CHAPTER 4

A brief overview on Manipuri

This chapter presents a brief overview of Manipuri language including people who speak the language and the places where it is spoken. It also describes the genetic affiliation of the language and its recognition by the government of India. Finally this chapter presents the linguistic features of Manipuri and writing system of the language.

4.1   Who speaks Manipuri and where it is spoken?

Manipuri (Meiteilon) is one of the oldest languages in the South-East Asia which has its own script (Meitei Mayek) and literature. At Present, Manipuri used to write in Bengali Script from 1709 A.D. onwards i.e., during the reign of king Pamheiba. Manipuri or Meiteilon is widely spoken in the state of Manipur which is located in North-Eastern part of India, bordering Myanmar. Manipur was one of the routes among South Asia, South-East Asia and central Asia [72]. Manipuri is also spoken not only in other North-Eastern states like Assam, Tripura, and Mizoram but also spoken in neighbouring countries viz., Bangladesh and Myanmar. The total number of people who return Manipuri as their mother tongue was 1,500,000 out of which 1,466,705 speakers reside in India (Census of India, 2001).

Approximately 1.9 million people of 29 different ethnic groups in Manipur used Manipuri as a lingua franca [27]. It is also used among some ethnic groups in North East India to communicate among them by using this language.

A map of North East India including the neighbouring countries viz.; Bangladesh and Myanmar where Manipuri is spoken is shown below.
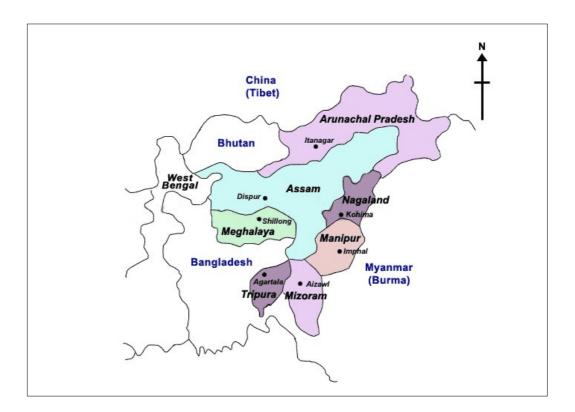

Figure 4.1: Map of North East India

4.2   Genetic Affiliation and other Associations

Linguistically, Manipuri belongs to the Kuki-Chin group of the Tibeto-Burman   family of Languages [32]. It has been included in the eight schedule of Indian Constitution since 20th August 1992. Interestingly, it is the first Tibeto-Burman language which has obtained its due place and recognition in Indian Constitution [72]. Manipuri is the official language in Manipur and it has adopted as the medium of instruction and examination.

Manipuri has been recognised by Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, as the language of All India Radio (AIR), Imphal and Silchar (for 30 minutes every day) in the year 1963 and 1978 respectively. British

Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) also broadcasts news in Manipuri. In Walter Hamilton's report on Manipur, 1820 states that the language has been internationally recognised since 1762 in the treaty of Gourashyam, the king of Manipur and East India Company. It has been recognised as a subject of Modern Indian Languages of India (MIL) by CBSE, Board of Secondary Education, Assam, Gauhati University, Guwahati, Dibrugarh University, Dibrugarh, Calcutta University, Calcutta, Delhi University, Delhi and Assam University, Silchar etc. Manipuri language has been taught as MIL and elective subjects up to graduate level and as an MIL up to Post Graduate, M.Phil and Ph.D. level in Manipur and Assam. Furthermore, Manipuri is also included as an optional paper (literature) in the Indian civil services examination conducted by Union Public Service Commission (UPSC).

