International Conference on Universal Knowledge and Language. Goa, 25 - 27 November, 2002

DEURI and **TIWA**: Endangered languages in the Brahmaputra valley.

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Acknowledgement: To the RCILTS center at IIT, Guwahati, where I am collaborating on a linguistic survey and study of Northeastern Languages. Thanks are due to Mr. Sattyakee Bhuyan, Research Scientist at the center for helping me in various ways in the preparation of this paper.

1.i. Introduction:

Languages along with culture, society and history are integral in nationality formation. The functional and symbolic value of languages is one of the great significance in the transitional continuum from community to ethnicity to formalized nationality. The Brahmaputra valley in Assam is a very heterogeneous linguistic and cultural area, and it comprises languages belonging mainly to the *Boro-Garo, Kuki-Chin* and the *Tani* (previously known as *North-Assam*) groups of the **Tibeto-Burman** stock, **Indo-Aryan** represented mainly by *Asamiya* and *Bangla*, **Siamese-Chinese** represented by various *Thai* groups like *Khamyang, Khamti, Turung, Phakyal, Aiton*, and *Nora*, and some **Dravidian** and **Munda** languages represented by the tea tribes. It is worthwhile to mention that *Indo-Aryan Asamiya* and the languages belonging to the **Tibeto-Burman** stock have co-existed here since time immemorial. *Bangla, some* **Dravidian** and **Munda** languages came here only after the British annexed the state of Assam from the Burmese in 1826 A.D. The **Siamese-Chinese** groups mentioned above entered the valley from Myanmar only in the 18th century.

These languages are used in a complex and wide-ranging ethno and socio-linguistic configuration. This ethnic spectra of this valley encompasses both the non-tribal and tribal population, where the *Asamiya* language is a dominant majority among non-tribal and tribal llanguages and can be termed a well-formed majority nationally. On the other hand languages like *Boro*, *Rabha*, *Mishing* and *Karbi*, belonging respectively to the *Boro-Garo*, *Tani* and the *Kuki-Chin* groups within **Tibeto-Burman** sub-family of languages are fast emerging as minority nationalities in the valley. Again in the other extreme there are minor languages like *Deuri* and *Tiwa* of the *Boro-Garo* group which are struggling to emerge as minority nationalities. It is worthwhile to mention that *Asamiya* has been serving almost as a lingua franca among such speech communities in the valley over a long span. Hence large-scale diffusion at the social, linguistic and cultural levels have been taking place between these even across genetic boundaries through the medium of bilingual speakers and have resulted in an *Indo-Aryanisation* of

non **Indo-Aryan** languages and also in a *Tibeto-Burmanisation* of non **Tibeto-Burman** languages. (Moral, 1996; Monkhemer Studies: *Northeast India as a Linguistic area*).

Deuri and Tiwa belong to the **Boro-Garo**ⁱ group of languages, which constitute one of the principal divisions of the Tibeto-Burman stock and are spoken primarily in the Brahmaputra valley in Assam. At one time there must have been a fairly continuous Boro-Garo distribution throughout the entire valley, but over the centuries, Asamiya, an Indo-Aryan language, has disrupted this continuityⁱⁱ. Asamiya is used by all as a common lingua franca for inter group as well as intragroup communication. It is worthwhile to mention in this context that *Moran*, once upon a time the eastern most member of this group has now become extinct as all the speakers have adopted Asamiya as their first language, resulting in a total language shift.

For the present paper two threatened **BG** languages namely *Deuri* and *Tiwa* have been taken for consideration and an attempt has been made to analyse the sound systems and highlight some salient grammatical features.

Though a very important group within the **Tibeto-Burman** language sub family it is still a largely unstudied group of languages where apart from *Boro Garo* and *Rabha*, sketchy linguistic descriptions has been attempted by a very few scholars on the rest of the languages particularly *Deuri* and *Tiwa*.

1.ii. SCHOLARLY SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PRESENT STUDY

Linguistically such languages are still unexplored and linguistic features, are they phonological or grammatical, are hardly known in detail. This study will therefore go a long way in meeting the academic hiatus of these languages.

