



Nagamese: A Threat To Naga Languages And Identity

With special reference to Tenyiphe - 1 Village

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Abstract: This paper aims to explore the potential threat posed by Nagamese in light of the increasing use of Nagamese in almost all the domains with reference to Tenyiphe-1 Village, Chümoukedima, Nagaland. Linguistic diversity has been a defining feature of the region, the state is home to numerous indigenous communities where each tribe is as unique as the language they speak. Among this diversity, Nagamese, a creole, born out of language contact and historical interactions has emerged as a lingua franca, serving as a bridge of communication for the diverse tribal communities. However, it is at this crossroads that the role of lingua franca given to Nagamese raises pressing questions about the repercussions it might have in the maintenance and preservation of the indigenous languages and cultural identity of the native people of Nagaland. The study employs a survey-based method where a set of 41 questions in the form questionnaire is made which is filled by 300 respondents from Tenyiphe -I Village. Critical analysis of the received data is carried out as well as from various articles, journals and research works related to the study.

Keywords - Nagamese, threat, Naga languages, cultural identity, maintenance, preservation.

I. INTRODUCTION

Language is a structured system of communication where the composition of words, pronunciation and the methods of combining them are used and understood by a particular community. It is also the means through which cultures, knowledge, and traditions are preserved and transmitted between generations, which sums that the loss of one's language is the loss of one's identity.

Language is an index, symbol and marker of identity (Baker, 2001, p. 51). The loss of language is part of the loss of whole cultures and knowledge systems including philosophical systems, oral literary and musical traditions, environmental knowledge systems, medical knowledge and important cultural practices and artistic skills which is a part of an individual's identity, their cultural identity. The world stands to lose an important part of the sum of human knowledge whenever a language stops being used (Hinton, 2001, p. 5).

Language Maintenance occurs when a language is threatened to become extinct. This language shift occurs mostly in minority language speakers as they are pressured to use the dominant language. Language Maintenance is "the preservation of the use of a language by a speech community under conditions where there is a possibility of shift to another language" (C. Ferguson & Heath, 1980, p. 530) while Language Preservation is the name given to all efforts to prevent a language from becoming extinct or dead. Despite taking years to go extinct, it is relatively easy for a spoken language to die in today's fast-changing world.

Linguists estimate that more than 250,000 languages are dead by now and a language dies every two weeks on average. (Venuh, 2023, p.12).

II. NAGALAND, NAGAS AND THEIR LANGUAGES

Nagaland, a picturesque land full of green hills and valleys is a landlocked state in the north-eastern region of India with a population of 1,980,602. It consists of 16 administrative districts and inhabited by 17 major tribes and various other sub-tribes. The people of Nagaland are known as the ‘Nagas’ and each tribe is distinct from one another in terms of customs, tradition and language though they share many cultural traits (Belho, 2019). NU Linguistic Fraternity coordinator Dr. Mimi Kevichüsa Ezung said, Nagaland is a land of myriad languages and culture, and is often referred to as a “gold-mine for linguists”. (Unrepresented Nations & Peoples Organization [UNPO], 2023)

The Naga languages are a geographic and ethnic grouping of languages under Sino-Tibetan, Tibeto Burman and Kamarupan languages. There are 16 recognized languages in Nagaland and about 60 spoken dialects. These are mainly divided into Eastern Naga, Central Naga and Western Naga. The most interesting feature of the Naga languages is that the language or dialect of a particular tribe is not understood by another tribe, they all speak ‘mutually-unintelligible languages’ despite the various tribes of Nagas sharing many cultural traits and accept or view themselves under the umbrella term ‘Naga’.

