



## A Linguistic Outline of Nyishi

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### Abstract

The vibrant life of the tribal people, their traditional customs, festivals, and dances are some of the significant components of their rich cultural diversity. The motive of the paper is to examine the language (Nishi) linguistically with some examples. Nyishi belongs to Tibeto-Burman stock of Sino-Tibetan language family. It is a language spoken in different districts of Arunachal Pradesh. The findings of the study revealed some interesting facts like Nyishi differs in tone, structure and from region to region.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

No matter be it human language or machine language, they are guided by a set of linguistic principles (Jha, 2004). So, is Nyishi under human language category. 'Nyishi', meaning 'the land of people – the human beings' happens to be the mother tongue of the Nyishi tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, India. Nyishi is mutually intelligible with the neighbouring languages of Adis, Apatanis, Hill Miris, Tagins, Galos and others. These languages are said to belong to a common ancestor – the **Abotani** group – from which they have descended and developed their separate identities. The main origin of this language has been pointed out by George Abraham Grierson as '**Dafla**'. He included different varieties under a common name which is known as North Assam group. The varieties are Dafla, Miri and Abor according to him. **Daflas** used to denote them as 'Nyi-Shi'. These tribes inhabited between the Assam Valley and Tibet. Then

they started to spread in Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Darrang Districts of Assam. Mr. William Robinson in his notes mentioned that Daflas were spread over a region from 92°50' to 94° north latitude. The word **nyishi** itself means "upland man", and is a compound of **nyi** ("man") and **shi** ("highland"). They are probably descendants of peoples who separated from Khasi 4,200 years ago.

### *1.1 Research Objectives*

The general objective of this paper is to analyze the prominent linguistic features of Nyishi language. The specific objectives are as follows:

1. To study the birth and spread of the language.
2. To identify various characteristics of the language.
3. To examine the different structures of nyishi language.

### **1.4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

1. Give an insight into phonological and morphological analysis of Nyishi with examples.
2. How does Nyishi differentiate the gender?

### **1.5. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

1. Nyishi is a language spoken by the Nyishi tribals of Arunachal Pradesh, India. The language was formed before the formation of the state.
2. The language differs in structure and tone in various districts of Arunachal Pradesh.

### **1.6. LIMITATION OF THE STUDY**

The changing environment makes internal adaptation necessary for culture to change. As a result, lot of changes have also been observed in the cultural practices of the Nyishi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

**Nyishi** (also known as Nishi, Nisi, Nishang, Nissi, Nyising, Leil, Aya, Akang, Bangni-Bangru, Solung) is a **Sino-Tibetan** language of the Tani branch spoken in **Papum Pare, Lower Subansiri, KurungKumey, KraDaadi, East Kameng, PakkeKesang, Kamle districts of Arunachal Pradesh** and Darrang District of Assam in India.

According to 2011 census of India, the population of the Nishi speakers is 300,000 approximately. Though there are plenty of variations across regions, the dialects of Nishi, such as Akang, Aya, nyishi(raga), Mishing, Tagin are easily mutually intelligible. With the exception of the rather small in population Bangni-Bangru and Solung Dialects being very different from the formers.

'Nisi' is sometimes used as a cover term for western Tani languages. Nishi is a subject-object-verb language.

### 2.1 Linguistic Features

Certain salient features make Nyishi an interesting language to study, such as the presence of the four basic nasal sounds from bilibials to the velar: **/m/** , **/n/**, **/ŋ/**, **/ŋ/**. There are five back vowels, out of which **/ʌ/and /ɔ/** are most notable. The three others being: **/u/**, **/o/**, **/ɑ/**. Interestingly, words undergo frequent nasalisations and the voiceless sounds sometimes seem to be unreleased in the language, especially in the word final position, like in **'hitap-**', *'book'*, where **/p/** is sometimes unrealised.

Similar to most other languages of the region, Nyishi has rich a stock of classifiers, deictic items and expressives, besides having compound verb constructions like: **kaKyrkátá**, *'see properly'* and reduplicated structures such as: **ribáribá**, *'fast fast'*. The language has mainly the **SOV** word order, typical of Indian languages.

