

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1. Language, location and demographic status:

Sylheti is one of the dialects of Bengali (Bangla), an Indo-Aryan language (Grierson, 1903) see in the following figure. Besides, Spratt and Spratt (1987) stated that Sylheti has been commonly regarded as a dialect of Bengali, with which it shares a high proportion of vocabulary. They reported that 70% of vocabulary of Sylheti is shared with the Standard Bengali.

More specifically, Sylheti is one of undocumented dialects of Bengali which is mainly spoken in the Sylhet district of present Bangladesh. It is also spoken in the Northeastern part of India particularly in the Barak Valley of South Assam, Tripura, United Kingdom, United States and some of the Gulf countries in the Asian sub-continent.

There are 11 million speakers of Sylheti throughout the globe, including 8,000,000 speakers in Bangladesh (Mikael, 2007). However no proper demographic survey has been carried out to determine the exact number of Sylheti speakers in Barak Valley of South Assam covering Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj. Consequently the number of Sylheti speakers in Karimganj district is estimated about 1 million, based partly on information from a number of local scholars and athours.

1.2. Typological overview

Vowel length is phonologically non-significant. The CV is the most common syllabic structure in the language. Generally, no consonant clusters are found in Sylheti. Surprisingly a very few consonant clusters are noticed in the variety due to deletion of unstressed vowels such as *geram* > *gram* ‘village’, *tiripti* > *tripti* ‘satisfy’. Like Assamese and Standard Bengali, the category of number in Sylheti

has no longer remained grammatical i.e., no agreement is noticed between verb and its argument for different numbers. Unlike the standard Bengali, Sylheti makes use of gender distinction in pronoun particularly in the case of the singular third person personal pronoun such as *he* 'he' and *tai* 'she' as the same grammatical feature is commonly found in Assamese (and its various dialects), one of the Eastern Indo-Aryan languages. In this connection, Grierson (1903) stated that "The inflections also differ from those of regular Bengali, and in one or two instances assimilate to those of Assamese". Agreement is one the typological features of Sylheti as the verb agrees with its subject arguments for different persons and genders. Sylheti is an agglutinating and V-final language with dominant SOV order.

1.3. Historical background of English loanwords in Sylheti:

It is a long time history of Sylheti to borrow words from different languages in different semantic domains from time to time. Sylheti speakers came in contact with the speakers of the different languages in various situations and were influenced by those languages. English is one of the instances that adaptations of English loan words in Sylheti also play an important role to impregnate the vocabulary of Sylheti. In the 18th century the British came into India for the purpose of business. But taking the advantage of weak political situations of India, the British captured the political power of the sub continent. As a result they started to exploit each and every part of India. Thus the Bengali dominated area i.e., the greater Bengal, Assam, and Orissa where a large number of Sylheti speakers resided were also not the exceptions. At that time they had a communication barrier as the Native Indian did not have any knowledge about English and the British did not know Indian languages. So the British realized the importance of Indian languages and started to learn these. Most probably at the time of British rule in 18th century Sylheti started

to borrow words from English because of the close touch and influence of English. During the first half of the 19th century, the British rulers decided to make English as the primary medium of education in India. They also envisioned the creation of a class of people in India that would act as a link between the rulers and ruled. The class would also become a source of inexpensive manpower for the lower levels of administration. With the efforts made by the British, knowledge in English soon became a key to get government services for the Indians. It also became a key to make successful careers in the fields like law, medicine, teaching, business, journalism, etc. The Indian people started to learn English to get advantage in professional and other fields. With the establishment of various educational institutions, the number of English educated Indians increased significantly.

Indian response to new opportunities created by the British was determined largely by their place in pre-British society. At the height of the Orientalist period, scholars of Sanskrit, Arabic, Persian and of south Asian learning were hired by such Indian educational institutes. With the shift to English education those castes that were already literate became students to master this new language; in practice this meant primarily Bengali Hindus of the Brahman, Baidya, and Kayastha castes. Earlier individuals from these groups learnt Persian to gain employment under the Mughal and post-Empire Muslim rulers. With the influence of the British on the mode of education they switched to English. By the late nineteenth century, new anglicized elite began to establish institutions to serve their own interests. For instance in 1816, the Hindu College in Kolkata was founded. On the other hand in 1825 the Elphinstone Institute was established in Bombay. These educational institutes were primarily responsible for producing the core of English educated elite. A trend toward English education and the acceptance of

western knowledge appeared in Poona. In 1832, the government founded an English high school. To counter this socio-cultural impact of the British ways several associations were formed across India to revive the ancient Indian traditions.

Besides education western models and English patterns were followed in the social etiquette, dress, eating habits, dwelling units, awareness in the public and hygiene, new modes of entertainment etc. were penetrated deep into the Indian way of life and society. Although the traditional habits were dominating in the countryside, the western outlook influenced the inhabitants of urban India. With the arrival of the British people in India, the rapid changes took place in the mainstream of Indian society. The international currents influenced the Indian pattern of social outlook, dress, food habits and even fashion with the British rule in India. With the course of time, the way of learning in India was influenced by the English style and the English words and idioms were penetrated into the vernacular languages. Thus we can find that most of the scientific, technical and administrative terms are derived from English and Sylheti does not have equivalent words in its own. So Sylheti is adapting all such words to enrich its vocabulary. But the most interesting fact is that Sylheti speakers prefer to use English words in various semantic fields rather than using their own equivalent words in Sylheti. Some times it is seen that even illiterate people can use English words in various situations smoothly but they don't know the equivalent words in their own language. So it is obvious that the contribution of the British in making the Sylheti speakers to be able to use English in various situations and various semantic fields is undoubtedly great. In this way, the socio cultural impact under the British rule completely spread through the Indian society and changed the life style of Indians in course of time.