2.1 Nagamese

Nagamese is an Assamese-lexified creole language. (Wikipedia, 2019) According to Boruah (1993), “The word Nagamese was coined by the people of All India Radio Station, Kohima” (p. 1624). It originates due to the contact in the barter trade centers in the plains of Assam between members of different Naga linguistic groups communicating with Assamese traders and with one another. The contact took place on a regular basis and allowed for the development and eventual stabilization of Nagamese. M.V. Shreedhar (1985) in his *Standardized Grammar of Naga Pidgin* states that neither colonization nor subjugation was responsible for the birth of Nagamese. In the early 1970s, M.V. Shreedhar sought to begin standardization processes with the intention of producing Nagamese educational material. It was agreed upon that the Roman script was to be adopted into Nagamese writing. Nagamese has a total of 34 phonemes including 6 vowel phonemes and 28 consonantal phonemes.

Despite the tension and history of ethnic conflict, the requirement of communication between the Nagas and non-Nagas induced linguistic contact, which was conducive to the growth and use of Nagamese as a method of intergroup communication. Nagamese became the lingua franca of Nagaland as it spread across the region and into various domains of the state though it was first used solely for trade and commerce and referred to as the ‘language of the street’, it is now used in almost all domains of daily life.

III. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

- To investigate the role and development of Nagamese, a creole language in Nagaland.
- To find out the potential threat posed by Nagamese to the Naga languages and cultural identity.
- To assess the factors contributing to the spread and dominance of Nagamese and its impact on the preservation of Naga languages.
- To explore the consequences of the declining use of indigenous languages including potential loss of cultural heritage, identity and traditional language.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology applied for this research is descriptive method. The research work is based on the collection of data from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data is collected by conducting a survey in the form of questionnaires from the speakers of both Nagamese and indigenous languages of Tenyiphe - I Village. The village is situated in the Chümoukedima district of Nagaland and as per the Population census 2011, there are a total 612 households and the total population is 3037. The questionnaire has a set of 41 questions which is filled up by 300 respondents. The data which are the responses are further analyzed and interpreted for the research. Secondary data is collected from various articles, journals, thesis and internet sources.

V. FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE GROWTH OF NAGAMESE

5.1 Lack of a common language among the Naga languages

B.K. Boruah (1993) in his article “Nagamese: The common language in Nagaland” notes that a language or a dialect spoken in one Naga village is not easily understood by the tribe of another village in the vicinity. Despite such problems, Ajii Kumar Baishya (2003) pointed out that not a single tribe wants to learn the languages of the other to facilitate inter-lingual communication. This refusal was mainly due to the practice of head-hunting which created animosity among the various tribes but in order to communicate, they adopted Nagamese which is socially neutral and does not personally belong to a single Naga tribe. This antagonistic attitude towards one another fails to form a common language from the Naga languages and paved the way for Nagamese which later became the lingua franca of the Nagas.

5.2 Spread of Nagamese to almost all the domains

Nagamese originates as a result of constant contact with the Assamese people especially for business, so initially the only domain where Nagamese was employed was in the field of trade and commerce. State Council of Educational Research & Training (SCERT) director Vipralhou Kesiezie said Nagamese first started as a market language amongst the various tribes and eventually it has come to be accepted by all sections of the society (UNPO, 2013). Nagamese was referred to as the ‘language of the street’ but it slowly crept into the homes of the Nagas. The Nagas started using Nagamese to communicate among themselves, casually being spoken between individuals, it is also used within official state-regulated domains such as conducting parliament meetings, at religious gatherings, educational system, healthcare and even at homes mostly in urban areas and in mixed households.

5.3 Lack of initiatives to promote Naga languages

Dr. Pangersenla Walling, member of Linguistics Fraternity NU said that 187 languages in India are under threat of disappearing and 9 already extinct. Out of 187 endangered languages 64 are in the north east along the Indo-Nepal border. Despite such glaring numbers, Naga tribal languages have been badly neglected and ignored. Only in recent years, some initiatives are being taken. The director also said that Nagas faces a big threat in promoting or preserving their languages due to several factors. Some of the major factors are multiplicity of tribal languages (16 recognised languages and 60 dialects) due to which, it becomes a problem to focus on all the Naga languages, English is made as the medium of instruction in schools as well as the official language of the state, due to multiple tribal languages Alternative English is taught as a subject in lieu of Mother tongues in school and the percentage of students opting for Mother Tongue is as low as 10-20% (UNPO, 2013).

