

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Classification

This book is a grammatical description of Meithei, a Tibeto-Burman language. There are about 250 Tibeto-Burman languages, with approximately 56 million speakers living in China, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim, Myanmar (formerly Burma), Laos, Thailand and Vietnam (Matisoff 1991b: 478–479). In his *Introduction to Sino-Tibetan*, Shafer (1966/1967) presented an internal sub-grouping of Tibeto-Burman languages. However, Matisoff (1991b: 473) has pointed out that the amount and quality of data available to Shafer did not justify his groupings. In the influential work *Sino-Tibetan: A Conspectus* (Benedict 1972), which relates Chinese to Tibeto-Burman, the exact relationship of Tibeto-Burman languages to each other is said to be too complex to define with traditional methods and is left open. To date, Sino-Tibetan historical linguists operate with a "working hypothesis" of language relationships within Tibeto-Burman. Matisoff's (1991b) heuristic model consists of seven groups:

Group	Approximate location
Kamarupan	Northeast India, Western Myanmar
Himalayish	Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim
Qiangic	Sichuan
Kachinic	Sichuan, Yunnan, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam
Lolo-Burmese	Northern Myanmar, Thailand, Yunnan
Baic	Yunnan
Karenic	Burma and Thailand

Meithei falls in the geographically determined group *Kamarupan* (from the Sanskrit word *Kāmarūpa* for Assam). Traditionally, the subgroups postulated for this area are Kuki-Chin-Naga, Abor-Miri-Dafla and Bodo-Garo. Earlier classifications put Meithei in a Kuki-Chin (Grierson 1903–1928) or Kuki-Chin-Naga sub-group (Voegelin and Voegelin 1965: 17). However, it has generally been recognized that the Mikir, Mru and Meithei languages do not fit readily into this or other sub-groups of the area. Although DeLancey (1987: 800) postulates a distinct Mikir-Meithei sub-branch, I remain agnostic, pending the collection of more data on other languages in the group, on the exact position of Meithei within Kamarupan.

On the one hand, Meithei shares many features with Tibeto-Burman languages such as tone, widespread stem homophony, agglutinative verb morphology, verb derivational suffixes originating from the semantic bleaching of verbs, duplication or elaboration (see Chapter 8), evidentiality and emotional attitudes signalled through sentence final particles, aspect rather than tense marking, lack of gender marking, verb final word order and the lack of grammatical relations such as "subject" and "object" (DeLancey 1987, Matisoff 1991b). On the other hand, Meithei is atypical for the Kamarupan group in some significant ways. It lacks pronominal marking on the verb, which is considered an original Tibeto-Burman trait (Bauman 1975, DeLancey 1989b),¹ and it lacks numeral classifiers. Also, due to extensive cultural contact with Indo-Aryan languages, in particular Bengali and Sanskrit, and in recent times Assamese and Hindi, Meithei contains a large number of borrowed lexical items and some non-Tibeto-Burman constructions such as the use of question words as heads of relative clauses.

Meithei is known by different names. The toponym *Manipuri*, a term derived in analogy with other place names in India such as Kanpur where *-pur* is of Sanskrit origin meaning 'state, place', is used by the Indian government and non-Meithei Indian scholars. Folk etymologies for *Manipur* originate from mythology: a snake god *Vasuki* is said to have thrown out a shining diamond (or *mani*, the Sanskrit word for jewel) from its head which filled the land with natural beauty or jewels. Government-run institutions in Manipur use this name; for example, *Manipur Language Department* and *All India Radio News in Manipuri*. On ideological grounds many Meithei speakers prefer to use the toponym *Meitheidôn* which contains *lôn* 'language' (N. Promodini Devi 1989a). In the linguistic literature written by western scholars, the term Meithei (sometimes spelled Meitei) is used. Meithei scholars seem to make a distinction between whether they are writing in Meithei (when they tend to use the term *Meitheidôn*) or in English (when they use Meithei). The term Meithei itself may be a compound of *mí* 'man' and *they-* 'separate' (Hodson 1908: 10). Shini Ray (p.c.) has pointed out that a current term in use by Meithei revivalists, those who wish to assert Meithei religious, cultural and political autonomy from India, is *Meetei*. The origin of this term and its pronunciation are yet unclear to me.

