

## Perspective of code-mixing in a multilingual city, Shillong, India

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### Abstract

*The discussion of code-mixing and code-switching in a multilingual city, Shillong is an outcome of contact induced language change. From a sociolinguistic standpoint, this paper provides a descriptive attempt to portray the linguistic behaviour of Khasi speech communities in Shillong. In focus, attempt is made here to unfold the pattern of amalgamation of two different linguistic codes, the phenomenon known as 'code-mixing or code-switching' in the speech habits of the Khasi speech communities in Shillong which evidently, brought about structural changes and language developments in Khasi, an Austro-Asiatic language spoken in Shillong, Meghalaya in India. In addition, the paper aligns itself with the underpinnings of the psychological motive behind the operant code-mixing and code-switching strategy.*

**Keywords:** Language contact, Khasi-Austro Asiatic language, code-mixing, linguistic behavior.

### Introduction

Meghalaya is one of the states of North East India. It became a full-fledged in 1972. With the formation of Meghalaya, Shillong, a small enchanting Hill with its mesmerizing valley, became the capital of Meghalaya. Shillong is situated at 25°34'N latitude and 91°53'E longitude at an altitude between 1400 to 1900 meters above sea level<sup>1</sup>. Shillong falls under the East Khasi Hills district of the state. According to Kyndiah, Shillong was originally designed by its founder, Col. Hendry Hopkinson, Commissioner of Assam and Agent to the Governor General of India to be 'a little England'<sup>2</sup>. Shillong is basically situated on a mountainous basin between the Assam Valley District on one side and Barak Plain on the other. 'The present site of Shillong is divided into five physiographic units, such as the northern slope of Shillong range (1900m), the Umshirpi valley, the Laitumkhrach-nowhere upland, the Umkhrach village and the Umkhrach-Umshing river divide. The northern slope of the Shillong range is now occupied by Nongthymmai, Motinagar, Malki, Lumparing and Laban. The Umshirpi is a narrow valley commonly known as Happy Valley and is occupied by the Cantonment area<sup>3</sup>. Shillong is the center of the numerous educational institutions in the North Eastern Region. Being the center of its innumerable establishment, Shillong is frequently visited by people from rural areas and migrants from neighboring countries which adds up to its diverse ethno-demography, culture and linguistic plurality.

### Language Contact and Multilingualism with special reference to Khasi

Khasi is the language primarily spoken by the indigenous people in Shillong. Three languages are found to be the dominant languages in this region particularly, in its urban cosmopolitan settings. These include Khasi (Associate- official language of

Shillong belonging to Austro-Asiatic language), Hindi (official language of the Indo-Aryan language family) and English (An official language of the Indo-European language family). With exception to the Khasi and Pnar, Austro-Asiatic languages which are the indigenous language, there runs a multifarious linguistic composition in Shillong. Lyngdoh pointed out that other languages like Assamese (an Indo-Aryan language) are found scattering in different areas namely Laban, Laitumkhrach, Lachumiere, Motinagar and Nongrim Hills. Bengalis (also an Indo-Aryan family language) is found in Jail road, Laban, Rynjah, Motinagar and Thana road. Mizo (A Tibeto-Burman language) can be found in and around Laitumkhrach, Madanriting, Happy valley, Lapalang. Apart from this, Panjabi speakers (Indo-Aryan language) are found in Gharoline and Bara Bazaar, Marwaris and Gujaratis in Mawprem and Police Bazaar<sup>4</sup>. The presence of different languages belonging to the three language families essentially created multilingualism in Shillong. One can aptly conclude that Shillong is a multilingual area in the true sense of a term where at the grassroot level, language ecology and acquisition is manifested naturally in the socio-cultural environment.

