The linguistic situation in Manipur

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From the linguistic point of view, Manipur can be treated as a Mini-India. There are many mother tongues and there are places where as many as three different language families interact with each other, e.g. in Moreh, a small Indo-Burma border town. Officially and according to Grierson, in Manipur as a whole there are 29 'dialects' besides Manipuri itself. This figure is of course only an approximation. Some regions have still not been surveyed at all, and other areas have not yet undergone scientific linguistic analysis. For example, Teizang and Tiddim Chin (spoken in some parts of Moreh and Churachandpur) were not included in Grierson's "29 dialects".
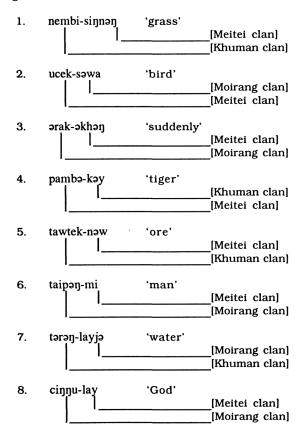
In this state, Manipuri is an official language as well as a lingua franca among the various speech communities. Manipuri has been adopted as the medium of instruction and examination from the primary to the high school stage. Some Naga and Kuki students are pursuing Manipuri as a subject of study in the High and Higher Secondary Schools and Colleges.

Manipuri has been the state language of Manipur since the 8th century A.D. Coins were struck, royal chronicles were recorded, royal firmances and edicts were issued in this language. During the British regime (1819-1947) its status as a state language continued. It was decided by the Manipur State Constitution (Act 1947, section 58) that the court language of the state would be Manipuri or English. Deliberations of the Darbar (the Highest Executive Judicial and Legislative Body) were held and judgements of law courts were delivered in the language. Its status as a state language was definitively recognized in the relevant provisions of the Manipur State Court Act of 1947. Since August 20, 1993, Manipuri has been recognized as the 8th Scheduled Language in the Indian Constitution. In the Legislative Assembly questions and answers are also expressed in Manipuri. Such are the important roles of this language in the state.

But still the language needs standardization, especially as regards the spelling system. Different writers use different spellings. Standardizing the orthography is a burning problem which remains to be solved. For example, phonetically in the modern language there is only one sibilant /s/, but in written form there are three or four other sibilants. Similarly, five retroflexes, namely /ṭ ṭh ḍ ḍh ṇ/ are maintained in the writing, but not in speech. This is of course very interesting for the historical study of the language. It is generally accepted that Modern Manipuri is the result of the mixture of 9 groups, viz., CHENGLEI, LUWANG, KHUMAN, MOIRANG (KEGE), ANGOM, KHABA, MANGANG, HEIREM, and NINGTHOUJA

(MEITEI). During the process of state formation all the groups merged into one and became the Meitei. The language of the Meitei is called "Meiteilon" locally, and "Manipuri" officially. Each group has its own mother tongue. A few lexical items can be mentioned here though a large number are not traceable.

Moravcsik in his paper "Reduplicative Constructions" (1978) expresses the opinion that in semantic reduplication the synonymous words may derive from different languages. This is true in the case of Manipuri also. One word in such expressions belongs to one clan while another word belongs to another clan.

1.   nembi-siŋnəŋ   'grass'
         | |_____[Meitei clan]
         |_____[Khuman clan]

2.   ucek-səwa   'bird'
         | |_____[Moirang clan]
         |_____[Meitei clan]

3.   ərak-əkhəŋ   'suddenly'
         | |_____[Meitei clan]
         |_____[Moirang clan]

4.   pambə-kəy   'tiger'
         | |_____[Khuman clan]
         |_____[Meitei clan]

5.   tawtek-nəw   'ore'
         | |_____[Meitei clan]
         |_____[Khuman clan]

6.   taipəŋ-mi   'man'
         | |_____[Meitei clan]
         |_____[Moirang clan]