I have adopted the practice of using the term Meithei to refer to the language of the Meithei since this is what speakers prefer. Also, this avoids confusing the Tibeto-Burman language spoken in Manipur with Bishnupriya Manipuri which is an Indo-Aryan language that was spoken in Manipur between the 18th and 19th century. In the early 1800s Bishnupriya speakers migrated from Manipur to neighboring Assam, Tripura and Sylhet. Due to the long period of contact with it, Bishnupriya Manipuri has borrowed many words and some affixes from Meithei (Sinha 1974, 1986).

1.2 Geography

Meithei is spoken predominantly in Manipur State. Smaller populations of speakers fled Manipur, due to either internal wars or wars with Myanmar, to neighboring Assam (Sylhet, Sibsagar and Silchar), Bangladesh (Dacca and Mymensingh) and the hills of Tripura. Meitheis can also be found in Myanmar where they were taken as captives in 1819 during invasions by the Meitheis of Myanmar. Manipur is bordered by Myanmar to the East, Mizoram to the South, Nagaland to the North, and Assam to the West and Northwest.

The state consists of 22,356 square kilometers, 1813 kilometers of which are level country approximately 750 meters above sea level. This level area is populated mainly by the Meithei and 120,000 Muslims who are the progeny of the intermarriage of Muslim traders and laborers with Meithei women. It is possible that the original population of Muslims were prisoners of war taken by the Meitheis from Cachar (Hodson 1908).

The 20,543 square kilometers of hill territory are populated by about 500,000 people belonging to Naga (Angami, Kabui (called Rongmei in Manipur), Kacha, Lamgang, Mao, Maram, Maring, Tangkhul) and Kuki-Chin (Mizo (Lushai), Hmar, Koirang, Kom, Ralte, Simte, Thadou, Zou) tribes. Other tribes which live in the state are listed as Old Kuki tribes because their languages have resemblances to both Naga and Kuki-Chin groups (Aimol, Anal, Chote, Koirao, Tarao, Monsang, Moyon, Paite, Vaiphei). The Chiru and Gangte tribes also live in Manipur.²

According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, Book of the Year 1993 (1994: 780), there are 1,180,000 native speakers of Meithei, although the number of actual speakers is higher since Meithei is used as a lingua franca in the state and is spoken by about 60% of the state population (Sen 1992: 23). As of 1981, when the last national census was taken, 41% of the total population in Manipur was literate. English and Meithei are the state languages. Meithei speakers are for the most part monolingual, but many can understand Hindi and English through constant exposure to the Hindi and English news and entertainment media. Educated speakers (those who have the equivalent of a high school education) have at least a marginal competency in English.

Manipur is divided into 8 districts: Imphal, Bishnupur, Thoubal, Ukhrul, Senapati, Tamenglong, Churachandpur and Chandel. The state capital is Imphal city, in the district of the same name.

The hill ranges run mostly north to south and are connected by spurs and ridges that run from west to east. The Naga hills are to the north, the Manipur hills begin at the eastern border with Myanmar, the Lushai and Chin hills are to the south. The highest hills are in the northeast with the highest point, *Kachao Phung*, reaching about 3000 meters (9,843 feet).

The most important river in the state is the Imphal, which flows from the north through the plains for about 130 kilometers to eventually join the Chindwin river of Myanmar, a tributary of the Irrawady river. The other significant rivers are the Iril (96 kilometers long) and the Thoubal (88 kilometers long). Both meet the Imphal river south of Imphal city.

Manipur is known for its many natural lakes, especially *Loktak lake*, the biggest fresh water lake in eastern India which in the rainy season covers about 100 square kilometers and in the dry season about 64 square kilometers. The monsoon is from May to September and the average rainfall in the state is 2077.7 millimeters.

The Manipuri hills are covered with evergreen forests which are being gradually reduced in size due to slash-and-burn agriculture: there were 15,090 square kilometers of forest area in 1975, which had been reduced to about 13,572 square kilometers by 1982 (Sen 1992: 8).

Manipur flora include bamboo, cane, cotton, lotus (including a famed variety with 108 petals), rhododendron bushes, and water lilies. More than 100 varieties of orchids are grown and exhibited at an orchid park in Khongampat on the outskirts of Imphal. Fauna includes leopard, bear, wolf and various species of deer (including the rare brow-antlered Thamin deer), snakes and (edible) frogs. The elephant was common before the time of the British.

