

Is Apatani a threatened language?

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Apatani language has been listed by UNESCO as a “definitely endangered” language in its electronic Atlas of the world's languages in danger 2009. An endangered language is one that is likely to become extinct within the next generations. According to the Worldwatch Institute, there are 6,800 languages spoken in the world today; more than half of which are predicted to disappear within this century. Sadly, India's Northeast Region, which hosts 120 out of country 196 threatened languages registered by UNESCO, has become a world “hotspot” of language endangerment. According to linguist M. Post, “many Arunachali languages may indeed die within our lifetimes”¹.

When, as a Social Anthropologist, I started a research study on the Apatani culture three years ago, that question was simply a non-issue for me. Having now become more familiar with the language I have acquired the conviction that the threat is real. Language is the backbone of any people's culture, and also a major component of anyone's identity.

The Language

The Apatani language, or *Tanii agun*, is spoken by some 26,000 people living in the State of Arunachal Pradesh, India. It belongs to the Tani branch of the Tibeto-Burman family (Sun, 1993). It is a tonal language that also contrast vowel and consonant length. Dialectical variations exist but are not very important, and the fact that all Apatani can freely understand each other fosters in them a secure sense of common identity. Apatani is a highly agglutinative language, marked by the profusion of verbal suffixes denoting various tenses, moods and aspects. Any action can be expressed a few dozen ways by adding to the verb root various combinations of inflectional or derivational suffixes, along with several types of reduplication. Each of the many resulting forms gives different shades of meaning to the verb. Major lexical categories are nouns, verbs and adjectives. Most nouns are bisyllabic, consisting of a root and a prefix which tends to function as classifier (such as *sii-* for quadrupeds, *pa-* for birds, *san-* for trees, *ta-* for small animals, cane and bamboos, etc.). The language also has a wide array of classifiers and a case-marking system.

The Apatanis possess a priestly language, with many words not etymologically related to their counterparts of the conversational form. This ‘classical’ language is performed mainly (but not only) in ritual context, and forms a specific part of the Apatani oral literature known as ‘miji’. However, classical or poetic words pertaining to mythology or migration stories often surface at conversational language through several structural devices or discourse features, such as these ‘noun-pairs’ which are so typical of Apatani formal discourse outside the ritual context. Such words permeate the common language through idioms, schemes of thought, or today modern songs. Even the intellectuals who publish pamphlets of Meder Nello, the

¹ M. Post, “many Arunachali languages may indeed die within our lifetimes”, Arunachal Times, 26 Nov. 2008.

Apatani local form of “Donyi-Poloism”, use a great deal of vocabulary related to the oral literature in their attempt to elevate the traditional religion to the rank of a religious philosophy.

The effective speakers of the language are about 2% of Arunachal Pradesh’s total population. So far it is used at best as a language of informal instruction in the primary school, and not as a curriculum subject. Though English is the State’s official language, hindi is the medium of teaching, though Apatani teachers may resort to the mother tongue whenever they feel like. Apatani is basically an oral language. Many educated people have started using Roman script to transcribe it, but to date no standard orthography exists for this language, and very few attempts have been made to publish books or journals using *Tanii agun*.

Language endangerment

At first sight it may seem that the Apatani language is threatened because it has a relatively small number of speakers. In fact, linguists have demonstrated that the size of a group hardly matters for determining the viability of any endangered language. Tiny groups successfully manage to maintain their native languages intact, whereas some larger groups fail to pass on them to new generations. What are crucial factors here are the intensity of language contact and the general attitude of native speakers with respect to their heritage language.

Language contact

Linguistic influence from Hindi, English or even Assamese came very late for Apatanis as their valley was in state of virtual isolation prior to 1950. However, as their villages are all located in the vicinity of the District headquarters, their exposition is now probably greater than it is for any other Arunachal indigenous community. Partly due to this proximity their literacy rate ranks highest in the State of Arunachal Pradesh: 70.6 % according to 2001 Census, with 86 % of the children attending schools in the 5-14 age group. There they are taught in English and mostly Hindi, with Apatani used as best as a third, informal language. Moreover, as Apatani parents pay a lot of attention to their children's education, those who can afford often send them to boarding schools where they are discouraged from speaking their mother tongue. Most Apatani still learn *Tanii agun* as a first language at home, but those many who pursue higher studies live near other communities where the children speak Assamese, Hindi or English, and for that reason tend to gradually forget their mother tongue. This is a heavy price that Apatanis have to pay for their otherwise remarkable achievement in the field of education. Ironically, the more people become educated, the more they tend to replace Apatani with Hindi or English in social life.