5.4 The role of media

Media in the form of music, movies, newspapers and videos plays an important part in contributing to the growth of Nagamese. Nagamese videos, songs, movies and stand-up comedy are creating a vibe in the society which is gaining more popularity with easy access to the internet (Belho, 2019). To garner more audience, many news forums employ Nagamese to inform people about current affairs which is mostly seen in the YouTube platform.

5.5 Increasing population of non-locals

Nagaland has a surplus of labor from other states such as Bihar and Assam. This situation only promotes Nagamese. Nagamese being an Assamese-lexified creole language makes it easier for Assamese, Hindi, Bengali speaker laborers to learn Nagamese quickly and communicate effectively. The market language which is Nagamese is also an advantage for these people (Belho, 2019).

VI DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The questionnaire has a set of 41 questions ranging from basic questions such as how well do the respondents speak their mother tongue to whether Nagamese is a threat to the mother tongue or not and various ways to maintain and preserve the Naga languages.

The majority of the respondents are of the opinion that Nagamese is a threat to their mother tongue. It is so because the usage of Nagamese has been increasing rapidly and this has caused the Nagas to forget one's own mother tongue. The use of indigenous languages is declining especially among younger generations that some cannot even construct a proper sentence in their own dialect. Many families especially the younger generations do not communicate in their mother tongue and communicate in Nagamese which has only led to the negligence of one's indigenous language and so many Nagas have lost the fluency in their own mother tongue due to extreme usage of Nagamese in their day-to-day life but are very fluent in Nagamese. Learning a mother tongue has become a burden for some leading to the use of Nagamese as it is more convenient. Due to over usage of Nagamese, for some people a proper sentence cannot be spoken without mixing Nagamese and some find it difficult to even talk with their families in their own mother tongue. One respondent strongly asserted that "Yes, it is a threat because rather than speaking one's own mother tongue people are communicating mostly with the so called "Nagamese", starting from a toddler who does not know how to speak his/her mother tongue properly is able to speak "Nagamese", even to the extent, some parents instead of teaching moral values to their children in one's own dialects, they themselves are communicating with their children in "Nagamese". If we continue this, there'll come a day when we will lose our own identity, our own language."