1.4. Borrowing:

It is common for one language to take words from another language and make them part of its own vocabulary: these are called loanwords and the process is called linguistic borrowing (Campbell, 1998). However, not only the words content can be borrowed but sounds, grammatical morphemes or syntactic patterns. Borrowing requires language contact, it implies at least a certain degree of bilingualism for some people in the 'donor language and those of the 'recipient language', so that loanwords can occur. 'A loanword is a lexical item (a word) which has been borrowed from another language, a word which originally was not part of the vocabulary of the recipient language but was adopted from some other language and made part of the borrowing language's vocabulary' (Campbell, 1998). There are reasons why languages borrow words. The main reason is that the word is needed, it happens when a new word for a new concept from abroad enters the language, as the English word *television*. The second main reason is 'for prestige', since the foreign acquisition is highly appreciated, as it is the case of the word *office* in India, which we think it is esteemed as it sounds posh. A much rarer reason for adopting a loanword is the opposite of prestige, i.e., borrowing due to negative evaluation, as we think could be the case of the word *idiot*. When the words are borrowed, the pronunciation also changes, it is remodelled to the conventions of the new language, this process is called adaptation, 'a foreign sound in borrowed words which does not exist in the receiving language will be replaced by the nearest phonetic equivalent to it in the borrowing language' (Campbell, 1998). Retroflex consonants of Indic languages like Hindi, Bengali, Punjabi, etc. owe their origin to contact with Dravidian languages, it is a case of phonological borrowing due to the intensity of the contact. There are different conditions that might influence the outcome of borrowing, such

as 'length, the intensity of the contact, the kind of interaction and the degree of bilingualism in the population'. The longer and the more intense contact is the more probabilities to introduce new phonemes into the borrowing language, 'this is sometimes called *direct phonological diffusion*.' (Campbell, 1998). The borrowed words undergo phonological changes, which are not always uniform. The same sound can be borrowed in one way or another, basically because different words are borrowed at different times that's why some of the words are easily recognizable as English words but there are others, which are seldom recognized as being of Indian origin like *Babu, Bungalaw*, etc. In order to identify when a word is a loanword we should identify the donor language and the recipient language; then the main clue may be the sound: 'words containing sounds which are not normally expected in native words are candidates for loans' (Campbell, 1998). Another clue is based on the phonological history: 'in some cases where the phonological history of the languages of a family is known, information concerning the sound changes that they have undergone can be helpful for determining loans, the direction of borrowing, and what the donor language was' (Campbell, 1998). The morphology of words can also help to determine where the term comes from, if a word is very complex and the recipient language has a simple morphology, surely the word is a borrowing from a complex language, for instance the word *kana* 'one-eyed' appears to be borrowed from Proto-Dravidian *kan* 'eye'+ a 'negative suffix', and it is the morphological complexity of the Dravidian form which shows the direction of the borrowing (Campbell, 1998). Thus, loanwords can represent an evidence for historical linguistics since they help to establish the older stages of a language before the changes occurred. Cognates are also a clue for discovering when a word is a loan, they are usually found in several languages of the same family, which means that

one of them is the donor language. There are geographical clues as well, as it is the case of *anaconda*, which had not an equivalent word in the recipient language since it only had a geographical identity in the donor language. Definitely, there are certain characteristics that are easily recognizable of the words that came into Sylheti. First of all, many words did not have equivalents in Sylheti, such as *television* or *computer*. Some other native words were not substituted by English words, such as *office*, *bag*, etc. More specifically, the contemporary Sylheti borrowed a large number of loanwords from English language in different semantic domains particularly name of objects, cultural, administrative, official, and technical terms to fulfill their day to day communication.

1.5. Attitudes of Sylheti speakers towards English:

However, if we assume that the level of English proficiency is directly related to the use of English loans in Sylheti, then the use of loanwords become a social marker directly related to the level of education, and consequently of social status. This correlates with the use of English in general. So, the most of the Sylheti people of elite class consider that English is a prestige and popular language in the present world. The most of the world needs to learn English because it is the language of the world's developing economy and the key to understanding the techniques of developed countries. Most of the Sylheti speakers say that English is now essential to get a good job, to develop a higher standard of living, to conduct a good business, to know about scientific and technological things etc. Now a day, the importance of English towards the Sylheti speakers is growing and most of Sylheti parents have a trend to send their children to the English medium schools rather than the Bengali medium school.

1.6. Language usage

Sylheti people use Sylheti language at home domains and also outside communication among themselves. However at the time of interaction with non-Sylheti speakers they use Hindi or English whatever is needed. If we consider the scenario of Barak valley, Sylheti is spoken everywhere informally in market, offices, courts etc as because Sylheti is a dominant language and almost all the people of the valley have the knowledge of the language. It is interesting to note that non-Sylheti speakers of Barak valley use Sylheti mostly a means of communication with the Sylheti speakers and thus it became the lingua franca of Barak valley. Nevertheless, Sylheti is not used in formal education system as medium of instructions or a subject in schools, or colleges. Besides, Sylheti is not also used in the print media, radio and television programmes.

1.7. Methodology

The data for the present study was collected in several visits from the randomly selected Sylheti residing areas of Karimganj district of Assam such as Kalacherra, Hamindopur, Nilambazar, Hasanpur, Kunapara, Bashail, Alekargool and Deorail.

Many loanwords in this present study came from the data collected from the conversation, folk tales, short stories, and narratives. The native speakers of Sylheti read all the words he/she was familiar. Besides, the native speakers of this variety also provided additional loanwords that they knew. The secondary data was collected in the form written materials like books, dictionaries, etc., through library works. The recorded data were later transcribed for the consistent analysis of the phonological changes that have taken place in the borrowed words from English in Sylheti.