The main crop of the state is rice and rice cultivation is a traditional occupation for Meitheis. Although some farmers are adopting modern cultivation methods, most still use buffaloes yoked to wooden ploughs to till soil. The biggest industry in the state is handloom textiles. Lower-caste families living in the plains practice mulberry rearing to produce raw silk that is used by the handloom industry. Fishing comprises 2% of the state's income. A wide array of indigenous fishing gear, such as weirs, bamboo and cane baskets, spears and nets can be seen in use around the Loktak area and even within Imphal city limits. Other industries are cultivation of sugarcane, pear, apple, pineapple, banana, guava, peach, cabbage, pumpkin, chilies, potato, and sweet potato. Tobacco and betel leaves are grown in abundance. Teak and rubber trees are found in the hills.

There is an airport in Imphal with flights to Calcutta, Assam and New Delhi. There is no railway in Manipur; only two main roads, Highways 39 and 53, connect the state to the rest of India. Transportation on these roads is not always feasible due to landslides, and transport of goods in and out of Manipur is often delayed. Imphal is connected to the other state districts by smaller highways which can safely be travelled by jeep but not by car. Non-citizens may enter the state only by permission of the Union Ministry of Home Affairs in New Delhi. Indian citizens who visit Manipur through Nagaland must also seek a permit.

A sizeable proportion of the population lives below the poverty line. In 1979-1980, the average per capita income in India was 1379 rupees, while for the same time period it was 822 rupees in Manipur (Ahluwalia and Ahluwalia 1984: 87). In 1982, out of 1,949 villages only 322 were electrified. Drinking water is scarce in most rural areas and in some urban areas as well.

1.3 Religion

The Meitheis are Hindus and the other major religious groups in Manipur are Christian and Muslim. A momentous event in modern Meithei history was the conversion of the Meithei people to Hinduism. Previous to the 18th century, the Meitheis were animists, worshiping deities that were vested with the characteristics of fire, water, wind, sun and other natural phenomena. They also carried out a form of ancestor worship where the rulers of clans rather than individual families were revered.

Between the 2nd and 15th centuries the Meitheis came in superficial contact with Aryan civilization, as evidenced by coins minted in the 2nd century that have Deva Nagari lettering and an 8th century copper plate that mentions Hindu deities. Shrines built to Hindu deities from the 15th century onward give evidence of proselytizing Hindus from Assam, Gujarat, Orissa and Bengal.

In 1750 A.D. the monarch Garibniwaj (also known as Pamheiba) converted to Hinduism, specifically to Vaishnavism which emphasizes devotion through worship of reincarnations of the Hindu deity Shiva. Garibniwaj instigated a mass conversion of the Meitheis to Vaishnavism, through various forms of coercion and the burning of scriptures of the old religion. Converted Meithei males observe and celebrate important milestones in Hinduism, such as birth, adoption of the sacred thread, marriage, death and cremation, with prescribed ceremonies or festivities. However, earlier forms of worship never disappeared and pre-Hindu festivals are still observed.

The conversion to Hinduism had enormous implications for the language and culture of the Meithei people. This is evidenced in the genesis of new social dialects of Meithei. Two groups were exiled from the dominant Meithei speaking areas in the Manipur plains to surrounding hill areas. These groups are the Lois, who were subjects of the Meitheis and were not converted to Hinduism and the Yaithibis, who did not follow strictly enough the rituals and rules of Hinduism. These groups are interesting from a socio-linguistic point of view since the Meithei they speak was not influenced by Sanskrit or Bengali and has therefore developed differently from the Meithei dialects spoken in the other areas. This difference in dialects has been reinforced by the geographic and

social isolation of these groups, as well as by their ideologically motivated efforts to align speech with older written forms of Meithei.

The influx of Brahmin men (the highest caste in the Hindu caste system), from various parts of North India into Manipur and marriages between these men and Meithei women formed a racially distinct minority. The caste system, necessarily imported into Manipur as a part of Hinduism, assured the social segregation of this community, which in turn resulted in the Brahmin Meithei speaking a distinct dialect of the language. Maharajah Garibniwaj claimed Kshatriya (warrior) status at the time of his conversion and allowed those subjects who also converted to Hinduism to claim this status as well. The lower castes of the Meithei caste system include the descendants of marriages between Meithei women and lower-caste Indo-Aryan Hindus.

