STUDYING THE ADJECTIVES OF TAI-PHAKE,

AN ENDANGERED LANGUAGE OF ASSAM

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ABSTRACT

An endangered language is a language that is at the verge of extinction for factors like its speakers' shift to another language. Language endangerment is a major concern of contemporary world. History and culture of a particular society is passed down through its language. Due to this, when a language dies, it may take with it important information about the early history of the community. Language experts and linguists are working closely with communities of endangered languages around the world in an attempt to preserve these languages. They are trying to offer help with language documentation, maintenance, and revival so that even if the language dies due to some reason, the knowledge of the language will still survive. Tai-Phake is one such language of Assam with a speaker of around 2000 (17th edition, Ethnologue, 2013). It is one of the six languages of Tai- kadai language family. Till date various researchers and linguists have worked on this language. However, it is still comparatively lesser studied and lesser documented language of Tai- kadai language family. In this paper an attempt will be made to give a detailed description of the Adjectives found in Tai-Phake. Adjectives are described as expressions *that alter, clarify, or adjust the meaning contributions of nouns*. They are used in the grammatical classification of words to refer to the main set of items, and they specify the attributes of nouns. This paper presents the semantic protypes of adjectives. This paper will also touch upon adjective reduplication process available in this language.

Keywords: Language endangerment, adjectives, Tai- phake

1.1 Introduction

Endangered language, also known as moribund language is *a language that is at risk of disappearing as its speakers die out or shift to speaking other languages* (Wikipedia.) Even though death of a language is a pertinent issue throughout human history however at present, they are disappearing rapidly due to various interlinked socio- economic and socio-political factors like globalization, migration, cultural replacement, imperialism and neocolonialism.

Ethnologue's 2005 survey of world languages gives a total 6,912 languages, of which 32.8% (2,269) were in Asia, and 30.3% (2,092) in Africa. Out of these languages many of the lesser-known languages are being replaced by other dominant languages that are more widely used in the region or nation. For example, in USA English replaces many native languages, the way that many of the regional languages of India is replaced by dominant language like Hindi. If this situation continues 80% of these endangered languages may vanish within the next century. Today, there are many such languages that are no longer being learned by new generations of its speakers and eventually these languages will become extinct with the death of its last speakers.

UNESCO's *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* categorises 2,473 languages by level of endangerment. In this work, UNESCO has presented six types of endangered language.

- Extinct: These are the languages that has no speakers left
- Critically endangered: These are the languages used by the grandparents and older, and they speak the language partially and infrequently

- Severely endangered: Such languages are spoken by grandparents and older generations. While the parent generation may understand it, they do not speak it to children or among themselves

- Definitely endangered: Children no longer learn such language as mother tongue in the home.

- Vulnerable: Most children speak the language, but it may be restricted to certain domains like home.

- Safe / Not Endangered: Is spoken by all generations and intergenerational transmission is uninterrupted

Though there is no definite parameter for identifying a language as endangered, UNESCO's 2003 document entitled *Language vitality and endangerment* outlines nine factors for determining language vitality:

1. Intergenerational language transmission

2. Absolute number of speakers

3. Proportion of speakers existing within the total (global) population

4. Language use within existing contexts and domains

5. Response to language use in new domains and media

6. Availability of materials for language education and literacy

7. Government and institutional language policies

8. Community attitudes toward their language

9. Amount and quality of documentation

Worldwide there are many languages having thousands of speakers but are endangered because new generation of children are no longer learning the language or may be because its speakers have shifted their affiliation to other dominant language. This is the case with Tai- Ahom language of Assam. It is a language of Tai- kadai language family. Now *more than a million people claim Tai ethnicity. However, over ninety-nine percent of these are Tai Ahoms who no longer maintain Tai as a spoken language*. This language is used only during religious function, marriage etc. as it got replaced by other dominant languages of Assam.

The Tai-Kadai language family consists of six language communities- Tai-Ahom, Tai -Khamti, Tai-Turung, Tai-Phake, Tai-khamyang and Tai-Aiton. Among these, Tai-Phake is comparatively lesser studied and lesser documented. Moran (2010) finds only 1426 Tai-phake speakers in the nine Phake villages of Assam which also indicates that this language is in the verge of extinction and needs immediate attention. Moseley, C. (2010) also categorises Tai-Phake as severely endangered language. This can be verified by Intergenerational language transmission factor given in Language vitality and endangerment (2003). Tai phake is a severely endangered language as this language is mostly used by the grandparental and older generations. On the other hand, in the parameter of language use within existing contexts and domains Tai-phake has third degree of endangerment which is 'dwindling domains' as the

language is used in home domains and in some ceremonial functions only. Currently, even home domain is penetrated by other dominant languages.

