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Why would a language with 5000 speakers have seven registers? Register-flipping in the isolates of Northeast India compromises the unitary concept of language

The languages of Northeast India remain poorly described, and although conventionally ascribed to Tibeto-Burman, they show limited resemblance both to the phylum and to one another. The paper focuses on a highly unusual situation among the ‘Mishmi’ languages, Idu, Tawrã and Kman. Each of these have around 4-5000 speakers but are highly endangered by the spread of regional languages. A striking feature of these languages is the diversity of registers speakers can manipulate. Register in this sense includes lexical and grammatical divergence, as well as restricted interactive contexts. Taking the example of Idu, the following have been recorded;

- Shamanic register
- Hunting register
- Cursing register
- Mediation register
- Mourning register
- Humorous register
- Babytalk register

In addition, Kman has a highly developed poetic register. The presentation will give examples of the operation of these registers as well as discussing their linguistic features. It will also suggest this situation is typologically highly unusual in a global context since register systems are most prevalent in large-scale societies with strong social hierarchy.

A striking feature of discourse in these languages is the use of register-flipping, the casual adoption of idiosyncratic forms from one register into both everyday speech and other registers. Linguists have a high investment in a ‘language’ with a unitary grammar and lexicon which can be encapsulated in a standard form for publication. However, the Mishmi situation suggests that this constitutes a highly misleading strategy for understanding how individuals operationalise their language on a daily basis.