A second influence of the conversion to Hinduism was on literature and orthography. (Details with examples of the writing systems in question are given in Appendix 3.) Many works about the animistic religion and other historical documents written in the original Meithei script, called Meithei Mayek, were burnt at the time of the conversion. The Bengali script was adopted for the writing of Meithei. Indigenous literary genres were all but replaced by translations of Bengali religious and secular works. (See Appendix 2.)

A third influence of conversion was on the structure and lexicon of Meithei. Due to its status as a sacral language and its literary and cultural ascendancy in India during the 18th century, Bengali (and Sanskrit through Bengali) were accorded high prestige in Manipur. The literate, comprised largely of Hindu priests, presented renditions of Hindu epics such as the *Mahabharata* in Meithei that was interspersed with Brajabuli, an artificial dialect based on Bengali and Maithili. The illiterate were also exposed to Bengali in ballads where the correct performance style called for occasional stringing together of synonymous words from Meithei and Bengali and later Hindi (M. Kirti Singh 1993: 128). Thus, representations of the scripture and contact with migrating Aryans led to the large-scale borrowing of lexical items into Meithei. This borrowing led to structural changes in Meithei such as the addition of a voiced and voiced aspirated (breathy) stop series in the phonemic inventory. It also led to functional changes such as the simplification of kinship terminology and changes in the structure of personal names (N. Promodini Devi 1990).

1.4 Political history

Between 1700 and 1800 there was war, either within Manipur between clans vying for the status of the most powerful group in the state, or with Myanmar, which sporadically occupied Manipur between 1758 to 1826. When the Anglo-

Burmese war ended in 1826, the British thought it expedient to allow Manipur to function as a buffer between the British empire in India and Myanmar. In 1891 Manipur was made a princely state of the British empire. In 1949, two years after India won independence from the British and the year that the Constitution of India was framed, Manipur was integrated into the Indian Union. In slow stages, Manipur evolved from being a province (administered by a Chief Commissioner appointed by the President in 1950) to a territory (administered by a council or elected and nominated officials in 1957) to a full-fledged state (with a governor and legislative assembly in 1972).

It has been argued that statehood was achieved in large part by violence or threat of violence by Marxist revolutionary groups such as the People's Liberation Army (Hazarika 1994). One of the initial moves of this group was to reject the Hindu faith and customs, but this became a subordinate interest to the overthrow of the government in Delhi by Indian workers. The People's Liberation Army was complemented by the People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak whose interests were to propagate "Meitheism" – traditional Meithei values, language and religion. At the height of its power in the 1970s, its foremost demand was that all foreigners (non-Meitheis) leave the state. Another show of force against the Central Government was staged in Ukhrul, an area in Manipur dominated by Tangkhul Nagas who have members in another anti-Indian insurgency group, the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland.

Anti-Indian insurgent groups, which since the 1980s are said to be hiding and training in Kachinland (Myanmar), have recently been active again. In 1993, over 100 people were killed in the Muslim village of Leelong, located on the outskirts of Imphal. The fighting began either because a Muslim arms smuggler refused to do business with insurgent groups or because residents of Leelong refused to pay tribute to insurgents (Hazarika 1993). Insurgent groups, which are generally supported by the Meithei populace, have legitimate goals: improvement of the standard of living for the average Meithei, rooting out of corrupt government officials who pocket funds allocated by the Indian government for the economic development of Manipur, and gainful employment.³ Unfortunately, these goals are often set aside to follow traditional feuds between tribes: for example, in 1994 Kuki and Tangkhul Naga groups fought in Manipur, resulting in the death of scores of people (Hazarika 1994). A radical goal of insurgent groups that does not seem to have much support is the creation of an independent nation state comprised either of Manipur or of the entire Northeast Indian region. The political atmosphere in Imphal in the 1990s has been tense: there are paramilitary forces stationed throughout Manipur and an informal curfew is constantly in effect. There were cases of violence and fraud reported during the national elections held in 1990. When

8 I was in Imphal in 1989 and 1990, I had occasion to visit friends at the main police station. It was always buzzing with activity; the walls covered with detailed maps of hills hastily covered upon my presence, lest I make sense of the many thumbtacks marking the location of the latest "agitation" or sighting of insurgents.

