

ISSN : 2395-4132

THE EXPRESSION

An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal

Bimonthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access e-Journal



Impact Factor 6.4

Vol. 12 Issue 2 **April 2026**

Editor-in-Chief : Dr. Bijender Singh

Email : editor@expressionjournal.com

www.expressionjournal.com



Linguistic Tapestry: Innovation, Borrowing and Structural Change in Lesser-Known Languages of Northeast India

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Abstract

Northeast India is one of the most linguistically diverse regions of South Asia. The region and its communities are marked by sustained contact among Tibeto-Burman, Indo-Aryan, Austroasiatic and Tai-Kadai languages. This paper examines how linguistic innovations and borrowing shapes the structural features of lesser-known languages in the region. Using theoretical insights from language contact theory by Weinreich, borrowing and language ecology models by Haugen, reflections on language and worldview by Sapir and Whorf, code-switching frameworks by Gumperz and Carol Myers-Scotton, theory of linguistic power, Bucholtz by Bourdieu, sociocultural theory of identity by Hall, and work on language maintenance by Fishman, one can see that contact-induced change is not merely a matter of lexical substitution but a multidimensional process affecting phonology, morphology, syntax, discourse practice and language ideology. Drawing on cases from tribal communities such as Khasi, Meitei or Manipuri, Bodo, Tai Ahom, Tai Phake, Bishnupriya Manipuri, Nyishi, Galo, Hruso-Aka, Adi, Koro and Kuki-Chin languages, we can see that borrowing often functions at once as adaptation, social negotiation and cultural risk. While new linguistic forms may improve communicative flexibility in multilingual settings, they may also weaken intergenerational communication when dominant languages become associated with education, mobility, administration and digital modernity. The paper therefore situates structural change within a broader discussion of cultural identity, language jeopardy and revitalization. It concludes that language conservation in Northeast India must move beyond conformist models of linguistic authenticity and instead recognize the adaptive, historically layered and contact-rich nature of the region's linguistic ecologies.

Keywords

Linguistic Borrowing, Language Contact, Lesser-Known Languages, Tibeto-Burman, Austroasiatic, Indo-Aryan, Tai-Kadai, Cultural Identity, Language Conservation.

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Introduction:

Northeast India is known for its exceptional cultural and linguistic plurality. The region contains a large variety of languages belonging primarily to four language families which include, Tibeto-Burman, Indo-Aryan, Austroasiatic and Tai-Kadai. These languages cannot be seen as isolated systems because, they have evolved through long histories of migration, settlement, trade, intermarriage, missionary activity, education, state formation and contemporary digital communication. The resultant of this is the linguistic landscape of the region which can be best understood as a field of sustained contact in which languages continually absorb, resist, reshape and re-explain external influences. The lesser-known languages of Northeast India occupy an important place in this landscape. Many of these languages are spoken by relatively small communities and remain closely tied to oral tradition, folklore, ritual practice, ecological knowledge and collective memory. Some have little to no written traditions, while others have only recently crossed the threshold of formal education, digital media and administrative documentation. Their structural features therefore cannot be studied only as isolated grammatical systems. They must also be examined as cultural forms through which communities exchange belonging, identity and continuity.

Here we explore the impact of these linguistic innovations and borrowings on the structural features of the lesser-known languages in Northeast India. Linguistic innovation refers to the development of new forms, meanings or patterns within a language. Such innovations may arise internally through similarity, semantic extension, grammaticalization or changes in their usage. They may also ascend through contact with other languages. Borrowing by contrast, refers more to the adoption of linguistic elements such as words, sounds, syntactic patterns, discourse markers and even stylistic conventions, from one language into another.

The central argument here in this paper is that innovation and borrowing in the languages and dialects of Northeast India must be understood as both linguistic and socio-cultural processes. They not only effect the structural assembly of languages, but they also reveal how speakers of the particular languages respond to changing relations of power, mobility, education, technology and identity. Borrowing may enrich a language by

The Expression: An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal

(A Peer Reviewed and Indexed Journal with Impact Factor 6.4)

www.expressionjournal.com ISSN: 2395-4132

intensifying its expressive range, but it may also contribute to the marginalization of hereditary forms when dominant languages become socially significant. In a similar way innovation may signal vitality and adaptability, but it may also point at pressure from larger linguistic systems. The study of these processes therefore offers important insight into the cultural pliability and vulnerability of the region's lesser-known languages.