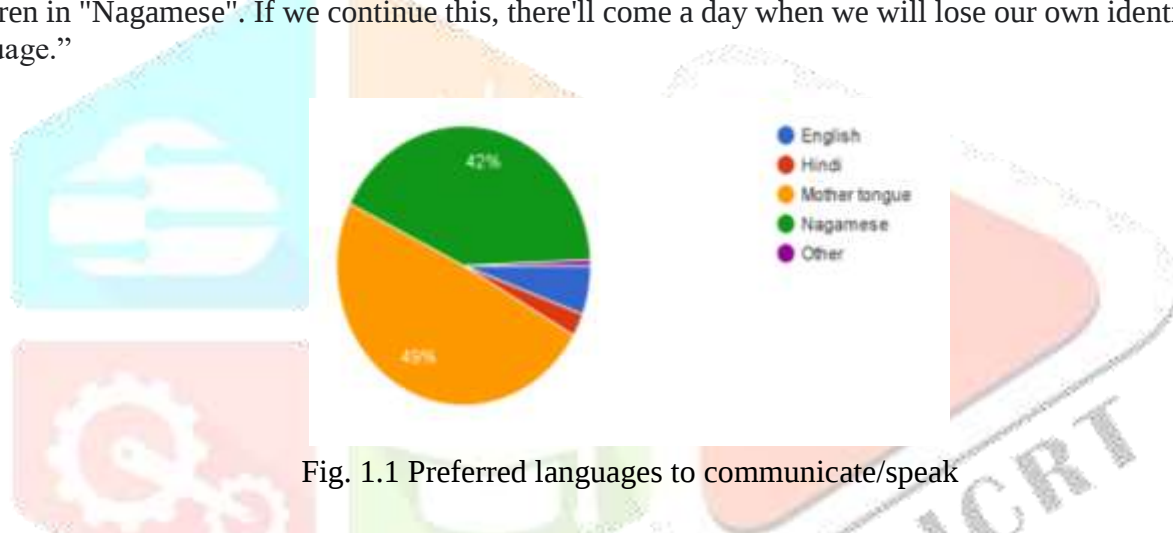


Fig. 1.1 Preferred languages to communicate/speak

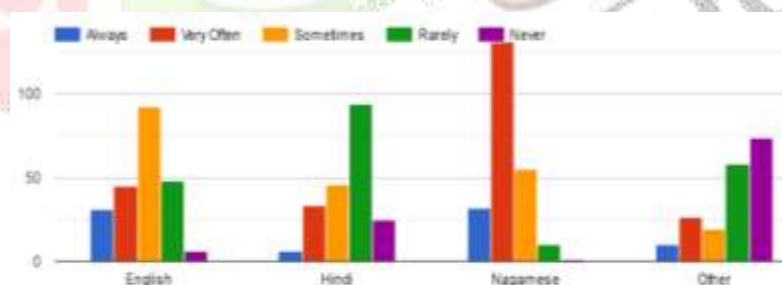


Fig. 1.2 The context of Code-switching

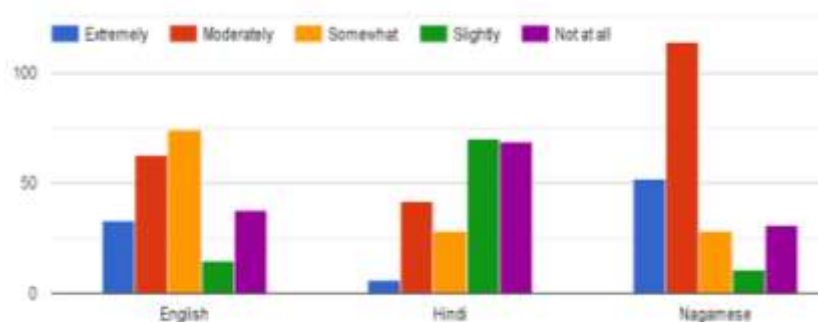


Fig. 1.3 Languages which pose a threat to Mother tongue

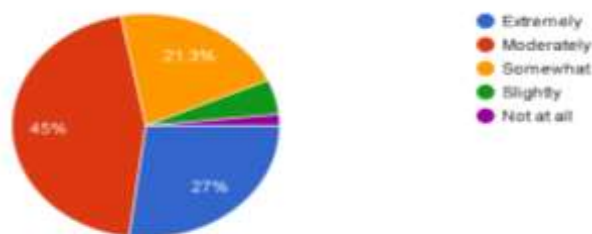


Fig. 1.4 Rate of use of Nagamese on daily conversations by the speakers rather than Naga languages

While some respondents are of the view that Nagamese is not at all a threat to their mother tongue because although many people use Nagamese for communication, the indigenous languages are also still spoken in a vast majority especially in the village areas. People from other places who settle in villages also in many cases learn only the indigenous language instead of Nagamese. Nagamese does not bring disruption between tribes, instead it serves as a common language and is used for easy communication with other tribes and non-Nagas. So, in order to communicate in Nagaland, one should know how to speak Nagamese and if Nagamese was not created, there would have been some other language or dialect for means of communication among the various Naga tribes. So, one cannot say or think that Nagamese will erase or eradicate our dialect when we can speak and can talk in our own mother tongues at home. One respondent stated that “We cannot put a statement on that because Nagamese being a common language of Nagaland, there is no way of the language being a threat.”

