



Linguistic Imperialism: A Study of its Impact on the Assamese Language in the Greater Sivasagar District of Assam

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Abstract: The state of Assam in India is the home to the people who speak Assamese, an Indo-Aryan language. Assamese is the native tongue of the people of Assam and the official language of the state of Assam. Based on linguistic standards and conventions, Assamese is a vital language for writing. However, when we attempt to see the language from the viewpoint of native speakers' attitudes towards the language, we find that the language is steadily deteriorating among the linguistic community. This deterioration is caused by Linguistic Imperialism. Linguistic Imperialism is a phenomenon in which a dominant language attempts to weaken other languages both socially and politically and in a theoretically founded way. The impact of the dominance is increasing day by day due to which a negative attitude has increased significantly among the native speakers of Assamese who considers English as superior to their mother tongue. Negative attitude is one of the reasons of language endangerment and we cannot deny the possibility of endangerment of the Assamese language in the far future if the dominance of English goes on increasing. History is evident that languages with a huge literature and population got extinct because of the reasons like negative attitude, dominance of other languages, decreasing rate of fluent native speakers, examples of such languages are Sanskrit, Hebrew, etc. This paper tries to analyse the negative attitude which is gradually increasing in the Assamese language and ways to strengthen it by reverting the dominance of Linguistic Imperialism by languages like English and Hindi.

Keywords: Linguistic Imperialism, Assamese Language, Language Endangerment, Language Community, Native Speakers, Negative Attitude.

About the Authors



Iftikar Ali Ahmed is a research scholar in the Department of English, Royal School of Languages, The Assam Royal Global University, Guwahati, Assam, and India. He pursued his M.A. in Linguistics from Tezpur University, Assam, India. His thrust areas and research interests include Sociolinguistics, Language Endangerment, Linguistic Imperialism, Language Documentation, Language Maintenance, Language Revitalization and Language Morphology. The increased dominance of languages like English, Hindi and Bengali over the Assamese language led him to conduct this research on the Assamese language in the Greater Sivasagar district of Assam to study the present status scenario of the Assamese language from the language usage point of view.



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1. Introduction

Assamese is an Indo- Aryan language spoken mainly in the state of Assam which is also known as "ꠘꠞꠘꠞꠞꠞ" (*Oxomiya*) by the people of North-East India. It is the easternmost language of the Indo-Aryan language family. In the year 1872, Assamese was established as an independent language of the state and was made the language of the courts and schools. The first grammatical note of Assamese was taken by Rev. Nathan Brown in his, *Grammatical notes on Assamese Language* (1848). The American Baptist Missionaries were the intended audience of these notes which makes them brief. In 1867, Miles Bronson created the first comprehensive dictionary of the Assamese language. Assamese, its Formation and Development (1941) by Dr. Banikanta Kakati was the first linguistic analysis of the language. This seminal work opened new channels in the study of Assamese linguistically which has a portion named Assam Sahitya Sabha to look into its functions and the way forward. Due to political reasons, the language has seen many ups and downs at the time of British Rule in India. There are 1, 50, 95,797 speakers of Assamese in Assam. (According to the 2011 census). The Greater Sivasagar district of Assam consists of 4 districts and 2 sub-divisions of present day Assam. The 3 districts are namely, Charaideo, Sivasagar, Jorhat and Golaghat and the 2 sub-divisions are Namrup and Naharkatia which falls under the Dibrugarh district.

According to Robert Phillipson, Linguistic Imperialism is a linguistic phenomenon/process in which a dominant language attempts to weaken other languages both socially, technologically, and politically. English is one of those languages which is trying to dominate other languages internationally. Linguistic Imperialism is the study, which focuses on how and why certain languages dominate internationally with an attempt to become 'world languages' and what are the impacts of the phenomenon on the languages which get imperialized (Phillipson, 1992). This phenomenon/process sometimes also happens within a multilingual country where a particular language, which is the mother tongue of a fraction of the population of the country, tries to dominate other languages, which are spoken in the country (Phillipson, 1992).