Theoretical Framework:

This paper is based on several interrelated theoretical perspectives like, language contact theory, borrowing theory, linguistic ecology, linguistic relativity, code-switching theory, socio-cultural identity theory, linguistic power and language-shift theory. These frameworks make it possible to examine structural change not as a secluded grammatical process but as a social, cultural and ecological phenomenon. In Northeast India, where multilingualism is a historical condition rather than an exception, such a cohesive theoretical approach is necessary for understanding how lesser-known languages adapt to changing communicative environments.

The first theoretical approach in this regard is Uriel Weinreich's theory of language contact. Weinreich's classic position is essential because it locates contact not in abstract language systems alone but in the practices of bilingual speakers. As he argues "The extent, direction, and nature of influence of one language upon another can be explained also, and sometimes more convincingly, in terms of the speech behaviour of bilingual individuals" (Weinreich xxxii). This formulation is useful for Northeast India because borrowing and innovation often begin within the everyday multilingual interactions, market speech, school discourse, administrative encounters, interethnic communication, digital messaging and youth registers. Contact induced change must therefore be studied through speakers, domains and social relations, not only through formal comparison of grammars.

The second theoretical approach is Einar Haugen's theory of linguistic borrowing. Haugen insists that borrowing cannot be understood without bilingualism, stating that "all borrowing by one language from another is predicated on some minimum of bilingual mastery of the two languages" and that "the analysis of borrowing must therefore begin with an analysis of the behaviour of bilingual speakers" (Haugen, 210). The above statement, can explain the extent of variation in the lexical and structural borrowing in Northeast India. Communities that have more frequent bilingual interactions with Assamese, Bengali, Hindi, English, or nearby tribal languages tend to show more visible borrowing. As can be seen borrowing involves more than just linguistic transfer, it includes bilingual proficiency, reflects on social evidence of contact intensity and the necessity for communication.

A third theoretical perspective is found in Haugen's ecological model. Haugen here defines language ecology as "the study of interactions between any given language and its environment" (Haugen, Ecology 325). When looked in context of the above statement, the "environment" of a language thus includes speakers, institutions, other languages, social functions, attitudes and areas of use. For lesser-known languages in Northeast India, ecology is especially pertinent because survival depends not only on grammar but also on the functional spaces of the language. This shows that a language can be structurally rich but can still become endangered because of its ecology of contacts.

The fourth view point considers the interaction and connection between language, culture and worldview. Edward Sapir's concept becomes important in this area where language serves as a repository for oral traditions, ritual classifications, environmental knowledge and shared memories. He asserts that "Language is a guide to 'social reality',"

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and “the ‘real world’ is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group” (Sapir, 209). This insight supports the claim that structural change in lesser-known languages is never simply formal. When a community loses inherited terms for land, kinship, ritual or oral tradition, it may also lose culturally specific ways of establishing experience. The reinforcement of the above statement is also found in cultural view of language where he states that “Speech is a human activity that varies without assignable limit as we pass from social group to social group, because it is a purely historical heritage of the group, the product of long-continued social usage” (Sapir, “Language” 2). This observation is particularly relevant to Northeast India because the region’s lesser-known languages are not only communication systems but also historical inheritances shaped by migration, settlement, ecological adaptation, and intercommunity exchange. Their structural features therefore carry traces of collective history.

Benjamin Lee Whorf’s concept of linguistic relativity provides a theoretical support if applied in a cautionary way rather than deterministic manner. Whorf states that “the background linguistic system (in other words, the grammar) of each language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of ideas” (Whorf, 212). This does not imply, that speakers are captivated by grammar. But it implies that grammatical and lexical frameworks shape categorization of social surroundings, ceremonial activities and cultural interpretations. Because of this borrowing and innovation transformation occurs not only within the structures but also in the ways in which people interpret information.

