

**'STANDARD' ASSAMESE: A SOCIO-HISTORICAL  
INVESTIGATION**

*Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the award of the degree of*

**MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY**

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**2001**

## DECLARATION BY THE CANDIDATE

This dissertation entitled '**Standard**' Assamese: A Socio-Historical Investigation submitted by me for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy, is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of any University.

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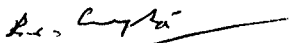
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**CERTIFICATE**

21<sup>st</sup> July 2001

Certified that this dissertation entitled " 'STANDARD' ASSAMESE: A SOCIO-HISTORICAL INVESTIGATION" submitted by Pallavi Goswami, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY, has not been submitted so far in part or full, for any other degree or diploma of this or any other University and is her original work. This may be placed before the examiners for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy.

  
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**FOR  
PAPA AND MA**

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*My sincere thanks are due to the undermentioned persons who have contributed in their own way for the successful completion of this dissertation.*

*My supervisor, Prof. R.S. Gupta for his valuable suggestions and guidance and for having been a patient teacher with me.*

*The teachers of CLE for their kind advice and best wishes*

*Rawatji and Bhagawatiji for their support*

*The people of Jorhat and Sualkuchi who had so kindly answered my numerous questions*

*The library staff of JNU and Gauhati University for assisting me in finding the required material for my research work*

*Rajat for his concern, encouragement, and help throughout*

*Nono, for being there and Niraj, for helping me in my endeavour*

*My friends Madhumita and Wricha, and in particular, Tahseen for their cooperation and support*

*Mr. M.C.Baishya and Mr.Pradip Goswami who had helped me greatly in the collection of data for my field work*

*My aunt, Mrs.Meena Goswami, on whose computer I had typed my entire dissertation*

*And last but not the least, my sincere thanks to Mr.L.N.Malik for having patiently assisted me in my reference work*

*And my parents and brother for everything*

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## Introduction

The study of language in the present context is seen as an evolving discipline, which affords numerous areas of research. It revolves around language, as it is used by native speakers communicating with each other in everyday life. Language itself is a form of social behaviour, used by human beings in a social context. It has been found that the study of language is no different from empirical investigation of other complex phenomena.

Proper analysis of human speech that began in the nineteenth century has also been motivated by the need to collect direct samples through direct methods. William Labov, whose variation studies have been significant in this field believes that "through the direct study of language in its social context, the amount of available data expands enormously, and offers us ways and means for deciding which of the many possible analyses is right"<sup>1</sup>.

The scope of language study has been further widened by the fact that every language exhibits considerable internal variation. According to Ronald Wardhaugh, "speech in almost any society can take many very different forms"<sup>2</sup>. The variation can be at different levels- lexical, phonological, morphological, syntactic, or at all these levels. Differences can also be corresponding to geographical variation, social variation, or stylistic variation.

The situation becomes more complex with the introduction of the notion of standard language. The formation and development of a standard variety

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<sup>1</sup> William Labov, 1972b, *Sociolinguistic Patterns*, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, p.202.

<sup>2</sup> Ronald Wardhaugh, 1986, *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, p. 1

raises a number of issues such as considerations of functions, uses, and status related to different varieties which will be discussed in the present study.

This study is based on the notion that each individual speech form is ultimately a variety of the language and can be characterized by those features that distinguish it from the next variety. Under investigation are the two varieties of the Assamese language, spoken in different regions, and the notion of a standard form to be followed in Assamese.

The study was conducted on the pattern of the variation studies of William Labov, John Gumperz, and Milroy. It also proceeds in a systematic manner, through a discussion of the concepts relevant for the purpose of the study. The notion of standard language in the context of the Assamese language has been analyzed and the reactions of speakers towards dialectal variation have been sought to be recorded. This study is built on the premise that attitudes toward language and language varieties also reflect perceptions of people in different regions. Such perceptions may in turn influence interaction amongst the speakers of various regional areas. In a broader context, it implies that all linguistic varieties have important implications for the way individuals regard themselves and are themselves regarded.



## CHAPTER 1

*In this chapter we attempt to delineate some of the concepts required for a proper understanding of the scope and relevance of this study in the context of the Assamese language.*

### Variety

This is one of the linguistic terms used for the purpose of the present study that requires an adequate definition. A general definition of 'variety' is in terms of a specific set of 'linguistic items' or 'human speech patterns' which we can uniquely associate with some external factor. With regard to the Assamese language, this external factor is related to geographical area, which has given rise to two major varieties of the language, the Upper Assam Variety and the Lower Assam Variety.

Fishman has said that "varieties may be regional at one time and social at another...the term 'variety' unlike the term 'dialect', indicates no particular linguistic status vis-a-vis other varieties".<sup>1</sup> According to him, variety "merely designates a member of a verbal repertoire".<sup>2</sup> Speakers of LAV are familiar with the UAV and use it as the written language.

Hudson (1980) has defined 'variety' as "a set of linguistic terms with similar distribution".<sup>3</sup> This definition allows us to treat all

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<sup>1</sup> Joshua Fishman, 1972, *Sociolinguistics- A Brief Introduction*, Newbury House Publishers, Massachusetts, p.23

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p.24

<sup>3</sup> A. Hudson, 1982, *Sociolinguistics*, Cambridge University Press, p.24

the languages of some multilingual speaker, or community, as a single variety, since all the linguistic items concerned have a similar social distribution.

In the present study too, the implication of size is immaterial to the use of this term, and here the divisions of language and dialect do not apply. It neither has any social, regional, or stylistic connotations.

### **Speech Community**

Language is a social phenomenon and we must be able to relate it to the community of users. We must also focus on “who speaks what variety of what language to whom, when, and concerning what”.<sup>4</sup> The notion of speech community requires a certain delineation of its composition and function. Various definitions have been advanced by linguists who focus on different aspects of the speech community.

The simplest definition is given by John Lyons as “all the people who use a given language (or a dialect)”.<sup>5</sup>

William Labov, who has conducted various sociolinguistic studies, have focused on shared attitudes to language and not on linguistic behaviour. He has stated that “The speech community is not defined by any marked agreement in the use of language elements, so much as by participation in a set of shared norms; these norms may be observed in overt types of

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<sup>4</sup> Joshua A. Fishman, 1972, *Sociolinguistics-A Brief Introduction*, Newbury House Publishers, Massachusetts, p.2

<sup>5</sup> John Lyons, 1970, (ed.), *New Horizons in Linguistics*, Penguin Books Ltd., Harmondsworth, p.326

evaluative behaviour, and by the uniformity of abstract patterns of variation which are invariant in respect to particular levels of usage".<sup>6</sup> The speech community in terms of such definition is a group of people who can identify themselves as part of the community and have a sense of belonging. It also implies a given range of attitudes to varieties. Sociolinguistic surveys involving elicitation of speech in significant contexts reveal that all speech communities are linguistically diverse.

John Gumperz remarks that "this diversity serve important communicative functions in signaling interspeaker attitudes and in providing information about speaker's social identities. Speech communities vary in the degree and in the nature of the linguistic relationship among intracommunity variables and it is this relationship which is most responsive to social change and most revealing of social information".<sup>7</sup>

It is necessary to point out that there is no prerequisite for people belonging to a particular speech community to speak the same language or use the linguistic forms. A common language and shared knowledge of rules for extracting the social meaning behind various kinds of communication is what is needed. This sharing does not imply a 'single body of verbal signs' and of rules for their use.

It is also essentially true that all speech communities are linguistically and socially diverse. The definition postulated by Dell Hymes of a speech

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<sup>6</sup>William Labov, 1972b, *Sociolinguistic Patterns*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, pp.120-1

<sup>7</sup>John Gumperz and Dell Hymes, (ed.), 1972, *Directions in Sociolinguistics: The Ethnography of Communication*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc, p.13

community focuses on it as a social rather than a linguistic entity. This is important for the present study since it relates language to its social context. The social significance behind language usage can be analyzed as has been done with the Assamese speech community, which constitutes a single language while allowing for variations at different levels of linguistic structure.

Hymes insists that we should note the way in which people view the language they speak, such as how they evaluate variation and maintain language boundaries. *Moreover, rules for using a language may be just as important as feelings about the language itself.*<sup>8</sup>

Hence the speech community is characterized by shared ways of speaking, and of understanding and evaluating speech. Gumperz has in another definition of speech community stated that "A speech community is any human aggregate characterized by regular and frequent social interaction by means of a shared body of verbal signs, and set off from similar aggregates by significant differences in language usage".<sup>9</sup> A speech community may thus have not one but different varieties in use among its members. Learning a language implies knowing what language can tell a person about others and others about him/her.

Speech community can be bidialectal or even multidialectal if the speakers are not required to belong to the same language or same dialect.

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<sup>8</sup> Dell Hymes, cited in Ronald W. Wardhaugh *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, UK, 1986, p.121

<sup>9</sup> John J. Gumperz, 1968, 'The Speech Community', International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, Macmillan, London, p.381

Gumperz remarks that “wherever the relation between language choice and rules of social appropriateness can be formalized, they allow us to group relevant linguistic forms into distinct dialects, styles, and occupational or other special parlances. The sociolinguistic study of speech communities deals with the linguistic similarities and differences among these speech varieties”.<sup>10</sup>

The different definitions forwarded regarding a speech community need not be reconciled with one another. They focus on different aspects of a speech community and are true of different sets of people.

An individual may therefore belong to various speech communities at the same time, but on any particular occasion will identify with only one of them. This depends on what is important in the circumstances. In all situations, shared evaluations are crucial for membership of the same speech community.

### **Language and Dialect**

The two terms have contributed much to the intricacy concerning language. There have been numerous attempts at defining ‘language’ and ‘dialect’, each description adding a different dimension to this dichotomy .

The French equivalents for these words are ‘dialecte’ referring only to regional varieties, which are written and have a literature, in relation to ‘patois’ implying regional varieties which are not written.

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<sup>10</sup> John J.Gumperz,1971,*Language in Social Groups*,Stanford University Press,Stanford,p.115

Dialects can be traced to the heterogeneous nature of language entailing differences in its varieties. They reflect variation in any aspect of language – pronunciation, morphology, syntax, vocabulary and so on, the most obvious of these is phonology while vocabulary registers the most notable differences.

Geographical distance is one of the factors leading to linguistic differences. Such regional variation is gradual. Regional varieties develop different verbal forms. This may lead to differences in vocabulary as is seen in words such as lora / āpā 'boy', k<sup>h</sup>owa / k<sup>h</sup>awa 'food' and nemu / lebu 'lime' belonging to LAV and UAV respectively. Phonology may also be affected such as k<sup>h</sup>owa / k<sup>h</sup>awa 'food' corresponding to UAV and LAV.

The term 'dialect' is often used to indicate variation which result from geographical location, but sociological features are equally important. The 'standard' languages too have their origin in a regional dialect as has been seen with regard to standard Assamese which has acquired its present status as a result of various geographical, cultural, and political reasons.

A dialect or a regional variety may in course of time come to be viewed as a social or ethnic variety. "Language' is a superordinate designation; 'dialect' is a subordinate designation."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Joshua Fishman, (ed.)1968, *Readings in the Sociology of Language*, Mouton, The Hague,p.32

The designation of the term 'language' or 'dialect' may also be led by considerations which may be more political or cultural rather than linguistic.

A language can be defined as consisting of all the varieties which share a single superposed variety which may be a standardized literary form, and which are either mutually intelligible or connected by a series of mutually intelligible varieties (Ferguson and Gumperz 1960, p.2).

The speakers of the UAV consider the LAV as 'dialects' since it does not have a written literature and is not used in formal writing.