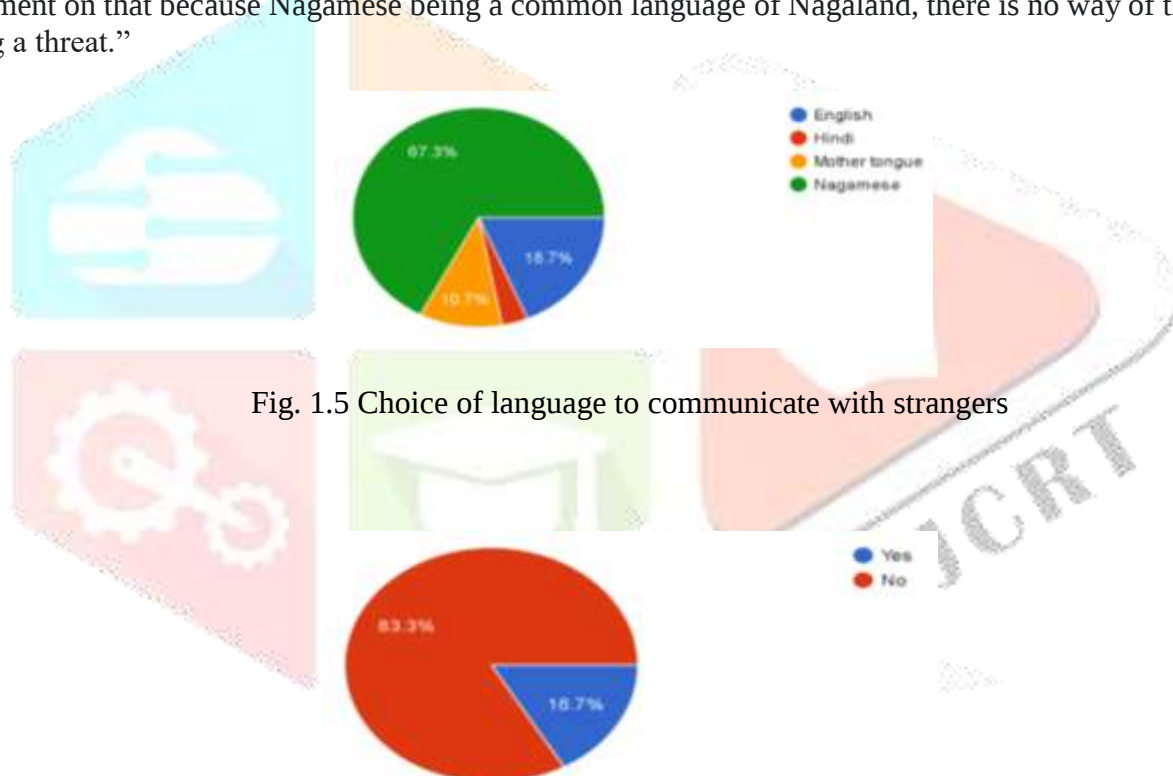


Fig. 1.5 Choice of language to communicate with strangers

Fig. 1.6 Preference of new lingua franca



Fig. 1.7 Should Nagamese and the Naga languages function together?

There are some respondents who do not belong to any of the two extremes and reasons that Nagamese being a threat to the indigenous languages depends on the person's environment and relationships, it is a matter of how people manage to use the languages. For some it might be as it totally depends on the parenting of the children by their parents because as we live in a modern society and we need a common dialect to communicate as well as to do business with the outsiders or other tribes.

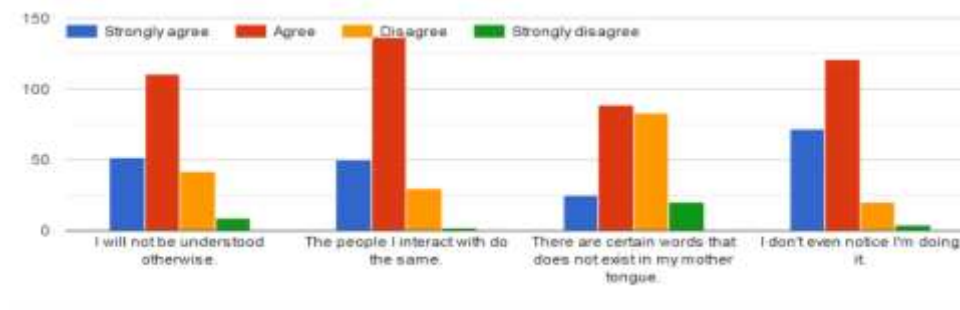


Fig. 1.8 Reasons for the context of code-switching and code-mixing



Fig. 1.9 View on recognizing Nagamese as 'language for communication' and Naga languages as 'language for identification'.