However, there are varieties which show both **SOV** and **SVO** word orderings, such as those spoken in central parts of Arunachal. The language has a complete range of pronominal system that not only categorises the three

persons – first, second and third, - but also differentiates between the three numbers – singular, dual and plural as in the table –

### Example of Nyishi Pronominal System

Person/number SingularDualPlural

First person *no* *ɲuninul*

## 2.2 Morphology

Differences are found in Nishi spoken in different regions. At morphological level, for example, the first person plural would appear as **ngulu/ngule** ‘we’ in Upper regions (UR) of Nyishi speaking areas like Mengio, Napin, Palin, Sagalee, Sangram, etc., while it appears as **ngul** ‘we’ in the Lower regions (LR) of Nyishi speaking areas like Baliyan, Kimin, Yazali, Doimukh, etc. It appears as **ngunu** in Raga – Daporijo areas.

Similarly, the word for *footpath* is **lamta** in Doimukh area, **lampya** in Yazali area, and **la ung** in Mengio area.

Some more examples are :

LR	UR	Meaning
<i>ababu</i>		‘father’
<i>anane</i>		‘mother’
<i>sebsebe</i>		‘mithun’
<i>nyurunyurang</i>		‘ear’
<i>pacupacung</i>		‘chicken’

However, the speech form of Upper region is given preference as it has high degree of intelligibility in comparison to other varieties and has the potential to emerge as the standard variety of Nyishi because of its linguistic characteristics.

### 2.3 Phonology

Nishi is a tonal language that utilizes three tones: rising, neutral, and falling. These can be applied to all of its vowels, and often can change the word's meaning:

bénam – "to hold"

benam – "to deliver"

bènam – "to vomit"

**Vowels** :The basic vowel system of Nyishi consists of seven short vowels :-

**Front Central Back**

**High** i i u

**Mid** e ə o

**Low** a

**Tones** :A three-way contrast is found in the tonal system of Nyishi as exemplified below :

**rising tone**

**neutral tone**

**falling tone**

*kónam* 'to bear/  
to wear'

*ko* 'child'

*kònam* 'to demand'

*j́nam* 'to give'

*jinam* 'to beat'

*jìgnam* 'to melt'

*cénam* 'to struggle  
to make space for  
oneself by pushing others'

*cenam* 'to learn'

*cènam* 'to bite'

### 2.4 Gender

Nyishi distinguishes between number, person, and case. It does not have a gender system, but special affixes can be added to nouns to denote gender. The third person pronouns are not distinguished for gender in Nyishi.

However, third person nouns are distinguished for gender. Nouns referring to biologically male are masculine in gender and that are biologically female are feminine in gender. Masculine and feminine genders are marked with the masculine marker **pu/bu** and feminine marker **ne** respectively. The markers are added in the final syllable of the nouns to derive masculine and feminine nouns. It may be noted that most of the nouns are disyllabic.

**Common                      masculine      feminine**

*Kubung* ‘rat’ *bungpu* ‘male rat’                      *bungne* ‘female rat’

*Ikhi* ‘dog’ *kibu* ‘male dog’                      *kine* ‘bitch’

*Iri* ‘pig’ *ripi* ‘male pig’                      *rine* ‘female pig’

Another strategy employed to distinguish the gender is the use of the words **nyega** ‘male’ and **nyeme** ‘female’ as the attributes to nouns. The attributes, normally, follows as the head noun.

**Common                      masculine                      feminine**

*Ko* ‘child’                      *konyega* ‘male child’                      *konyeme* ‘female child’

*Ko* ‘son/                      *konyega* ‘son’                      *konyeme* ‘daughter’

daughter’

### 3. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Nyishi language is spoken by the people, with little above 3.45 lakh population (25% per cent of the state’s total population) as per 2011 Census who are mainly concentrated in about 6 districts of Arunachal Pradesh viz. East Kameng, Papum Pare, Lower Subansiri, KurungKumey, KraDaadi, and Upper Subansiri and some parts of North Lakhimpur and Sonitpur districts of neighbouring Assam.

### CONCLUSION

Modern-day Arunachal Pradesh is one of the linguistically richest and most diverse regions in all of Asia, being home to at least thirty and possibly as many as fifty distinct languages in addition to innumerable dialects and sub dialects

thereof. Boundaries between languages very often correlate with tribal divisions - for example, Apatanis and Nyishis are both tribally and linguistically distinct – but shifts in tribal identity and alignment over time have also ensured that a certain amount of complication enters into the picture. Nyishi language is specially speaks by Nishi tribal people in Arunachal Pradesh. Nyishi language belongs to Tibeto- Burman language family sub-division of Sino-Tibetan language family.

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