The fifth theoretical viewpoint originates from code-switching and markedness theory. Conversational according to Gumperz’s code-switching is “the juxtaposition within the same speech exchange of passages of speech belonging to two different grammatical systems or subsystems” (Gumperz 59). This definition is significant because it views code-switching as a formal structured communicative practice rather than a linguistic failure. Myers-Scotton’s markedness model builds on this understanding that code selection has a social significance, where individuals choose codes based on expected or marked sets of rights and obligations during interactions. When applied in context with Northeast India, this model explains why younger generation alternates between a mother tongue and other languages like, English, Hindi, Assamese or Bengali in a deliberate manner rather than randomly. Code-switching also becomes a signifier of education, modernity, intimacy, solidarity, distance, aspiration or ethnic belonging. This shows that mixed speech does not indicate deterioration of a language but it serves as a conversational tactic which allows speakers to navigate and align themselves with various social environments.

The sixth viewpoint is socio-cultural identity theory, with significant contributions from Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall. Identity as defined by them is “produced in linguistic interaction,” and identities are “relationally constructed through several, often overlapping, aspects of the relationship between self and other” (Bucholtz and Hall 585). This is important because structural borrowing often carries identity value. When speakers use English vocabulary within Khasi syntax, Assamese inclined constructions in Bodo or Bengali lexical items in Bishnupriya Manipuri, they are not only moving linguistic material across boundaries. They are also aligning themselves in relation to tradition, modernity, locality, education, ethnicity and mobility.

The seventh perspective addresses the relationship between language and power. Pierre Bourdieu contends that “linguistic exchanges” are also “relations of symbolic power in which the power relations between speakers or their respective groups are actualized” (Bourdieu 38). This insight is important for understanding why borrowing from mainstream

languages like English, Hindi, Assamese or Bengali may carry different social meanings as compared to borrowing from among smaller neighbouring languages. Dominant languages often hold institutional capital through schooling, administration, media, employment and state authority. Their influence therefore cannot be treated as unbiased contact alone, it must also be read as a part of the unequal linguistic markets.

The eighth theoretical perspective focuses on language maintenance and language shift. Joshua Fishman's work is especially applicable because it emphasizes intergenerational transmission and the cultural penalties of language loss. Fishman warns that when a language is detached from its cultural base, communities lose "its greetings, its curses, its praises, its laws, its literature, its songs, its riddles, its proverbs, its cures, its wisdom, its prayers" (Fishman 72). This is vital to the argument of this paper. The danger that the lesser-known languages are facing is not borrowing in itself, but the weakening of the cultural and intergenerational systems through which local languages carry oral tradition, ecological knowledge, ritual memory and community history.

Taken together, these theories show that linguistic innovation and borrowing must be read at numerous levels. At the structural level, they touch phonology, lexicon, morphology, syntax, and discourse. At the social level, they imitate bilingualism, prestige, education and mobility. At the ecological level, they disclose shifts in domains of use. At the cultural level, they redesign the understanding of communities related to continuity, authenticity and belonging. This paper therefore approaches the lesser-known languages of Northeast India as dynamic cultural-linguistic systems rather than static fragments of the past.

Conceptual Framework:

Linguistic innovation and borrowing are closely related, but not identical. Innovation refers to the creation, extension or restructuring of forms within a language. A community may innovate by generating new vocabulary for technological objects, extending older words into new domains, simplifying grammatical forms or developing new patterns of code-switching in multilingual speech. On the other hand, borrowing involves the amalgamation of material from another language. The material in this context may be phonological, lexical, morphological, syntactic, semantic or pragmatic. These two processes often overlap in contact situations. A borrowed word may be phonologically improved to fit into the sound system of the receiving language. A borrowed construction may also generate new syntactic possibilities. A code-switched phrase may gradually become stylized as a part of the ordinary speech. Here we can see that what begins as a peripheral borrowing may therefore become an interior innovation once speakers normalize it within the receiving language. Borrowing may occur at different levels of organizational depth. Superficial borrowing typically involves the acceptance of verbal items without major changes to the receiving language's grammar. For example, words connected with education, administration, technology, religion or market discussion are often borrowed because they denote new institutions or concepts. Deeper borrowing occurs when contact effects the phonological system, word order, case-marking patterns, clause structure or morphological organization of a language. Such cases are especially significant because they indicate sustained bilingualism or prolonged sociolinguistic pressure.

In Northeast India, both superficial and deeper forms of borrowing are common because multilingualism is an existing reality for the communities. Speakers may use a home language within the family, a regional lingua franca in the market, Hindi or English in education and administration and multiple local languages in interethnic settings. This

layered multilingualism generates conditions in which innovation and borrowing become ordinary instruments of communication. At the same time, these mechanisms raise important questions about identity and conservation. If borrowed forms become dominant, hereditary vocabulary and grammatical patterns may decline. But, if communities reject borrowing completely in the name of purity, they may supervise the historically adaptive nature of their own linguistic traditions.