The result is that the level of knowledge of the native lexical items is dwindling fast among the younger generation. The total number of Apatani “words” used in conversational language can be roughly estimated at around 20,000. Having worked with many Apatani students on their language, I found that most of those who are still able to converse in Apatani use a stock of less than 1,000 genuine words. It means that, for them at least, 95% of the language has been lost in 2 or 3 generations. What will they be able to pass on their own children? Parent-child transmission of the language is at risk of being severely altered or interrupted at the next generation.

Fluency here is quite pivotal. In the area of vocabulary, many of the words in some traditional semantic domains are no longer known by younger Apatanis. To my surprise, the terms for denoting some basic colours were recalled with great difficulty, as were also some classifiers. There are numerous typical Apatani verbs that are now uncommon in the usage and have been replaced by their Hindi or Assamese counterparts. Knowledge pertaining to animal and plant names appear to be minimal, as is the vocabulary related to kinship and the associated system of social obligations. The fact is that there are many native lexical items that are being replaced fast by the loan words from Hindi, Assamese or English. Apatani language is not moribund, but if nothing is done it is at risk of becoming so heavily mixed with Assamese, Hindi and English that it may rapidly become a sort of pidgin.

More recently, a new trend has emerged with the introduction of Christianity in the Apatani Valley. In an attempt to use only Apatani words to introduce concepts for which there were no words in the traditional language, some Christian preachers have started to forge neologisms, most of them being mere literal translation of English words such as 'aro aya' (good morning), 'alyin aya' (good evening), 'danyi alo' (Sunday), piilo halo (Monday), 'piniibo' (the Creator). Despite of being a laudable effort to promote the use of Apatani words instead of loan words it has a pernicious effect of accelerating to the pidginization of the language.

Attitudes towards the language

Surprisingly, out of the 25,576 Apatani listed in the 2001 Census, less than 10,000 returned as Apatani speakers, and therefore Apatani is not even regarded officially as a Non Schedule Language. Although the methods used for language data collection may be questionable, it also seems indicative of a general desaffection with the language issue.

Till now the children of Ziro still speak Apatani, but much of their cultural background is Hindi- and English-oriented. Many youngsters consider their mother tongue as old fashioned, though few will express this view openly. Most youngsters readily admit that they don't have a good command over Apatani language, and some of them hardly speak it. Young people believe that their mother-tongue can't compete with other languages that are taught in school because it has only a limited vocabulary. Many think that Apatani is a simpler or archaic form of language, because "it has no gender nor plural", and "no grammar", despite the fact that three Apatani grammars have been published so far, two of which by Apatani scholars. They simply don't want to learn languages that they know few people outside their immediate vicinity will be able to understand. Most Apatani still learn *Tanii agun* as a first language, but due to the emphasis put on education parents often encourage their children to speak either English or Hindi over their mother tongue at home. Some people also choose, for a variety of valid reasons, not to teach their children their own mother tongue. As a result the few attempts which have been made to implement the language in school at primary level have met with little success. This general attitude hampers further action that could be initiated by the State or local NGOs.

Today many children learn their mother tongue imperfectly and, if nothing is done, will probably be unable in future to pass along the language to their own children.

Yet, very few people seem aware that their language may vanish within the next generations. Further, very few people realize how much the language has changed since the middle of the last century. Teenagers tend to think of the decade having followed India's independence as that of their "forefathers", i.e. something very remote in time, forgetting that it was only their grandparents' time. During the past 60 years following the opening up of Ziro Valley a tremendous amount of change has occurred, and so tremendous is the today's generation gap. Large sectors of traditional knowledge are being forgotten or discarded by the younger generation, mainly due to scarce communication between young and old people. A good indicator of this language evolution is the domain of proverbs and old sayings (*nitin-hormin*). This particular genre of oral literature is marked by extreme economy of expression, in a way reminiscent of Japanese *Haikus*. As rhetorical devices it uses contracted, often elliptic forms of the language, and frequent use of metonymy that makes it very difficult to understand for most Apatani-speaking youngsters, though those proverbs were understood by the general population just one or two generations ago, and still are by the elders of Ziro. Moreover, many Apatani words make sense only by reference to a mythological background which is now largely unknown to the Apatani youth. The fact is, the languages not only carry the cultures with them, but are also embedded into the cultures.

Fortunately, a growing number of Apatanis are now aware of this language situation. There is a fear that unless parents teach more of *Tanii agun* to their children, unless the language is maintained in a written form and used as a medium or subject in schools, it will die out sooner or later. The trend can still be reversed, as to date many aspects of the traditional culture and oral literature remain vivid. It is the responsibility of the present generation to work toward language development, revitalization and perpetuation. The Apatani language is the root of Apatani culture, and as such requires to be preserved, documented and promoted in every possible way.