploitations in such novel ways. The three-language formula that the Indian government has devised could actually be implemented where English, Hindi, and a local language can be taken up, so that the languages that are getting depleted could find a better place of stay in the people's tongues. A dictionary project can thus in due course be taken up for this particular purpose of archiving the language. Like a short documentary on Marie Wilcox, where she builds a 'wukchumni' dictionary for almost seven years, are such efforts which can be used for documenting the Idu Mishmi language and which are to be seriously undertaken⁶. Also building various dictionaries (mono-lingual, bi-lingual, tri-lingual) for the prescribed CBSE books of the elementary level in the Idu Mishmi dominated areas could be an important step towards archiving and learning the language. It is important because it could provide a two-way helping dictionary, as both Idu Mishmi language and English could be learned simultaneously and three languages (English, Hindi and a local language) for the tri-lingual dictionary. The various dictionaries built for the endangered languages could be innovatively used by building the dictionaries for the elementary level school textbooks. This could be a helping hand while learning the language. John Locke believed that a child's mind was a 'Tabula Rasa', a clean state of mind which could easily take in things⁷. Thus, building dictionaries at the elementary level could enhance the learning process and thus contribute towards the growth of the Idu Mishmi speaking population. It would therefore imprint the languages into their minds before they are exposed to multilingualism, negative attitudes towards their languages and thereby save them from abandoning their own identity. Since the language spoken of consists of different dialects, for the present stage of learning both could be inculcated for an easier learning of the students. Why is this dictionary so relevant? The question seems demanding because there could be other methods to learn a language. But this relevancy springs up from the need that arises in this global world where not only the mother tongue but along with the mother tongue other tongues

⁶ See <https://www.salon.com/2018/04/20/keeping-native-american-languages-alive-in-maries-dictionary-wukchumni-lives-on/>

⁷ See <https://philosophybreak.com/articles/john-lockes-empiricism-why-we-are-all-tabula-rasas-blank-slates/>

should also necessarily be taken up and due to this proficiency, that is needed for the development this dictionary/ a compilation of the Idu Mishmi language could be useful in helping a child develop both the languages.

In the given context, it is necessary to work out an effective plan of saving the Idu Mishmi language/dialect from its present reported endangered status. What is an effort if not actually brought to practice? What are the uses of saving the language if it ultimately gets archived in some corner where only once a while the researchers and some individuals pull it out for reference and put it back? For once why cannot the language saving and documenting be something practical and a daily living conversation among the old and the young alike? Instead of just a conversation among the old and a distant memory among the young why don't we bring it to everyone's plate? This therefore looks pertinent that a dictionary which in the form of compilation of the words from the school textbooks could be developed and that indeed would help a lot. Besides, there is a race among the languages where the dominant language subdues the minor language and, in the process, the minor language loses and disappears from the face of the earth. But what if it could be brought to classrooms where all the learning takes place? Not all the students are apt in English language and not all of them are familiar with the Idu Mishmi language (in the Idu Mishmi dominated areas). If there was the possibility of the usage of the language interchangeably with the help of the dictionary, then maybe a better comprehension and a better academic performance could be possible. If this be the case of an understandable use, then we could probably expect an increase in the use of the language and actually bring it out from the tag of the Idu Mishmi language being 'definitely endangered'.

The saving of this endangered language has thus become an utmost priority for the conscious speakers who are aware of this enclosing danger. There has been awareness among various groups like the IMCLS, i.e., Idu Mishmi Cultural and Literary Society, where not only the welfare of the society, but various issues related to the culture, language and society are brought to the knowledge of the people. In the younger generation speakers the code mixing and code switching are being used almost naturally as if it were the original native language spoken by the native Idu Mishmi people as the use of Assamese, English and Hindi is frequently observed. The language is not dead yet. Therefore, its preservation is an immediate and unavoidable urgency to stop the process of dying and getting extinct and thus lost these days. The various practices that the endangered languages of the globe use could indeed be taken as models for important measures to build favourable conditions for the growth of the Idu Mishmi language.

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