Structurally, the amalgamation of the different linguistic communities co-existing in Shillong has made language contact phenomenon rather inevitable than an impact. Contact between the Khasis with other linguistic communities is embedded in all spheres of activities (social, political, religious and economic) which apparently has a socio-linguistic impact on language learning and acquisition emanating from the different socio-ecological environment<sup>5</sup>. Consequently, in Shillong, majority of the Khasi ethnic people are found to be multilingual, speaking more than two languages. The degree of competence of different languages differs from individual to individual. Irrespective of good command of their mother tongue, the Khasis in Shillong have additional knowledge in two other languages namely

English and Hindi but 'the skill in understanding and speaking Hindi is comparatively higher among the Garos and Bengalis than the Khasi native speakers'<sup>6</sup>. Nevertheless, Hindi is the language which is perceived instrumental for various economic reasons such as transacting business in the marketing field and also serves as a link language for inter-communication<sup>5</sup>. Other languages known by the inhabitants of this region include Nepali, Bengali and Assamese and other dialects. However, it should be noted that these languages are insignificant and seldom used by the Khasis but the linguistically diversified orientation of Shillong city inevitably leads to acquisition of numerous other languages Shillong. One may conjectured that these languages are learned owing to the contact situation, influence by the migrants which were found to scattered in different parts of Shillong.

### Code Mixing and Code-Switching in Shillong

In the literature, the phenomenon of code-mixing and code-switching has been used synonymously to denote the pattern of alternative mixture of linguistic features of two or more languages within or across sentential boundaries in a speech event. Bokamba define code mixing as 'mixing of words, phrases and sentences from two distinct grammatical (sub) systems across sentence boundaries within the same speech event'<sup>9</sup> and code switching is the 'juxtaposition within the same speech exchange of passages of speech belonging to two different grammatical systems or subsystems'<sup>10</sup>. Both the definition of code-mixing and code-switching refer the alternation pattern of speech when two or more codes are employed in a conversational speech. This pattern of code mixing and switching has been a common phenomenon in the speech habits of bilingual speakers and its operation is more functional than arbitrary. Scotton mentions that one of the motivation of Code-switching is 'to lexicalize semantic/pragmatic feature bundles found only in Embedded Language (there is a lexical gap in the Matrix Language)<sup>11</sup>. Apparently, language contact and multilingualism in Shillong has concomitantly give rise to greater degree of mixing and switching of linguistic codes which consequently help in sustaining the coexistence and alternative use of linguistic resources giving rise to 'a stable type of bilingualism in the ecological environment of Shillong'<sup>6</sup> and hence follows Romaine vantage point that 'in some cases code-switching and diglossia are positive forces in maintaining bilingualism'<sup>12</sup>. Thus, the functional role of code switching in Shillong cannot be overlooked since the switching strategy devise by the Khasis helps in bridging the grammatical constraints brought about by lexical gap in a language as evident in the present study.

In light of this background, this paper empirically attempts to portray the phenomenon of 'code-mixing and code-switching'<sup>7-8</sup> strategy of the 'Khasi Speech Community' from the socio-psychological perspective in multilingual milieu of Shillong. Theoretically, it outlines the salient features of communicative behaviour and strategy of appropriating communicative act at

the intra and inter level among the Khasi Speech Community in Shillong. The study anticipates to highlights the speech behaviour of the Khasis ethnic groups, who *pragmatically* devise strategies of code-mixing and switching mechanism in their speech habits to avoid *linguistic gaps (lexical gap)* which may disrupt spontaneous cognitive processing in a discourse. The study conjectures that such impulses of juxtaposition of linguistic codes arise from either the following: i. Integrative motivation, ii.) Lack of certain lexical item in one's mother tongue, iii. A process of linguistic influence and iv. A desire to be identified as an educated iconoclast.

Behind the simplicity of the nature of multilingualism which is manifested naturally in the Khasi speech community in Shillong, one is often perplexed by the complexity of the internal nature and structural consequence of multilingualism induced by *language contact*. This is due to the fact that multilingualism and language contact inevitably gives rise to the concept of 'Code-Mixing and Code-Switching'. This is exemplified in Shillong city (particularly in the speech habits of the Khasi speech community), a process where a bilingual mixes and blend different languages in the course of a conversation or discourse. In the case of the Khasis speech community in Shillong, this process of mixing and blending of two or more linguistic codes is not a new phenomenon but either it is not given importance to or it is oblivious and remains unnoticed in the speech behaviour of the people. In light of this background, the study will focus on this aspect of code-mixing and code-switching in the speech behaviour of the people in the course of a conversation.

