

A brief linguistic sketch of the Barman Thar¹ (Language)

Prepared by:

The students of MA in Linguistics and Language Technology²,
2018-20, Dept of English, Tezpur University

1. INTRODUCTION

It is a descriptive study of the Barman language, also called Barman Thar (IPA: /bɔ̃rmon t^har/) by the native speakers, spoken by the Barman Kachari community of Assam. Barman Thar, where “thar” means language, is a highly endangered language. It is a Tibeto-Burman language that belongs to the Bodo-Garo subgroup. The population of the Barman Kachari community is 24,237, according to a 2017³ census. However, only a small part of this population speaks the language.

Family tree of the Barman language:

- Sino-Tibetan
 - Tibeto-Burman
 - Sal languages
 - Bodo-Garo
 - Barman Thar

2. GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION

The Barman Kacharis are found in the North Cachar district of the Barak Valley as well as in these districts of the Brahmaputra Valley confined mainly into the districts of Udalguri, Baksa, Chirang, Kokrajhar, Darrang, Goalpara, Nagaon, Kamrup, Lakhimpur, Dhemaji and Biswanath Chariali.

3. PHONOLOGY

The Barman Thar phonemic inventory consists of eight vowels, nine diphthongs and twenty consonants (including two semivowels).

3.1 Consonants: In the study of Barman Thar, we found twenty consonants amongst its phonemes.

	Bilabial		Labio-velar		Alveolar		Palatal		Velar		Glottal	
Plosive	p	b			t	d	c		k	g		
Aspirated Plosive	p ^h				t ^h				k ^h			
Nasal		m				n				ŋ		
Flap						r						
Fricative					s	z					h	
Approximant				w				j				
Lateral Approximant						l						

It is to be noted that /p^h/ and /z/ have idiolectal variations. They are, by some people, sometimes pronounced as /ɸ/ and /d͡z/ respectively. For example, the word /p^ha/ (meaning “father”) is sometimes pronounced as /ɸa/ and /nɛmza/ (meaning “bad”) is sometimes pronounced as /nɛmɸza/.

¹ This investigation is a result of a field trip that was undertaken during 02.03.2019 to 05.03.2019 as a part of the Course LG429, Field Linguistics, taught by Dr. Arup Kumar Nath and Dr. Dhanapati Shougrakpam. We are grateful to the university for funding us, our instructors and our informants.

² Pranami Kaushik, Primly Baruah, Gitashri Borah, Amrit Boruah, Debjani Roychowdhury, Chitra Devi, Upasana Saikia, Riya Sutradhar, Mohsina Taskin, Bidisha Devi, Moyoor Sharma, Gayatri Borah, Koyel Biswas, Rakshanda Debnath, Anindita Baruah, Puja Das, Anamika Das, Riju Bailung, Rimpi Borah, Snigdha Medhi.

³ A census by a local organization

3.1.1. Minimal pairs:

[h], [ɾ]: [hiŋ] “to go”	[riŋ] “to drink”
[g], [d]: [goisa] “one”	[doisa] “boy”
[n], [ŋ], [l]:	[hən] “to be” [həŋ] “to give” [həl] “fire”
[d], [m]:	[dɛn] “to cut” [mɛn] “to get”
[s], [c]:	[sum] “salt” [cum] “to hit”
[s], [g], [m]:	[sini] “seven” [gini] “two” [mini] “to laugh”
[g], [p ^h]:	[gəŋ], [p ^h əŋ]
[c], [s], [p ^h], [k ^h], [n]:	[ca] “to eat” [sa] “tea” [p ^h a] “father”
	[k ^h a] “to tie” [na] “fish”
[m], [s]:	[mei] “rice” [sei] “husband”

This analysis suggests that these sounds are different phonemes as they are in contrastive distribution.

3.1.2 Gemination:

Gemination, which is the twinning of two consonants, is also found in our study of the Barman language.

Phonemes	Example (Barman)	English Gloss
p+p	t ^h əppəra	“ash”
t+t ^h	mətt ^h ai	“big”
d+d	gəddəl	“new”
c+c	bicci	“egg”
k+k	nukkuruŋ	“eye”
k+k ^h	bək ^h uma	“dull”
m+m	dummua	“fever”
n+n	cunna	“cloth”
l+l	mulluk	“earth”

3.1.3 Consonant Clusters:

In our study of Barman Thar, we found only one word, i.e. [brui], with a consonant cluster. It is a cluster of two consonants, [b] and [ɾ]. And we found no final cluster in any word.