The evidence for or against linguistic imperialism can be investigated empirically in each context. Linguistic imperialism entails the following:

- Linguistic imperialism interlocks with *a structure of imperialism* in culture, education, the media, communication, the economy, politics, and military activities.
- Its essence is about *exploitation*, injustice, inequality, and hierarchy that privileges those able to use the dominant language.
- It is *structural*: More material resources and infrastructure are accorded to the dominant language than to others.
- It is *ideological*: Beliefs, attitudes, and imagery glorify the dominant language, stigmatize others, and rationalize the linguistic hierarchy.
- The dominance is *hegemonic*: It is internalized and naturalized as being "normal."
- This entails *unequal rights* for speakers of different languages.
- Language use is often *subtractive*, proficiency in the imperial language and in learning it in education involving its consolidation at the expense of other languages.



- It is a form of *linguicism*, a favoring of one language over others in ways that parallel societal structuring through racism, sexism, and class: Linguicism serves to privilege users of the standard forms of the dominant language, which represent convertible linguistic capital.
- Linguistic imperialism is invariably *contested and resisted*.

(Phillipson, 1992, 2009)

Assam being a multilingual state of India, the dominance of English, Hindi and Bengali can be seen in a much higher rate. Linguistic Imperialism attains a different level here. It is not politically or economically imposed imperialism, perhaps it is a psychological imperialism which the native speakers of Assamese are accepting or welcoming voluntarily. The speakers of the Assamese language have acquired a negative attitude in their thoughts, consider their mother tongue to be an inferior language when compared to other dominating languages like English, Hindi, and Bengali which has led to a willing welcome towards linguistic imperialism.

Language serves as the identity of a community. All the important factors that make the community unique like culture, heritage, rites, rituals, etc. are based on language. When a language is lost or endangered, it is the whole community, which suffers from an identity crisis. English being a dominant language is trying to imperialize the world languages either politically or by influence. Therefore, it is a humble endeavour on the part of the researchers to examine the Assamese language from the point of view of linguistic imperialism in order to track the current situation of the language and to envision the prospect of the language becoming endangered in the future. Also, the researchers will try to find out the solutions and prerequisites to wipe out the negative attitude towards their mother tongue from the mind of the native speakers.

Phillipson (1992) discusses the phenomenon of Linguistic Imperialism in a very detailed manner. As Phillipson was a native of Scotland, the paper is based on the European setup. According to Robert Phillipson, the study of linguistic imperialism focuses on how and why certain languages dominate internationally, and attempts to account for such dominance in a theoretically informed way. (Phillipson, 1992). Whenever a new language dominates some other languages, the patient language starts losing all its societal and political characteristics and attributes, and gradually surrenders in front of the dominating language and hence the language that got dominated becomes dependent on the dominating language. (Phillipson, 1992)

Rahman (1996) provides examples to illustrate language imperialism, which refers to the way in which language is influenced by colonial impositions. This form of imperialism is never-ending, and it will continue to affect the languages of India. It talks about the British policies embedded upon languages and how it rationalizes the concept of imperialism in India. The paper explains the term linguistic imperialism as the dominance of one's language by another language in terms of power, status, elites, and privilege. The impact of imperialism through language continues till today. We can observe the impact of English over most of the indigenous languages of India. There are community speakers who feel the urge of substituting their own language in order to use English. This tendency occurs due to negative attitude towards their language.

Phillipson (1997) gives a brief summary of the principles for analysing language imperialism and shows that it is not a mythical. Robert Phillipson, in this paper, tries to defend Alan Davies. Alan Davies mentioned Linguistic Imperialism and Linguicism as mythical and far from reality. As an answer to that, this paper by Phillipson focuses on proving that the phenomenon of Linguistic Imperialism is very much theoretical and real in nature. "Linguistic Imperialism is a subtype of *Linguicism*, a term which Tove Skutnabb-Kangas coined (1988) to draw parallels between hierarchization on the basis of 'race' or ethnicity (racism, ethnicism), gender (sexism) and language (linguicism)" (Phillipson, 1997).

Crystal (2003) states language death seems similar to a death of a person. It is because if a language dies the identity of a person dies as well. The authors discuss about Stephen Wurm, who came up with a 5-level classification of Weaker languages, viz.

- **Potentially Endangered:** Socially and economically disadvantaged, under heavy pressure from a larger language, and beginning to lose child speakers.
- **Endangered:** Have few or no children learning the language, and the youngest good speakers are young adults.



