Languages and Peoples of the Eastern Himalayan Region (LPEHR)

Languages and Peoples of the Eastern Himalayan Region and the North East Indian Linguistics Society: Taking stock

Linda Konnerth
University of Regensburg

Stephen Morey
La Trobe University

Mijke Mulder
University of Amsterdam

Mark W. Post
University of Sydney

Kellen Parker van Dam
University of Zurich

ABSTRACT

This introductory contribution to the inaugural issue of *Languages and Peoples of the Eastern Himalayan Region* (LPEHR) outlines the mission and goals of this new publication outlet. LPEHR takes over where the *North East Indian Linguistics* (NEIL) series left off. As such, this introduction also looks back on NEIL. An index of all articles published in the NEIL volumes is attached as supplemental material to this contribution.

Languages and Peoples of the Eastern Himalayan Region and the North East Indian Linguistics Society: Taking stock

Linda Konnerth
University of Regensburg

Stephen Morey
La Trobe University

Mijke Mulder
University of Amsterdam

Mark W. Post
University of Sydney

Kellen Parker van Dam
University of Zurich

1 Introduction: What is LPEHR?

The Eastern Himalayan Region is one of the ethnolinguistically most complex and yet least understood areas of mainland Asia. The region comprises the eastern part of Nepal, the mountainous areas of West Bengal, Sikkim and Bhutan, the 'seven sisters' of northeast India including the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys, and the hilly border regions of Tibet, southwest China, Myanmar and Bangladesh.

The region is home to an unknown number of languages - certainly in the hundreds - from four different language families: Trans-Himalayan (Tibeto-Burman/ Sino-Tibetan), Austroasiatic, Indo-European, and Tai-Kadai, in addition to some possible language

isolates. Within Trans-Himalayan itself the languages may form anywhere from ten to twenty distinct genealogical units. Most of these languages have not yet been comprehensively described. This is also a region of complex language contact and multilingualism, with a traditional diversity in cultural practices now enriched and complicated by modernity and an increasing variety of religious affiliations.

Languages and Peoples of the Eastern Himalayan Region (LPEHR) has now been established as an annual special issue in the journal *Himalayan Linguistics*, set up to explore aspects of this linguistic and cultural diversity. LPEHR welcomes both synchronic descriptions and those that have a view to the historical. LPEHR will build on the work of *North East Indian Linguistics*, which appeared in eight volumes between 2008 and 2018. It will also consider distinct special publications on an irregular basis, such as descriptive monographs (for example, dictionaries, grammars or ethnographies).

Given the scale of complexity and diversity in the Eastern Himalayan region - implying a time-depth of corresponding scale - study and comparison of its ethnolinguistic units will reveal otherwise unobtainable facts regarding the pre-history and peopling of the Asian continent. We have a particular commitment to publish the descriptive works prepared by scholars, including students, who are living and working in the region. We strongly encourage the submission of linguistically-oriented manuscripts with a primary descriptive component, preferably from a functional-typological or anthropological-linguistic perspective. Manuscripts that are richly informed by and exemplified with well-transcribed linguistic data are particularly welcome, as are papers with an interdisciplinary approach to the study of the region's languages and peoples, involving ethnobiology, ethnobotany, archeology, (pre)history, traditional music and ritual, and language contact issues.

As an annual special issue of *Himalayan Linguistics*, *Languages and Peoples of the Eastern Himalayan Region* is continuing the *North East Indian Linguistics* series (NEIL). At this juncture, we would like to take stock of the linguistic research published under NEIL, as well as outline how we would like to use this opportunity to outline where we see NEIL being headed.

The idea of a publication series and/or journal under the title *Languages and Peoples of the Eastern Himalayan Region* (LPEHR) was first conceived by Mark W. Post who together with Stephen Morey planned and organized a meeting in 2014 to bring together a number of scholars working on the ethnolinguistic prehistory of the Eastern Himalayan Region (titled *International Consortium for Eastern Himalayan Ethnolinguistic Prehistory*). During this meeting, LPEHR was born. LPEHR began its life as a publication series within Asia-Pacific Linguistics (then under Australian National University Press). There, LPEHR published *Language and Culture in Northeast India and Beyond: In Honor of Robbins Burling*, as well as NEIL volumes 6, 7 and 8. In 2019, the LPEHR Editorial Board approached *Himalayan Linguistics* with the suggestion that LPEHR become an annual special issue of the journal, to continue and expand on the mission of the *North East Indian Linguistics* volumes.