In the parameter of availability of materials for language education and literacy Tai phake comes under group two which indicate that in Tai Phake 'written materials exist, but they may only be useful for some member of the community, and for others, they may have a symbolic significance.' This language is not a part of the school curriculum. This language follows the Tai script and has a unique syntactic structure. It is an agglutinating language. It has monosyllabic morphemes (Edmondson and Solnit, 1997 a:7). There are16 consonants and 09 Vowels in this language (Moran 2010). This paper explores the Adjectives of Tai Phake language.

Adjectives are described as expressions 'that alter, clarify, or adjust the meaning contributions of nouns''. They are used in the grammatical classification of words to refer to the main set of items, and they specify the attributes of nouns. Linguists have given four characteristics for defining this word class in English language.

- They can occur within the noun phrase as modifiers of their head nouns and function in the 'attributive' position. For example: the beautiful girl.
- They can occur in the post-verbal or 'predicative' position. For example: the girl is beautiful
- They can be pre-modified by an intensifier like very. For example: the very beautiful girl
- They can be used in a comparative and superlative form, either by inflection or periphrastically.

Dixon (1991) in his work presents ten semantic types of adjectives in English language. Abbi (1992) add two more types of adjectives to this list. This list with twelve semantic prototypes is given below:

	Semantic Types	Examples
1	Dimension	big, great, short, thin
2	Physical property	hard, strong, clean, sick
3	Speed	quick, fast, slow, sudden
4	Age	New, young, old, modern
5	Colour	White, black, red, blue
6	Value	Good, bad, strange, odd
7	Difficulty	Easy, difficult, tough, simple

8	Qualification	Definite, possible, normal
9	Human propensity	Angry, happy, eager, clever
10	Similarity	Like, unlike, similar, different
11	Taste	Sweet, sour, bitter, hot
12	Quantifiers	Two, twice, both, same

1.2. Literature Review

Bandhumedha, B. (1987) in his work *The Phake-English-Thai Dictionary*, a key work on Tai Phake. The dictionary was a collaborative effort with Phake informant Ai Ney Ken Gohain. It aimed in describing the phonology and tonal system of Tai Phake.

Buragohain, Y. (1981) and (1998) listed the Tai divisions of time and presented Phake texts with a non-phonemic "transliteration".

Gogoi (1994) in his PhD work on *Morphological Study of the Tai Phake Language* presents a comprehensive study of the tonal differences that exist in Tai Phake language.

Gohain, A. K. (1991) is a valuable sketch of the socio-linguistics, phonology and syntax of Tai Phake, which Aimya Khang spells as <Phakae>. Aimya Khang Gohain (1991 :47) discussed the phonology of Tai Phake. He writes '*The one-time mighty Ahoms have lost their language. So also the Khamjangs and the Turungs. They still have a chance for revival or at least regain to some extent their lost language through the Phakaes, and also the Khamtis and the Aitons. The Phakaes are also now in the threshold of being lost, unless the Ahoms and the Government come to help.*'

Gohain, A. K. (1997) is a text book for teaching Ahom script but with Phake tones and grammar. Words are introduced in Ahom script with a tone mark in Assamese and then the meaning in Assamese and English.

Kingcom (1992) is essentially a comparison of Tai Phake with Standard Thai, which is his own native variety. There is a data set of 495 sentences which were presumably elicited and compared with Kingcom's own variety (Standard Thai).

Morey, S. (2005) in his book *The Tai Languages of Assam- a Grammar and Texts* presents a descriptive grammar of the Tai languages of Assam. This work includes a comprehensive information on Tai -Phake language.

Sharma ,T. (1982) is essentially an anthropological study of the Tai Phake, and does not claim to be a linguistic study. He did, however, reproduce a number of texts, with translations. The translations appear to be good, but the transcription of the Tai Phake missed both vowel and tonal distinctions.

Wilaiwan (1983) on Tai Phake Word Order**,** observed an ongoing shift in word order from SVO to SOV. Wilaiwan observed that Tai Phake was in a state of changing from SVO to SOV. As for present-day Phake, the form of the sentences is both SVO and SOV, but if we study the old manuscripts, we find the order SVO only.

1.3 Objective of the study

1.To give a detailed description of the Adjectives found in Tai Phake.

2. To throw light on the semantic protypes of adjectives.

3. To touch upon adjective reduplication process available in this language.

1.4 Methodology

The data for the present study is taken from both primary and secondary sources. The primary source includes data collected through interviews and questionnaire given to native speakers of Tai-Phake. For secondary data various reference books, newspaper, journal etc. were consulted.

2.1 Adjectives in Tai Phake

The ways of categorising word classes in Tai- Phake language is a problematic one. Realising this Grierson argued that he could not 'divide the vocabulary into parts of speech' (1904:73), and added that: 'As to what function each word performs, that is determined partly by custom. Although, theoretically, every word may perform the function of any part of speech; in practice, such is not the case'. Grierson's statement that the function is 'determined partly by custom' might be a forerunner of the approach of construction grammar, taking the view that a word does not acquire its full meaning until it is in a syntactic construction.