4.3   Typological features of Manipuri

The grammar of Manipuri is a motivating one for the linguist because it exhibits different interesting typological features. Some of the typological features of Manipuri are described below:

1. Manipuri has a total number of 32 phonemes consisting of 6 vowels, 24 consonants and two tones: high and low [16].

   e.g.;   **ee/** ꯑꯤ 'blood' **i /** ꯏ 'hay'

2. Gender distinction in Manipuri is determined on   the natural recognition of sex i.e., gender is not grammatically marked in the language.

   e.g.;   nupamachaa / nupimachaa-du-na   isei   sak- lam-i

            boy   /   girl   -DIST-NOM song sing-EVI-ASP

         'That boy / girl were singing a song'

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3. Number is also not grammatically significant in Manipuri i.e., there is no subject predicate agreement as far number is concerned.

e.g.; nupamachaa / nupimachaa-sing-naa   isei sak-lam-i

boy /girl   - PL -NOM   song sing-EVI-ASP

'Boys/girls were singing (a) song'

4. Case relations in Manipuri are expressed by means of postpositions.

e.g.; ei-na   ma-haak-pu keithel-da   u-ram-i
I –NOM   he-HON-ACC   market-LOC   see-EVI-ASP
'I saw him in the market'

5. The words in Manipuri are highly monosyllabic i.e., even a vowel can be a syllable or a morpheme or a word in the language.

e.g.;   u/ ঊ 'tree', i / ই 'blood'

6. Like many other Southeast Asian languages, Manipuri is also an agglutinating type of languages having large number of affixes particularly in the form of prefixes and suffixes.

e.g.;   a-paamba-du   tau-han-ning-i

Prefix-like-NOM do-CAUS-wish-ASP

'(I) wish to make you to do whatever you like'

7. In Manipuri, words are mainly formed by morphological processes like derivation, compounding and reduplication [72], [81].

e.g.;   chaa-baa 'eating'
chaa- NMZ
chaak-sang 'kitchen'
rice-hut
khun 'village'
khun-khun 'villages'

8. The normal order of words in an unmarked sentence is subject-object-verb (SOV).

> e.g.;　Chaoba-naa　laphoi　chaa-i
>
> 　　　　Chaoba-NOM　banana　eat-ASP
>
> 　　　'Chaoba takes banana'

9. There is a lack of relative pronoun, the relative clause is expressed by means of participle.

> e.g.;　Imphal-dagi laak-pa nupamchaa-du ei- gi marup-ni.
>
> 　　　Imphal -ABL come-L　boy　-DIST I-GEN friend-COP.
>
> 　　　'The boy who came from Imphal is my friend'

10. Negation is mainly expressed by means of affixation i.e., by suffixation.

> e.g.;　ei chaa thak-te
>
> 　　　I tea drink - NEG
>
> 　　　'I do not take tea'

4.4　Writing System

Manipuri writing system is syllabic. The writing style of Manipuri is conventionally from left to right and have a space between the words as that of Roman script writing English. Capitalization is not used in written Manipuri [74]. It has two writing systems, a traditional system, which is written with ancient indigenous script called "Meitei Mayek" and a modern writing system, written with Bengali script. Here we can mention that Manipuri is one of the Tibeto-Burman languages which have its own script. Meitei Mayek is the system in which all the ancient Manipuri literature was written before the advent of Hinduism in Manipur. At Present, Manipuri used to write in Bengali Script from

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1709 A.D. onwards i.e., during the reign of king Pamheiba [72]. Bengali Script is now the dominant writing system and is employed in most of the modern publications including literature and newspapers. However, of late, there is resumption movement supported by Manipur state government attempting to popularise the Meitei Mayek writing system.

4.4.1 Meitei Mayek (Script)

Meitei Mayek, the indigenous script of Manipuri has 27 Iyek Ipi "main letter" of which 18 are indigenous and 9 are exotic. There are 8 Lonsum Iyek "unreleased letter", 8 Cheitap Iyek "vowel signs including matra" and 5 Khudam Iyek "punctuation marks including diacritics". It is interesting to mention that Meitei script has its own numeral system known as Cheising Iyek [55]. The following tables show the Meitei Mayek script with IPA representation:

Table 4.1: Main letters of Meitei Mayek

Meitei script	IPA representation	Meitei script	IPA representation	Meitei script	IPA representation
𑴱	k	♡	s	𑴂	l
𑴌	m	𑴉	p	𑴇	n
𑴥	c	𑴒	t	𑴗	k^h
𑴞	ŋ	𑴏	t^h	𑴤	w
𑴈	j	𑴓	h	𑴙	u
𑴪	i	𑴃	p^h	𑴆	ə
𑴜	g	𑴊	j^h	𑴅	ɹ
𑴕	b	𑴎	ɟ	𑴋	d
𑴝	g^h	𑴐	d^h	𑴍	b^h