The linguistic diversity of Northeast India is engrained in complex histories of relocation, settlement, ecological variation and intercultural conversation. Tibeto-Burman-speaking communities, Indo-Aryan-speaking populations, Austroasiatic groups and Tai-speaking communities have intermingled across hills, valleys, riverine corridors, trade routes and political boundaries. These interactions have produced not only multilingual aptitude but also created a structural junction among languages that are genealogically discrete.

Migration has been predominantly important in shaping the region's linguistic ecosystem. Communities entering the region at different historical instants carried their languages, ritual systems, oral narratives and social institutions with them. Over time, these linguistic ethnicities came in contact with neighbouring groups. Trade, agriculture, warfare, marriage alliances, religious conversion and colonial administration further deepened language exchange. The resultant of which is a region where linguistic margins are often absorbent and the structural profile of a language reflects both hereditary features and contact persuaded alteration.

The sociolinguistic position of lesser-known languages differs significantly. Some have documented literary traditions and institutional sustenance, while others remain primarily oral and are used in moderately constrained areas. Many communities face pressure from locally dominant languages such as Assamese, Bengali, Hindi, English or other lingua francas. In such circumstances, language shift may occur progressively when younger speakers associate dominant languages with education, employment, urban life and social agility. However, shift is rarely a simple relinquishment of one language for another. More often, speakers move across linguistic repertoires, creating mixed forms that reflect both steadiness and change. This obscures any simple disagreement between preservation and change.

Phonological borrowing occurs when a language integrates sounds, stress patterns, intonation patterns or tonal structures from another language. In multilingual areas of Northeast India, such change may rise because of continuous contact, bilingual speech and frequent accommodation among speakers. Phonological influence is often indirect. It may appear as the variation of borrowed words to the sound system of the receiving language or as steady merger in articulation among neighbouring communities. One such example can be seen in the form of the influence of neighbouring Indo-Aryan languages on minor Tibeto-Burman languages. In contact regions, speakers may include new phonic patterns through loanwords, schooling, religious practice or everyday interaction. These changes do not simply modify pronunciation but they may also affect how speakers see linguistic stature. A pronunciation associated with a dominant language may be treated as modern while older phonological features may become associated with ruralism or tradition.

Lexical borrowing is the most noticeable form of language contact. Words relating to administration, technology, education, religion, trade, governance and media frequently transfer from dominant languages into smaller languages. English, Hindi, Assamese and Bengali have underwritten many such items to local terminologies across Northeast India. In some cases, borrowed words fill lexical gaps formed by new social truths. In others,

borrowed forms substitute existing native terms because the donor language conveys greater institutional prestige. As can be seen in the borrowing of terms such as “computer,” “school,” “government” or “market”, they may appear superficial, yet its collective effect is significant. When borrowed vocabulary becomes intense in modern domains, the receiving language may begin to seem less suitable for education, technology or governance. This perception can quicken language shift. Equally, communities may indigenize borrowed vocabulary and make it part of a transformed expressive system. The social meaning of borrowing therefore rests on how speakers use, assess and transmit the borrowed forms.

Borrowed items often experience morphological adaptation within the receipt language. A loanword may take innate plural markers, case markers, tense-aspect markers or derivational affixes. This development shows that borrowing does not necessarily weaken the receiving language’s grammar. On the contrary, the incorporation of borrowed material into native morphology may validate the continuing strength of the host system. In several Tibeto-Burman languages of Northeast India, borrowed words from Indo-Aryan languages or English have merged into local patterns of affixation and articulation. Such adaptation is mainly visible when English or Hindi verbs are used within native syntactic frames. A borrowed lexical root may be joint with native auxiliaries or inflectional markers, producing a hybrid form that is structurally local even when its lexical source is exterior. These forms reveal the creativity of multilingual speakers and the capacity of local grammars to engross new material.