Dialect also carries information of group membership. When we speak we tend to betray, sometimes by design and sometime unintentionally, details of our group membership which is conveyed through the particular variety of language that we speak. A regional dialect, like the LAV, can serve the role of accentuating linguistic differences between the local group and speakers of other varieties like the UAV.

Haugen remarks that "language can refer either to a single linguistic norm or to a group of related norms. A dialect is any one of the related norms comprised under the general name 'language', historically the result of either divergence or convergence."<sup>12</sup> Hence the term 'language' encompasses various dialects but not vice versa.

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<sup>12</sup> E. Haugen, cited in J.B.Pride and Janet Holmes, 1972, *Sociolinguistics: Selected Readings*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, p.99

A shared writing system may categorise a number of varieties under one language as in the case of Chinese. On the other hand political reasons may motivate speakers of intelligible varieties to claim to have a separate language.

Dialects may exist as a continuum sequentially arranged over space and some may well be mutually unintelligible.

Haugen attempts a functional distinction between them. A dialect “may be defined as an (language) undeveloped (or underdeveloped) language. It is a language that none has taken the trouble to develop into what is often referred to as a ‘standard language’”<sup>13</sup>. Thus there is a dimension of functional hierarchy implied in this definition. In our present study too, we seek to explore the social functions of the standard Assamese variety and the other regional dialects and the prestige that attaches to them.

### **Diglossia**

This term is used to describe a linguistic situation in which two different varieties of language co-exist in a speech community, each with a distinct range of social function. There is a ‘high’ variety for formal occasions and a ‘low’ variety used in informal circumstances. Each variety has its own

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<sup>13</sup> E. Haugen, 1966, ‘Dialect, Language, Nation’, American Anthropologist, pp.925-928.



specialized functions. This is a key factor in a diglossic situation in that the functions of the two varieties are kept separate and distinct. Ferguson has defined diglossia as:

Diglossia is a relatively stable situation in which, in addition to the primary dialects of the language (which may include a standard or regional standards), there is a very divergent, highly codified (often grammatically more complex) superposed variety, the vehicle of a large and respected body of written literature, either of an earlier period or in another speech community, which is learned largely by formal education and is used for most written and formal spoken purposes but is not used by any sector of the community for ordinary conversation.<sup>14</sup>

The 'high' (H) variety is associated with prestige, the 'low' (L) variety usually lacks it. Related to this "prestige valuation for the H variety, there is likely to be a strong feeling that the prestige is deserved because the H variety is more beautiful, logical, and expressive than the L variety". Hence it is put to literary and other official uses.

A similar example is seen in the case of the standard language and the regional dialect of Assamese. The UAV, considered as the written standard, enjoys the status of the 'high' variety, in which a considerable body of literature is found to exist. The LAV is considered as the 'low' variety and although certain manuscripts of early Assamese literature have been found in this variety, it is no longer employed in literature. The speakers of this variety speak the local dialect at home but use the standard language in

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<sup>14</sup> C.A.Ferguson, 1959, 'Diglossia', *Word*, 15, p.336

interaction with speakers of the UAV and on formal occasions. The UAV is taught in schools to the exclusion of the LAV. Grammars, dictionaries, and standardized texts have been written in this variety by noted authors whereas no comparable texts are available in the LAV. There is an established norm for vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation in the UAV with minor variation. Such variations are however widespread in the LAV. There are different sets of words used by the LAV speaker in different contexts, words belonging to their colloquial variety used in informal situations and those for use in formal occasions taken from the 'high' variety or the UAV. Hence in the context of the LAV community the two varieties co-exist with each having a definite role to play. Unlike some other diglossic situations existing in different parts of the world, the Assamese varieties do not mark social distinctions. There is no reference to the social hierarchy of speakers of the two varieties because there is none.

### **Indicators, Markers, and Stereotypes**

William Labov<sup>15</sup> has on the basis of his studies on sociolinguistic variation coined these terms to refer to various linguistic features, which find their relevance in the social context of interlocutors.

Indicators are features of speech, which are functions of social indices like class or region but do not vary with the style of a speaker and are beyond the speaker's control. They have little or no social significance.

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<sup>15</sup> William Labov, 1972b, *Sociolinguistic Patterns*, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, p.237.

Markers have social value attached to them and vary with group membership and style of the speaker. They can be also used in role-switching. The hypercorrection of the lower middle-class speech is a good example. People are conscious of markers and their use is related to particular groups. Use of markers may affect the listener's perception of the social qualities of the speaker. A linguistic feature used by an Assamese speaker may be an indicator of his origins and a marker of another speaker may be a presentation of a particular identity. Markers reflect the use of speech to present oneself.

Stereotypes refer to features which have become part of social consciousness and which evoke from the listener some standardized response. They are intricately linked to the verbal behaviour of particular individuals having certain social characteristics.

Speakers use such linguistic features to manipulate their language in particular contexts. Individuals may try to eliminate certain features from their speech if they recognize that they reflect undesirable social characteristics. Use of linguistic features must thus be placed in a social context. It must take into consideration the interlocutors' backgrounds, the context of the speech event, and the language attitudes of the speaker and the listener.

## Chapter 2

### Standard Language

A standard language is a variety, which has been codified for various functional purposes of a speech community. It evolves as a result of societal behaviour towards language through a process called 'standardization' which according to Stewart is "the codification and acceptance, within a community of users, of a formal set of norms defining 'correct' usage". (Stewart 1968).

Before the emergence of a language/ dialect as a standard for the other, that language/ dialect is the same as the other dialects in status. There is nothing inherent in a language that can be the index of the status of a language. According to Hudson, "standard languages are the result of a direct and deliberate intervention by society. This intervention, called 'standardization' produces a standard language where before there were just 'dialects' " <sup>1</sup>. Both Hudson and Labov agree with Haugen that there are four aspects of language development from 'dialect' to 'language', from 'vernacular' to 'standard'. <sup>2</sup>They have been mentioned as:

1 Selection of norm: The first step involves choosing a particular variety with the aim to make it a standard language. In such a selection, considerations, which are socially, politically, and economically important, play a major role.

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<sup>1</sup> R.A.Hudson, 1982, *Sociolinguistics*, Cambridge University Press, p.32.

<sup>2</sup> E. Haugen, 1966, 'Dialect, language, nation', *American Anthropologist*, Vol.68, pp. 922-935.

2. Codification of form: Dictionaries and grammars are written prescribing the rules for the correct forms which is agreed upon by all members of the speech community.

3. Elaboration of function: All major functions are conducted in the selected variety and its sphere of use is constantly enhanced.

4. Acceptance by the community: Speakers of all varieties have to accept it as the standard language. It then performs the function of “unifying” several dialect areas into a single community with one standard language. It also has a separatist role in marking the community as independent and distinct from its neighbours. Thus, at one point the standard language allures the ‘others’ to join the ‘us’, and at the other point it retracts itself by further distancing the ‘other’ from ‘us’.

In the case of standard Assamese too, a look at historical developments will provide evidence for the fact that the UAV had undergone all the above mentioned processes. This variety has acquired its present status through a period of evolution in terms of its usage and functions. Literary activities in the UAV had enhanced the popularity of this variety to a great extent. Such was the influence of the UAV that all intellectual, political, and literary work was done through this variety and the other varieties were marginalized. They were used mainly in the domestic domain. The historical developments related to this language variety becoming the ‘standard’ language of the state will be discussed in the following sections. The present study seeks to investigate the domains of usage of

the LAV and the use of UAV as the standard form through such queries as:

1. Which variety is used in speech at home with other members of the family?
2. Which language variety is taught in schools?
3. What is the form of speech used in the marketplace?
4. What is the language of books and newspapers?

The situation of a standard language and several dialects in a region can elicit stereotyped impressions or biased views which members of one group hold of representative members of a contrasting group. Standard dialects denote prestige and a higher status. Nonstandard varieties are sometimes rated as conceptually "deficient" and sociologically "deprived".<sup>3</sup> This has also been seen in the context of the UAV and LAV where speakers of the former variety view the other variety as of lower status in comparison and its speakers as 'uneducated' and 'unsophisticated'. The UAV speaker use the standard language so as to signify a higher prestige for themselves, marking off those who employ it from those who do not. In turn they themselves are criticized for misplaced pride in their speech variety. Such value judgements reflect regional bias and prejudices of particular speech groups. Before the emergence of a language/ dialect as a standard for the other, that

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<sup>3</sup> Basil Bernstein, cited in Peter Trudgill, 1974, *Sociolinguistics: An Introduction*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, p.53

language/ dialect is same as the other dialects in status. There is nothing inherent in a language that can be the index of the status of the language.

The attitude of the UAV speakers, however, does not imply that speakers of the LAV will shift to the 'prestige' dialect. Such language solidarity is a function of their group identity. Opinions along similar lines were voiced by speakers of both the varieties in response to questions such as:

1. Which variety of language is considered superior and prestigious?
2. What does the speech of each variety reflect about its speakers?

The UAV is the standard language, which exists with the local speech. One is taught in schools and is the language of the print medium while the other has its own domain of use at home. This is in contrast to popular notion that a standard language threatens to absorb all the dialects in the region.

It may be possible to characterize standard languages on linguistic grounds. Kroch argues that "non-prestige dialects tend to be articulatorily more economical than the prestige dialect".<sup>4</sup> This means that standard dialect pronunciations are likely to make more distinctions than are strictly necessary for understanding. While the present study does not make an in-depth analysis of the phonological and phonetic differences between the UAV and the LAV, it aims to conduct preliminary and basic investigations in this field. This would reveal any such variation in articulation.

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<sup>4</sup> Anthony Kroch, 1978, 'Towards a theory of social dialect variation', Language in Society, Vol.vii (1). P.20.

Linguistically, however, one variety cannot be described as better than another. All languages and 'dialects' irrespective of the fact whether they are 'standard' or 'nonstandard', are structured and rule governed and fit for communication among members of any speech community.

The LAV speakers consider their speech variety to be as 'correct' as the UAV. They concede that the 'standard' literary variety is that which is known as the UAV, and which they themselves use for all written purposes. This also goes to show that perceptions concerning the 'correctness' and 'purity' of languages are social rather than linguistic. The structure of 'dialects' cannot be based on a scale with gradations of increasing or decreasing superiority. Peter Trudgill states that "any apparent inferiority is due only to their association with speakers from under-privileged, low-status groups. In other words, attitudes towards nonstandard dialects reflect the social structure of society".<sup>5</sup> John Earl Joseph points out that the high value accorded to a standard language follows from the 'myth' that in the 'Golden Age', "all people shared a common tongue, and that the subsequent diversity of language and dialects accords with a diminution of all positive virtues from their primeval absoluteness. In so far as standardization represents a cultural effort to restore language to its pristine state, its goal will be to overcome dialectal diversity by providing the ideal medium for communication among all members of the unit of loyalty"<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Trudgill, 1974, *Sociolinguistics: An Introduction*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, p.20

<sup>6</sup> John Earl Joseph, cited in Ronald Macaulay, 1994, *The Social Art: Language and Its Uses*, Oxford University Press, p.69



Standard languages that are primarily written languages are quite differently situated with respect to their dialects. The norm sets up no opposition to the dialect, since no dialect tends to encroach upon any other. In such instances the conversational language does not coincide with the written language.

The process whereby a particular variety becomes a 'standard' language may not be planned. Its popularity, spread, and usage may be enhanced by virtue of it being the variety used in a political, social, or cultural center. It was as a political and literary center that Sibsagar district in Upper Assam had the distinction of establishing the standard language.