- **Seriously Endangered:** Have the youngest good speakers aged 50 or older.
- **Moribund:** Have only a handful of good speakers left, mostly very old.
- **Extinct:** Have no speakers left. (Crystal, 2003)

Fernandez (2005) talks about what Robert Phillipson has coined regarding the dominance of a language over other languages and claims English to be the international language. The author focuses on the consequences of why we need an international language and how it impacts and affects other languages. Fernandez states that the use of English as an international language over other languages has a discriminative and unfair aspect (Fernandez, 2005).

Dastgoshadeh & Jalilzadeh (2011) depicts how losing a native tongue can affect the sense of identity. Since language and identity are intricately intertwined, it is imperative that we make every effort to preserve it. The purpose of this research is to illuminate the main factors that lead to language loss, such as the inability to successfully explore material and non-material options owing to a lack of access to power, which is a lack of voice, is a major factor in language loss. To have something to communicate to everyone in the world through their language, people need to take use of and investigate all of its facets. It also discusses the relationship between language and one's sense of self, arguing that language is not just a means of communication but is tied to a particular set of social mores and cultural values.

Mahanta (2012) gives a good explanation of the Assamese language. It discusses why the variety of Assamese spoken in Sibsagar is considered as the standard variety. It also discusses about Assamese spoken in others states of India and also internationally. It points out the distinctive features of the Sibsagariya variety, like, the deletion of /r/, no contracting of morphemes, etc.

Sourabh & Vibhakar (2012) provides an analysis of the English language and its influence on Hindi language information retrieval. Although English remains the language of choice for accessing online resources, the rise of the internet in regions like China, India, Russia, the Middle East, and South Asia has heightened the significance of IR in languages other than English.

Singh & Rajesh (2014) attempts to study the sociolinguistics of English in relation to India. It shows the emergence of the English language around the globe. The paper explains about the power of the English language by providing the scope in which the English language is being used. The study also analyses the syntax and structure of Indian English, claiming that it is quite similar to that of Standard English. However, it has a large number of locally restricted lexical items.

Unganer (2014) states that language losses are more frequently found among the first language learners. The paper is based upon the experience of the writer's own language. The paper aims at showing the reasons for first language loss and also tries to understand if there are possible ways to revive the lost language. It talks about the circumstances under which language loss occurs and its effects upon one's life. This paper discusses about the first language loss from sociolinguistic perspectives including acculturation, assimilation, anomie, and extinction.

El-qassaby (2015) in this paper talks about how English language in prevailing Linguistic Imperialism in the world. The author discusses how the growing stature of English in the world in formal education, media, world trade, diplomacy, etc has made the English language an imperialist one. The author states that English is considered as the lingua franca of the modern era. The author discusses how English has emerged as a globally accepted language by dominating minor languages and cultures. The paper discusses how English language is significant towards social and economic rise of the people, which also changes the norms of attitudes, behaviour, values and beliefs mostly among the young generation. This upliftment of English is also a reason towards social inequality between English speaking and non-English speaking peoples. The author also discusses the agenda aimed by the super powers of reshaping the worldview by eliminating other languages and cultures.

Brahmachary (2016) discusses about imperialism in the linguistic and cultural aspects and perspectives of Assam. The author talks about the legacy of sovereignty and explains how this legacy has helped in moulding different cultures present in Assam into one Assamese Culture. The author also talks about the historical evidences regarding migration and formation of the diverse cultural environment in Assam. The author states the various communities found in Assam and how they migrated to Assam. The author also talks about the Bengali language



dominance over Assamese community during the British colonial rule. The author explains how imperialism is prevailing in the disguise of nationalism.

Goswami (2016) discusses how English language has been imposed over the natives of Assam during the Colonial period. English has always been a sign of colonial legacy and imposition. The authors talks about the language movements that took place in support of the Assamese language. The authors gives a statistical data of the 1901 census regarding the population of English speaking people in Assam and also compares it with the 2001 census. It shows how drastically the popularity of English is prevailing to the masses. The author talks about how and why the filtration theory of education by Macaulay was adopted in the country for imparting education. The author also discusses about the period when Assamese was adopted as the official language of Assam and how the non-Assamese speaking communities of Assam revolted against the decision. The paper also gives an aspect of how the Asom Sahitya Sabha and the All Assam Students' Union played key roles in establishing Assamese as the official language.

