Abstract

This dissertation is a descriptive-comparative study of the dialects of Mising (exonym: Miri), a language of the Eastern Tani sub-group of the Tibeto-Burman (TB) language family. The 5,87,310 Mising speakers as reported in the Indian Census (2001) constitute 17.8% of the total (3,308,570) tribal population of Assam. The eight traditionally recognized Mising dialects: Pagro, Dolu, Ojan, Dambuk, Sa:jan, Mo:ji, Somua, and Samuguria are chiefly spoken in the districts of Dhemaji, North Lakhimpur, Sonitpur, Golaghat, Jorhat, Sivasagar, Dibrugarh, and Tinsukia in Assam. In Arunachal Pradesh, Mising is spoken by a good number of people in the districts of East-Siang and Lohit. A standardized form of Mising is yet to emerge and so the base form of the Mising data presented in this study, for comparative purposes, is from the dialect which is spoken by the largest number of Misings, i.e. Pagro.

This synchronic study has two major objectives (1) to study the variations between different Mising dialects and (2) to study the changes brought about by the interference of dominant languages. The thesis has seven chapters and three appendices. The introductory chapter gives a brief background of the Misings: their origin, migration, dialects, linguistic affiliation, population and the present demographic distribution. The few existing works on Mising are also revisited in this chapter. The major findings of this dissertation are presented in Chapter II through VII.

A description on the phonological and the morphological features of Mising, as it is required to meet the main objectives of the study, is given in chapter II. Syntactic features are outside the scope of this study as we do not find striking difference between Mising dialects at this level. The segmental phonology shows the phonemic inventory and the distribution of different phonemes whereas the section on suprasegmental features sheds light on the linear and metrical syllable structure, occurrence of geminate and non-geminate consonant clusters, the placement of stress, and the vexing question
of the presence or absence of tone. Mising morphology is discussed under two headings: *inflectional* and *derivational*. Number and case (often referred to as morphosyntactic categories), definiteness, demonstratives, and gender are focused under the dimensions of nominal inflections while Tense, Aspect, and Mood are studied under verbal inflections. Adjectives are inflected for comparative and superlative degree with the suffixes *ja* and *pak* respectively. As regards the derivational morphology, it focuses on *nominalization*, *verbalization*, and *adverbialization*. This chapter also seeks to expound the word-formation processes in Mising. The most common processes are *prefixation*, *compounding*, and *reduplication*.

Chapter III focuses on the various phonological variations in Mising dialects. We find variations at three levels: (1) variations between geminate group (GG) and non-geminate group (NGG) of Mising dialects, (2) variations within dialects of the same group, and (3) variations in individual Mising dialects brought about as a result of different geographical settings and influence from dominant language like Assamese. This chapter sheds light on certain phonological differences which highlights issues like retention, attrition and/or deletion, and convergence of the syllable codas: the lateral *l* and the velar nasal *ŋ*, replacements of consonants (for instance: the tap *r* ~ lateral *l*), and the substitutability and/or free variation of different vowels (excluding the mid-front vowel *e* and the central low vowel *a* which are stable). Variations in loanword phonology are also dealt with systematically.

Chapter IV sheds light on the morphological variations that exist between Mising dialects. We notice variations on two kinds: (1) inflectional suffixes and (2) derivational suffixes. We also observe some differences in morphological processes like *prefixation*, *reduplication*, *nominalization*, and *verbalization*.

Chapter V sheds light on the various morphophonemic variations. The attachment of the marker *-ŋ* to a subject NP or to a sentence-final nominal/adjective brings about morphosyntactic variations in Mising dialects. On the ground of this variation Mising dialects can be divided into two major groups: *geminate group* (GG)
and *non-geminate group* (NGG). The marker -a in all the dialects has two different syntactic functions: (1) as a *copula* when suffixed to sentence-final nominal or adjective. (2) as a *generic or definite non-specific* marker when suffixed to a subject NP. The attachment of -a to GG root words exhibit morphophonemic variations whereas the suffixation of -a to NGG root word triggers no morphophonemic changes, regardless of syllable structure or the nature of the word-final vowel. In GG, words ending in consonants and long vowels i: and e: (i.e., words with final heavy syllables) are not affected either, whereas various morpho-phonemic changes occur in words ending with a short final vowel (i.e., words with light final syllables): suffixation of -a to words ending in short high polar vowels, central vowels, and mid polar vowels variously trigger *vowel coalescence, vowel deletion*, and *word-medial gemination*.

Chapter VI focuses on the variations in different lexical categories like noun, verb, adjective, and adverb which are again due to different geographical settings, proximity to other Tani languages (especially Mipol and Padam Adis), and influence from other dominant languages.

Chapter VII expounds the influence of Assamese on Mising dialects. The Misings are in close contact with the Assamese speaking people ever since their migration from the hilly tracts of Arunachal Pradesh to the foot-plains of Assam. When languages interact closely it is natural for them to influence each other, but for most of the time it is the non-dominant language which really gets affected. Mising, being a non-dominant language of Assam, is influenced by Assamese to a great extent. We notice Assamese influence at the phonological and morphological levels. Samuguria exhibits influence at the syntactic level too. Assamese influence on Mising dialects largely vary depending on their degree of exposure to Assamese. We also observe influence of Adi languages (Mipoŋ and Padam) on some Mising dialects. The influence is mostly observed between dialects that live in the abutting areas bordering Assam and Arunachal Pradesh (for instance, Pagro Mising and the Mipoŋ Adis). Otherwise, dialects like Mo'jig Mising and Sacjag Mising are closer to the Adis for being cognate dialects.
The findings of the study suggest the division of Mising dialects into two major groups: geminate group (GG) and non-geminate group (NGG). The dialects which are placed in the GG are: Pagro, Delu, Ojan, and Dambuk, whereas Sa:jaj and Mo:jij fall in the NGG. The Somua and Samuguria dialects cannot be placed in any of the mentioned groups. Linguistically and culturally, Somua is in a transitional stage in adopting the Adis (mipon and padam) of Arunachal Pradesh while Samuguria has almost merged with Assamese. Mising dialects are mutually intelligible, albeit variations at the phonological and morphological levels. Striking differences are also observed at the morphophonemic and morpho-syntactic levels.

Because of heavy influence of Assamese, borrowed words are pouring into Mising vocabulary at a prodigious rate, either freely or with some phonological/morphological adaptations. Today, we find frequent Mising-Assamese code-mixing/code-switching situations in the daily discourse of the speakers of Mising dialects.