**Research Question:** The following question emanates with regards to the process behind the perspective of code-mixing and code-switching in Shillong. i. Why do the speaker code-switch? ii. Is code-switching inadvertently manifested due to the influence of the second language? iii. Is code-switching a deliberate phenomenon?

These questions are of dire importance when one confounded with the aspects of contact induces changes in a language.

### Discussion

When one considers the multilingual orientation of Shillong urban settings, one will undoubtedly agree that in the Khasi speech community, most (if not all) the people in this area are bilinguals, proficient in at least two languages i.e. Khasi (an indigenous language) and English or Hindi (or both). These languages are used in the various contextual situations, depending on the kind of interlocutor<sup>5</sup>. This is lucid in the speech behaviour of the bilingual Khasi speakers who is also proficient in English language where his/her speech behaviour is liable to changes depending on the scene and context of the conversation. According to the author's observation, in one instance, where data was gleaned unnoticed to the participants (which perhaps equates to disguised techniques), an educated

Khasi bilingual speaker competent in Khasi and English language was seen mixing *Khasi and English* in his casual conversation with his friend (who is also a native Khasi speaker equally proficient in English and Khasi) who perhaps happens to be his classmate in college where they happen to meet near the highway. Here is the conversation recorded below: The English forms are *italicized* in the *parenthesis*.

In this simple conversation, notice the structures of both English and Khasi forms are predominantly used in the conversation and code-switching here is said to be at the sentential level. The conversation above is deliberately fragmented into four distinctive parts as indicated by the capitalized alphabets: (A), (B), (C) and (D) for the purpose of simplicity of analysis. Here code-switching happens not only within a single sentence but almost completely shifted to a distinct language as discourse proceeds.

The example above shows the fact that the speaker is in effect of using both the languages simultaneously. On the other extreme, it may be assumed that the equally intelligible languages in a conversation will eventually lead to the prominence of one language as the conversation stretches. Notice also the topic of the conversation relates to 'institutions' and hence, English (being the medium of most instruction in school in Shillong) predominates even in casual conversation. An analysis of the conversation above shows the following salient features:

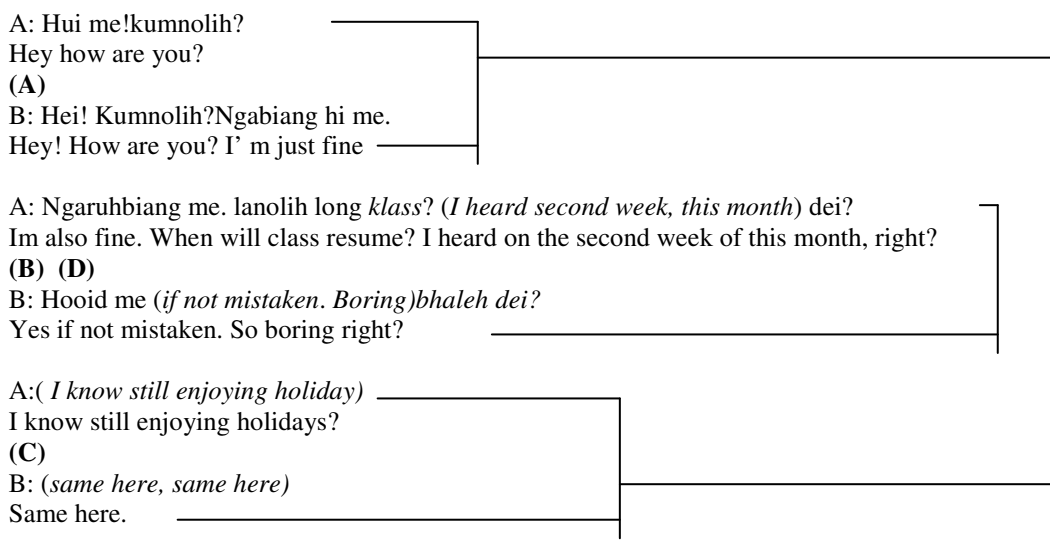
In the example (A), speaker 'A' *greet* his friend using his native language i.e. Khasi for which his friend 'B' was seen replying in the same language. In (B), speaker 'A' uses two distinct languages, here he code switch from Khasi to English language in a single utterance marked by the italics which induced speaker 'B' to also switch to from Khasi to English as seen in his response. In (C), the conversation completely switches to