A standard language is normally linked to institutional support, maybe in the form of formal education and use in media and administrative offices. Inherent in the process is the normalization and codification of the language, performed by academic institutions such as universities or some other regulatory bodies.

Speakers were asked to respond to questions relating to the notion of standard, which were also expected to reveal their attitude to such a variety:

1. Can the Assamese people claim to have a standard language?
2. If so, then which variety is accepted as the standard?
3. What are the functions designated to this variety?
4. What status is associated with the standard?
5. Does a standard language imply a language distinct from the colloquial speech?

6. Is such a language used as a means of communication across other varieties?

The speaker's use of words such as dail / dali 'pulses' and lora / apa 'boy', indicated his/her preference of a particular linguistic variety and his/her attitude to dialectal variation and standard in the Assamese language. Opinion was unanimous among speakers of both the varieties that the term 'standard' Assamese is used to refer to written forms of the language which conform to the patterns of the speech variety spoken in the Upper Assam region.

It is the function of a standard language to allow the speech community to use its own language in order to participate in the developmental activities taking place in various spheres of life without having to take recourse to another language. It also serves as a frame of reference primarily in terms of language correctness.

In most cases, the written language tends to be more highly standardized than the speech of those who use it. An accepted standard for the written language can serve as a model of propriety and correctness for the speech of members of the speech community. The literary variety is superposed as standard over several spoken varieties. This influence is particularly noticeable in the more formal styles of speech. Hence when we say that a person speaks standard Assamese, we mean that the language he/she uses is more or less identical with the written standard. However, in all such cases, it is important that the standard must not only be established but must also be observed.

## Acceptability

The notion of standard language is linked to the selection of a variety and its acceptance by the speech community as "the major language of the region for general usage" (Nahir, 1977) or supra-dialectal norm "rated above regional and social dialects". (Ferguson, 1972) The standard then helps measure linguistic differentiation and variability in a speech community and plays an important role in the integration, stability, and uniformity of language for communicative needs.

Linguists have variously treated the concept of standard as a 'point' or as a 'range' of acceptable expressions. The data for linguistic analysis have been the intuitions of native speakers of the language, most importantly their judgements of the acceptability of sentences. This explains the responses of the speakers to the questionnaire and questions asked during the interview. It also explains why some identify with the standard and some others do not. A standard has thus been recognized as a range of acceptable expressions. *More the range, more the acceptability.*

A distinction has been made between *acceptability* and *grammaticality*, the former denoting the reactions of native speakers, and the latter, denoting what can be accounted for in the grammar of a language. Grammaticality, according to Lakoff (1969)<sup>7</sup> implies a binary division on what should be included or excluded from the data accounted for by the grammatical rules. Acceptability, however, need not imply a distinction between the acceptable

<sup>7</sup> Lakoff, cited in Sidney Greenbaum, 1977, *Acceptability in Language*, Contributions to the Sociology of Language, 17, Mouton, The Hague, pp.5-6.

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and the unacceptable. It can denote a continuum from the most acceptable to the least acceptable. The criterion of acceptability may also depend on sociological or psychological factors, such as the social status of the participants in the discourse and the speaker's assumptions.

Linguists have also given evidence for the notion that a sentence-based grammar cannot predict the acceptability of sentences in a discourse, since the acceptability of an utterance is relative to its verbal and non-verbal contexts. Hence, grammaticalness of sentences and acceptability of utterances should be accounted for *relative* to the structure of verbal and non-verbal context.

## CHAPTER 3

### Methodology

At this point we need to delineate the scope of the present study and the methodology involved. This can be presented in terms of the subject matter under investigation.

Firstly, the linguistic features characteristic of a dialect or regional variety are identified. Speaker's responses will then be required to such questions as:

1. Does a member of the Assamese speech community relate such linguistic items to markers of a particular variety?
2. Are the dialectal variants identifiable as such to members of different varieties?
3. How does the Assamese speaker react to dialectal variation?
4. What is the speaker's response to the notion of standard Assamese?

Secondly, it aims to study the attitude of speakers to their own variety and to the 'other' variety. Attitude here is considered as significant in understanding the speaker's behaviour towards language and its speakers.

Thirdly, this sociolinguistic information is analyzed against a historical background with a chronology of events marking the formation and development of a standard language.

The methods adopted to conduct an analysis of such topics have been:

Firstly, by eliciting responses from subjects to a questionnaire which includes the linguistic items indicating variation at the phonetic, morphological, lexical, or syntactic level.

Secondly, by interviewing subjects on dialectal variation and the notion of a standard Assamese language.

### **Variety:**

In the present study, variety will be associated with a particular region. We can view regional variation as existing along a continuum, and not as having sharp breaks from one region to the next. Our first step will be to identify the different varieties spoken in Assam and the region in which they are spoken.

### **Linguistic Variable:**

The next step involves classifying linguistic items according to the dialectal varieties and areas where they are used.

## **Methodology**

The methodology used in extracting information about language from informants plays a vital role. While no error-free rules are at the disposal of linguists, certain guidelines have been set out on the basis of research conducted in this field.

The principle governing methodology is aimed at recording casual speech in which minimum monitoring is involved. This style of speech has been referred to as the 'vernacular', which provides authentic and relevant data for linguistic analysis.

A necessary prerequisite for conducting any kind of linguistic analysis involving linguistic structures is knowledge of the language concerned in order to follow a conversation. The interviewer must also be able to judge the authenticity, level of consciousness, and knowledge involved in any form of elicited speech.

The aim of the present study is to trace the notion of 'standard' Assamese through a survey of the two regional varieties spoken in the state of Assam, namely the UAV and the LAV. In this study, methodology was given due consideration and importance. To this end attention was paid to:

1. Drawing a list of linguistic forms reflecting dialectal variation.
2. Formulating questions to address the speaker's attitude to his language and the standard form.
3. Locating places for collection of authentic data.
4. Identifying procedures for the elicitation of such data.
5. Selecting informants from the sample of population.

Limiting the study to only a qualitative or quantitative approach may not produce the desired results. So both the approaches have been taken

into consideration. Quantitative methods only help to enhance the credibility of qualitative procedures. Moreover, the information gathered must also suffice for the formulation of certain theories about language use and its variation in the speech community, which can be done through a quantitative approach. The procedures were developed based on the kind of data being collected and the kind of analysis required to arrive at certain definite answers. The study has followed one of the principles suggested by Bell<sup>1</sup> based on the work of William Labov. This is the principle of subordinate shift. According to this, when speakers of a nonstandard (or subordinate) variety of language, for instance, a dialect, are asked direct questions about that variety, their responses will shift in an irregular way toward or away from the standard (or superordinate) variety, for instance, the standard language, so enabling investigators to collect valuable evidence concerning such matters as varieties, norms, and change.

1. In the first stage, a list of linguistic variables is drawn. Items included in this list are considered as being significant in indicating differences between the Upper Assam Variety (UAV) and the Lower Assam Variety (LAV). To highlight variation at the syntactic or sentential level, a set of sentences is prepared using the lexical items as they are spoken in the most natural contexts. The criterion for the selection of such items is that the linguistic forms will indicate any kind of variation existing at the lexical, morphological, phonological, and syntactic level between the UAV and the LAV.

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<sup>1</sup> R.T.Bell, 1976, *Sociolinguistics : 'Goals, Approaches and Problems'*, Batsford, London, pp.187-91.



The aim is also to find out a speaker's choice of a particular linguistic variable. Language is connected not only to the real world in its ability to signify but also to the social world of speakers. The choice of a specific item from the linguistic repertoire may express the attitudes and beliefs of a speaker, reflecting the social context.

The linguistic variables considered are potential indicators of the regional varieties, UAV and LAV. A speaker's use of a certain linguistic variable will reflect the variety he/she identifies with. It will also help in revealing the speaker's attitude towards the 'other' variety and its speakers. Similarly, his reaction to certain sentences will indicate his preference or disapproval of such forms. More importantly, we can observe whether he/she conforms to the standard to be followed in Assamese.

2. A set of questions is prepared in the next step attempting to seek answers related to the prevalence of a 'standard' variety of the Assamese language over and above the dialectal variants. More importantly, they try to reveal the speaker's awareness of such a variety and his/her attitude towards it vis-à-vis his/her own variety.

3. Identifying the areas for the purpose of the study is an important step. The two varieties spoken in the state, the UAV and LAV encompass several other dialects found in this region. To conduct a survey of these dialects, two places have been chosen, Jorhat, representing UAV, and Sualkuchi, with speakers of the LAV.

4. Methods employed for the elicitation of data has already been mentioned in the earlier section. The questionnaire and interview

concentrated on lexical usage and grammatical selection habits. This helped to record pronunciation patterns, which were transcribed phonetically. Through such procedures we obtained speech samples of both extremes of the style continuum, which means, both formal and informal.

5. There is the need to select representative samples of speakers. This involves some important decisions, which are to a certain extent dictated by hypothesis about the expected results. Before the actual data collection a framework was prepared taking into consideration how many people were to be interviewed. This number was then divided among various sections of the speech community. In the present study an attempt has been made to collect information from all classes and sections of society covering the various socio-economic groups, age groups, and both the sexes. Age group ranges from 12-75 years. People from various educational backgrounds and professions have been included. Also members from both the sexes have been considered although sex differences are not significant to this study. Moreover, the speakers had to be made aware of the purpose of the study. Also a certain level of willingness had to be encouraged when needed. It is, however, important to note that in both the places, namely, Jorhat, and Sualkuchi, the people were enthusiastic and came forward in voicing their opinions on the questions asked them, which made the task of eliciting data much more easier and fruitful.

It is necessary to collect data from speakers in everyday situations in order to show the social significance of variability in speech. A direct observation of actual speakers using language in natural social contexts can produce many fruitful results. The present study too is based on analysis of real speech events in the Assamese community.

### **Problems faced in such procedures of eliciting data:**

At the stage of the interview we are required to observe naturally occurring linguistic events such as conversations. What has been found, however, is that the speaker is almost always aware of the formal situation and it is to be expected that a certain level of formality would enter his speech. One way of overcoming this limitation is to be able to indulge the informant in conversations where he is not conscious of the fact of being interviewed.

We must also be careful to note that the speaker does not have complete knowledge of the 'superordinate' variety, so that his speech is not influenced by use of this variety. In such cases, the user may avoid the nonstandard forms and shift to the standard speech. The term 'superordinate' refers to the 'prestige' dialect in society.

Again, an educated speaker exposed to the standard forms used in speech will be unable to shift to the vernacular during such an interview. His knowledge of language and linguistic structures may come in the way of an authentic elicitation of casual speech. There was an attempt made

to record the careful and casual styles of conversation. The careful style conformed to the rigidity of the interview situation where the speaker had to answer questions put by the interviewer. In the casual style, the constraints of an interview were not present and the speaker could be engaged in any conversation outside the purview of the interview. This could even involve a personal narrative.

An interview again has a definite structure, which is difficult to avoid. Moreover since each speaker is singled out, it is not a natural exchange as it would be with other members of the speech community. Problems also arise when the interviewer is an outsider. For then, the interview generally captures the speaker's attempts at appropriating the standard form.

In the present study, the interview setting was made as informal as possible: No formal structure was given to the interview. Rather the flow of natural conversation was maintained and queries were inserted at natural points instead of adhering to a rigid format. It is also imperative for the investigator not to have any predetermined responses in his mind while interviewing the informant so as to make the most of his powers of observation and analysis. Such strategy was found useful in collecting data on the UAV and LAV on such questions as- what regional varieties are recognized, what features distinguish them from one another, and what are the attitudes toward varieties of language.