How is a study of sounds and grammars of certain indigenous languages of the Brahmaputra Valley relevant to an understanding of the society of that region? The study attempted here is essentially a micro level one. However, such micro linguistic study has important implications for wider issues:

At the level of particular languages, for the individual communities served by each of the languages, a well articulated description of their language is associated with a sense of prestige; such a description is seen as inextricably linked with their self perception as a vibrant community. Sociologists of language have frequently pointed out how the claim for a status of a variety as standard language crucially rests on its codification in terms of formal descriptions. Thus, the phonological, and grammatical descriptions of *Deuri*, or Tiwa are an essential part of their definition as standard languages.

Apart from such socio psychological and socio political relevance, codifications of such linguistic norms have important contributions to make in the academic and administrative spheres of the respective communities. The status of standard language puts a heavy burden on its terms of the various kinds of researches such as dictionaries, pronunciation guides, reference grammars etc. which the concerned communities would naturally expect to be made available for their use. When a relatively codified and constitutionally recognized major language like *Asamiya* continues to face a considerable dearth of such material, the situation

with regard to such minority indigenous languages can easily be imagined. Therefore this paper is to be viewed in this light as a contribution to micro level language planning (complementing macro level) that every standard language must undergo if it is to serve its community effectively. Moreover this would definitely act as a catalyst in preserving such endangered languages.

2 Following is a brief introduction of the speech communitiesⁱⁱⁱ taken for study:

2.i. Deuri.

The *Deuri* language is the easternmost member of the *Boro-Garo* group of languages and is spoken mainly in the districts of Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Jorhat, Tinsukia and in certain parts of Sonitpur district.

The Deuri speech community could be broadly divided into four main groups, viz: Dibongia, Tenga pania, Patorgoyan and Borgoyan. This classification is based on religious grounds as each group has its own deity for worshipping. Deuris are Hindus and they follow the SANATAN faith and are followers of Siva and Parbati. It may be mentioned here that the *Deuris* inhabited fertile lands near the rivers. The *Dibongias* inhabited the fertile areas near the Dibong river and hence are called Dibongias and their chief deity is called gira girasi also called burha burhi(the old couple) and sometimes also refered to as kundil mama. Those settled near the Brahmaputra or the bor luit were called Borgoyans. Their chief deity was called pichachi dema or Tameswari devi (the daughter). The *Tengapanias* settled near the Tengapani river and hence were referred to as the Tengapanias. Their chief deity was called pecha dema or balia baba (The elder son or the mad one). The *Patorgoyans* settled in a place called pat Sadiya in the extreme eastern corner of Assam and their main place of worship was known as pator sal. Out of these four groups, only the Dibongias have retained the Deuri language and the rest of the groups have all shifted to Asamiva, which has become their first language over the years. It may be useful to note that the *Dibongias* are essentially bilinguals with equal command over *Asamiya* as well. The population as recorded in the 1991 census is 15,955. The Dibongias are found scattered in the eastern Assam districts of Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Jorhat, Lakhimpur, Dhemaji and Tinsukia.

The name **DEURI** is of Indo-Aryan origin meaning belonging to the house of priests(Kakati 1941). However they traditionally call themselves *zimasayan* or *dimasayan* which has its roots in the *Tai Ahom* language(now extinct) where *zim* refers to the past and *sai* denotes man which could be semantically realized as the *early man*^{vi}.

2.ii. TIWA

Semantically the word *Tiwa* has two components {ti} meaning water and {wa}denotes belongingness. Hence the *Tiwas* are by and large, barring a few hill *Tiwas* are essentially inhabitants on the banks of rivers. The river Khoirang originating from the hills of the Khasi and Jaintiya hills of Meghalaya have reached the plains where it has taken the name of Gobha and Kiling, before merging with the Brahmaputra. The *Tiwas* have