English language where the initiator of the conversation 'A' and the respondent 'B' both switches to English. The real contrast from (A) in the use of Khasi language and (C) in the use of English language is marked by (D) where code switching is completely seen from one language to the other.

Why does speaker A code-switch from one language to the other? This question axiomatically entails a second question regarding the necessity to appropriate two distinctive codes in a conversation? One may speculate on the linguistic concept of 'interference' which is at work here. The example above demonstrates the fact that both speakers are bilinguals and code-switch between languages here may be hypothetically stated as due to two chief reasons:

Firstly, the speaker's first language (Khasi) gets interfered with his knowledge of the second language (English) where he blends the structure of both languages. Secondly, the *scene* in the example is in casual setting (roadside) where one's native tongue is employed but the *topical* contexts of speech relates to formal domain pertaining to educational institutions and hence speakers switches codes to more formal language, in this case English. While both arguments seem plausible, a close examination of the example above shows that the first point holds stronger argument. There is an apparent interference mechanism in the speech behaviour of the first speaker 'A' (shown in (B) where the amalgamation of both Khasi and English language structure is dependent on the topical context.

The language confliction with his knowledge in the second language is evident discerning from the fact that there is no lexical gap for any items in the conversational utterances for which he may resort to code-switch in another language. Thus, one of the causes of code-switching may be attributed to language interference.



However, a situation may arise making code-switching inevitable due to the presence of lexical gap in the vocabulary of the language. In such a situation, code switching happens at the lexical level. This occurs quite commonly in everyday speech of the educated Khasi speakers. This is exemplified in the example below where the English forms are italicized.

A: (fi) laʔdɛptaipkr:tokr:jiŋkylimnɛ?  
HON PST done type those 2PLU questions DEM  
'Are you done typing those question papers lately?'

B: m (fi) pat dɛpko:zkalaptopka lahlut  
NEG HON FUTdone because 2PFEM laptop 2PFSG PSTempty  
ba:triand u ɛa:jərruhlahkletha ye:ŋ.  
battery and3PSG charger also PST forget LOC house  
'No not yet because mylaptop's battery went kaput and I left my charger at home'

A: tɔ-ta sataipnɔʔfaye:ŋ, saprimsindɔ:n(k)?  
AFFPRESFUT type PERF LOC home FUT print also ok  
'okay then you can type at home and also get it printed okay?'

B: ok. Sure  
okay sure  
'okay sure'

This example typically shows the type of code-mixing strategy of Khasi and English which is qualified as inadvertent utterance, a strategy where English vocabulary is used as a regularlexisin Khasi to avert the lexical gap present in Khasi language. One may notice that the English words, especially those relating to technologies have come to be used as a regular vocabulary item thought the process of adoption and nativization varying in the way of pronunciation [for instance the lexical item /ɛa:jər/ 'charger' and /ba:tri/ (battery) in the example]. Conversely, at the level of phonemes, some English sounds enters into Khasi phonetic inventory for instance the morpheme /p/ in Khasi have been anglicised to /f/ as seen in the example (phi > fi 'you' where /p/ > /f/ ) and the same phoneme /f/ is added in the Khasi vocabulary in the process of anglicization.