Today LPEHR's Editorial Board consists of the following scholars (in alphabetic order): Prafulla Basumatary (Gauhati University), Krishna Boro (Gauhati University), Bihung Brahma (Central Institute of Technology, Kokrajhar), George van Driem (University of Berne), Gwendolyn Hyslop (University of Sydney), Yankee Modi (University of Sydney), Mark W. Post (University of Sydney) and Jyotiprakash Tamuli

(Gauhati University). The current Chief Editor is Scott DeLancey (University of Oregon), and the current Managing Editors are Linda Konnerth (University of Regensburg), Stephen Morey (La Trobe University), Mijke Mulder (University of Amsterdam), and Kellen Parker van Dam (University of Zurich).

We would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the enthusiastic welcome we have received from the *Himalayan Linguistics* Editorial Board to become part of this outstanding publication venue. Kristine Hildebrandt has helped us with every detail to make our transition as easy as possible. We cannot count the number of emails Kristine has sent us, and certainly have no way to measure the thoughtfulness and support we have received from her. We are very excited, and very proud, to join *Himalayan Linguistics* for an exciting new chapter in our endeavors to promote and support the description, documentation, and more broadly, (ethno-)linguistic study of the languages of the Eastern Himalayan Region.

2   From NEIL to LPEHR

The *North East Indian Linguistics Society* (NEILS) was initiated in 2005 by Jyotiprakash Tamuli (Gauhati University), Mark W. Post (then at La Trobe University, now University of Sydney) and Stephen Morey (La Trobe University). Its publication series *North East Indian Linguistics* (NEIL) was inaugurated in 2008 with an eponymous volume, and since then has published a total of eight volumes. The first five volumes appeared with *Cambridge University Press India*, edited by Stephen Morey and Mark W. Post, and, from Volume 3, also by Gwendolyn Hyslop. After those, NEIL kept its title but went open access and shifted to *Asia Pacific Linguistics*, a series then under *Australian National University Press*. During that time, Priyankoo Sarmah, Amos Teo and Linda Konnerth joined as editors. The eight volumes of *North East Indian Linguistics* published a total of 114 articles, and we will take stock of these in terms of the subject languages in §3 as well as the topic domains in §4. A complete index of all articles published in the NEIL series is attached as supplemental material to this contribution.

It is important to us to point out that we consider LPEHR a direct continuation of NEIL in terms of the content and the mission. The editorial board of LPEHR consists of the same people that have been behind the *North East Indian Linguistics Society*. However, naturally some things are different. We are now an annual journal (special) issue. We consider this a change for the better as we will have a regular publication rhythm. We have moved from edited proceedings of conference presentations to a distinct journal. However, our biennial NEILS conferences will remain at the heart and soul of our engagement process, and we emphasize that we very much encourage scholars to first present their work at a NEILS conference before submitting to LPEHR.

The renaming of NEIL to LPEHR makes official what has been implicitly the case all along: that languages and peoples are connected at a much deeper time level than the shallow number of decades during which the modern political nation states have existed. At NEIL(S) we have always considered the adjacent regions in other countries, such as Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, China, and Myanmar, just as much part of our region of interest as the 'seven sisters' of North East India.

From now on, research articles that focus on languages of the Eastern Himalayan Region can be submitted either to Himalayan Linguistics more generally or specifically to LPEHR. It is up to the author(s) to decide. The difference is only whether the editorial board of Himalayan Linguistics, headed by Kristine Hildebrandt, will handle the submission, or the editorial board of LPEHR, currently headed by Linda Konnerth, Stephen Morey, Mijke Mulder, and Kellen Parker van Dam, will handle the submission.

3 Languages

While the majority of 73 articles among the 114 published in NEIL volumes primarily focus on Trans-Himalayan languages, the remainder includes articles on the other three languages families of our region, most prominently Indo-Aryan (25 articles), but also Austroasiatic (nine articles) and Tai-Kadai (five articles). These numbers indicate an emphasis on Trans-Himalayan, but it should be kept in mind that this distribution of articles mirrors the number of different languages in these four language families that are spoken in our region.

The primary mission of NEILS has been to promote the description and documentation of the linguistic diversity of Northeast India. Thus, while out of the 25 articles on Indo-Aryan languages we find 15 focusing on Assamese, there are also 10 articles that discuss other language varieties, such as Assam Sadri, Bishnupriya, or Hajong. We also find papers on local varieties of major *lingua francas* such as Meghalaya Hindi or Kamrupi Assamese.

Among the articles on Trans-Himalayan languages, the majority of 32 contributions deal with the Sal branch, and within this branch mostly with Boro-Garo languages (21 articles), followed by the Northern Naga subgroup (9 articles). The other contributions are spread across a number of TB branches, such as Tani (9 articles) and South-Central ("Kuki-Chin") (9 articles), but also the geographically more marginal branch of Bodic (6 articles), two languages of central Northeast India whose phylogenetic status has remained undefined for the time being - Karbi and Meitei - as well as a few more contributions on the three distinct "Naga" branches: Angami-Pochuri, Central Naga, and Western Naga. There have also been articles on Burmish, as well as other languages of as yet not fully certain phylogenetic status, such as Hruso (Aka) and Puroik.