Basid (2016) discusses about the up and downs faced by the Assamese language during the colonial period. The paper is specifically set on the period from 1836 to 1960. The authors discusses about how the Bengali language was established as the language of courts in Assam and what were the impact and repercussions of the same. The papers reflects the social dominance of Bengali speaking community in Assam. The paper states how the Assamese literature writing faced a great challenge in this period. The paper also discusses about the criteria and protocols based on which the Assamese Language Act, 1960 came into effect. The papers deals with the historical perspective or re-establishment of the Assamese language as an independent language.

Mishra & Srivastava (2017) discuss the glory and fall of the Sanskrit language. The paper attempts to put forward the reasons for the downfall of the Sanskrit language. The paper portrays how the introduction of foreign languages depleted the Sanskrit language. According to the authors, the prime reason behind the downfall of Sanskrit was the introduction of new languages like Arabic, Turkish, Persian, etc. Because of these factors, the usage of the Sanskrit language got constrained and resulted in the death of the language.

Asad (2020) tries to review how the people of Pakistan comprehend English language as an international language. The study is based basically in the University of Central Punjab, Lahore where the authors tries to analyse the importance given to English language over Urdu language. The authors marks the impactful emerging era of English in Pakistan during the rule of General Zia-ul-Haq and which was maintained accordingly during the rule of General Parvaiz Musharaf. The authors explores the dominancy of English in Pakistan and how the people mix the English language while speaking Urdu. The paper discusses how the English language is used as a tool by the elite class for their own benefits in reshaping the economic and political sphere in Pakistan. The paper projects how the English language is defaming and depopularising the Urdu language in Pakistan.

Sonowal (2022) in this paper discusses about the role of magazines in the history of Assamese literature. The era(s) of Assamese literature are mostly divided based on the reign of the magazines. The author specifically talks about the magazine Bahi edited by Laxminath Bezboruah and how this magazine dealt with the Assamese language affairs. The authors focuses on how the Bahi magazine paved the road for the growth of the Assamese literature. The paper gives a very important aspect of the relationship between Bahi magazine and Assamese literature.

Nath & Gayan (2020) explain the Assamese language in a proper linguistic manner. They also state the population statistics based on the census. The paper states that Assamese has 24 Consonants and 8 Vowel sounds and 11 diphthongs in its phonemic inventory. It points out that the alveolar fricative /f/ is the hallmark of the Assamese language. Assamese has monosyllabic and Polysyllabic words. The paper states an important point of population decrease. In 1971, the Assamese speakers contributed 60.89% of the total population of Assam, but in 2011, it got decreased to 48.38%. (which is a matter of a great future threat from the Linguistic Imperialism point of view).

1.1 Rationale and Aims of the Study

An overview of the literature review shows that there has been very substantially a small number of research conducted so far on the Assamese language from the perspective of Linguistic Imperialism. Therefore, it is a humble



attempt on the part of the researchers to study the status of the Assamese language from the perspective of Linguistic Imperialism with the aim to envisage the future of the language.

This research paper focuses on the sociolinguistic aspect of Linguistic Imperialism in Assamese. The research paper aims to study the following:

- To explore the present status of the Assamese language.
- To study the dominance of the English language over the Assamese language and to observe whether it is making the Assamese language susceptible to endangerment in the far future.
- To envisage the measures that should be undertaken to eradicate the negative attitude from the minds of the native speakers of Assamese so that they prefer using the language over other languages.

2. Methodology

This research follows the descriptive survey method and data has been collected from primary and secondary sources. Fieldwork in the Greater Sivasagar district of Assam has yielded the study's primary data. Questionnaires have been prepared based on the objectives. A total number of 1385 informants were been consulted during the fieldwork. Fieldwork has been conducted based on situations across all the possible platforms of language usage such as political meetings, educational institutes, social community functions, public places and so on. Secondary data has been collected from the literary and linguistic works on the Assamese language and the topic genre which are relevant to the research topic. The data has been collected based on 5 age groups, viz. 10-19 years, 20-29 years, 30-39 years, 40-49 years and 50 years and above. The data has been analysed and graphically represented through bar diagrams.

2.1 The Present Status of the Assamese Language

The Assamese language is considered as a vital language and the regional official language of Assam. There is an extensive amount of work written in the language since it has a good number of native speakers. However, the vitality of a language depends on more than just these factors. The future of a language primarily depends on its speakers. That is why the spoken form of a language is considered to be the primary form. Since the speakers of a language are the actual stakeholders, it is their attitude that actually determine the status of a language. Thus, the usage of the language by its speakers in various formal and informal domains is the basis of the determination.