A linguistic observer also faces the problem which Labov has termed 'the observer's paradox'<sup>2</sup> whereby "The aim of linguistic research in the community must be to find out how people talk when they are not being systematically observed; yet we can only obtain these data by systematic observation", implying that even while collecting a large data of natural speech for study, the investigator changes the character of the phenomenon he is observing. Interviews of single individuals may produce very limited and restricted information about his linguistic repertoire. In the present study items have been elicited using methods designed to keep the informants from being self-conscious, so as to obtain natural, unguarded speech responses.

There is an important axiom of vernacular shifting: whenever a subordinate dialect is in contact with a superordinate dialect, answers given in any formal test situation will shift from the subordinate to the superordinate in an irregular and unsystematic manner. The terms 'subordinate' and 'superordinate' here refer to any hierarchical social dimension equivalent to 'prestige' and 'stigmatized'. The subject may then use his knowledge of the prestige dialect to avoid giving any vernacular form, which is identical or similar to the standard, and so produce stereotyped forms. Again, speakers who have had extensive exposure to the superordinate form may no longer have clear intuitions about their vernacular.

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<sup>2</sup> William Labov, 1972b, *Sociolinguistic Patterns*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, p.209.

In the identification of linguistic variables, there is a considerable degree of subjectivity in recognizing phonetic variants. Hence one needs to record the linguistic situation in which each variable is used since this often involves the choice made by the speaker.

Interpretation and analysis of the data is important since this is fitted into a general framework dealing with the structure of language and its relations to society and individuals. The importance of a correct methodology has to be complemented with an adequate general theoretical framework. In all the techniques and methods employed in the present study are embodied the principles of linguistic and social behaviour.

## CHAPTER 4

### Tracing the Socio- Historical background of standard Assamese

#### Language

**Asamīyā** is the major language of the northeastern state of Assam.

**Asamīyā** (əxamīyā) is derived from **Asama**, the name of the province, plus adjectival affix –īyā meaning 'of', 'relating to', or 'belonging to'. The word

**Asama** can be traced to the Shan invaders of the Brahmaputra valley. This particular race ruled the land from 1228 AD till the advent of the British in 1826 AD. They called themselves Tai but came to be known as Ahoma later on.

Assamese is the major language of the northeastern state of Assam. It is surrounded by languages and dialects from other language families. Khasi belonging to the Austro-Asiatic family, Tibeto-Burman languages including Bodo, Kachari, Mikir, Chutiya, and a few dialects of the Dravidian family are spoken in this region by people of various communities and ethnic origin.

According to various sources, the New Indo-Aryan Assamese language took shape from the Magadhi Prakrit and Apabhramsa dialects. Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterji agrees with this opinion that this language was brought by settlers from Bihar and North Bengal during the greater part of the first millennium AD.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterji, cited in Hem Barua, 1965, *Assamese Literature*, National Book Trust, New Delhi, p.2

The Assamese language considered to be a dialect of Bengali in earlier times has come a long way to its present status as a prestigious language of the people of Assam. The language itself has evolved through the ages. Vendryes (1925) had remarked that the formation of “the common languages, as well as their development and disintegration, are regulated by historical causes outside the sphere of language, namely by the movements of civilization itself”.

The patronage of the Barahi-Kachari-Kamata-Koch rulers helped in the development of early Assamese literature in Western Assam (Referred to in the present study as Lower Assam). The language also flourished following the interest of scholarly and learned men. Early Assamese literature had developed in the historical chronicle a literary form not found in other Indian literature. Named ‘**burañjīs**’, these chronicles are in simple and direct language, and recount the political, social, economic, cultural, and administrative aspects of Assamese life from early Ahom times down to the nineteenth century. A number of these ‘**burañjīs**’ are extant, and the most important among them have been published. They form a unique thing in Assamese and Indian literature. In the seventeenth century, the focus of literary scholarship shifted from Western Assam to Eastern Assam, the court of the Ahom rulers. These rulers patronized the language of the Sibsagar district of Upper Assam. It became the language of the courts. Under the influence of the Ahom rulers, the language of this region gained a certain uniformity. But the same cannot be said of the dialects of Lower Assam.



The Ahom rule came to an end when the East India Company took over Assam in 1826 AD. 1836 AD saw the advent of the American Baptist missionaries. The contributions made by these missionaries to foster development in this region are noteworthy. Major changes were brought about in various fields, one of the most prominent being in the field of language and literature.

### **Role of the Christian missionaries**

The coming of the missionaries to Assam heralded a number of developments in various fields, the fruits of which are still being enjoyed by the Assamese people. In this section we intend to highlight their contributions in the linguistic sphere and particularly in the emergence of a standard Assamese language.

Sadiya in Upper Assam was the place where they landed in 1836 AD. Due to various difficulties, they had to abandon the place and settle in Sibsagar, the then administrative headquarter of the East India Company government in 1841 AD. Their mission was to teach and preach Christianity but for this purpose learning the language of the natives became imperative. They opened schools for elementary education and sought to involve the people in such endeavours. By 1844 AD there were fourteen schools functioning in the region of Sibsagar with Assamese as the medium of instruction.

Reading and writing in Assamese was encouraged so that the people could comprehend the Bible and other religious texts of Christianity, which were published in their native language. Hence their mission of spreading

Christianity inadvertently benefited the Assamese people in more ways than one. Most importantly, an interest was cultivated in the minds of the natives for their mother tongue.

The missionaries also united with the native people of Assam in their struggle to establish Assamese as a separate language and liberate it from the tradition of grouping it with other dialects of Bengali. Bengali had enjoyed a status of pre-eminence in administration and education over Assamese under various rulers. In the year 1831 AD, the Government of Bengal replaced Persian by Bengali as the language of the courts of Assam stating that it was financially difficult to keep Persian scribes.

Assam had come under British rule in 1826 AD, though Upper Assam was not fully annexed till the year 1838 AD. In 1837 AD, the year of the inception of the American Baptist Mission Press in Sibsagar, an Act was passed by the President of the Council of India which made it imperative to install Bengali in place of Persian. Though no documentary evidence has been found, noted historians and writers have inferred that the Bengali Amlahs were responsible for introducing Bengali in Assam.

The British employed educated Bengalis in large numbers in the administrative offices and gave them the opportunity to work in their own language. Lieutenant Matthie, the Principal assistant, Nowgong, reported in 1835 AD, "On British conquest of Assam numerous Bengalis came to Assam and under our system, the Assamese were obliged to patronize them. They became the penmen of their petitions, accountants, often spokesmen at the

Council”<sup>2</sup>. The Assamese people failed to overcome their unfamiliarity with the new administrative system. Neither could they register any form of protest against the use of Bengali. Instead, Assamese writers like Heliram Dhekial Phukan and Maniram Dewan published a few books in Bengali.

The contribution of the British administrators in supporting Bengali gave a new impetus to this language. Mr. William Robinson wrote the first book on Assamese grammar in the year 1839 AD. While in his capacity as the Inspector of schools in Assam, he also authored a second book titled, ***A Descriptive Account of Assam*** which reflected his poor opinion of the Assamese language. Assamese was relegated to the status of a dialect and the writer went as far as to remark that, “the language spoken in Assam, I believe to be essentially same as Bengali”.<sup>3</sup> This first Assamese grammar was written in English with specimens of Assamese language in Roman characters.

Similar opinion of Assamese as a dialect of Bengali was held by a number of non-Assamese people due to the similarity between certain lexical terms and the scripts of both these languages. The American Baptist missionaries protested against grouping Assamese alongwith other dialects of Bengali. They tried to project the distinctive characters of the Assamese language and argued that it was ridiculous to call Assamese an offshoot of Bengali.

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<sup>2</sup>Matthie to Jenkins, February 15, 1835, cited in H.K.Barpuzari, *Assam in the Days of the Company*, p.267.

<sup>3</sup> q.v. F.S.Downs, *Missionaries and the Language Controversy in Assam*, cited in Maheshwar Neog (ed.), *Journal of the University of Gauhati*, Vol. Xxviii-xxix, No.1, Arts,1977-78, p.137.

People like Nathan Brown even remarked that, “ Assamese really far excelled Bengali in grace and poise”. 4

Since its inception in 1837 AD, the American Baptist Mission Press produced a number of useful works in Assamese. The printing press revolutionized education and reading. Sadiya earned the distinction of having the first printing press in Assam in the year 1836 AD. It was shifted to Joypur in 1839 AD and finally installed in Sibsagar in the year 1843 AD. The first Assamese monthly paper, **Orunodoi** was published from this press in 1846 AD. **Orunodoi** meaning ‘Dawn of Light’ marks an epoch in the history of Assamese language and literature. The publication of this monthly paper was a historical moment, which was to lead to the growth of mass media in Assam. It remained the only paper published in the region for several years. It also had the distinction of being well edited and covered various subjects meant to enlighten and interest the general public.

In 1813 AD Dr. William Carey of the Serampore Mission gave the people their first printed characters of the Assamese language in the form of his translation of the New Testament. The second grammar of the Assamese language, written in English, was compiled by Rev. Nathan Brown and published by the American Baptist Mission Press in 1848 AD under the title **Grammatical Notices of the Assamese Language**. An important feature of this grammar is that it showed that while there are fifty letters in the Assamese language yet the number of corresponding articulations is only thirty-six. The grammar written by the missionaries, however, was

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4 Nathan Brown, cited in Nagen Saikia, *Background of Modern Assamese Literature*, 1988, Omsons Publications, New Delhi, p.154.

challenged on the ground that certain grammatical operations were left undefined. To establish the purity of the Assamese language, Hemchandra Barua later prepared his ***Asamiya Vyakaran*** in 1859 AD.

Books published by the missionaries include ***Vocabulary and Phrase Book*** in 1848 AD, ***Brief Vocabulary in English and Assamese with Rudimentary Exercises*** in 1846 AD, and a sequel to it published under the title ***Phrases in English and Assamese*** in 1877 AD. A significant contribution in this field was made by Rev. Miles Bronson who compiled the first Assamese Dictionary under the title ***A Dictionary in Assamese and English*** in 1867 AD. ***Axamia Ingraji Abhidhan*** was the Assamese title of this Dictionary.

A book on language titled ***Vocabulary and Phrases of Assamese Language*** was published in 1840 AD. The age saw the beginning of modern Assamese fiction in the hands of the missionaries. Mention of Rev. A.K. Gurney's ***Kaminikanta, Elokeshya Beshyar Bishaye***, Mrs. Mary F. Lawrence Gurney's translation of the Bengali novel ***Phulmani o Karunar Bibaran*** into Assamese are noteworthy in this field.

The efforts made by the missionaries through literary activities furthered the cause of the Assamese language. No amount of criticism can negate the fact that such literary works gave the Assamese people a language-based identity and established Assamese on the linguistic map of the country. It was also a fitting reply to the people who tried to classify the language as a dialect of Bengali. A noted Assamese author, Hemchandra Goswami has observed, "The Missionaries taught our language a new tone. This tone was

never known to Assamese before; nor was it known to any Indian language. It was a wealth of the English people.”<sup>5</sup>

The Missionaries also inspired a new generation of Assamese writers, the most eminent among them being Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Hemchandra Barua and Gunabhiram Barua. ***Assamiya Larar Mitra***, the first Assamese textbook was authored by Anandaram Dhekial Phukan in 1849 AD. The ***Asam Buranji Puthi*** (History of Assam) written by Kashinath Tamuli Phukan was printed from the Mission Press at Sibsagar; and it was the first Assamese book written by an Assamese, appearing in print.