1.5 Material culture

There is a great emphasis on cleanliness and decorous appearance. When in Manipur, Meithei women dress traditionally in a *phanék*, which is a rectangular piece of handloom cotton cloth, about 117 centimeters long and 170 centimeters wide. The length is sewn together to form a tube with 50 centimeters on top left open to allow for the cloth to be pulled tight around the waist. The *phanék* is worn with a short, tight blouse that ends at the midriff. A thin muslin cloth is either draped around the shoulders like a shawl or worn around the waist and over the shoulder like the top of the Indian sari. For everyday wear a thinner solid color cotton *phanék* with a solid color cover-up cloth is used. For special occasions a *phanék* made of heavier cotton or silk striped cloth with patterns commonly of green, maroon or purple with black and white stripes is used. The bottom of the *phanék* has a large hand-embroidered border. The cover-up cloth is also fancier, usually a gauze cloth about 236 centimeters long and 121 centimeters wide, with intricate embroidery. In rural areas, women wear the *phanék* under the armpits without the blouse or additional cover-up cloth.

Younger women wear their hair long, usually loose or braided, and older women wear their hair tied back in a chignon. At weddings and official receptions, women are adorned with heavy gold jewelry, necklaces, earrings and rings. Meithei women do not pierce their noses or wear ankle bracelets or toe rings. Meithei women outside of Manipur tend to dress in the local style.

Meithei men dress in a western-style clothes for everyday occasions. For special occasions, the men wear the pan-Indian *dhoti* (a piece of cloth that is tied around the waist with extra cloth being brought between the legs and tucked in at the waist) and *kurta* (a loose thin cotton shirt). For ceremonial occasions, men wear headgear known as *pugree*, an impressive turban of white cotton cloth that has no catches or pins to hold it in place.

Traditional Meitheis follow a joint family system with male siblings and their families living together in one compound. The main door of the houses within the compound faces eastward and there is usually one other door at the end of the house towards the northeast. A large open veranda at the entrance of the house is used for entertaining and relaxing. The houses are not well ventilated

9 or well lit as windows are uncommon. Many houses do not have running water. There is usually one toilet per family, located outside of the main house, for which water is carried in from a pond or well on the grounds. It is common for compounds to have ponds which may be stocked with fish or used to irrigate vegetable gardens. Modern houses are built with brick or concrete while traditional houses have thatch roofs, wooden or bamboo posts and walls made of straw and mud.

Houses are sparsely furnished and decorated. The kitchens that I saw were usually stocked full of high quality aluminum utensils and earthenware cooking dishes. Meals are served on banana leaves to family members who sit cross-legged or squat in a row on the floor. Nowadays it is not uncommon to eat at a table on plates. For festivals and special occasions such as marriage celebrations, rice and other main dishes are placed on the banana leaf; while side dishes and condiments are placed in tiny cups made of bamboo or banana leaf, held together with twigs.

A Meithei meal is not complete without rice which is eaten steamed and minimally accompanied by *amétpa*, a chutney made of dried fish paste and green chilies. A popular variant is *ironba*, where a tuberous vegetable such as potato is added to the basic *amétpa* recipe. Like most Hindus, Meitheis do not eat beef, pork or lamb. Poultry, fish and eggs, however, are consumed. Vegetables are fried and heavily spiced. Yoghurt is expensive and hard to come by. Fermented soybeans are an important condiment as are chilies, ginger and salt. I have heard that businessmen from Japan have travelled to Manipur to study the art of soybean fermentation from the Meithei.

Those Meitheis who closely follow the restrictions on food will drink milk, but not tea or coffee. Although alcohol is prohibited by custom, it was legally available till around 1992 when Manipur was made a "dry" state. Minority hill groups home brew a wine called *yu* which is made by fermenting rice. Social drinking is not accepted but the consumption of alcohol by Meithei men is not unheard of.

Cigarette smoking is not common but older Meithei men might smoke tobacco in a *hookah*. Both Meithei men and women chew betel-nut and the *pan* leaf. Heroin is transported from Myanmar to Bombay and other parts of India via Manipur. Many Manipuris have gotten involved in the drug trade either as middlemen between dealers from Myanmar and Bombay or as consumers. It is now not unusual for a Meithei to know or know of a heroin addict. Addicts are sent to prison but do not receive help in rehabilitation.