Syntactic borrowing is more challenging to identify than lexical borrowing, but it is often more important. It may include changes in word order, clause association, relative clause formation, use of particles, case-marking patterns or discourse structure. Such borrowing usually involves intense contact and continuous bilingualism. In languages such as Bodo, contact with Assamese has been testified to influence certain sentence patterns in informal or bilingual situations. Where Assamese functions as a language of education, administration or regional communication, speakers may transmit its syntactic habits to Bodo speech. This does not suggest that Bodo loses its grammatical identity in total. Rather, it suggests that speakers may select from multiple grammatical repertoires depending on setting, audience, and social resolve. Kuki-Chin languages provide another important place for studying this syntactic innovation. In some contexts, relative and correlative clause structures appear to imitate contact with neighbouring languages such as Bangla and other Tibeto-Burman varieties. A structure resembling “the man who came from the mountain, he is my brother” may show a more obvious correlative structure than older dense relative constructions. Such examples prove how clause structure can become a site of contact-induced innovation.

Code-switching has become a prominent feature of multilingual communication in Northeast India, especially among younger speaker of the urban communities, and digitally connected groups. Young speakers switch between English, Hindi, Assamese, Bengali and local languages within a single discussion or written message spontaneously. In digital communication, traditional expressions are often combined with modern ones, where abbreviations, emojis and other transliterated forms become a seamless part of the messages. One finds that digital code-switching complicates older models of language conservation. On one hand, it may reduce the use of inherited lexis and formal grammatical structures. On the other hand, it may produce new spaces for local languages on digital platforms. A language that seems marginalized in formal institutions may continue to be actively embraced in the form of digital intimacy. The task for language preservation is therefore not only to document

older forms but also to comprehend how younger speakers are restructuring language in modern communicative environments.

Khasi, an Austroasiatic language spoken primarily in Meghalaya, exemplifies the multifaceted effects of borrowing in a multilingual environment. Khasi has long intermingled with neighbouring languages and English, especially through education, christianity, administration and urban life. English lexical items have become common in current Khasi speech, particularly in areas such as schooling, bureaucracy, technology and popular culture. Among younger speakers, code-switching between Khasi and English functions as a marker of urban identity and educational mobility. Such switching echoes the social value attached to English, but it also reveals the flexibility of Khasi speakers in adapting their language to new domains. The concern, however, is that excessive dependence on English may weaken the transmission of traditional vocabulary, oral genres and culture specific expressions. Khasi therefore shows how borrowing can be both a resource and a challenge as it increases the communicative possibilities while raising questions about linguistic continuity.

Meitei or Manipuri Meitei, also known as Manipuri, which has a long history of contact with neighbouring Tibeto-Burman languages, Indo-Aryan languages and more recently Hindi and English. Its linguistic history replicates the political and cultural centrality of Manipur as well as its connections with surrounding hill communities and wider South Asian networks. In contemporary settings, Meitei speakers often include Hindi and English terms in their everyday speech. This is particularly visible in digital communication, where modern expressions coexist with traditional forms. Such innovation produces a hybrid linguistic environment in which speakers convert local identity and wider national or global affiliation. The structural effects of borrowing may include lexical expansion, shifts in register and changes in discourse style. At the same time, Meitei remains an important vehicle of cultural memory, literature, performance and identity. Its case demonstrates that contact induced change need not be understood only as erosion.

Bodo, is a Tibeto-Burman language of the Bodo-Garo subgroup, which has experienced constant contact with Assamese and other regional languages. This contact is visible in lexical borrowing and in some bilingual settings, in its syntactic impact. Because Assamese has historically held important roles in education, administration, print culture and regional communication, its influence on Bodo-speaking communities has been noteworthy. Borrowing from Assamese has enriched Bodo vocabulary, especially in current social domains. However, it also created a pressure on native lexical resources where borrowed items are favoured even when equivalent Bodo terms exist. Syntactic influence is especially important because it proposes deeper contact which goes beyond vocabulary. When bilingual speakers replicate Assamese like clause patterns or discourse particles in Bodo speech, they disclose how language contact functions through everyday usage rather than formal instruction alone. The Bodo case highlights the necessity to scrutinize borrowing within its institutional setting. A language may be structurally affected not simply because speakers appreciate another language, but because schools, markets, administration and media create unequal conditions of linguistic use.