3.2 Vowels:

In Barman Thar, there are eight vowels and nine diphthongs.

3.2.1 Pure Vowels:

	Front	Central	Back
High	i		u
Close-mid	e		o
Open-mid	ɛ		ɔ
Near-open		ə	

Open	a		
------	---	--	--

3.2.2. Diphthongs:

	i	u	a
i			ia
o	oi	ou	
ɐ	ɛi		
e	ei		
u	ui		ua
a	ai	au	

4. MORPHOLOGY AND GRAMMAR

4.1 Case:

	Case	Marker	Examples
1.	(a) Nominative (b) Ergative	(a) ∅ (b) a	(a) ram hibaja ram-∅ hiba-ja Ram-NOM come-PST “Ram has come.” (b) rama thekasu caja ram-a t ^h ekasu ca-ja Ram-ERG mango eat-PST “Ram has eaten a mango.”
2.	Accusative	kɔ	ramkɔrigɐm ramkɔ rigɐm Ram-ACC call “Call Ram.”
3.	(a) Instrumental (b) Comitative	ca ne nɔɟe	(a) owa khɛttai-ca thekasu-kɔ dennaja owa khɛttai-ca thekasu-kɔ den-naja 3SG knife-INS mango cut-PST “S/he has cut (the) mango (b) ɛɲa ɔmrɪtne nɔɟe hiŋgen ɛɲa ɔmrɪt-ne nɔɟe hiŋ-gen 1SG Amrit-GEN INS go-FUT “I will go with Amrit.”
	Genitive	ne	ɔmrɪtne nɔk ɔmrɪt-ne nɔk Amrit-GEN house “Amrit’s house”
	Locative	ou	ɛɲa tezpuru dɔɲa ɛɲa tezpuru-ou dɔɲa-a 1SG Tezpur-LOC be-PRS “I am in Tezpur.”
6.	(a) Intentive Dative (b) Destinal Dative	ne nega ca	(a) ɔmrɪtne nega ɔmrɪt-ne nega Amrit-GEN DAT “... for Amrit.” (b) tezpura tezpuru-ca Tezpur-DAT “... to Tezpur.”
7.	Ablative	ne tukki	tezpurne tukki tezpuru-ne tukki Tezpur-GEN ABL “... from Tezpur.”

4.2 Tense and Aspect:

Three tenses are morphologically marked in Barman Thar.

Present: owa hiŋa
owa hiŋ-a
3SG go-PRS
“S/he goes.”

Past: owa caja
owa ca-ja
3SG eat-PST
“S/he ate.”

Future: owa riŋgən
owa riŋ-gən
3SG drink-FUT
“S/he will drink.”

In Barman Thar, the present tense is marked with the suffix “-a”, the past tense, with “-ja” and the future tense, with “-gən”.

Moreover, we also found aspects in this language.

Present Perfect: owa hibado
owa hiba-do
3SG come-PRS.PRF
“S/he has come.”

Present Continuous: owa hiŋa
owa hiŋ-dəŋ
3SG go-PRS.PROG
“S/he is going.”

Past Perfect: owa caniŋ
owa ca-niŋ
3SG eat-PST.PRF
“S/he had eaten.”

Future Continuous: owa riŋdəŋgən
owa riŋ-dəŋ-gən
3SG drink-PROG-FUT
“S/he will be drinking.”

4.3 Pronouns:

Number	Person	Pronoun
Singular	1 st	eŋa
	2 nd	neŋ
	2 nd (honorific)	neŋeŋ
	3 rd	owa
	3 rd (honorific)	oteŋ
Plural	1 st	ciŋa
	2 nd	neŋeŋ

	2 nd (honorific)	naṅətəṅ
	3 rd	otəṅ

4.4 Negation:

In Barman Thar, verbs are negated by suffixing “-za” and “-zia” for present and past tense respectively.

For example, the root word for the verb “eat” in Barman Thar is “ca”. The negative form of the word in the present tense is “caza” (ca+za), meaning “do/does not eat” and that in the past tense is “cazia” (ca+zia), meaning “did not eat”.

Again, in case of imperative sentences, the suffix “-nəṅ” is use.