In Imphal most families own radios; upper middle class families own televisions and tape recorders. A wide variety of music tapes are available: Hindi film music, Hindi film music re-recorded with Meithei words, Country Western music and Rock and Roll. Video machines are not uncommon as attested by

the number of stores which rent videos. Telephones in private residences are still a rarity, as are privately owned automobiles. Men and women get around town by two-wheel scooter, bicycle or city bus. For short distances, bicycle rickshaws are available.

1.6 Performing arts and sports

Undoubtedly the best known and locally and internationally celebrated aspects of Manipuri culture are its classical dance, music and martial arts exhibitions. The dance known throughout India as Manipuri dance is religious devotional dancing called the *Rasa Lila* which emphasizes the desire of the soul to yield to a supreme being manifested in Krishna, a reincarnation of the deity Vishnu. These dances, which depict scenes of Krishna interacting with milkmaids (who represent humankind), are performed with ornate costumes and a distinct style of music. Another form of religious Manipuri dance that depicts expressions of the deity Vishnu is based on the choreography of Guru Amubi Singh. The conch, a symbol of good fortune, is an important accompanying instrument in classical Manipuri dances. Conch music or *Moibúng ishéi* involves the simultaneous playing of two conch shells by one player to produce a booming yet pleasing sound.

Pungcholom is a drum dance where a group of young men wearing *pugrees*, *dhotis* and *chadars* (thin shoulder cloths), play cylindrical drums made of jack-fruit and *wang* trees. The drummers wear these instruments on the torso with a strap while executing intricate movements. A remarkable aspect of this dance is the coordinated modulation of amplitude of drum playing from crescendos to decrescendos. The *Dhol Dholok Cholom*, in which flat, round drums are used, is a more acrobatic dance, requiring incredible stamina as dancers play and twirl in the air. During the monsoon season the Meitheis have a fifteen-day festival known as *Lai Haráoba* 'happiness of the gods', to atone for sins that have been committed in the past year. The festivities of *Lai Haráoba* take place in temples built to the gods and goddesses of the forest and are celebrated by traditional priestesses known as *máibis* who dramatize the creation of the world and the rise of civilization in their dances. Ancient forms of martial arts such as sword fighting, spear fighting and wrestling were used for self-defence in earlier times. These have now been adapted for the stage. Women are said to possess mystical strength and are also participants in martial arts.

Notable games played in Manipur are *khón kánjāy* (*khón* 'foot'; *kánj* 'puck' *ējāy* 'thrashing stick') or 'foot hockey' where opposing teams of nine players try to score goals by hitting a small puck with a bamboo stick. Another popular

game in Manipur is polo which some say was introduced in the state in the 1600s (Hodson 1908: 49), popular legend has it that polo originated in Manipur. I have not had occasion to witness a Manipuri polo game; but Hodson, writing about them at the turn of the century says, "To describe the game is beyond the powers of any but an imaginative and practiced pen, for, in respect of brilliance of play, constant excitement, rashness, courage, skill and popular enthusiasm, there is no game to equal it." (1908: 30)

1.7 Dialects

This book is a study of the Imphal dialect of Meithei which is considered to be the standard for Meithei. It is difficult to assess the exact number of Meithei dialects in existence. The Lois and Yaithibis, who are segregated from the Hindu Meitheis, speak a different dialect. The documented dialects are Sekmai spoken in Sekmai village 19 kilometers north of Imphal (H. Sarojkumar Singh 1988), and Pheyeng spoken in Pheyeng village 2 kilometers south of Imphal consisting of 4000 households (P. Rajkumari Devi 1988). The inhabitants of Pheyeng and Sekmai are Lois. Additionally, there are Brahmin Meithei and Muslim Meithei dialects which have not yet been documented.

Another dialect mentioned in the literature is the Kwatha dialect spoken in Kwatha, a village situated on the Indo-Burmese border near Moreh. The population of Kwatha is composed of descendants of a group which tried to overthrow the Meithei monarch in the 14th century (W. Ragumani Singh 1989). Thoudam (1980) also lists the following dialect names: Kakching, Thanga, Nongmaikhong, Ngaikhong, Moirang, Langthel, Palel and Tokcing. I am unaware of any study which describes these dialects and it is difficult to say if these are simply geographical terms or truly distinct dialects.

