

CONFERENCE REPORT
THE 6TH ANNUAL MEETING OF THE NORTH EAST INDIAN
LINGUISTIC SOCIETY

Tezpur University, Assam, India
31 January – 2 February 2011

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The 6th annual conference of the North East Indian Linguistic Society (NEILS) was held from 31 January to 2 February 2011 at Tezpur University, Assam. As in previous years, the conference was preceded by two full days (29-30 January) of workshops on basic language documentation and linguistic analysis, also held at Tezpur University. The conference itself was a great success, with international and local scholars presenting a variety of papers on Tibeto-Burman, Indo-Aryan and Austroasiatic languages of this linguistically diverse part of the world. Many thanks go to Tezpur University and James Cook University for providing the funds to run the workshops and conference, as well as to the organisers Jyotiprakash Tamuli, Anita Tamuli, Mark Post and Priyankoo Sharma for the wonderful job they did to make the conference run as smoothly as it did.

This year also marked the introduction of the NEILS Indigenous Languages Documentation Award (NILDA). NEILS has set up this award in order to support students from North East India in the work of recording and preserving the many languages of the region. Funding for the awards derives from sales of books in the series *North East Indian Linguistics* (Cambridge University Press India), and from a grant by James Cook University, Australia.

The goal of the award is threefold: 1) to render reliable data on little-studied North East Indian languages available to researchers worldwide; 2) to aid in the preservation of endangered North East Indian languages; 3) to aid North East Indian students in increasing their capacity and experience base in language documentation.

The recipients of the 2011 awards will receive the sum of 20,000 Indian Rupees each to:

- Undertake field work in a language that is undescribed or little described, over a period of around one to three months;
- Make digital recordings of between 1500 and 2000 lexical items, using a word list divided into semantic fields that will be provided to the successful candidate;
- Make a narrow phonetic transcription of the word list, checking transcriptions with the native speakers in the field location; and
- Make whatever tentative phonological conclusions about the language that can be made.

The finished word list will be archived on the SEALANG website (<http://sealang.net>) in the form of an on-line, searchable word list with links to sound files. The data will be permanently attributed to the fieldworker and community from which the data were provided, but will be freely available to others for research purposes. The winners for 2011 are Poppy Gogoi, Gauhati University, for a project on Tangam (Arunachal Pradesh), and Syed Iftiqar Rahman, Gauhati University, for a project on Meyor (Arunachal Pradesh).

To be eligible for this award, these students needed to attend the workshops conducted in the two days prior to the conference. The first workshop was an all-day affair conducted by Mark Post and Priyankoo Sharma, who worked with native speakers of Bodo, Rabha and Chungli Ao on wordlist elicitation and other core aspects of language documentation. The second day began with a workshop by Scott DeLancey on finding and describing grammatical categories, while after lunch Mark Post gave a presentation on how to use the computer software Toolbox.

The conference itself kicked off with the launch of Hyslop, Morey and Post (2011), *North East Indian linguistics, Volume 3*, a collection of peer-reviewed and edited papers from the Society's 3rd conference, held in 2008. Scott DeLancey proudly introduced this new volume and gave a brief but uplifting speech expressing his own excitement and optimism for NEILS, especially given the increasing number of student attendees at the conference every year.

During the conference we had the great fortune of hearing new phonological descriptions of a few previously undescribed languages of north east India. These included Hakhun, a language spoken by the Tangsa (Krishna Boro); Bugun, spoken in Arunachal Pradesh (Madhumita Barbora and Priyankoo Sharma); and Ralte, spoken in Mizoram (Lalunthangi Chhangte and R. L. Thanmawia). Other phonological descriptions of Tibeto-Burman languages included a look at the 'sixth' vowel of the Boro-Garo languages – often a high back or mid-central unrounded vowel (Robbins Burling), as well as a comparison of the phonologies of Dimasa and Teddim Chin (Monali Longmailai and Zam Ngaih Cing). The effect of the phonology of Tiwa on borrowed words from neighbouring Indo-Aryan languages was also considered (U. V. Joseph). Of the languages of Nagaland, there was one paper on tonal alternations in Sumi deverbal formations (Amos Teo) and another on syllable structure in Chungli Ao (T. Temsunungsang).

Topics in morphosyntax included a survey of verb agreement suffixes in the Mizo-Kuki-Chin languages (Scott DeLancey), an analysis of Karbi *lo* as an aspectual / pragmatic marker remarkably similar to Mandarin *le* (Linda Konnerth), and a look at relational nouns in Thadou (George Bedell). The Austroasiatic family was represented by a talk on argument marking in War (Anne Daladier). As in previous years, there were also a good number of talks dedicated to aspects of Assamese grammar, such as case marking (Runima Chowdhary) and passive and causative formation (Madhumita Barbora).

Not all papers looked at providing language descriptions. Some notable mentions included the exciting proposal for a possible 'Siangic' subgroup within

Tibeto-Burman (Mark Post), issues in orthographic standardisation of Nepali, particularly in the context of Nepali speakers residing in India (Samar Sinha), as well as a presentation on the Wihu song of the Tangsa Naga (Meenaxi Barkataki-Rusheweyh) – although co-presenter Stephen Morey could not be physically present for this talk, he was nevertheless linked to the conference via Skype to introduce the paper and to field questions from the audience.

It was also heartening to hear a paper dedicated to the future of North East Indian linguistics (Jyotiprakash Tamuli), which suggested the need for ways of dealing with large corpuses of data and for local capacity building, both in the area of education and in the broader language community. A few papers at the conference addressed some of these issues, including one on corpus linguistics that focused on grammatical tagging of Bodo case markers (Atreyee Sharma). The need for minority language education was emphasised in a study of the level of bilingualism in Adivasi communities in Assam (Luke Horo), while the need for suitable materials to teach literacy in the home language was highlighted in an analysis of Assamese language learning materials intended for young learners (Anita Tamuli).

Before the end of the conference, a meeting was held to discuss plans to continue the tradition of publishing the year's conference proceedings in a volume of *North East Indian Linguistics*. It is likely that this volume will be submitted to Cambridge University Press India for publication.

As part of the conference programme, a number of participants were treated to some of the sights around the beautiful town of Tezpur, including a visit to Agnigarh, on the banks of the Brahmaputra River, and a trip to Cole Park, near the centre of the town. The Vice-Chancellor of Tezpur University also kindly hosted a special dinner for the conference participants at the Tezpur University Guest House.

Attended by scholars from across India, as well as from Australia, France, Germany, South Korea, Thailand and the United States, the 6th NEILS conference was another huge success.

REFERENCES

Gwendolyn Hyslop, Stephen Morey & Mark William Post (eds.) 2011. *North East Indian Linguistics – Vol. 3*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.