

NU working to develop Naga languages

Academics handle a complex environment of unaccounted dialect variations & a Roman script

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The Nagaland University, Kohima campus, is making several efforts to develop indigenous Naga languages. While Tenyidie has a department of its own, an effort is underway to develop standard grammar for Khamtiungan and Konyak languages.

"A two-year project is underway to develop Khamtiungan and Konyak languages at the Nagaland University (NU). The former is funded by ex-MLA, P Longon, and the latter by the Konyak Literature Board," informed Dr. Mimi Kevichusa Ezung, Principal Investigator of the Khamtiungan language project and Head of the Tenyidie Department at NU. She will be assisted in the efforts by students who are native Khamtiungan speakers.

A Commencement Programme of the Khamtiungan Grammar project was held on December 8, 2017, at the Tribal Council Hall, Noklak under the aegis of the Khamtiungan Tribal Council, the Khamtiungan Students' Union, and the Kham-

tiungan Baptist Church Association. The project commenced officially in February this year.

The Konyak language project has already got the required approvals and is set to begin shortly; it will be supervised by Dr. Pangserenla Walling, Assistant Professor at NU's Department of Linguistics.

The projects aim to develop standard grammar for Khamtiungan and Konyak languages focusing on their most commonly used variety in order for smoother expansion of literature, based on which education in these indigenous languages can be part at higher levels.

Linguistic variations

Naga communities speak multiple languages and dialects. The linguistic, cultural and social diversity it offers is spectacular; and inundating as most Naga languages have hardly been developed in the written format. From one village to the other, there could be a difference in dialect and, sometimes, in the language itself.

"We are studying the variety which is being taught in schools as Modern In-



dian Languages (MIL)," explained Dr. Mimi, one of Nagaland's premier linguists. 18 languages have been recognized by the Government of Nagaland as MILs that are meant to be taught to students in their respective language areas.

The Grammar Projects of both the languages have been chosen from the respective common language/*lingua franca*, namely the Noklak variety (including Pangsha [Wolam] and Pathso) for the Khamtiungan Grammar, and the Wakching variety for the Konyak Grammar.

The Bible of both the

communities was written in the common language chosen for the projects. Each variety was chosen by the people of that community, Dr. Mimi is careful to emphasize.

"It is only natural to have differences but for the sake of development of literature and further education, we have to choose and standardize one variety," affirmed Prof. Duovituo Kuolie, Head of Department of Linguistics at NU. "For each variety to develop, we will need extensive research, make people proficient enough in the variety to produce good literature for others to study and

learn from. Each will need to be standardized and textbooks to be produced, which is not possible at this stage. Besides, language should be a stepping stone to unity, not division," stated Prof. D Kuolie.

But what is the fate of the smaller dialects, languages and cultures?

"Once a standard is set, we can do comparative studies and work on dialect varieties," noted Dr. Mimi. Recently, the Government of Nagaland recognized two separate Rengma languages— Rengma and Ntenyi (Upper Rengma and Lower Rengma respectively).

With increased linguistic study, fresh recognition of Naga languages may define the future but it will be "a very slow process needing lot more Naga students to start studying linguistics from all corners of the state," Dr. Mimi argued.

According to the linguist, "Being a native speaker of a language doesn't mean you know the grammar. It needs to be codified so that native and non native speakers can learn the language through a system."

While it may take 100 more years for any Naga language to be 'lost,' there is a lot to be done to even begin grouping and standardizing them in order to hold on to them. Not having a script means all of this work needs to be done with the help of the Roman script.

Script - aye or nay?

Dr. Mimi and team are currently wrapping up a project that documents speech sounds of 15 Naga languages. "Most Naga speech sounds don't distinguish between voiced and voiceless sounds. Both sounds are represented in the Roman alphabet system which has been ad-

opted into the alphabet system of the Naga languages. All a linguist can do is provide a description, not a prescription, of a language; it is up to the people to decide what to use," she maintained.

While having a script could have allayed several technical problems, linguists are not sure if that would be helpful to the Naga cause for now.

"At this juncture when our languages are being developed, a new script could push the languages back by 100 years or so. A new script would mean a complete shift of focus to other aspects of the language," the Tenyidie HoD held.

Prof. D Kuolie agreed. "Nagaland has now developed syllabus that helps each learner pick up their language. All languages are using the Roman script to do this. Developing a new script is not practically convenient for resource persons or readers. Even school children are familiar with the Roman script."

As Nagaland University expands its linguistic scope, exciting times lie ahead for Nagaland, the "most linguistically diverse state" in the Indian Union.