thrived on the banks of these rivers for many centuries. The migration of a lot of Tiwas from the hills of Meghalaya has also followed the course the river Khoirang to the plains. The *Tiwa* language is spoken mainly in central Assam particularly in the district of Morigaon and in some parts of the bordering districts of Nagaon, Karbi-Anglong and Kamrup. The *Tiwa* speech community has two types of speech varieties, in the hills and in the plains, which are known as *Hajowali* and *Datiyali* respectively. But the dialect of the plains has gradually made way for *Asamiya*, which has almost replaced *Datiyali*. However in the hills *Tiwa* is still being retained even though they are essentially bilinguals with competence in *Asamiya* as well. For this study the *Tiwa* of the plains have been included. The plain *Tiwas* are Hindus and are worshippers of Siva and Parbati, but the hill *Tiwas* are by and large Christians and the Missionaries now have taken the initiative to write grammars and dictionaries in this dialect thereby initiating the process of codification to attain standardization. The 1991 census shows the *Tiwa* population (hills and plains) as 32633.

3. Following is a phonological and a brief grammatical sketch of the Deuri language.

3.i.Phononology:

a. Consonant Phonemes^{iv}:

	Bilab	ial	Alv	eolar	Palat	al	Velar	•	Glotta	al
Stop	•	•	•	>	•	>	•	•		
Nasal		>		>		>>		4 0 (-		
Fricative			•	>			•		>	
Affricate(Aspirated)						>				
Roll				>						
Lateral				•						
Semi Vowel		>				>				

b.Vowel Phonemes:

	Fron	nt	Cent	tral	Back	
High	>	>>			•	>>
Mid	•	>>			•	>
Low			•	>		>

c.

There are three tones^v in the Deuri language, which are phonemic.

The High tone is marked as- / \blacktriangleright

The Level tone is unmarked-

The Low tone is marked as- /

The following examples show the tonal system operating in the language.



d.

Nasalization is phonemic. All vowels in the language contrast for oral-nasalization distinction and it is marked as /

4. Some salient features of Deuri grammar:

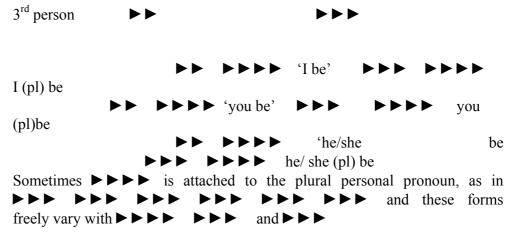
i.The Deuri language follows the Subject +Object+Verb pattern in the formation of sentences in the language, as in



ii.

Personal pronouns:

Singular		Plural
1st person	>	>>
2 nd person	>	>>>



There are three **tenses** in the language. They are – Present, Past and Future. The present tense itself has two forms: one is habitual present and the other is immediate present. In every tense there is a continuous form. There are also two perfect tenses, the present perfect and the past perfect. Hence the tenses are: Present (a) habitual and Immediate, Past, Future, Present Perfect and Past perfect. Examples:

```
(i) ►► ← 'I eat' (habitual present)
(ii) ►► ← ← 'I just eat' (immediate present)
(iii) ►► ← ← 'I ate' (past)
(iv) ►► ← 'I shall eat' (future)
(v) ►► ← 'I have eaten (present perfect)
(vi) ►► ← ← ← 'I have eaten' (past perfect)
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iv. Gender:

There are two genders operating in the language. Masculine and Feminine. The word use for masculine is \triangleright \triangleright \triangleright \triangleright \triangleright and the word use for feminine is \triangleright \triangleright \triangleright \triangleright \triangleright

For example:

(non adult)

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►►►► 'male human' (non adult)
►►►► 'female human'
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Apart from this there are feminine suffix markers $\triangleright \triangleright$ and $\triangleright \triangleright \triangleright \triangleright$, as in :

It has also been observed that sometimes a neuter gender marker lambda is used to refer to the young ones of animals, as in meaning 'a chicken'.

v. Number:

There are two numbers in the Deuri language. and $\triangleright \triangleright \triangleright$ are the plural morphemes. Out of which **>>>** is used only after humans and **>>>** is honorific than **It** is observed that there is free variation among these plural morphemes, as in **>>>** (old man) which is realized as plural by attaching either ▶▶▶ or ▶▶▶ and ▶▶▶ to get the plural form.

Some examples of plurals and singular forms are given below:

vi. Negation:

The negative marker operational in the language is $\triangleright \triangleright$. It is attached after the inflected verb forms to denote negation.

▶▶ ▶▶▶ 'you know' but ▶▶▶▶ ▶ is 'you do not know'.

7. The use of **classifiers** is another striking feature of the Deuri language. It is normally used with different types of nouns. Some examples of classifiers are used after nouns denoting solid objects, areca nut +classifier. ▶▶ used after leafy light objects, such as ▶▶▶▶ ►► (betel leaf +classifier).►►► is used after + classifier.▶▶▶ is used with slender bundle of objects as in long objects as in ▶▶▶▶ +classifier.

The combination noun + classifier + numeral in constructing phrases is also interesting to observe. The following phrases show such a combination operating in the language