The literature of Assamese for a quarter century since 1836 AD written mainly by the missionaries has also been called ‘Christian-Assamese’. Their style has been synonymous with ‘broken Assamese’ and is comparable with the broken words spoken by a child of any native speech. Such literary expressions have had its share of criticism though one cannot deny the simplicity, charm, and novelty of such forms.

Equally impressive are the efforts made by the Christian missionaries to enrich the Assamese vocabulary by reviving a large number of words, which were becoming obsolete. They also tried to bring uniformity between the spoken and written forms by increasing the use of colloquial forms.

The printed books and newspapers brought literature to the people, and not only helped in its advancement but also enabled the growth of a standard

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<sup>5</sup> Hemchandra Goswami in Benudhar Sarma, (ed.), *Hemchandra Goswami Rachanavali*, p.134, cited in Nagen Saikia, *Background of Modern Assamese Literature*, 1988, Omsons Publications, New Delhi, p.148.

language intelligible to all. The publication of the first monthly newsmagazine, *Orunodoi* started in 1846 AD was a milestone in the history of Assam. The print name *Orunodoi Sambad Patra* was changed to *Orunodoi* in 1850. The publication aroused the consciousness of the Assamese towards the need to develop their language and give it a separate identity. Articles were published on the efficacy of an Assamese learning his mother tongue (August, 1853), on the distinctive character of the Assamese language (February, 1854), and on similar topics. The language of the newsmagazine inspired the people to work for its development and enhance the functions and usage. Hence it was instrumental in the intellectual awakening of the Assamese society, which in turn paved the way for further developments. Eminent writers like Nidhi Levy Farewell, Gunabhiram Barua, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Ida B. Pata, Utsabananda Goswami and many others contributed to the various issues of this periodical.

The missionaries made Sibsagar the center of their literary activities and used the dialect of Sibsagar for their literary purposes. Under their influence a set of native writers came forward and through the printing machine books and periodicals in the language of the UAV multiplied. Hence the missionaries continued the traditions of the Ahom Court and established the language of Eastern Assam or the UAV as the literary language of the entire province. The UAV thus attained literary and cultural supremacy over other varieties of the language.

## Contributions of Assamese writers

The father of modern Assamese language and literature, Hemchandra Barua's (1835-96) contributions are manifold. He gave the people their first systematic, rule-governed grammar in Assamese in 1859 titled **Asamiya Vyakaran** emphasizing on the distinct characteristics of the language. **Hemkosh**, the writer's contribution towards a standard lexicon gave the etymology of words and their English equivalents and meanings. They continue to be the most important reference books on the Assamese language till date. Such works set the standard form of the language in a scientific way. This standard has been revealed to be the variety used in the Upper Assam region. Literature also found expression in this variety. Various writers, whose work influenced the people and gave them confidence in their language, wrote in this variety. This particular dialect itself flourished and gained popularity. Thus standard Assamese had its origin in a regional dialect. The language for literary purposes laid the foundation for the standard form. Even today, it is largely the written language that determines what is accepted as standard.

Anandaram Dhekial Phukan is another writer whose work is commendable in this respect. His work **A Few Remarks on the Assamese Language** in 1849 AD which was published by the American Baptist missionaries was a plea for the recognition of the Assamese language. Gunabhiram Barua took Assamese prose to great heights and it became an artistic medium for the expression of thoughts. His literary work inspired many others of his time.



**Dialectal variants in Assamese and the 'Standard' form**

Grierson, whose Linguistic Survey of India is a monumental work in the field of language categorization states, "The standard dialect of Assamese is that form of speech, which is prevalent in and about Sibsagar. Over the Upper part of the Assam Valley the language is everywhere the same. As we go west, we find a distinct dialect, which I call western Assamese, spoken by the people of Kamrup and eastern Goalpara".<sup>6</sup> Various factors can be attributed for such linguistic diversity. Western Assam had been conquered by Muslim invaders a number of times in the course of history. Changes in the language under various rulers were natural which grew over a period of time. As stated by another linguist, Emeneau (1942), "During the early Assamese period the dominant kingdom in the linguistic area was the Koch kingdom in the west, where Kamrupi is spoken; it was circa seventeenth century, that political and linguistic prestige passed to the Ahom kingdom in the east and later still, early nineteenth century, that missionary activity more firmly established the eastern Assamese dialect as the standard literary language".

Banikanta Kakati<sup>7</sup> has divided all the dialects of Assam under two broad groups- Eastern Assamese and Western Assamese. The Eastern Assamese is spoken in the area from Sadiya down to Gauhati and

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<sup>6</sup> Grierson, 1968, *Linguistic Survey of India*, Vol. V, Part. 1, p.394.

<sup>7</sup> Banikanta Kakati, 1962, *Assamese: Its Formation and Development*, Lawyers' Book Stall, Gauhati, Assam, p.18.

constitutes a single homogeneous unit which “hardly presents any notable difference from the spoken dialect of Sibsagar”. Western Assamese is confined to the area from a little east of Gauhati in the south and the western half of the Darrang district in the north, and down to the district of Goalpara in the west. It is a heterogeneous group comprising of several regional variations.

The earliest literature was produced in the language of Western Assam, which has been designated as the Kamrupi language. As centers of art, literature, and culture were confined within Western Assam, the literature of the region flourished. The works of poets and writers have been found in this language which acquired prestige till about the seventeenth century AD.

Major political and cultural changes in the history of the region led to the Eastern Assamese dialect as becoming popular among the educated and elite classes of this eastern part of Assam. This dialect spoken in Sibsagar district has attained the status of standard literary language. It is the standard colloquial for people of this region while speakers of Western Assamese or the LAV use it only in formal situations. However, an emerging trend is seen in that the highly educated and cultured are trying to introduce LAV idioms into the standard colloquial.

The standard is being used by a larger number of people with its spread in education, broadcasting, newspapers, and other means of communication. But the dialects have preserved their own domain of usage even in the wake of such widespread popularity of the standard. Though the standard language is used for all written purposes and formal occasions, the dialects are spoken at home. Moreover, a tendency to preserve the dialects is being observed in the attempt put forward by some people to publish folk songs and folk literature in the dialects themselves, and to use them in plays for a more realistic presentation.

## CHAPTER 5

### Findings

The methods and techniques mentioned in the earlier chapter have helped in the elicitation of data relevant for the present study. This chapter presents details of the data collected from the speakers of the two regions using the Upper Assam Variety and Lower Assam Variety. We concentrate on the questionnaire and the interview and give a systematic outline of the various stages involved in obtaining the information. The recorded responses of the speakers to the linguistic items and questions asked them through the various methods are put forward in the following pages. Analysis of the data and inferences which can be drawn from it, is however, outside the purview of this chapter.

#### **Questionnaire:**

The various sections of the questionnaire contains biographical information of each speaker interrogated and questions on the linguistic items and structures related to his/her variety with a view to ascertaining their forms of usage. The questionnaire has been prepared as a device to explore the notion of 'standard' Assamese while analyzing the dialectal differences between UAV and LAV.

### **Speaker Information:**

#### **Upper Assam (Jorhat):**

Members of both the sexes were included with ages varying from 16-72 years. Almost 99% of the sample had been living in Jorhat since birth. Of them, 60% were male and the rest were female. Among both male and female, people were included from various backgrounds. Since we wanted a cross-section of the population in our sample of speakers, there were students, housewives, professionals, educators, and business class people. Assamese was the mother tongue, which was spoken with fluency and competence. This was also the language taught in schools. Most of the people had education also in English, it being the second language (L2). About 50% had competence in reading, writing, and speaking Bengali. Almost all the speakers understood Hindi and professed proficiency in reading and writing the language though it was not used in speech and literature.

#### **Lower Assam (Sualkuchi):**

The age range is similar to that of the sample of population taken in Jorhat with ages between 15-75 years. Almost 90% of the population were educated. The male members constituted 65% of the sample while the rest were females. The cross-section of population under investigation comprised the same classes as in Jorhat. There were businessmen, students, housewives, and teachers. The languages known to the sample are also similar to the ones in the Jorhat sample. The subjects had received formal

education in Assamese and unlike the sample in Jorhat. English did not have as important a place in the academic syllabi. This did not mean that speakers were not competent in reading and writing the language. They also had a working knowledge of Hindi. Thus the composition of the two samples of population was similar in almost all respects with only minor differences.

### **Questionnaire:**

The questionnaire itself has various sections for the purpose of making an analysis relevant to the study easier and effective.

#### 1. Biographical details of the informant

These include name, age, sex, occupation, number of languages known, place of birth and stay.

#### 2 List of lexical items used in everyday life

The subject was asked what terms were used for the particular object. They were required to classify them as correct / allowed / permissible, standard or substandard.

#### 3 Set of sentences

Corresponding to the words, subjects were asked to speak one or two sentences to show usage of these words in natural contexts. Such a procedure also tests whether the subject had given reliable information and

whether there is a correlation between words used in isolation and in the course of natural conversation.

#### 4 Pertinent questions on the topic of 'standard' Assamese

Direct questions to ascertain the awareness of the speaker about the notion of standard language, and if so, about a 'standard' Assamese language variety. Such queries also reveal the speaker's attitude towards his own variety and towards the speakers of other varieties, towards a standard form, and the superior / prestige variety. It also shows to what extent he/she has been influenced by the variety used in formal education.

#### 5. Informal conversation

The speaker was engaged in casual conversation dealing with topics of everyday life, their work, family, children, and so on. In this way, useful tips could be picked up on how they actually spoke including tone, manner, pitch, and speed. The observer could thus form associations between the language variety and its speaker's verbal behaviour. For instance, LAV speakers used 'harsh' sounds while conversing. While the speakers of UAV spoke with slowness and had a milder tone of speech. All the above could be observed at great length and with greater accuracy since the observer and the informants belonged to the same speech community.

The above mentioned methods helped in eliciting data regarding the following questions:

1. What is the nature and extent of dialectal variation found in the Assamese language?



2. Are the speakers aware of such variation?
3. If so, how do they react to this variation?
4. What is their attitude towards speakers of other variants?
5. What is their notion of a 'standard'?

**Words used in UAV and LAV:**

Speakers of both the UAV and The LAV were asked to identify linguistic terms used in their speech for a range of objects. This also incorporated kinship terms and words referring to various grammatical categories. With a few exceptions revealing a uniformity of opinion among speakers of both the varieties, variation accounted for the rest. Such variation found in the vocabulary was mainly at the phonological level. For instance, speakers of UAV used k<sup>h</sup>owa 'food', eito 'this', dail 'pulses' against k<sup>h</sup>awa, etu, dali, in use among the LAV speakers for the same items.

Entirely dissimilar forms were found with respect to a majority of words. Here the variants of the two varieties were observed from which opinion of the speakers could be gathered about the 'correct' forms. Such terms corresponding to the UAV and LAV respectively, lora / apa 'boy', d<sup>h</sup>unia / t<sup>h</sup>ouga 'beautiful', aita / abu 'grandmother' constituted an interesting aspect of the present study.

The linguistic terms used by the LAV speakers were classified as nonstandard and hence as not 'pure' Assamese by the speakers of the UAV. They however agreed that some of them could be allowed in speech.

Instances of such words were *api* 'girl', *dali* 'pulses', *pita* 'father', and *tiruta* 'wife'.

The LAV speaker adhered to the forms used in everyday life. The investigator made efforts not to allow considerations of 'correct' or 'standard' forms to come in the way of their responses. Comments on whether the words used were representative of the standard variety indicated that the forms were 'correct' colloquial. Though for all written purposes the linguistic structures of the UAV were used.