With the objective to determine the present status of the Assamese language, the informants were asked a few questions to get the inference of the native speakers about their mother tongue preference and usage. The data below shows the response of the informants of various age groups.

- ❖ Preference of language use in a formal meeting

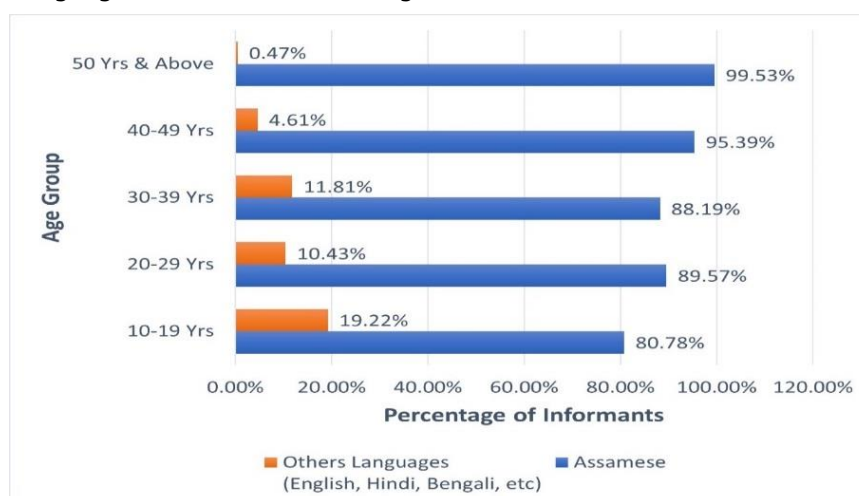


Figure 1. Preference in language use in formal meetings



❖ Pride in language use by children.

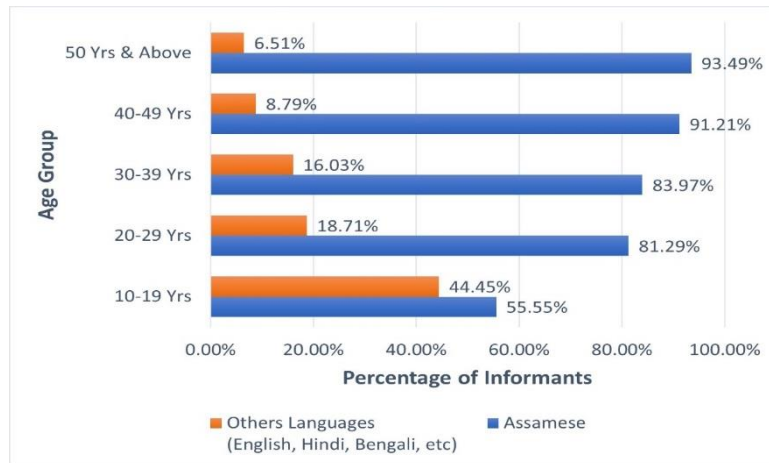


Figure 2. Pride in use of language by children

❖ Preference and encouragement in the use of language by relatives and friends.

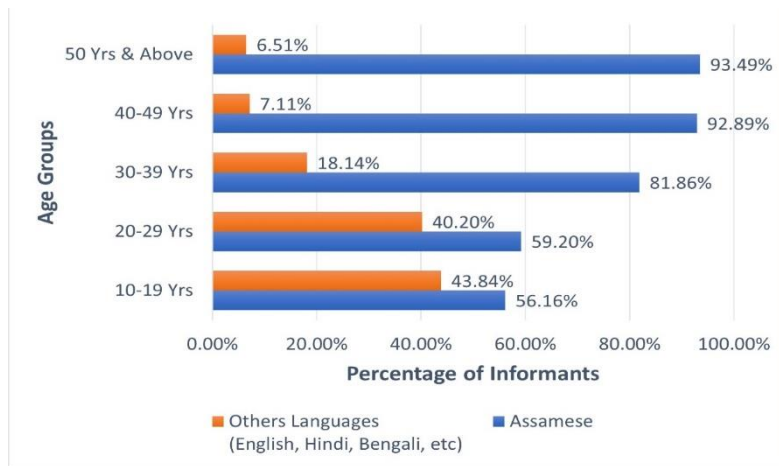


Figure 3. Preference and encouragement in the use of language by relatives and friends.