```
▶ ▶ ▶ ▶ ▶ arecanut+ classifier+one

▶ ▶ ▶ ▶ ▶ ▶ betel leaf+classifier+one

▶ ▶ ▶ ▶ ▶ ▶ bamboo+classifier+five.
```

vii. Affixes:

One of the peculiarities of the Deuri language is the addition of different suffixes, prefixes, and infixes to the verbal roots and thereby indicating different ideas. The following are some of them:

- A. Suffixes after the verb roots:
 - (i) ● → (conjunctive); e.g. → → ● → eating ; → → → - ● → hearing
 - (ii) → ▶ ▶ (present participle); e.g. ▶ ▶ ▶ ▶ ▶ while eating
 - (iii) \rightarrow (imperative);e.g. \triangleright \triangleright eat(1 Person)
- B. Suffixes after negative formations

 - (ii) ► indicating the possession of a quality, e.g. ► ► ► ► does not hear, ► ► ► ► ► ► .
- C. Prefix before a verb root
 - (i) ▶ indicates prohibition and command, as in ▶ ▶ do not eat.
- D. Infixes between verbal roots and terminations
 - (i) -▶▶ (denotes frequency) ▶▶ -▶ -▶ shall be eating frequently.
 - (ii) → ► (indicates the sense of having to) ► ► → shall have to eat.
 - (iii) -▶ (indicates the act of finishing something) ▶ ▶ -▶ eats without leaving anything.
 - (iv) -▶ (denotes causation) ▶ -▶ causes to eat
 - (v) -▶ (denotes ability) ▶ -▶ -▶ you can eat
 - (vi) ▶ (denotes finality) ▶ **(+-)** was *finally dead*

5. <u>Tiwa</u>

A. Consonants:

	Bilab	ial	Alveo	lar	Pa	Palatal Vela		Velar		Glottal	
Plosive	>	•	>	>			>				
	> >>		> >	> >			> **				

Nasal	•		>		@ (-		
Fricative		>	>			>	
Affricate		>>					
Trill			•				
Lateral			•				
Semi- vowel	•			•			

B. Vowels:

	Front	Central	Back
High	>		>
Mid	>		>
Low- mid			О
Low		> >	

C. Distribution of Consonants:

All the Consonants occur in syllable initial position. All except /▶▶ ▶ occur syllable finally:

symmetry.					
>>>>	firewood	>>> >>>	all	>>>	he/she
			together		
	open space	>>>>>	medicine	>>>	pigeon
>>>>	punishment		a pit	>>>>	morning
					star
>>+>>	betel leaf	>>>>	sparrow		nose
>>> >>>	pine(tree)	>>>>	skin	>>>	huge
>>+>>	fruit	>>+>>	blood	>>>>	part of
					whole
>>	face	>>>>	monkey	>>>	hope
	phlegm	>>>	wine		fever
>>>>	teeth	>>>>	a		uncooked

			particular place		rice
>>>>	To divide		a place of worship	>>>	pig
>>>	finger	>> >>>	hand	>>>>	spider
>>>>	wine		salt	▶ ► >> ►	onion

5.d. Syllabic pattern:

A word in Tiwa generally constitutes one or more syllables. Such syllabic patterns are of 12 types in Tiwa. These may be grouped in two major types as open and closed. These are illustrated below. Open v: words ending in vowels

V	>	this
VV	>>	hand
cv	>>	soil
cvv	>>>	rice
ccv	>	thunder
cvcv	>>>	rat
vvcv	>>>>	Plum
cvccv		girl

Closed v:c., words ending in consonant.

vc	▶ •••	I
	>	mat
vvc	>>>	yes
cvc	>>>	cheek
ccvc	>>>	goat

6.Grammar

- **6.i.** The **nouns** in Tiwa ▶▶▶ **(*man', ▶▶▶)** 'cow', ▶▶▶ 'elephant', **▶▶▶** 'donkey' etc. are capable of taking number, gender, case- suffixes.
- **6.ii.** Number: The plural suffixes $\triangleright \triangleright \triangleright$, $\triangleright \triangleright \triangleright$, $\triangleright \triangleright \triangleright$ are added to the word or stem indicating singular to mean plurality of the items. These are illustrated below –

Other plural suffix $\triangleright \triangleright \triangleright$ and $\triangleright \triangleright \triangleright \triangleright$ 'many' is also used with personal pronouns while $\triangleright \triangleright \triangleright$ is added after animate object. For examples:

- **6.iii. Gender**: There is no grammatical gender in Tiwa. Only the animate objects distinguish genders, which is generally distinguished in three ways: -
 - (a) By using qualifying terms,
 - (b) By employing different words, and
 - (c) By using some suffixes.
- (i) The qualifying terms are ►►► 'male/ he' and ►►►► ►► ►► 'female/ she'.

This ▶▶▶▶ is used only in Hill Tiwa. e.g.

	'man'		'woman'
>>>	' male	>>>>	'female
	child'		child'

(ii) The qualifying terms $\triangleright \triangleright \triangleright \triangleright \triangleright \triangleright \triangleright \triangleright \bullet$ 'male' and $\triangleright \triangleright \triangleright \triangleright \triangleright \triangleright \triangleright \bullet$ 'female' are used only in case of animals. e.g.

		'bullock'		'cow'
--	--	-----------	--	-------

>>	'he bird'				'she
					bird'
>>>>	'he dog'	>>>>	>>>>	>>>>	'she
					dog'

(ii) Use of different words indicating male and female. e.g.

>>	'king'	>>>	'queen'
> >	'father'	>>> >>>	'mother'
>>	'husband'	>>	'wife'

(iii) The feminine suffixes → , ► ► are also frequently used to indicate feminine gender. These are borrowed from Assamese. e.g.

	'prince'	>>>>>	'princess'
>>>>	'male	>>>>>>	'female servant'
	servant'		

Indefinite senses. These are noted below: -

	with man		
	'the man'		
>>>> >>> >>> >>>	'the prince'		
>>>> >>>> >>>>	'the girl'		
>>>> :	'with some wide or flat object'		
	'the village'		
>>>>>	'the cloth' (In some places		
	becomes becomes		
>>>> :	'with some delicate and beautiful inanimate objects.		
>>>>>>>	'the lotus'		
	• 'the flower'		
	'with a group or in collection sense.'		
	' the bunch of banana'		
	'the bunch of betel'		
>>> :	'in collective sense, a loan from Assamese.'		
>>>>	'quite a little'		
>>>>>	'some'		
	' sufficiently'		

6.iv. Pronouns: Tiwa possesses personal and demonstrative pronouns as in other language.

Personal pronouns:

1 st	• ••	'I'		'we'
2 nd	>	'you'	>>>>	'you all'
3 rd	>>>>	'he/she'	>>>>>	'they'

Demonstrative pronoun: Near: he/ hebe 'it/ this'

Far : haube 'that'

>>> >>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>	'who comes there?'
>>>>	'what is that?'
>> >>>> >>>	'where will you go?'
>> >> >>>>>>>>	'when did your father come?'

6.v. Adjectives: Adjectives are used with the noun or the qualifying object. These are illustrated below: -

		T	
>>>>	new	>>>>	new
			house
>>>>	good	>>>>	good
			girl
>>>>	bad	>>>>	bad
			boy
>>>>	sweet	>>>>	sweet
			banana
	red		red
			cloth
>>>>	black	>>>>>	black
			crow
	green		green
			field
>>>>	white	>>>>	white
			crane

6.vi. Verbs: The verbal system in Tiwa show three tenses: - present, past and future. The present and past tenses show four different times of action of the verbs such as indicative/habitual, perfect, continuous, perfect continuous while future shows simple and continuous, only two types. The verbal suffixes of these tenses are given below:

Present tense	1 st person	2 nd person	3 rd person
Indicative/ habitual	-		-
Perfect	- > > >	- > >	- > >
Continuous	->>>	->>>	->>>
Perfect continuous	-	-	-
	>>>>>		

Past tense			
Indicative/habitual	- > > >	->>>	- > > >
Perfect	-▶ ▶ •••	- > >	-▶ ▶
Continuous	- > > > > •	-	->>>>>>>
		>>>>>	
Perfect continuous	-	-	-
	>>>>>	>>>>>	>>>>>

Future tense			
Indicative/habitual	- ••€	-	->>>
Continuous	- > > ••		-

These verbal suffixes are simply added to the verb stems as shown below : the verb root $-\triangleright \triangleright \triangleright \triangleright$ 'to see'