The UAV speaker identifies with the 'standard' both in speech and for literary purposes. Responses from respective speakers indicate that colloquial speech had a certain legitimacy of use outside the rules of the 'standard' literary variety. A highly standardized written language does not influence the local speech. It would have been expected that an accepted standard written language would have served as a model of correctness for the speech of dialect speakers. The speech of the educated reflects such influence especially in the context of the more formal styles of speech. In such situations, the speech of dialect speakers approximates the written standard in grammar and vocabulary. Different domains of use exist for the regional variety and the standard for the speakers of Lower Assam. Through a remarkable functional criterion, both the varieties are kept separate and distinct from each other. The shift vis-à-vis the spoken and written language is made with an accuracy reflecting competence in both the varieties.

Again, when sentences were formed with the words, there were variations in the UAV and the LAV and their spoken forms. The UAV speaker considered his/her colloquial speech as the 'standard'. Hence the sentence:

mɔi taloi goisilu

I Psg there go-Pst

I had gone there

Is a correct formation corresponding to the standard. While

mɔi takɛ gɛsilu

I Psg there go-pst

I had gone there

Is considered substandard because of the use of 'takɛ' and 'gɛsilu' by the UAV speaker.

On the other hand, certain forms have been marked as correct or allowed by the UAV though they do not completely conform to the UAV.

Hence structures such as:

ɛtu ki bostu?

This what object

What is this object?

which is typically LAV has been considered as allowed by the UAV speaker.

Many of the speakers of the UAV classified a few sentences as substandard and not necessarily as incorrect. This inspite the fact that they are the colloquial speech of the LAV speakers. Thus one could use such forms as:

g<sup>h</sup>umti asi nε?

Sleep come is?

Can you get sleep?

Certain sentences revealed variation with respect to one or two words. Such items are:

aji moi kəl kini anisū

Today I Psg banana buy-Pst bring

I have brought bananas today

Which is colloquial UAV and the same sentence in LAV:

aji moi kəl kini anisu

this however is taken as allowed.

Similarly

moi bahrot jam

I Pst outside go F

I will go out

following the standard colloquial UAV has a similar form in the LAV.

moi bahrot jam

Such items have come to be termed as allowed.

The LAV speakers stated that the forms they used were correct with respect to colloquial speech. They agreed that the written language incorporated a few changes made in the spoken variety.

Thus structures like the following which are correct (in) as far as speech is concerned, (requires)

ghərəklegɪ alohi ʔsi

House(Loc) guests come-Pre

Guests have come to the house

requires minor alternations:

g<sup>h</sup>ərəlɔi alohi ahisɛ

The use of g<sup>h</sup>ərəlɔi and ahisɛ renders it suitable for use as the literary standard.

Similarly, sentences such as:

mɔi takɛ gəsilu

i psg there went Pst

I had gone there

which is classified as correct or allowed for colloquial speech has to be modified as

mɔi talɔi goisilu

## Linguistic forms

Data elicitation procedures involved in studying the Upper Assam Variety and Lower Assam Variety enabled the compilation of a list of lexical items used by speakers. The list indicated use of more than one form for a few objects. Among the listed variants, frequently occurring ones were kʌɔbɔɔ, kagɔj / batori kagɔj 'newspaper', kukura / murgi 'chicken', tɔrkari / sɔbzi 'curry', and deuta / pita 'father'.

Certain speakers claimed that they restricted the use to only one of these forms. While a few others interchanged them in different contexts.

Opinion of speakers of both varieties coincided with regard to the issue of 'correctness'. The forms could not be differentiated on the basis of this criterion. The issue of 'standard' was however debatable. A consensus could not be reached even among members of one variety. Hence their use was allowed in speech thereby enhancing the vocabulary of the language.

### **Interview:**

The interview focused on the issue of language with a view to obtaining the opinion of speakers on dialectal variation and standard in Assamese. It was constructed around questions relating to the use of different varieties in colloquial speech and in written texts, the preferred variety, issue of prestige language, and the language-dialect dichotomy and related topics.

Speakers of both the varieties professed an awareness of dialectal variants in their language. The characteristics of the UAV and LAV were easily identifiable. The LAV speaker was more proficient in analyzing the observable differences found among the variants of the UAV. The UAV speaker could not make a similar claim though he/she was well aware of subdialects in the LAV.

Speech was seen as an indicator of a person's regional and group identity. Each variety possessed regional markers which were retained regardless of a change of place. The varieties could also be traced on the basis of differences in tone, pitch, speech rate, and accent.

Views differed on the issue of standard. The standard written and spoken language was considered identical by the UAV speaker. Such opinion contributed to their notion of the UAV as being the accepted norm with regard to the Assamese language. This perspective is contrasted with that of the LAV speaker who holds the standard literary variety as that which is known as UAV. This is the variety functioning as the written language for all speakers irrespective of any regional division. Local speech however had its own domain. The situation has given rise to bidialectal speakers. The use of the UAV in the linguistic repertoire of the LAV speaker is seen as purely for instrumental reasons.

The LAV cannot gain the status of a 'standard' primarily because it is excluded from any form of literature written in the Assamese language. Its use hence does not extend to the print medium. Neither has it been able to

find a place in education, thereby limiting its use exclusively to the domestic domain.

Instances of code-switching from one variety to the other were rare. There was a higher tendency of the LAV speaker to approximate the common forms of the UAV. No linguistic differences were observed between the male and female members. The elder people spoke a version closer to the written standard. The younger members did not strictly follow the standard norms and thus revealed a certain degree of casualness in their speech.

**Summary:**

1. UAV and LAV speakers are aware of dialectal variation.
2. There are more variants in LAV and these speakers are more aware of this fact than the UAV speaker.
3. Speakers of both the UAV and LAV believe that one's speech reveals the speaker's regional identity.
4. The UAV speaker believes that there is no dialectal variation in UAV though it exists to a large extent in the LAV.
5. There is influence of the different varieties on each other.
6. A LAV speaker may use a combination of the UAV and the LAV in his speech.
7. The two varieties differ greatly at the lexical level, which extends to other linguistic constructions.



## CHAPTER 6

### Analysis

The sociolinguistic significance of the data collected has been analyzed in a systematic manner in this chapter. Speakers' response to the notion of dialectal variation in Assamese reveals an awareness of the existing linguistic situation. Such reactions have been classified in terms of attitude, which, in this case, is language attitude. The definition of attitude has been twofold analyzing:

1. Response to different varieties of Assamese.
2. The notion of a standard as the norm.

Certain perceptions grow out of this knowledge, which influence social behaviour.

While speakers of both UAV and LAV recognize dialectal variation, there is a difference in the level of awareness. The LAV speaker can identify the variations within his/her variety more than the UAV speaker can with regard to the UAV. Kamrupia, Goalparia, Barpetia, Nalbaria are some of the subdialects of the LAV characterized by certain linguistic differences which is known to the LAV speaker. The UAV speaker, however, is at a disadvantage to distinguish between dialects around his area. In linguistic terms, there is a justification behind the assertion that the dialects of Lower Assam are marked as compared to those of Upper Assam. Moreover, UAV is the

umbrella term used to denote all dialects and subdialects spoken in this region.

In a view held by some UAV speakers, the term dialect is used to denote an inferior variety of language. In this context, the varieties spoken in Lower Assam, which are not used in literary texts, are referred to as dialects. Opposed to this, the UAV is “pure” and “correct”. Differences manifested mainly at the lexical level and in phonology affects communication among speakers of dialects and subdialects of the LAV. On the other hand, only minor variations are found in the speech spoken by the UAV speakers.

### **Standard form of Assamese**

The linguistic situation where one ‘language’ and several ‘dialects’ co-exist gives rise to complex issues, one among them, allowing a wide scope for discussion, is the notion of ‘standard’ or norm.

Paul Garvin and Madeleine Mathiot<sup>1</sup> have focused on the acceptability criterion while defining a standard language as “a codified form of a language, accepted by, and serving as a model to, a larger speech community”. Its function then is to fulfill the communicative needs and prescribe the norm to be followed. Various processes and agencies are involved in the standardization of a particular variety. We have discussed these processes in the context of formalization of the Assamese language in the earlier chapters. Alongwith such systematic planning, we have also traced the formation and development of the standard Assamese regulated

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Garvin and Madeleine Gathiot, cited in Dell Hymes, *Foundations in Sociolinguistics: An Ethnographic Approach*, 1974, Tavistock Publications, UK.

by historical events outside the sphere of language. Such factors have also contributed to the growth of the standard colloquial and literary variety.

In a major turn of events in the history of the Assamese language, the political and cultural center shifted from Lower Assam to Sibsagar in Upper Assam with the advent of the Ahom rulers. The language of the region gained prominence under the patronage of these rulers. It was popularized by the American Baptist missionaries in Sibsagar who endowed it with the status of a literary language. This was the beginning of standard modern Assamese. The standard has evolved over the years and it is the norm prescribed for every speaker of Assamese irrespective of regional and group affiliations.

Recognition of a particular dialect as the standard raises the issue of acceptance or non acceptance of the standard. Speakers were unanimous in their agreement regarding a standard Assamese language prescribing the norm in speech and writing. Interviews conducted among the UAV speakers indicated a certain authority and confidence in recognition of their variety as the standard. The LAV speakers while refusing to label their language as a 'dialect', were of the opinion that its use in speech was correct and permissible. The literary style remained the UAV.

Discussion on the topic revealed a subtle delineation of hierarchy of both the UAV and LAV. It resembles a diglossic situation with the UAV taken as the standard and used in writing and for all official functions. The LAV is the Lower variety and its use is limited to nonformal occasions and the domestic domain. Herein the notion of acceptability plays a major role in determining a

speaker's verbal behaviour. A speaker may identify with the standard and make efforts to approximate it in speech. On the other hand, he/she may not recognize its status as the norm and insist on his/her own variety. Again, the standard may have very little use for a speaker, being just another variety. In the interview varied responses have marked all the above situations. The notion of acceptability has been dealt with earlier in the present study.

An interesting notion has been brought to light in this context. In any interaction involving speakers of the UAV and LAV, communication is conducted in the UAV. This reveals the LAV speaker's competence in being conversant in both the varieties. Such aptitude in using the UAV can be attributed to the fact that formal education imparts training in this variety to the exclusion of the LAV. The UAV is the language of literary texts and of the print medium. The existence of an accepted standard for the written language serves as a model of propriety and correctness for speakers irrespective of their place of origin and regional identity. This written language exercises its own standardizing influence on the LAV in relation to which it has served as a standard. This influence can be seen in the more formal styles of speech.

The UAV speakers are of the opinion that their colloquial speech is identical in grammar and vocabulary with the written standard. The LAV speaker, however, achieves this only in writing. Such a view is refuted by the LAV speaker who perceives the speech of the other variety as a variation of the literary style which however minor, should not be acceptable. The speech of the UAV speaker reflects a certain level of casualness which could arise

from the belief that it is a reflection of the written standard and hence is 'correct'. The speech of the nonstandard variety can on certain formal occasions adapt itself to the norm considered 'standard' in the language. Though this could not be proved quantitatively due to lack of adequate equipment, uniformity of opinion among all members of the sample population led to a confirmation of this aspect of the language. The consensus extends to the opinion expressed by the speakers of LAV that the literary style used by them is a 'pure' and 'correct' version of the standard form. This is in contrast to the tendency of the UAV speakers to commit errors in writing.

In certain cases, government efforts have been responsible for the selection and standardization of a particular variety for use in education, mass media, official publications and literature. The Upper Assam variety came to be recognized as the standard due to its association with Sibsagar which was the political and cultural center since the coming of the Ahom dynasty to power in Assam. In a similar case, Standard English was a product of the formalization of the London variety, which emerged as such over the centuries by virtue of the political and cultural importance of London. The Christian missionaries through their literary activities in the UAV and later the British rule consolidated the position of this variety as the standard to be followed in the Assamese language.