On the surface level, Tai- phake adjectives seems indistinguishable from verbs, and they are categorised as verbs or verbals by both Noss (1964) and Vichin Panupong (1970). However, later studies recognise adjectives as a separate class because *they can be both intransitive predicates (which nouns cannot) and can modify nouns (which verbs cannot)*. In other words,

in Tai- phake language, adjectives can be both modifiers within a noun phrase and the heads of intransitive predications.

2.2 Position of adjectives

Adjectives can occur within the noun phrase as modifiers of their head nouns and function in the 'attributive' position. For example:

toŋ   nā   kāŋ

area rice field wide

'a wide paddy-field' (Phake sentence, Banchob 1987:9)

kāŋ is one of the semantical functions of an adjective, that of an attribute of a noun.

In Tai- phake, adjectives can occur in the post-verbal or 'predicative' position also. For example:

Leng Naiŋ ne Kiaŋ

car   red BE fast

The red car is fast

2.3 Semantic prototypes of Tai Phake Adjectives:

Tai phake adjectives can be divided into the following semantic prototypes:

	Semantic Types	*Examples in English*	*Examples in Tai-Phake*
1	Dimension	big, short, thin, wide, long, small	Yāu, lɔt, yɔm, Kāŋ, Yāu, ɔn
2	Physical property	hard, strong, clean, sick, beautiful	Kheŋ, henŋ, sonŋ, khai, sɛn/cɔp
3	Speed	fast, slow, sudden	Kiaŋ, nān, momā kiaŋ
4	Age	New, young, old	maŭ, po maŭ/ po saŭ, yaŭ

5	Colour	Red, yellow, black, White	Naiŋ, lɔŋ, nam, khāu
6	Value	Good, bad	nī, minī
7	Difficulty	Easy, difficult	ŋai, Yāp,
8	Qualification	possible, normal	Jangpain, announg
9	Human propensity	Angry, happy, clever	cɔi nyut, cŭm, phāi
10	Similarity	Like, unlike, similar, different	Thukjao, mauthukjao, tu koun, mau tukoun
11	Taste	Sweet, sour, bitter, hot	Ŭan, sɔum, khum, nyut, kāt
12	Quantifiers	Two, twice, same	Nu soŋ, soŋ pɔk, kyun phau

2.4 Modification of adjectives

Adjectives can be followed by a modifier which intensifies the meaning. Phake adjectives also can be pre-modified. Specific modifiers are very often either fully or partially reduplicated intensifier. The full list of the adjectival modifiers recorded by Banchob (1987) can be found in the English-Phake word finder. The semi-reduplicated nature of these specific modifiers makes it likely that they are an open class of words.

In present research also it was found that adjectives are reduplicated to intensify the statement of the speaker. For example,

Kiaŋ

quick

Kiaŋ Kiaŋ

very quick.

Another way of expressing intensification of adjectives is to repeat the adjective in combination with waa/wā as in the following Phake phrases:

kai wā kai

(far-SAY-far)

far, far away

hāi wā hāi

(bad-SAY -bad)

very very bad (as mentioned in Morey 2005)

2.5 Agreement

Indian languages show two types of gender, number or person agreement. In some languages adjectives agree with the noun they modify in gender, number or person and in some other they stay invariant. Tai – phake falls into second category of languages. In I,t there is no gender, number or person agreement. For example,

luksau nī

girl good

good girl

lukon nī

boy good

Good boy

lukasu khau nī

girl PRT good

good girls

lukon khau nī

boy PRT good

good boys

2.6 Degrees

In Tai phake adjectives can be used in both comparative and superlative form. However, unlike English here this change in degree can be done only periphrastically. For example,

Sita ne cɔp

Sita PRT beautiful

Sita is beautiful

Sita   khen   cɔp   Gita

Sita   COMP   beautiful   Gita

Sita is more beautiful than Gita

Sita   kham tinŋ lounŋ   khen   cɔp

Sita   SUP   COMP   beautiful

Sita is the most beautiful girl

3. Conclusion

Examining some of the nine factors mentioned in UNESCO's 2003 *Language vitality and endangerment* parameter for determining degree of endangerment of a language in the context of Tai-Phake, it is evident that Tai- phake comes under severely endangered group of language. However, it has a unique adjective morphology. Here, adjectives come after nouns in a sentence. This language has twelve class of adjective protypes. There is no gender, person, or number agreement with adjectives. Also, changes in degree of adjectives can be made only periphrastically.

During our study it was found that there is lack of research conducted on Tai- phake morphology. Only a few grammar and other related works are available with the community. As it is categorised in UNESCO's Endangered language group, it needs immediate action on the part of stakeholders for preservation and continuation of rich culture and heritage of this community.

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