7.   tərəŋ-layjə   'water'
         | |_____[Moirang clan]
         |_____[Khuman clan]

8.   ciŋŋu-lay   'God'
         | |_____[Meitei clan]
         |_____[Moirang clan]

Regarding semantic reduplication two questions arise: "Why was semantic reduplication more extensively used in Old Manipuri by comparison to Modern Manipuri?" The second question is "Why is semantic reduplication regarded as having high literary value? The first question can be answered in terms of a gradual attrition of vocabulary over the generations. Even more important perhaps is the great number of loanwords that have been incorporated from the Indo-Aryan languages. The answer to the second question is to be sought in the fact that archaic forms are more difficult to master, and thus reflect credit on those who can use them correctly. Speakers may take pride in their subtle felicities of language. The study of Old Manipuri along with the other languages and dialects spoken in Manipur, will help a lot in the reconstruction of proto-forms.

It is commonly accepted by linguists that Manipuri has four major dialects: ANDRO, PHAYENG, SEKMAY[1] and KAKCHING. One can study the differences among the dialects, and the differences between standard Manipuri and the other dialects. It is also agreed that in the olden days, in PHAYENG and ANDRO areas, a now extinct dialect called Chakpa was spoken.

There are some speech forms in Manipur, viz., THADOU, PAITE, HMAR, VAIPHEI, SIMTE, KOM, GANGTE, etc. which are mutually intelligible to some extent and share a great number of common features in phonology, morphology and syntax. These are mostly concentrated in Churachandpur district.

To substantiate this statement, I offer some vocabularies collected from these speech forms, viz. GANGTE (G), PAITE (P), SIMTE (S), THADOU (Th), HMAR (H), KOM (K), and VAIPHEI (V):

1.	'go'	ciə	V, G, S	2.	'give'	pie	V, G, S
		pay/cia	P			pia	P
		cie	Th			pi	Th
3.	'liquor'	zu	V, G, S, P	4.	'flower'	pak	G, P, V
		zu	Th			pa	S
						pan	Th
						par	Hm
5.	'water'	in	V, G, S, P	6.	'arrow'	thəl	G, P, S, V, K, Th
		duy	Th			səl	Hm

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[1] This is apperently the same as **Sengmai**, which along with Andro and Kadu comprise the "Luish" group. [Ed.]

7.	'north'	mal	G, P, Th, S	8.	'dry'	gə	G, S, Th, V
		hmar	Hm			tral	Hm
						ken	P, V
9.	'land'	gəm	V, G, P, S, Th	10.	'poison'	tul	P, Th, V
		rəm	Hm			tur	K, Hm
11.	'eye'	mit	G, V, P, S	12.	'face'	mai	G, P, S, Th, V
						hmai	Hm, K
13.	'alive'	hiŋ	G, P, S, Th, V	14.	'back'	nuŋ	G, P, S, Th, V
		hriŋ	K, Hm		(of body)	hnuŋ	Hm
15.	'nose'	nak	G, P, V	16.	'neck'	noŋ	G, P, S, Th, V
		naʔ	S, Th			riŋ	Hm, K
		hnar	Hm, K				
17.	'louse'	hik	G, P, S, V	18.	'snake'	gul	G, P, Th, V
		hit	Th			rul	Hm
		hrik	Hm, K				
19.	'bone'	gu	P, V	20.	'heart'	luŋ	G, P, S, Th,
		guʔ	G, S, Th				Hm, V
		ru	Hm			mluŋ	K
		ruʔ	K				
21.	'good'	pha	P, S, Th, V	22.	'moon'	thla	Hm, K
		thra	Hm, K			tha	G, V
						xa	P
23.	'chin'	xa	G, P, S, Th, V	24.	'tongue'	lai	G, S, Th, V, Hm
		khak	Hm			mləi	K
		ŋkha	K				
25.	'knee'	xup	G, S, Th, V				
		khup	Hm, K				
		xuk	P				