We have counted over 60 languages or language varieties that figure prominently and are subject of discussion in the 114 contributions to the NEIL series. This is impressive, however we want to emphasize that we enthusiastically invite contributions on all the *other* languages and language varieties of the Eastern Himalayan Region as well, as we move on to LPEHR.

4 Topics

The NEIL series was able to publish contributions on a wide variety of topics, and LPEHR aims to continue this. The largest portion of more than one third of all NEIL articles focus on morphosyntax. Other well-represented areas include phonology and historical linguistics, both at just under one quarter of the total number of NEIL articles.

It should be noted that among the contributions on phonology, only seven focus on tone. Since the majority of North East Indian languages are tonal languages, more contributions on this topic are very welcome. Of course, tones in our area can be very difficult to work out (but see the advice in Morey 2008, Coupe 2014 and Post 2015). However, there is also more than enough evidence that tones play a very important role not just in the lexicon but also in different grammatical domains (Morey 2018; Ozerov 2018). Moreover, there is good work to build on (Coupe 2003; Watkins 2013; Teo 2014), including the seven mentioned contributions in NEIL, which range from a phonological analysis of Boro tones by Burling and Joseph (2009) (Vol. 2) and studies on other Boro-Garo languages, i.e., Dimasa by Sarmah and Wiltshire (2009) (Vol. 2) and Tiwa, Sarmah, Wiltshire and Hong (2013) (Vol. 5), to an analysis of Tenyidie tones by Meyase (2015) (Vol. 7), and work on Karbi tones by Konnerth and Teo (2014) (Vol. 6).

The NEIL series have also published a considerable number of articles primarily addressing other very important topics, such as issues in sociolinguistics, as well as contributions on the morphology, semantics, syntax, and the lexicon of the languages of North East India. Finally, we are especially happy that we have had contributions in the domains of anthropological linguistics and language contact; we would be happy to receive more of those as we shift to LPEHR.

5 The future of linguistic research in the Eastern Himalayan region

We conclude by sketching out some points of a research agenda that we want to promote at this juncture that marks the beginning of LPEHR.

We already noted the great importance of studying the **tone** systems of the languages of our region. When the NEIL series started, there were barely any studies to build on and get advice from. Now we are in a position that we can consult the literature to get help both with methodologies as well as understanding better what to expect.

We also firmly believe that a good understanding of today's linguistic diversity must rely on the empirical study of different situations of **language contact**, including different **sociolinguistic** scenarios, including the documentation of current or previous multilingual settings. It is important to keep in mind here that language contact is not only a phenomenon in which smaller languages are impacted upon by large lingua francas. Language contact in our region has also shaped languages on a bilateral basis, as speakers are bilingual or multilingual in a wide range of types of language, sometimes also including two or more closely related varieties. We do not have much time left to carry out interviews with the elders in the communities we work with to ask them what the situation concerning multilingualism was like when they were children. Was it common for them to speak different languages – if so, which ones? Or was it common that only those coming into a community from outside (such as women entering through marriage) acted as linguistic intermediaries?

We would also be very happy to receive contributions that tackle **linguistic phenomena less commonly studied**, especially those that **connect the languages with the peoples speaking them**. For example, what types of imperative constructions are there in the languages of our region? For almost all languages, we are still lacking a comprehensive

description of the many different ways in which people can be ordered, commanded, requested, asked, suggested, admonished, and pleaded, to do something. Of course, a detailed understanding of such phenomena implies an understanding of who the speaker is, who the addressee is, and the nature of the social relationship between them. Or as another example, how about recording one song in the song language (if there is one), transcribing and translating it – what can be found in terms of special lexical items, in terms of metaphorical expressions, in terms of the content and the way the song is organized? Or apart from songs, how can we linguistically analyze different genres of language use, including ritual texts, procedural texts (e.g., weaving baskets, communal fishing, food preparation, etc.), or folk stories?

Another important issue in the description and documentation of Eastern Himalayan languages is to carry out more **text collection**. Building a linguistic study solely on data derived from elicitation (i.e., translation through a contact language) is anything but ideal. As soon as we have data from natural language use (i.e., texts) we can verify how patterns found in elicitation actually function in natural spoken language, but we can additionally detect new constructions that may in fact be much more common than the constructions we identified through elicitation. Collecting texts and working with evidence from how the language is used by native speakers ensures that we describe and document the actual language, in a bottom-up fashion, without any preconceptions concerning the grammatical forms that a language should or should not have.