Tai languages in Northeast India, including Tai Ahom and Tai Phake, inhabit a distinctive position because they are historically connected to the larger Tai-Kadai linguistic world while being embedded in the contact zones of Assam and adjoining regions. Their structural development replicates interaction with the neighbouring Indo-Aryan and Tibeto-Burman languages. Tonal and phonological modification in Tai languages has often been discussed as part of their adaptation to new linguistic environments. Contact with Assamese

and other neighbouring languages has influenced pronunciation patterns, tonal distinctions and lexical choices. Such changes are important because tone carries both grammatical and lexical significance in Tai languages. Any alteration in tonal patterns therefore disturbs not only sound but also the symbolic distinctiveness of the language. For Tai communities, language is closely tied to historical memory and cultural connections. Structural change may thus generate inconsistency. On one side, adaptation permits speakers to participate in broader regional communication. On the other side, the weakening of older phonological or tonal distinctions may diminish a marker of Tai identity. Tai Ahom and Tai Phake therefore show how phonological innovation can become part of a broader compromise between cultural continuity and contact induced alteration.

Bishnupriya Manipuri, an Indo-Aryan language spoken in parts of Northeast India and adjoining regions, presents a convincing example of lexical borrowing and identity negotiation. The language has been influenced by Bengali, Assamese and Meitei due to historical proximity, relocation, social contact and regional multilingualism. Borrowed vocabulary is especially visible in everyday spheres. Such borrowing reflects the realistic needs of speakers who participate in multiple linguistic communities. A Bishnupriya Manipuri speaker may use borrowed Bengali or Assamese terms not because the native language lacks expressive power, but because these terms carry immediate significance in shared social and institutional contexts. Borrowing can therefore reinforce intercommunity communication and support social mobility. The lexical dependence on dominant neighbouring languages may decrease the use of inherited vocabulary. Bishnupriya Manipuri thus exemplifies the double role of borrowing where it is both an instrument of adaptation and a possible pathway toward linguistic weakening. A balanced approach to preservation would document older vocabulary while also recognizing the living multilingual authenticity of its speakers.

Hruso-Aka and Koro, spoken in Arunachal Pradesh, represent the challenges faced by smaller languages. These languages are closely tied to community identity, oral tradition and local knowledge of the local community. Yet they exist in a sociolinguistic environment where Hindi, Assamese, English and regionally dominant languages often carry greater recognized value. Borrowing in Hruso-Aka and Koro includes vocabulary from Hindi, Assamese, Nyishi or other neighbouring languages, particularly in domains related to public life. This borrowing reflects on the need to communicate in changing social contexts. However, when younger speakers favour dominant languages for education and employment, borrowing may become part of a broader shift away from the smaller language. The threat is not borrowing itself, but the collapse of intergenerational transmission. If children no longer learn traditional stories, songs, ritual vocabulary, ecological terminology and everyday grammar in the home and community, the language may lose cultural depth even if some words last.

The Kuki-Chin languages, spoken across parts of Northeast India, Bangladesh and Myanmar, offer important sign for syntactic innovation under situations of contact. In some Kuki-Chin varieties, relative and correlative sections appear to have developed or shifted through contact with neighbouring languages, including Bangla and other Tibeto-Burman languages. The example of Mro-Khimi is especially appropriate for understanding how syntactic borrowing may function. A correlative pattern in which a relative clause is followed by an obvious resumptive or supporting clause which reflects the contact influence. Such constructions create a more intricate clause structures and differ from older compact patterns. They show that borrowing affects not only vocabulary but also the sentence formations.

These syntactic innovations also give rise to cultural questions. Clause structure may seem grammatical, but it shapes the narrative style. If traditional narrative forms are altered through constant contact, oral storytelling practices also change.

The role of English in Northeast India is very complex. English is associated with the dominant spheres of everyday life. Its status has encouraged extensive borrowing across several local or lesser-known languages. English nouns and verbs are frequently introduced into indigenous grammatical frames, producing forms that are neither simply English nor simply local. These mixed constructions disclose how speakers are adapting global vocabulary to local syntax. Hindi also exercises its growing impact through national media, schooling, migration, administration and popular culture. In many communities, Hindi vocabulary is used for everyday interaction with outsiders. Assamese and Bengali have historically influenced neighbouring languages with the help of regional administration, print culture, trade, migration and education. The impact is particularly visible in border zones and multilingual settlements. These contact languages do not affect all communities equally. Their influence depends on various things such as geography, schooling, religion, media exposure, political history and economic mobility. For some speakers, borrowing from English or Hindi may indicate ambition and modernism.

