

A preliminary classification of the Mon-Khmer languages of India and Bangladesh

Anne Daladier, LACITO, CNRS
a.daladier@wanadoo.fr

This group of languages, spoken by some 1 300 000 speakers in 2006, is called Khasian but very little is known about it. In Meghalaya, written Standard Khasi (S. Khasi) has become a Lingua Franca after the British allied a minority Khasi to rule the Pnar kingdom and set a Khasi political state.

Historically Pnar has been by far the most important language. The settlement of different groups in Meghalaya is not uniform and rather late. One Lyngngam and three small Khasi kingdoms appear in Meghalaya in the 18th century while the Pnar already had a large kingdom spread in the rich plains of Assam, in Bangladesh and across Meghalaya before the arrival of the Ahom in the 15th century. Wars have settled on Pnar lands in different groups at different times as shown both by genealogy narratives and by important dialectal variations in War. Pnar is still the most important group for the number of speakers and for its geographic extension. Pnar, in its different varieties, has probably been a Lingua Franca before the British colonisation as shown by similarities between Sutnga Pnar and War, Langrin Lyngngam and Maram Pnar and between Jowai Pnar and S. Khasi. Wars and Lyngngams still speak Pnar in addition to S. Khasi. This situation reflects in lexico-statistics where Pnar has the highest intersection with the lexicons of the four languages. Cardinal numbers also show that S. Khasi and Lyngngam numbers are derived from Pnar and that War numbers are the most decentred.

The group now has many different pidgins (or rather composite varieties). They result from the former predominance of the Pnars, the post-colonial spread of S. Khasi in somewhat isolated Pnar and War territories and also from the spread of different Tibeto-Burman groups (Karbi, Garo, Paite), mostly on former Pnar and Lyngngam territories.

Jowai Pnar and S. Khasi have become lexically close but they still show important differences in their grammatical morphology and in their typological features.

Beyond some important lexico-statistics differences, Pnar, War, Khasi and Lyngngam (PWKL) show differences in their phonetics, grammatical morphology and typology indicating that they were probably spoken in different locations of the Assam corridor before they grouped in Meghalaya. Lyngngam has lexical and grammatical borrowings from Munda not found elsewhere. Some of the distinctive typological features of these languages are shared by geographically remote south Munda and MK languages, showing the conservative character of these features. For example these four languages have quite different functional and morphological negation systems, War with very complex assertive properties, bearing similarities both with different Munda languages (especially South Munda and Korku) and also with different MK languages like Palaung and Mon. War and Lyngngam express complementation without complementizers through correlation properties of their respective assertive markers. This feature is also found in Khmu and in Semlai in opposite North and South locations of the MK area.

PWKL raises categorization questions, especially through a graded functional opposition noun-verb in the four languages. The four languages appear to have different “assertive dependency systems” rather than verbal predications in the usual sense of the term. This notion of assertive dependency is useful to understand the main typological features of these languages and perhaps useful also to compare typological features of PWKL with other MK and Munda groups. Such features are: assertive asymmetric negations; complementation without complementizers; inexistence of verbal pro-clitics or interesting constraints on them and focus-oblique marking of core arguments for some semantic roles.