However, collecting texts means to at least audio-record (if not also video-record) natural language use, and then to transcribe, translate, and grammatically analyze the recording. This takes a long time, no doubt. But once there is a text collection of a language, it represents a lasting contribution for the documentation of that language, and any aspect of the language can be studied based on that text collection, from phonetic and phonological issues to patterns in morphological word formation, to larger syntactic constructions, to markers and patterns sensitive to discourse factors, such as "optional"/differential case markers or word order. Of course it is necessary for all of us to continue academic publishing and building a CV. Therefore, we are currently exploring options for how to publish text collections (such as Konnerth and Tisso 2018, although smaller text collections will certainly also be publishable). Note also that recordings and other primary data should always be archived, and a good option for our region is the *Computational Resources for South Asian Languages* (CoRSAL) archive, housed at the University of North Texas under supervision of Prof. Shobhana Chelliah: https://corsal.unt.edu/.

In order to collect texts, it is necessary to know something about recording procedures, about software that facilitates transcription and software that facilitates grammatical analysis, especially about the preparation of interlinearised texts. A good resource for recent articles that discuss such issues is the journal *Language Documentation and Conservation*. In addition, however, we would like to emphasize that we want LPEHR to also be a place to publish on **methodologies:** for the description and documentation of languages of our region, for tonal analysis, and for historical-comparative studies (e.g., word lists that are particularly useful for evaluating relationships between languages), among others.

REFERENCES

Burling, Robbins and U.V. Joseph. 2009. "Boro Tones." In *North East Indian Linguistics*, edited by Stephen Morey and Mark Post, 2: 45–58. Delhi: Cambridge University Press India.

Coupe, Alexander R. 2014. "Strategies for Analyzing Tone Languages." *Language Documentation & Conservation* 8: 462–89.

Coupe, Alexander R. 2003. *A Phonetic and Phonological Description of Ao: A Tibeto-Burman Language of Nagaland, North-East India*. Canberra, Australian National University: Pacific Linguistics, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies.

Konnerth, Linda, and Amos Teo. 2014. "Acoustic-statistical and perceptual investigations of Karbi tones: A peculiar case of incomplete neutralization of F0." In *North East Indian Linguistics*, edited by Gwendolyn Hyslop, Linda Konnerth, Stephen Morey, and Priyankoo Sarmah, 6:13–38. Canberra, Australian National University: Asia-Pacific Linguistics.

Konnerth, Linda, and Chikari Tisso. 2018. "Karbi Texts: A Fully Glossed Corpus of Different Genres." *Himalayan Linguistics Archive* 17 (2): 117–472.

Meyase, Savio Megolhuto. 2015. "The fifth tone of Tenyidie." In *North East Indian Linguistics*, edited by Linda Konnerth, Stephen Morey, Priyankoo Sarmah and Amos Teo, 7:63–68. Canberra, Australian National University: Asia-Pacific Linguistics.

Morey, Stephen. 2008. "Working with Tones in Northeast India -The Tonal System of Numhpuk Singpho, Assam." In *North East Indian Linguistics*, edited by Stephen Morey and Mark Post, 26–44. Delhi: Cambridge University Press India.

Morey, Stephen. 2018. "Verb Stem Alternation in Pangwa Tangsa." In *North East Indian Linguistics*, edited by Linda Konnerth, Stephen Morey, and Amos Teo, 8:86–109. Canberra, Australian National University: Asia-Pacific Linguistics.

Ozerov, Pavel. 2018. "Grammatical Tone in Anal." *Studies in Language* 42 (3): 708–33.

Post, Mark W. 2015. "Tones in Northeast Indian Languages, with a Focus on Tani: A Fieldworker's Guide." In *Language and Culture in Northeast India and beyond: In Honour of Robbins Burling*, edited by Mark W. Post, Stephen Morey, and Scott DeLancey, 182–210. Canberra, Australian National University: Asia-Pacific Linguistics.

Sarmah, Priyankoo and Caroline Wiltshire. 2009. "An Acoustic Study of Dimasa Tones." In *North East Indian Linguistics*, edited by Stephen Morey and Mark Post, 2: 25-44. Delhi: Cambridge University Press India.

Sarmah, Priyankoo, Caroline Wiltshire and Seung-ah Hong. 2013. "Tiwa tones in Monosyllables." In *North East Indian Linguistics* edited by Gwendolyn Hyslop, Stephen Morey and Mark Post, 5: 249–270. Delhi: Cambridge University Press India.

Teo, Amos B. 2014. *A Phonological and Phonetic Description of Sumi, a Tibeto-Burman Language of Nagaland*. Vol. 007. South East Asian Mainland Languages. Canberra, Australian National University: Asia-Pacific Linguistics. http://hdl.handle.net/1885/12015.

Watkins, Justin. 2013. "A First Account of Tone in Myebon Sumtu Chin." *Linguistics of the Tibeto-Burman Area* 36 (2): 97–127.