Discussion:

Language is not only a means of communication but it is also a repository of collective memory. In Northeast India, many lesser-known languages encode genealogies, migration histories, ecological classifications, ritual practices, agricultural knowledge, myths, songs and oral epics. When these languages experience structural change, the consequences extend beyond grammar. Borrowing and innovation may reshape how communities talk about the past, classify the environment, perform rituals and imagine belonging. However, language identity should not be associated with linguistic purity. No language in a contact zone remains unaffected. The history of Northeast India shows that languages have always interacted, borrowed, adapted and changed. A conservation model based only on recovering an imagined pure form may fail to involve younger speakers whose linguistic lives are already multilingual. More productive preservation strategies should identify both hereditary forms and contemporary innovations. Effective revival requires community participation. Documentation projects should not only record vocabulary and grammar but also stories, songs, proverbs, ritual speech, children's games, place names and ecological terminology. Bilingual education can also help younger speakers develop competence in both their heritage language and wider contact languages. Digital tools can support in building archives, mobile dictionaries, keyboards, podcasts, community storytelling platforms and online learning materials. Importantly, revitalization should be directed by communities themselves, with linguists, educators and institutions serving as collaborators rather than external authorities. Policy support is also essential as smaller languages need recognition in education, cultural programming, local administration and public media

The examples conferred upon in this paper demonstrate that innovation and borrowing are fundamental to the structural evolution of lesser-known languages in Northeast India. These processes affect multiple linguistic domains like phonology, lexicon, morphology, syntax, discourse, and digital communication. Borrowing remains superficial when it is limited to vocabulary, but it becomes structurally deep when it effects clause patterns, tonal systems, affixation and discourse organization. The cultural meaning of borrowing thus depends on the context. Haugen's distinction between individual bilingual

behaviour and established language borrowing is useful here as it explains how irregular speech forms may slowly become a part of the receiving language. Field's later synthesis of borrowing theory makes this point clearly where he states that "languages borrow words because individual speakers have at one time borrowed them" (Field 4). This clarifies that structural changes begin in practice before they become a part of the recognized system of language. In some cases, borrowing supports flexibility by allowing a language to name new realities and remain useful in changing circumstances. In other cases, borrowing contributes to erosion when it substitutes inherited forms and accompanies a decline in transmission. The same linguistic process can therefore have different outcomes. The region also challenges stationary models of linguistic identity. Communities do not preserve identity simply by counterattacking all external influence. They preserve identity by adapting inherited resources to new conditions. A speaker who uses English vocabulary within Khasi syntax, Assamese influenced expressions within Bodo or Bengali loanwords within Bishnupriya Manipuri may still be contributing towards a local linguistic tradition. The question that arises is that whether such hybrid usage coexists with sustained knowledge of older forms or replaces them entirely. This means that language contact in Northeast India should be premeditated through an interdisciplinary lens. Weinreich's prompt that language contact must be associated to "the socio-cultural setting in which languages are in contact" is especially important with reference to this area because structural borrowing cannot be separated from everyday life of an individual. Structural analysis must therefore be combined with ethnography, oral history, folklore studies, education policy and cultural ecology. Such an approach can reveal how grammatical change traverses' social aspiration, cultural memory and community survival.

Conclusion:

The lesser-known languages of Northeast India form a multifaceted linguistic tapestry shaped by migration, contact, innovation and borrowing. Their structural features cannot be explained through genetic classification or internal grammatical development alone. They must be understood within multilingual ecologies where speakers frequently negotiate between heritage and modernity, local identity and regional mobility, cultural continuity and communicative adaptation. Linguistic innovation and borrowing have changed these languages in significant ways. They have introduced new vocabulary, altered phonological patterns, encouraged morphological adaptation, influenced syntax and expanded digital expressive practices. These changes establish the vitality and creativity of speakers. Yet they also raise apprehensions about language endangerment, especially where dominant languages deteriorate intergenerational transmission and reduce the use of traditional forms. The study of innovation and borrowing in these languages thus contributes to a broader understanding of how minority language communities respond to social change. In Northeast India, language remains a powerful marker of memory, identity and belonging. Its changing structures reveal not only grammatical transformation but also the continuing struggle of communities to preserve cultural uniqueness in an interconnected world.

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