The notion of standard depends to a certain extent on individual perception. This explains the varied responses to the questionnaire and some questions during the interview. The sentence

xei      sowali    jonik    matsun

That-3Psg girl      class    call-2P

Call    that    girl

has been recognized as a standard form by speakers irrespective of the region to which he/she belongs. Certain other sentences have evoked mixed responses. Such sentences have been classified as substandard or correct or ungrammatical according to the speaker's judgement of verbal behaviour. Hence sentences such as

xi    kam    kərbo

He    work    will-F

He    will    work

has been marked as incorrect by UAV speakers who use 'kərbo' for third person instead of 'kəribo'. The LAV speaker, however, is of the view that it is correct and should be acceptable. This reveals individual notion of standard through which sentences and other linguistic constructions are given different classifications.

For all written purposes, however, the literary variety which is accepted to be the UAV, is superposed as standard over the spoken varieties. Hence in the context of the LAV speaker, two distinguishable dialects of the same language are used differentially. The dialects are the standard variety of the

language and the regional variety. Ferguson<sup>2</sup> has introduced the term 'diglossia' to refer to this kind of standardization situation in which two varieties of the same language coexist within the same community, with each having a definite role to play.

Responses of the speakers revealed a diglossic situation between UAV and LAV. The UAV taken as the standard language is considered to be a prestigious form of the language. It is the Higher variety and used on formal occasions. Consequently, the UAV speaker perceives the LAV as the Lower variety, which is not found in literary texts. The literary language here is regarded as prescribing the norm to be followed.

The implications of a diglossic and bidialectal linguistic situation are attitudinal beliefs. Speech differences in the use of the UAV and the LAV set off a chain reaction of responses in the minds of the listeners who take the verbal cues as denoting whether the speaker is an 'ingroup' or an 'outgroup' person.

To both speaker and hearer, then, the manner in which linguistic information is carried through the medium of linguistic variety is an important one. One of the significant reasons being the sociolinguistic information conveyed by the variety to be of far greater significance to the listener.

The present study has attempted to seek answers to such queries as:

1. What is the variety used for colloquial speech?
2. Is there an accepted literary standard for the Assamese language?

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<sup>2</sup> C.A.Ferguson, 1959, 'Diglossia', Word, 15, p.336

### 3. Which are the areas of usage of the different varieties?

Apart from differences resulting from geographical distance, differences between the two varieties used in Upper Assam and Lower Assam corresponds to another form of sociolinguistic variation. This can be related to formal and informal styles involved in written and spoken varieties. The literary style is used in all forms of writing and literary discourses irrespective of the social status or region to which the user belongs. The informal or spoken variety, however, shows marked differences and this diversity can be related to the regional boundaries. The Assamese language, thus, affords of such stylistic variation. The colloquial and the literary styles have separate functions, which are marked, particularly in the context of the LAV. The UAV functions as the literary style and is used in formal situations, lectures, in writing, and is the variety taught in schools regardless of geographical region and social class. This variety is recognized as the literary standard by the LAV speaker, who also professes communicative competence in this linguistic variety, although for all domestic purposes, the local speech variety is preferred. Thus speakers of the LAV have become bidialectal, who, while retaining the colloquial variety, use the UAV for all official and educational purposes.

### **Language Attitude**

The verbal behaviour of an individual is a signaling feature of the person's conception of himself and of the listener. One is first socialized by means of a specific form of language and that form of language gives rise to feelings



engendered by attitudes which may be positive (favourable) or negative (unfavourable). Such social behaviour is an important deciding factor in any form of social interaction.

The speech form of the UAV and LAV speakers is also intimately tied to considerations of social and regional identity. Differential reactions of the speakers reflect their attitude towards language itself and towards speakers of language varieties. The study of language attitude is important because attitudes represent an index of intergroup relations and they play an important role in mediating and determining them.

For an analysis of such behaviour we have to refer to social psychology which has found a subject of interest in the study of language attitudes. Sarnoff (1970) defines attitude as "A disposition to react favourably or unfavourably to a class of objects". This disposition includes three basic components: thoughts (cognitive factor), feelings (affective), and predispositions to act (behavioural). Attitudes to standard language are continuous, sliding scale features rather than absolute features.

Much of the work is based on a mentalist view of attitude which is given by Williams (1974) as, "Attitude is considered as an internal state aroused by stimulation of some type and which may mediate the organism's subsequent response". The present study too follows this method wherein data is collected depending on individual reports of speaker's attitudes.

In the present study there is inquiry into such things as:

1. What is the speaker's attitude towards the variety of Assamese that he/she speaks?
2. What is his/her response to dialectal variation and variants?
3. How does the speaker perceive the 'other' varieties and their users?

The notion of attitude is important because people's reactions to language varieties can reveal their perceptions of the speakers, and can thereby be linked to notions of identity. Language attitudes thus reveal social perceptions.

According to Wolff<sup>3</sup> language attitudes can have an effect on whether or not a language variety is intelligible. Given two closely related language varieties, speakers of the higher status variety may not be able to understand the other one, but can be understood by the speakers of the lower status variety. In this study involving UAV and LAV, such reports did come in from certain speakers with reference to the former as the higher status variety and the latter as the lower status variety.

Direct methods of study of attitudes involve questionnaire and interview. Attitudes about the Assamese language and its varieties were revealed when speakers were required to respond to a questionnaire and few questions that reflected their opinions.

The questionnaire had both open and closed type of questions. Open questions presented the speaker with the freedom to express his/her opinion

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<sup>3</sup> Hans Wolff, 1959a, 'Intelligibility and Inter-Ethnic Attitudes', AL,1(3),p.34

on the subject. Such open questions performed the function of an interview where open responses were recorded. Closed questions were mostly of the yes-no type.

### **Attitude vis-à-vis variation**

A speaker encodes language behaviour, which in turn regulates social behaviour definable in terms of attitude.

A LAV speaker can distinguish differences existing among the Kamrupia, Goalparia, Barpetia, and Nalbaria dialects. He/she is also aware of the variations between his colloquial speech and the standard form. Such knowledge requires a decision to be taken to determine his/her linguistic patterns. The desire to be identified with a particular variety influences any step undertaken by an individual. He may wish to be identified with the standard, in which case, he will modify his speech accordingly. On the other hand, affinity with the group may urge him to retain his particular variety and put it to more frequent use.

The role of extralinguistic features cannot be ruled out in evaluating speakers in interpersonal and intergroup relations. "Listeners use the perceived characteristics of speakers and speech styles in making multidimensional inferences of their likely backgrounds, personalities, psychological states, degree of influence over others, quality of their arguments and so on. This process is very complex depending not only on the listeners' own social and personality characteristics, but on how the

other's speech style conforms to social and situational expectations, how it allows inferences to be made about how the target speaker views the listeners, and how others' speech behaviour in the situation provide cues as to how they perceive the speaker as well"<sup>4</sup>. So it is important to determine *how a message is said rather than what is said in terms of verbal context*.

Reflecting such opinion, Howard Giles remarks, "it will also be seen that a wide range of language variables such as accent, speech rate, pitch variety, voice loudness, and interruptions can have important influences not only on people's general impressions of others, but also with regard to potential decisions they may about them".<sup>5</sup>

The Assamese language varieties are reacted to as 'standard', 'substandard', 'harsh', 'musical' and so on. One can also distinguish attitudes and emotions toward the 'typical' speakers of such language variants. Generally speaking, these are language stereotypes (Fishman, 1956). So, the UAV is 'pure' and the LAV is rated as 'deficient' by the UAV speaker. The speech of the LAV is at times ridiculed simply because it is a deviant form of the standard Assamese. Analysis reveals that such stereotypes are social rather than linguistic. Perceptions ingrained in childhood, societal reactions, and the speakers' exposure to such variation form the basis of language oriented attitudes.

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<sup>4</sup> Howard Giles and Robert N. St. Clair, (eds.), 1979, *Language and Social Psychology*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, p.7.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p.4

## **Language and Identity**

Individuals try to interpret the world through various categorizations. Language is one of the major factors used to categorize others (Giles and Johnson, 1981). Among other linguists, Dell Hymes (1972) and Michael Halliday (1972) have put emphasis on the speech community as a group of people who 'feel' themselves to be a community in some sense, and not a group definable only in linguistic terms. Such groups in society manifest distinct social characteristics alongwith distinctive speech characteristics.

Language is also a key factor in the formation of social identity. Social identity has been defined as "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his/her knowledge of his/her membership in a social group(s) together with the values and emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel,1978).

The language which speakers use determines to a large extent their affiliations to a particular group(s). Language is also used as a means to create an identity for oneself. Linguistic identity is very much a part of a person's social identity. What a speaker says on any occasion is in part, a reflection of his social identity. This is interesting in the context that individuals self categorize themselves as members of certain groups. This in turn is important for our understanding of verbal behaviour and language attitudes.

On the basis of such aspects of language study Robert Le Page<sup>6</sup> has come up with certain observations. Each individual creates the systems for his verbal behaviour so that they shall resemble those of the group or groups to be identified, to the extent that

1. He can identify the groups,
2. He has both opportunity and ability to observe and analyze their behavioural systems,
3. His motivation is sufficiently strong to impel him to choose, and to adapt his behaviour accordingly,
4. He is still able to adapt his behaviour.

Identification with a group determines a person's linguistic behaviour to a large extent. The speakers of both the UAV and the LAV identify with the regional group he/she belongs to. The tone, pronunciation, accent, and speech rate of a LAV speaker is part of his identity as a person from the Lower Assam region. An individual's production of spoken language serves to locate him/her regionally as well as socially. In the context of the present study, speech has enabled categorization of people as belonging to either the Upper Assam or the Lower Assam region.

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Le Page, 1968a, *Problems of description in multilingual communities*, Transactions of the Philological Society, Wiley, New York, p.27.

Howard Giles<sup>7</sup> makes four important points about the relationship between language and social behaviour, the latter following from the notion of social identity.

First, language is not a homogeneous, static system. It is multi-channelled, multi-variable, and capable of vast modifications, which afford social significance.

Second, a social or ethnic group's past, present, and aspirations for the future are intricately linked to language and hence it is often a salient dimension of their identity. People like to emphasize their ingroup identity through language in certain situations.

Third, with this association between language variables and societal structure, people use speech behaviour as cues to group categorizations and subsequent inferences for evaluation in important, social contexts.

Fourth, the specific manner in which a speaker encodes language behaviour can be a subtle, indirect yet crucial indicant of how he or she defines the situation and or the other.

In any kind of social interaction, the individual's use of features is correlated with different groups. It expresses group membership and the values of that group and its attitudes toward itself and other groups. Features like pitch range, tempo, rhythm, and voice setting provide indexical information about the speaker's group affiliations. Group membership

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<sup>7</sup> Howard Giles and Robert N. St. Clair, (eds.), 1979, *Language and Social Psychology*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, p.17.

also plays an important role in social interaction. This is attributable to the simple reason that norms of social behaviour are influenced in large measure by classification of significant groups of people. Rules for appropriate behaviour can then be attached to such classes.

Social identity is in large part established and maintained through language. The historical character of the process whereby groups are formed and symbols of identity created are partially responsible for endowing speakers with their particular characteristics. Analysis of this in regard to the Assamese language forms a part of the scope of the present study.