❖ The language used by the informants to read the questionnaire.

Response: Shown in Figure 4

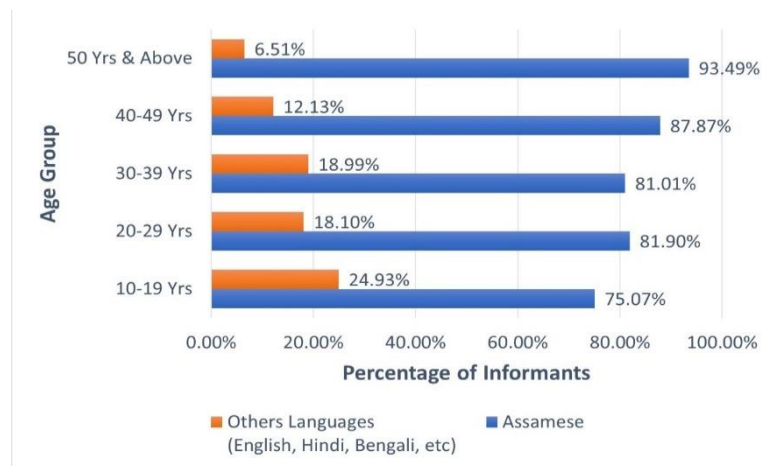


Figure 4. Language used by informants to read the questionnaire



The data shown in figure 1 to 4 clearly shows that the status of Assamese language is getting weaker in regard to the young speakers. The young speakers prefer other languages like English, Hindi, Bengali, and so on to their mother tongue. This is a sign of a gradual depletion of loyalty of the native speakers towards their mother tongue. This shift of preference in making the Assamese language weaker day by day.

2.2 Susceptibility of the Assamese Language towards Endangerment in the Far Future

Language Endangerment has evolved as a serious matter of concern for the linguistic ecology of the world. In the context of India, languages like English, Hindi and Bengali are the imperialistic languages which are killing the other languages. In Assam, Assamese being the regional language is considered as a vital language and so its endangerment has never been considered. Unfortunately, Assamese speakers are becoming increasingly dismissive towards their mother tongue, which is considered unhealthy for any language. As we all know, negative attitude is one of the primary elements of language endangerment and in the case of the Assamese language, the development of this negative attitude might lead to the endangerment of Assamese in the far future.

With the objective to study the dominance of English and other languages over the Assamese language to observe the susceptibility of the Assamese language towards endangerment in the far future, the informants were asked a few questions to inference the level of dominance of other languages over the Assamese language and to observe the developed negative attitude. The data below shows the response of the informants of various age groups.

- ❖ The perception of the informants on the importance of learning a particular language properly.

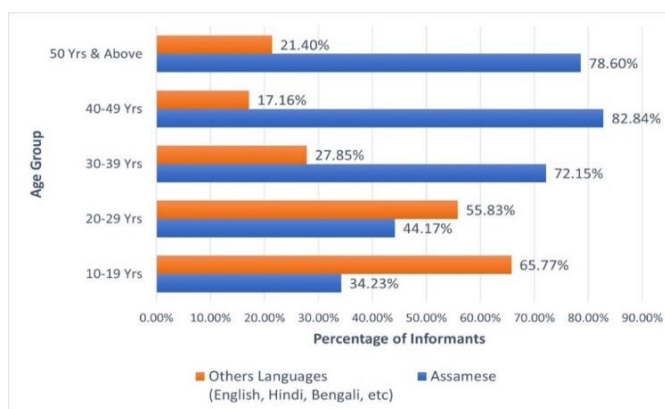


Figure 5. Perception of informants giving importance in learning a particular language

- ❖ Statements termed as correct from the informant’s perspective:
 - To learn Assamese is very much important for our future generations and us.
 - English language learning is more important than learning Assamese.
 - We can easily keep up with the world if we don’t even know Assamese properly.
 - Assamese is just a regional language, so not of much importance.