For example, “mei canəṅ” means “Don’t eat rice.” [“mei” means “rice”, and “canəṅ” is bimorphemic, formed by the root word for “eat”, i.e. “ca”, and the imperative negative marker “-nəṅ”.]

4.5 Classifiers:

In our study of the language Barman Thar, we found one classifier, i.e. “-ja”.

doisaja	sijai	hiṅaja	
doisa-ja	sija-i	hiṅ-(a)ja	
boy-CL	die-PFV	go-PST	
“The boy died.”			

4.6 Allomorphs:

Another feature of this language that needs to be mentioned is the presence of allomorphs. We found some allomorphs in Barman Thar.

Allomorphs of the past tense marker:

“-ja” is the past tense marker as we have seen in 4.3. But when this morpheme is suffixed to a verb ending in [m], it becomes “-maja”. For example, “cum” + “-ja” = “cummaja”. When it is suffixed to a verb ending in [n], it becomes “-naja” as in “den” + “-ja” = “dennaja”. When it is affixed to a verb ending in [ŋ], it becomes “-aja”, as in “hiṅaja” (“hiṅ” + “-ja”).

Therefore, we can say that “-maja”, “-naja” and “-aja” are allomorphs of the morpheme “-ja”.

Allomorphs of the ergative case marker:

“-a” is the ergative case marker in Barman Thar. However, when it is affixed to a noun ending in a vowel, it becomes “-ja”. For example, “sita” + “-ja” = “sitaja”.

So, “-ja” is an allomorph of the ergative case marker “-a”.

4.7 Homophones:

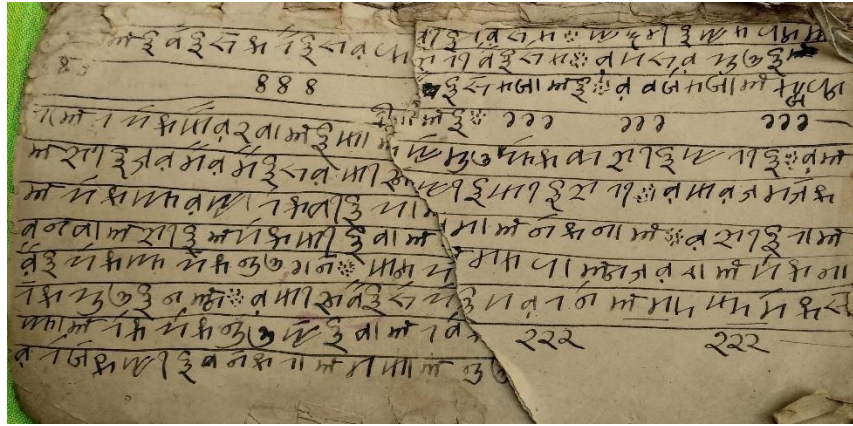
The past tense marker in this language is also “-ja”. “-ja” is also an allomorph of the ergative case marker “-a”. At the same time, “-ja” is also a classifier. Therefore, we can say that the suffix “-ja” is homophonous.

5. LITERATURE

During our fieldwork, we came to know that there are some organisations of their community. The conferences held by these organisations publish magazines, namely *Phurungi* and *Rigam*. In these magazines, poems written in their language are published. There are also some articles written on the community in Assamese and English.

6. SCRIPT

Following is a representation of the script that the Barman Kacharis consider as their script.



7. CONCLUSION

This paper is just a glimpse of Barman Thar. We could not collect much data since only a small part of the population speaks the language well. Barman Thar is a highly endangered language. Further research is needed for the revival of this language. We hope this paper will attract several linguists of the world to this language.

7. REFERENCES

7.1 Informants:

	Name	Gender	Age
1.	Bilasi Singha	Female	100+
2.	Babul Barman	Male	37
3.	Gobinda Barman	Male	48
4.	Sanjib Barman	Male	30
5.	Mira Barman	Female	25
6.	Basanti Barman	Female	50
7.	Kalicharan Barman	Male	60
8.	Biswajit Barman	Male	26
9.	Animesh Barman	Male	50
10.	Jatindra Barman	Male	65+
11.	Uma Rani Barman	Female	70+
12.	Sabitri Barman	Female	80+
13.	Sarada Barman	Female	70+
14.	Gendo Barman	Male	70+

7.2 Magazines:

1. *Phurungi*
2. *Rigam*