### **Linguistic variables and sociocultural significance**

In general, individuals speaking different types of dialects may find themselves in particularly advantageous or disadvantageous positions by virtue of the social connotations or prejudices attached to their particular variety. All the characteristics of speech are relevant in this respect. Tone, pitch, accent, loudness, speech rate, and even manner of speech are seen as 'betraying' the identity of a speaker as to which part of Assam he/she belongs to.

Dialectal variations can correspond to geographical variation as well as social differences. In certain cases, a dialect, which originated as a geographically defined variety comes to be regarded as a social dialect. It is then associated with a specific group and their mode of living, socioeconomic status, and so on. The two varieties spoken in Assam, namely, the LAV and UAV are distinguished on the basis of their regional



identity. The present study also explores the notion of social variation in the context of these two speech varieties. Evaluations were made of the speech variety being associated with considerations of having prestigious qualities or negative connotations. The UAV speaker may accord a high status to his variety on the grounds of it being recognized as the 'standard'. He may have an unfavourable attitude towards the LAV and its speakers. The LAV speaker, on the other hand, may look up to the standard. He may also maintain his original dialect with tenacity as the symbol of unity and group solidarity.

People are prone to classify others on the basis of their speech characteristics. Certain notions of the typical UAV and LAV speaker are created in the minds of the speakers. A UAV speaker's speech is nasalized while a LAV speaker uses a pharyngeal voice and rough manner. As a result of such linguistic characteristics, one develops, consciously and unconsciously, certain social characteristics which are identified with certain groups of speakers. The LAV speaker is regarded as 'uncouth', 'unrefined', 'unsophisticated' in his behaviour. There is also social stigma attached to the regional pronunciations of the LAV. This is the perception of the UAV speaker. The UAV speaker perceives himself and others of his speech community as 'cultured', 'educated', and 'sophisticated'. Moreover, he considers himself at an advantage over the LAV speaker.

Such behaviour has been termed as 'prejudice' by social psychologists. McDonagh and Richards (1953) have defined prejudice as "preconceived judgements toward persons, beliefs, or objects". According to Marden and

Meyer (1962) prejudice is “an attitude unfavourable to or disparaging of a whole group and all the individual members of it”. Attitude has been defined as “an interrelated set of propositions about an object or class of objects which are organized around cognitive, behavioural, and affective dimensions”.<sup>8</sup>

The social characteristics influence any form of interaction between speakers of the two varieties. Many of the UAV speakers have a tendency to think of the speech form of the LAV speaker as dialectal, substandard, and in certain cases even deficient. Young and Mack (1962) defines such behaviour as “a culturally predetermined, biased attitude toward or conception of a person or group”. It is a preconceived notion of societal discrimination and hostility towards others.

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<sup>8</sup> Howard J.Ehrlich, 1973, *The Social Psychology of Prejudice*, John Wiley and Sons, New York, London, Sydney, Toronto,p.25

## **Conclusion**

Regional variation has been one of the major factors contributing to linguistic diversity. It has resulted in the differentiation of features within a single language. The sociolinguistic significance of such variation can be analyzed through a correlation between verbal and social behaviour of speakers. The relationship of language to society can then be studied through an understanding of the social meaning of language use.

The present study has made a sociolinguistic inquiry into dialectal variation dependent on regional variation. The reaction of speakers to variation in their language has been taken to reflect certain attitudes and premises about the language they use. Such perceptions are based on their experiences and judgements about the other varieties.

The regional varieties have also been classified as standard/ nonstandard/ substandard. The methods and techniques adopted in the present study have explored the criteria behind such evaluative judgements.

Concepts from the field of social psychology have been taken to relate language to its social context and evaluate the social meaning behind language use. The scope of the study has been defined by the notion that one's speech is the embodiment of his societal expectations and beliefs, and in many cases, the reflection of what other parts of the society perceive as well.

Some of the answers found were expected while certain others hinted at the need for a more detailed inquiry than the present one.

The close interdependence between linguistic data and elicitation procedures required selection of appropriate methods and techniques for the present study. The questionnaire and interview formed the basis of elicitation procedures. They tested the speaker's awareness of regional variation in the language, their preference for certain words, and their notion of a standard. Representative samples of speakers were taken using the Upper Assam Variety and the Lower Assam Variety. They were native speakers of Assamese and came from diverse backgrounds. Their responses, therefore, were crucial in representing the speech community to which they belonged.

Though the sample was chosen with an aim to include all the major divisions in society, certain parameters did not have any direct bearing on the results of the study. Gender difference and occupational background had no influence on the responses of the speakers. Age factor showed a slight variation in the reactions, with the older generation showing not the least deviation from their respective variety. The younger generation seemed more open to change and tolerance of the 'other' variety.

The sentences generated during the questionnaire and interview aimed at testing lexical usage and grammatical habits were based in reality. Utterances used in everyday life were elicited from speakers. Such real utterances also fulfilled the criteria of spontaneous natural speech which any study of language aims to investigate.

The methods adopted attempted to study attitude, which in this case is language attitude. The analysis of attitude took into account the speaker's

attitude towards his own variety, that of the 'other' variety and its group of speakers.

Speakers revealed clearly definable attitudes regarding the notion of standard. The standard has been defined as that variety which is followed as the norm. Various forces are at play in the formation of a standard. Though each regional group had their own notion of standard, individual perception of what is standard or not also played a major role. The responses to the questionnaire and the interview, though mostly uniform, also had exceptions that reflected the speakers' preconceived notions of verbal behaviour and the notion of standard.

Though the LAV is used in colloquial speech, there is a conscious effort to use the UAV in writing. The domain of varieties used in speech and writing are distinct in the context of the LAV speaker. They however feel that their colloquial speech is as acceptable as the standard colloquial of the UAV.

Speaker's attitude towards those of other varieties reflects certain stereotyped images in their minds. The tone, presence of certain words, manner of speech, loudness, pitch are some of the features which are used to create a stereotype of the 'typical' UAV and LAV speaker. Any form of social interaction is influenced by such markers more so than the linguistic characteristics themselves.

Though the interview contrived a formal situation in which speakers became conscious of their role as informants, the 'vernacular' constituted the responses to a large extent. The responses too were placed on a scale ranging from the least acceptable to the most acceptable. And nonstandard utterances were also rated as allowed or correct depending on the speaker's notion of verbal behaviour.

The study of attitude has been central to an investigation of dialectal variation and the notion of standard. Linguistic features evoke a response in the mind of the speaker that manifests itself into an attitude of the individual.

Concepts from social psychology have been taken to understand such phenomenon and related issues. Theories and concepts available to the sociolinguist have been combined with concepts from social psychology to have an in-depth analysis of the subject matter of the present study. Howard Giles' (1973) explanation of the relationship between linguistic and social behaviour is an interesting example. People use speech behaviour as cues for subsequent inferences for evaluation in social contexts. Such a theory coincides with Labov's principle of subordinate shift. In an interaction situation, when speakers of a subordinate variety of language are asked direct questions about that variety, their responses shift toward or away from the standard or superordinate variety. The Assamese standard was accepted as the norm by those speakers whose speech styles moved towards this style during the interview. On the other hand, some others negatively evaluated the standard and did not wish to be identified with that group. Such speakers maintained the dialectal variations. Desire for social mobility and identification with a particular group may motivate a speaker to vary his speech characteristics.

Historical developments were also traced to understand formation and emergence of dialectal variation and the making of a standard. The process of standardization and other factors responsible in contributing to the present linguistic scenario were studied and answers were found to many related questions.

The study has highlighted an increasing awareness and influence of the varieties over each other. Speakers have responded favourably to

utterances, which may not be standard. Though the notion of hierarchy between dialects was reflected in the responses of the speakers, such a concept was becoming less popular. We can state the following regarding dialectal variation on the basis of the study:

1. The Assamese speaker is aware of dialectal variation and its sociolinguistic significance.
2. The speaker is also aware of a standard or norm in the language.
3. Individuals have stereotyped images of the 'other' variety and its speakers.

Certain questions though, have remained unanswered, such as influence of the desire for social mobility on loss of certain linguistic features of a variety. The scope of the study could not include a comprehensive analysis of all related issues. The study focused on finding answers to the existence of a standard Assamese language and tracing the reactions of speakers towards such a variety. It was aimed at a delineation of attitude based on lexical usage, structured questions and casual speech.

The study helped to assert the relevance of Haugen's statement that "a complete language has its regional accents and its class or occupational jargons, which do not destroy its unity so long as they are clearly diversified in function, and show a reasonable degree of solidarity with one another".<sup>1</sup>

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1 E.Haugen, 1966a, 'Dialect, language, nation', American Anthropologist, Vol.68, p.933.

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## Appendix 1

### Questionnaire

Name:

Age:

Sex:

Place of Birth:

Place of stay:

Education:

Occupation:

Languages known:

1 Word-List	UAV	LAV
Pulses	darl	dali
Mustard	xorijoh	bəhar
Chair	sokɪ	sokɪ
Fan	fɛn	fɛn
Newspaper	k <sup>h</sup> ɔbɔr kagɔj/ batorɪ kagɔj	
Table	tɛbul	tɛbul
Book	kɪtɔp	kɪtɔp
Study	pɔrha	pɔrha
Government	sɔrkɔr	sɔrkɔr
Girl	sowali	api
People	manuh	manuh
Boy	lora	apa

Food	k <sup>h</sup> owa	k <sup>h</sup> awa
Some	ɔkɔnman	ɛkutman
Happiness	xuk <sup>h</sup>	xuk <sup>h</sup>
Animal	jontu	jontu
Wife	g <sup>h</sup> omɪ	g <sup>h</sup> onnok
Husband	girɪɛk	lalɔk
Brother	dada	dada
Sister (Elder)	baɪdɛo	bai
Sister (Younger)	b <sup>h</sup> ɔni	boni
Spoon	samus	samus
Water	pani	pani
Road	rasta	bāt
Milk	gak <sup>h</sup> ir	gak <sup>h</sup> ir
House	g <sup>h</sup> ɔr	g <sup>h</sup> ɔr
Banana	kɔl	kɔl
Bed	bɪsɔna	bɪsɪna
Bowl	bati	k <sup>h</sup> uri
Vegetables	pasoli	posoli
Father	dɛuta	pɪta
Iron	luha	luha
Egg	kɔni	dɪma
Mosquito net	at <sup>h</sup> ua	mohorɪ
Beautiful	d <sup>h</sup> unia	t <sup>h</sup> ogua

Lot	bohūt	iməngɪla
Cloudy	gumut <sup>h</sup> a	mɛg <sup>h</sup> dɪɣɛ
Lime	nemu	lebu
Chicken	murgi	kukura
Red	rɔŋa	lal
Black	kola	kolɛ
Green	xeuzia	kaima
Yellow	halod <sup>h</sup> ia	hald <sup>h</sup> ɛ
Glass	gilas	gulas
Blue	nɪla	nɪɛ
Grandmother	aita	abu
Grandfather	kɔka	ata

2 Sentences using the above words by individual speakers.

1 How would you classify these words?

Colloquial / Sub-standard / Standard / Formal

2 What do you think of dialects in the language?

3 What is your opinion of the variety you use?

4 What is 'standard' Assamese?

5 Which variety can be taken as the 'standard'?

6 What is your opinion of UAV/LAV?



- 7 Which variety is used for formal purposes / taught in schools?
- 8 Literary activities are conducted in which variety?
- 9 Which newspapers do you read?
- 10 What is the language used in them?
- 11 What is the present state of the Assamese language?
- 12 In your opinion which variety is associated with higher status-  
LAV or UAV?
- 13 In interaction with people using the 'other' variety, which would  
you use-your own variety or that of the 'other'?