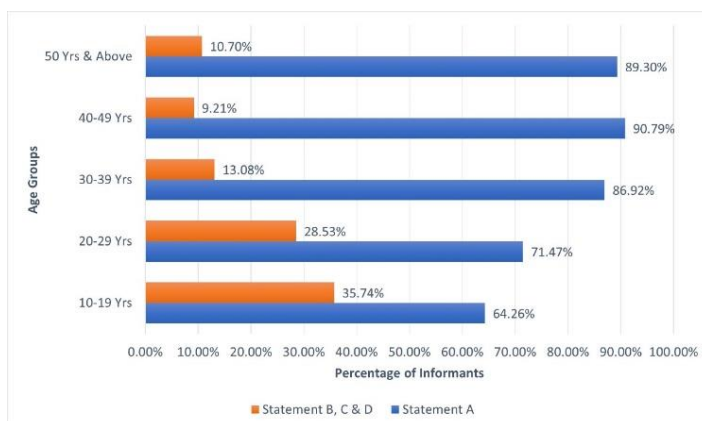


Figure 6. Informants going with or against Assamese language learning importance



- ❖ Language considered by informants as more sophisticated.

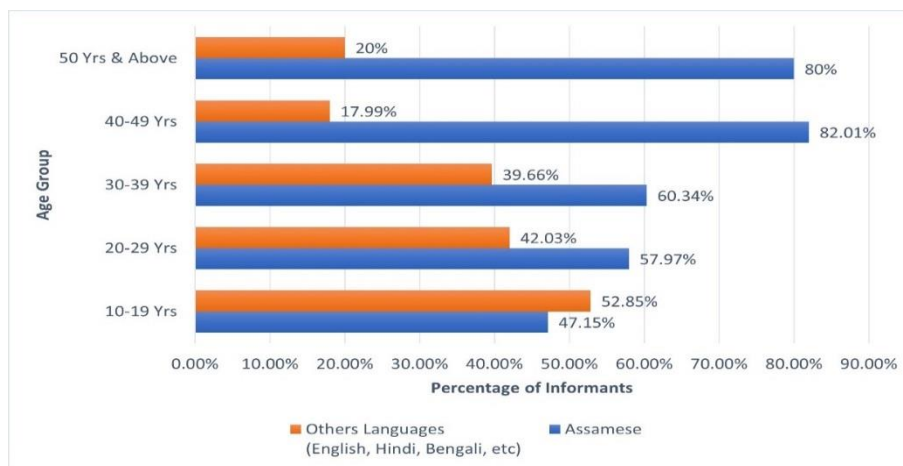


Figure 7. Language considered as more sophisticated.

- ❖ Impact of linguistic imperialism on different age groups

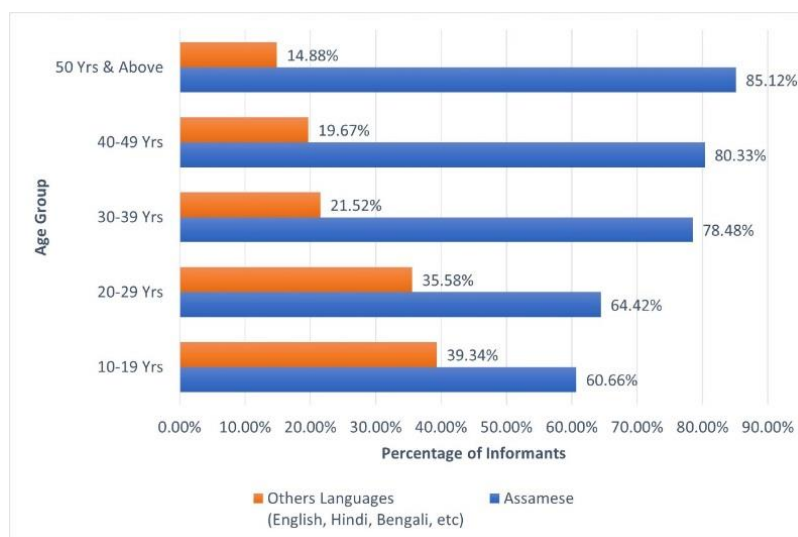


Figure 8. Impact of linguistic imperialism on different age groups

From the above data, as shown in figure 5 to 8, it can be stated that the age group '50 years and above' is least impacted by linguistic imperialism and the impact gradually increases towards the young generation. The age group '10-19 Years' is mostly impacted by linguistic imperialism. According to the 5-level classification of weaker languages by Stephen Wurm, the 2nd level is when a language has a few or no children learning or speaking the language. If you go by the above data, the Assamese language is heading towards the 2nd level gradually.