Currently the University Grants Commission of the Indian Government is funding a project entitled *Sociolinguistic Survey of Dialects spoken in Manipur*, directed by Professor P. C. Thoudam of Manipur University. There were to be monthly reports published by the project; I am, however, aware of only one publication resulting from this important work, a description of the Kabui language (L. Mahabir Singh and L. Priyokumar Singh 1986).

1.8 Review of literature on the Meithei language

In general the inaccessibility of Northeast India to foreign and Indian scholars has made the documentation of Tibeto-Burman languages spoken there diffi-

cult. This has not been the case with Meithei, about which much has been written. Existing works can be divided into four categories.

The first is the practical grammars of British missionaries/ administrators, the most important of which are Primrose (1887, 100 pages) and Pettigrew (1912, 111 pages), who provide useful word lists, conversational sentences and list of idioms which cannot be found elsewhere. Pettigrew is especially insightful with regards to the verb morphology. However, neither of these works is exhaustive: much of the affixal morphology is not described, tones are not marked or described in any detail, textual information is not used, and there is little to no description of the syntax.

Second, there are a number of pedagogical works on Meithei written in Meithei or English, and a new grammar comes out almost every year. Since these are written on the model of Sanskrit grammar, certain grammatical relations such as evidentiality are ignored and other grammatical categories are postulated where they do not exist. (Subjects are claimed to be marked by nominative case, for example). These works are useful, however, in that they provide lists of bound roots, sentences, compounds and the like, as well as insights into language use. The reader should refer to the References section for titles and authors of such pedagogical works.

Third, there is the body of literature by native speaking Meithei linguists which, by 1990, consisted of 27 Master's theses and Ph.D. dissertations. Notable is Thoudam's 1980 Ph.D. dissertation which provides a comprehensive description of Meithei phonology. Sushila Ningthongjam's 1982 Master's thesis on Meithei morphology includes a near exhaustive list of verbal and nominal affixes in Meithei with examples. Nongthombam Nonigopal Singh's 1987 Ph.D. dissertation on Meithei affixal morphology provides appendices with lists of compounds, roots and examples of words that have from one to ten affixes.

Finally, there is the work of non-Meithei linguists or anthropologists writing in Hindi and English, such as Grierson from the *Linguistic Survey of India* (1903-1928), Hodson (1908) and more recently D.N.S. Bhat and his consultant and co-author M.S. Ningomba. The work of Bhat and Ningomba (1986a, 1986b) and Bhat (1991) has been the most influential work on Meithei since Thoudam's (1980) Ph.D. dissertation. The topics covered are word formation, the case system, tense, and aspect and directionals. Tones are not marked or described. Some of the data and resulting conclusions are unreliable since elicited data have been used and results have not been checked with naturally occurring speech (for more details, see Chapter 4).

During my trips to Manipur, I collected published and unpublished works on Meithei from the Manipur University Linguistics Department and main library, from research scholars working on Meithei dialects, and from book stores in Imphal and Delhi. Works written in Meithei or Hindi were translated with the

help of native speakers. I have included these works in the References section of this book.

1.9 Fieldwork

Preliminary fieldwork on Meithei was conducted with N. Promodini Devi, in a Field Methods class taught by K.V. Subharao at the University of Delhi in 1984.

In June of 1986, I spent three weeks at Manipur University, Canchipur, Manipur, where I completed sixty hours of fieldwork with ten bilingual Meithei-Hindi or Meithei-English speakers. The consultants were Naorem Saratchandra Singh, a graduate student of Linguistics at Manipur University; Sushila Ningthongjam, a Meithei language teacher; Radhe Sham Singh, the Deputy-head librarian at the Manipur University Library, Thoidingjam Purnima Devi, a library assistant; M.C. Sharma, the owner of a restaurant; Mangla Ningomba, a high school student; and the gardener and the cook at the University Guest House. I also worked with a monolingual Meithei speaker, Rasesowri, a village girl who worked as Radhe Sham Singh's maid.

In July of 1986, I completed 15 hours of fieldwork in New Delhi with two trilingual speakers (Meithei, English, Hindi) from the University of Delhi, Thongram Birjit Singh and Bishwajeet Sharma. During this trip to Manipur, my research consisted mainly of the tape recording, transcription and translation of texts.