At the inter level, the phenomenon of code-mixing and code-switching is inevitable in the speech habits of the Khasi ethnic group. The psychological processing of two different linguistic codes is clearly marked distinctly which often resulted to a system of amalgamation of both the structural features of linguistic codes employed which sometimes (though seldom) attaining grammatical simplicity. Thus, is especially seen in the market places (in Bara Bazar and Police Bazar in particular) where the sellers and buyers often switch linguistic codes (sometimes to that of the buyer's or seller's language or a more intelligible lingua franca- mostly *Hindi*) which is feasible for transacting business especially to the non-Khasis speakers, in particular to avert communicative gap<sup>6</sup>. The structure of code-switching in the market is peculiar since at the grammatical level, it is characterized by a reduced and impoverished

vocabulary tended to relexification, simple morphological and syntactic grammatical constructions which often involve the process of grammaticalization. This variety is commonly referred to as 'Bazar Hindi'. The example below demonstrates a rich example (of the type of code-switching described above) which is apparent in the market place particularly between the Khasis and Non-Khasi speech communities. [This conversation is recorded in the market between one seller and a buyer]

X. ga:jərka:noekkiloba?? (1)  
carrot howmuch one kilo HON (male)  
'How much is one kilo of carrots?'

Y. ji:mma:ŋa ai lai-p<sup>h</sup>ew-san taŋ:kamɔ? (2)  
take1PSg give thirty five rupees AFF  
'I can give you thirty five rupees okay?'

X. m ai bi:sru:pia? (3)  
NEG give twenty rupees?  
'Is it okay for twenty rupees?'

Y. bi:sru:piateymloŋ. tiz: ru:piamɔ(4)  
twenty rupees then NEGpossible. thirty rupees AFF  
aithi:kthi:k  
give exactexact  
'Twenty rupees is not possible. Take it for exactly thirty rupees okay!'

X. eh!! laʔ ji:m 5 tɔ:lisub:jitɔai ka:tala bian (5)  
eh! PST take 5 NUM vegetables AFF give that PST fine  
'eh! (Expressing disapproval) already taken 5 vegetables items, that amount is fine'

Y. tɔʃi:mʃi:mkhi:ŋʃi:spa? ba:roʔ mo(6)  
ok taketake calculate hundred all AFF  
'okay take it hundred (rupees) for all (items)'

In the example above, notice that the language structure visualized in the conversational text above is rather improper Khasi and/or Hindi form. In (1) notice that the non-Khasi speaker (Mr. 'X' who is the buyer) intimates his enquiry by mixing the speech codes of Khasi and Hindi structural form giving the shopkeeper (Mr. 'Y' in the example) a perfunctory jot of recognition to his buyer's knowledge of Khasi language who in turn replied in Khasi. Code-mixing here is at work as seen in the conversation above (see (2) above) in which case, both the seller and buyer's control both form of languages. Notice the construction of Khasi in the conversation above which exhibit a grammaticalized syntactic form that neither obeys the Khasi grammatical rule nor conforming to the Hindi grammatical structure but rather an amalgamation of both structures which the author referred to as 'Bazaar Khindi'. Examine sentence-4 in the conversation above, where the following can be observed:

[bi:sru:pia] to [nei:]. [ʃi:mʃi:mai]tiz:loru:piamɔ! [thi:kthi:k]

The emphasis here is the expression of disapproval (nei:) regarding the amount (bi:sru:pia) which is both expressed in Hindi lexical forms while the embedded phrase which emphasizes on the exact (thi:k) offered (ji:m 'take') amount is accentuated by the seller through reduplication to attain grammatical simplicity.

## Conclusion

One may speculate the psychological processing of linguistic codes (code-mixing and code-switching) in Khasi on the basis of two paradoxical assumptions. Firstly, code-switching is an inadvertent phenomenon, a strategy employed by the Khasi speech groups owing to deal with the presence of *lexical gap* in the vocabulary of their language to appropriate everyday communication. Secondly, one can be ascertained that code-mixing and code switching is a deliberate process employed by the Khasi people, a process where a speaker employs both the codes of languages as discourse proceeds to attain the correct blend. However, since language code-switching between Khasi and English is more prominent among the educated people especially among the young breeds where the propensity of code-switching is higher than the older generations. In this sense, one may thus viewed code-switching as partly a strategy to effect communication and partly an icon of being identified as being educated. However, a need for further in-depth investigation is therefore required to study the sociolinguistic and psychological processing of code mixing and code switching depending on the variable age, sex and education.

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