2.3 Measures and Pre-Requisites to be undertaken for the unaffected survival of the Assamese Language

Language Death and Language Endangerment are not absolute phenomenon. There are always ways and means of saving a language from these situations where it can be revitalized. Assamese being a regional official state language is in its very early stage of endangerment. It does not even fall under the criteria of being termed as an endangered language. However, the future of the Assamese language is in threat due to the rising tide of speakers abandoning it in favour of English, Hindi, and other dominant languages. If the speakers do not start working on strengthening the language from now on, it will become a very hard task to revitalize the language in the future. This is not the first time that this kind of threat is emerging for the Assamese language. A similar movement happened in 1836, when Bengali replaced Assamese as the official state language. A similar drift might arise again after a few decades if we do not focus on strengthening the language now.



It has been noticed that the native speakers are gradually developing a negative attitude towards their mother tongue which is a serious concern and threat towards the Assamese language. It has also been observed that the speakers of Assamese feel a sense of pride in speaking English and other dominating languages over their mother tongue. In situations where there is an Assamese word or phrase available for expressing a thought, there is a marked tendency of using English, Hindi and Bengali alternatives for the purpose. From the linguistic point of view, no language is superior or inferior. It is just because of some non-linguistic factors, that the native speakers of Assamese are developing a mindset that Assamese is an inferior language in comparison to English, Hindi and Bengali.

The government is also equally responsible for the weakening of the Assamese language. Being the regional official language of the state, the Assamese language should have got more importance and prominence. It has been observed that in the government offices, the forms, records books, ledgers, registers, etc. are mostly maintained in English. It is an obvious tendency that works related to the government of Assam will mostly be dealt with by someone who hails from Assam and speaks Assamese fluently. So, the necessity of using some language other than Assamese can be minimised. The hoardings, banners and posters, if not all, are also found to be in languages other than Assamese. This scenario of the government affairs is not the same with the other states of India. In most of the states of India, where the regional language is the state official language, there seems to be a good representation of the same.

The measures and prerequisites which are needed to be undertaken for strengthening the Assamese language and to wipe the negative attitude can be divided into 3 levels, viz.

❖ **Native Speaker Level:**

- The native speakers of Assamese should have a strong belief that their mother tongue is not inferior to other dominating languages. Assamese has equal qualities and importance similar to the other dominating languages.
- The native speakers of the adult age group must encourage the young ones of the community to learn Assamese properly and use the language on all possible platforms.
- The native speakers should lessen the usage of other dominating languages for communicating and sharing their thoughts and use the Assamese language.
- The tendency of code mixing and code-switching should be restricted.

❖ **Language Worker/Linguist Level:**

- The language workers of Assamese have to focus on exploring the unresearched domains of the language.
- The documentation and digitisation of the Assamese language should happen in a properly guided way.
- The language workers have to work on the proper digitization of the Assamese language.
- Encouragement of the community speakers to use their mother tongue on a primary and priority basis should be emphasised.

❖ **Government Level:**

- As a state regional language, the usage of the Assamese language needs to be increased.
- The government should issue strict guidelines on the usage of the Assamese language, i.e. the Assamese language should be used for most of the official matters while the use of the other dominating languages should be minimised.
- All the state government websites must have Assamese as an operating language without any fail.
- Posters, banners, hoardings, and all other public visualisations must have the Assamese language as the head language, followed by any other language, if required.



- Promotional events for the upliftment of the Assamese language should be organised.

3. Conclusion

With the increasing influence of other languages over the native language, there has been a growing competition to maintain the continuous use of a language from a regional and socially more powerful languages. Languages evolve by continuous transmissions from one generation to the next and spread into the dialects of the region which ultimately establishes the standard languages. In the present scenario, when it is found that the younger generation resorts to the influence of a dominant language, the problem of an identity crisis emerges. The analysis also confirms to the fact that the young speakers of the Assamese language prefer other languages like English, Hindi, Bengali etc over their mother tongue. They are also susceptible to language imperialism which also marks a negative attitude towards their mother tongue. This problem can be resolved only if we understand the intensity of the situation and help in the maintenance of the language. Thus, with the help of the older generation, language workers and the government, measures should be undertaken so that the usage of the language increases thereby impeding it from endangerment and further language shift.

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Yes

Conflict of interest

The Authors have no conflicts of interest to declare that they are relevant to the content of this article.

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