Table 4.2: Lonsum (unreleased letters) of Meitei Mayek

Meitei script	IPA representation	Meitei script	IPA representation
𑴺	k	𑴼	l
𑴹	m	𑴻	p
𑴽	n	𑴾	t
𑴸	ŋ	𑴿	i

Table 4.3: Cheitap Iyek (vowel signs including matra) of Meitei Mayek

Meitei script	IPA representation	Meitei script	IPA representation
ꯨ	u	ꯤ	i
ꯆ	a	ꯦ	e
ꯣ	o	ꯧ	əu
ꯩ	əi	ꯪ	ŋ

Table 4.4: Vowels due to matras of Meitei Mayek

Meitei script	Phonetic representation	Meitei script	Phonetic representation
ꠇꯆ	a	ꠇꯦ	e
ꠇꯩ	əi	ꠇꯣ	o
ꠇꯧ	əu	ꠇꯪ	əŋ

Table 4.5: Punctuation marks including diacritics of Meitei Mayek

Meitei script	Punctuation marks	Meitei script	Diacritics marks
꯫	? (question mark)	.	Falling tone mark
I	, (comma)	__	Cluster mark
II	. (full stop)		

Table 4.6: Numerals of Meitei Mayek

Meitei script	Pronunciation	International numerals	Meitei script	Pronunciation	International numerals
꯰	/pʰun.bə/	0	꯵	/mə.ŋa/	5
꯱	/ə.mə/	1	꯶	/tə.ɹuk/	6
꯲	/ə.ni/	2	꯷	/tə.ɹet/	7
꯳	/ə.hum/	3	꯸	/ni.pan/	8
꯴	/mə.ɹi/	4	꯹	/ma.pən/	9

4.4.2 Bengali Script

The Bengali script for written Manipuri uses 55 symbols to represent 32 phonemes (including two tones) of Manipuri. The extra symbols are being used unconsciously or very sparingly. In English, it is found that a letter represents more than one sound. In case of written Manipuri with Bengali script, mapping of extra letters to a fix number of sounds is very

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contradictory as well as purposeless [74]. The following figures show the Bengali alphabets used in writing Manipuri:

Table 4.7: Bengali consonant symbols used in written Manipuri

ক	খ	গ	ঘ	ঙ
চ	ছ	জ	ঝ	ঞ
ট	ঠ	ড	ঢ	ণ
ত	থ	দ	ধ	ন
প	ফ	ব	ভ	ম
য	র	ল	ৱ	শ
ঐ	স	হ	ক্ষ	ড়
ঢ়	য়	ং	ঃ	ঁ
		ৎ		

Table 4.8: Bengali vowel symbols used in written Manipuri

অ	আ	ই	ঈ
উ	ঊ	ঋ	৯
এ	ঐ	ও	ঔ
	অং	অঃ	

Table 4.9: Chart of Bengali vowel diacritics used in written Manipuri

া	ি	ী	ু
ূ	ে	ো	ৌ
ৃ			

Table 4.10: Bengali punctuation marks used in written Manipuri

।	,	;	" "	' '	?	!	-
()	{}	[]	ঃ				

Table 4.11: Bengali consonant conjuncts used in written Manipuri

ন্দ	হ্ব	ঞ্জ	ঊ	খ্ব	ধ্ব
ঞ্ঝ	ত্ত	ষ্ঠ	স্মা	ও	ক্ত
স্ট	ষ্ব	ন্ম	ক্ক	প্র	ঙ্ক
ক্ষ	ট্ঠ	ঙ্ক			

Table 4.12: Bengali numerals used in written Manipuri

১	২	৩	৪	৫
৬	৭	৮	৯	১০

4.5   Chapter Summary

In this chapter, a brief description of Manipuri i.e., the places where it is spoken and the people those who return the language as their mother tongue, genetic affiliation and other associations of Manipuri language is presented. The status of the language in north eastern states of India and its recognition by the central government also described in this chapter. Typological features of Manipuri and its writing system including the ancient traditional Manipuri script called "Meitei Mayek" and Bengali script dominantly used in modern Manipuri publications and other academic purposes.