In 1989, I received a fellowship from the American Institute of Indian Studies to conduct further research on Meithei for my Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Texas at Austin. I spent 8 months in Manipur and Delhi on this fellowship. In Manipur, my main language consultant has been Thounaojam Harimohon Singh, a student at the Linguistics Department at Manipur University. Other speakers that I worked with during this stay in Manipur were Janatan Begum, Heisnam Ranjana Devi, Kakchingtabam Amita Devi and Kshetrimayum Meena Devi. These consultants assisted my research in a number of ways: they provided me with raw data (in the form of conversations, translations from English to Meithei of comic book stories and narration of folk tales); they guided my efforts in reading the script; they procured copies of traditional grammars and books on Meithei used at the college level in Manipur; and they allowed me to practice speaking Meithei with them.

I also met with Laishram Shila Devi, Thongam Pishakmaha Devi and Khurajam Meena Devi, who provided me with versions of folk tales and paraphrases of monologues on various topics previously recorded and analyzed by me.

14 In Delhi I worked with Thongram Birjit Singh, Takhellanka Geetarani Devi and Pravabati Chingangbam.

Since my fieldwork in Manipur I have met with speakers sporadically in India and in the United States. In 1991 and 1992, a troupe of Manipuri artists performed in Arizona. During visits with them I was able to clarify questions I had at the time about Meithei syntax. Finally, in 1995 I met with Th. Harimohon Singh in New Delhi in order to check the data included in this book.

I have collected a total of 35 texts from both male and female speakers, speakers of different dialects of Meithei and speakers of different social classes and educational backgrounds. Of the 35 texts recorded, 30 were transcribed; 17 were translated and 13 were studied in some detail and used to provide illustrative sentences in this book. I provide a list of these thirteen texts along with information on the speakers.

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|---|---|
| (1) <i>əmutkəŋ khənthəsi</i> (Let's at least think about it once) | A radio play about education in Manipur. The speakers are actors, names unknown |
| (2) Conversation between friends about visiting home during the school year | Three females in their early 20's |
| (3) Announcement about meeting concerning national elections | Speaker unknown, recorded from public address system |
| (4) <i>Həŋóy əmasəŋ kəy</i> (Rabbit and Tiger) | Radhe Sham Singh, male, in his early 50's, University librarian |
| (5) <i>Hənúbə hənúbi pan thabə</i> (The planting of pan by the old man and woman) | L. Kalachand Singh, 66 years old, male |
| (6) <i>Kekruhəŋjəbə kəwəy</i> (The one called black berry) | N. Saratchandra Singh, male University of Delhi lecturer in his 30 |
| (7) <i>Láybaknə təmbə khəttəhokpə yade</i> (It is impossible to change fate) | L. Kalachand Singh |
| (8) <i>Məriup ənikhək</i> (The two friends) | L. Kalachand Singh |
| (9) <i>Shakuntala</i> (retelling of a Bengali classic by Rabindranath Tagore) | Ranjana Devi, female graduate student in her 20's |
| (10) <i>Səmpenu Səwaynu</i> (Girls named) | Rasesowri, a female teenage maid |
| (11) <i>Sóybə</i> (Mistake) | Geetarani, a female undergraduate student in her 20's |
| (12) <i>Təpta</i> (The Boogie man) | Radhe Sham Singh |
| (13) Conversation between a professor and student | Male in his 20's with male in his 50's |

15 Illustrative examples in this book are taken from texts collected, material elicited during fieldwork sessions and data from the published or unpublished works collected. Illustrative examples may be presented in bundles of five to six lines, where the first line represents a broad phonemic transcription of the utterance, the second line gives a morphemic analysis of each word, the third line gives a gloss of the individual morphemes and the fifth line gives a gloss of each word. For sentences, a sixth line is provided with a free translation.⁴

1.10 Organization of this book

This grammar consists of nine chapters. Chapter 2 describes the sound system and phonological rules of Meithei. Chapters 3 to 6 describes Meithei syntax: the major lexical categories, grammatical relations, the structure of root sentences and subordination. Chapters 7 and 8 describe Meithei verb and noun morphology, the distribution and semantics of enclitics and patterns of compounding and duplication. Chapter 9 deals with functional issues such as indirect speech acts and evidentiality.

I have used a generative approach in presenting the data and in arguing points of analysis. However, it is not the goal of this book to argue the merits of any one theoretical framework or to point to data that might feed some theoretical controversy. Rather, I hope to have provided accurately transcribed and analyzed data that will serve as a resource for theoreticians, historical linguists and those interested in language typology.