	Singular		Plural	
Present habitual		I see		We see
	>> >>>>	You		You see
		see		
	>>>	He		They see
		sees		
Past		I (past)		We(past)
indicative		see		see
	>> >>>>>>	You		You
		(past)		(past)
		see		see
	>> >>>>>>	Не	>>>> >>>>>>	They
		(past)		(past)
		see		see
Future		I		We
indicative		(future)		(future)

	see		see
>> >>>	You	>>>>	You
	(future)		(future)
	see		see
>> >>>>>	Не	>> >>>>>>	They
	(future)		(future)
	see		see

The tense suffixes are attached to all verbal roots as shown above.

7.CONCLUSION:

In the plains of the Brahmaputra valley, the tribal population constitutes a minority with the tribal population in no district exceeding 15% of the total district population (Ekka 1986). The pressures of a majority language like Asamiya on Deuri and Tiwa has resulted in the emergence of groups of bilingual speakers. It is a well-known sociolinguistic tendency with such bilingual speakers that they are carriers of sound, vocabulary and grammatical items from one language system to another thereby generating a process of assimilation. While such wider issues of linguistic assimilation are of interest to the specialist of language, they are of significance to the social scientist as well as in so far as they constitute 'hard' evidence that provides further support for the centuries old socio cultural interaction which has forged and led to the emergence of the larger overall society in the Brahmaputra valley. The significance of studying these languages individually is also relevant to larger socio-political issues that have been known to effect these languages collectively. Few communities exist in isolation, certainly the least with the communities with whom the Brahmaputra Valley languages are associated. Over the centuries they have interacted among themselves socially, politically and of course, linguistically and this has resulted in the creation of a common social, cultural and a linguistic area. An idea of such linguistic assimilation can also be attested from the languages included in this study. Thus, Asamiya has lost many of the sounds of Indo Aryan inheritance Indo Aryan inheritance. and has acquired features that are traceable to such contiguous Extra Aryan languages like *Deuri* and *Tiwa*. In grammar, the extensive use of classifiers and the complex strategy of combining classifiers with nouns and numerals is another feature such bear eloquent testimony to the influence of the latter on Asmiya^{VIII}.

iv In Deuri all the consonants except /▶▶▶▶ ♦♦▶ l/occur in syllable final positions.

v In the BG group Garo, Koch and Tiwa are non tonal languages.

vi The Ahoms came and conquered the Deuris in the thirteenth century and ruled over them.

vii Unlike other New Indo Aryan languages Asamiya does not have any Retroflex sounds instead it has a whole series of Alveolar sounds which include stops, fricatives ,trills and laterals.

viii Such examples in Asamiya are as follows:



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ⁱ The currently prevalent Boro-Garo languages are: Kakborak, Boro, Garo, Rabha, Koch, Dimasa, Tiwa and Deuri.

This aspect has been dealt with in detail in the author's paper *North East India as a linguistic area*, *Mon Khmer Studies*, vol: 27,1996.

iii Unlike other BG languages Deuri and Tiwa are primarily spoken and is yet to develop a written form.

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