Majority of respondents do agree that Nagamese has hindered the learning of their mother tongue which eventually made them speak less in their mother tongue as the language dominates in all the domains except in family and religious domains but as of recent, it is used more than it should in both the domains as well. It is also the younger generations who use the language in excess, infiltrating it in the family and religious domains. This has led to people to speak less in one's mother tongue but there are some respondents who do not think that Nagamese has hindered the learning of their mother tongue as they have strong command over their mother tongue and is confident in themselves to not let Nagamese intervene in the usage of their mother tongue. They are able to maintain and use the languages when and where it is required for better communication and it is the older generations who are of such view and who practice it in their day-to-day conversations.

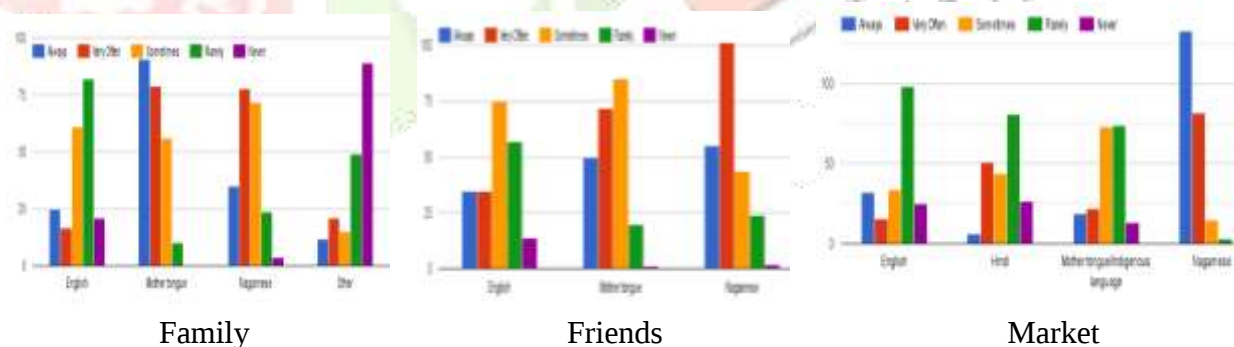


Fig. 1.10 Nagamese as Preferred language in Informal Settings



Fig. 1.11 Nagamese responsible for speaking less in mother tongue

About 95% of respondents are of the opinion that they need Nagamese to communicate whether the respondents agree that it is a threat or it is not because all the Naga tribes have their own unique dialect which is unintelligible to one another. In order to communicate even to the non-Nagas especially the vendors and laborers, a common language is required and Nagamese plays the perfect role in bridging the gap as the other two language options i.e., English and Hindi are not grasped by all the Nagas like Nagamese. The respondents say that Nagamese is easier to use to communicate, it is convenient and comfortable for most of the respondents as they can express themselves well only with Nagamese since there are some respondents who are not fluent in their mother tongue and find it difficult to explain things or recall certain words in their mother tongue. English is the official language of the state and almost all the students and younger generations can communicate in English but for those who are illiterate and for the older generations, Nagamese becomes the convenient language. Some respondents reason that in cases like demise of both the parents, divorce as well as due to the negligence of parents, some of them are deprived of learning their mother tongue. The languages which remain are English, Hindi and Nagamese. Nagamese being the most dominant one is left with no choice but to communicate in it as he/she feels comfortable using Nagamese. Some respondents do agree on the need for the usage of Nagamese but not for every conversation and that it depends on people to people for the usage.

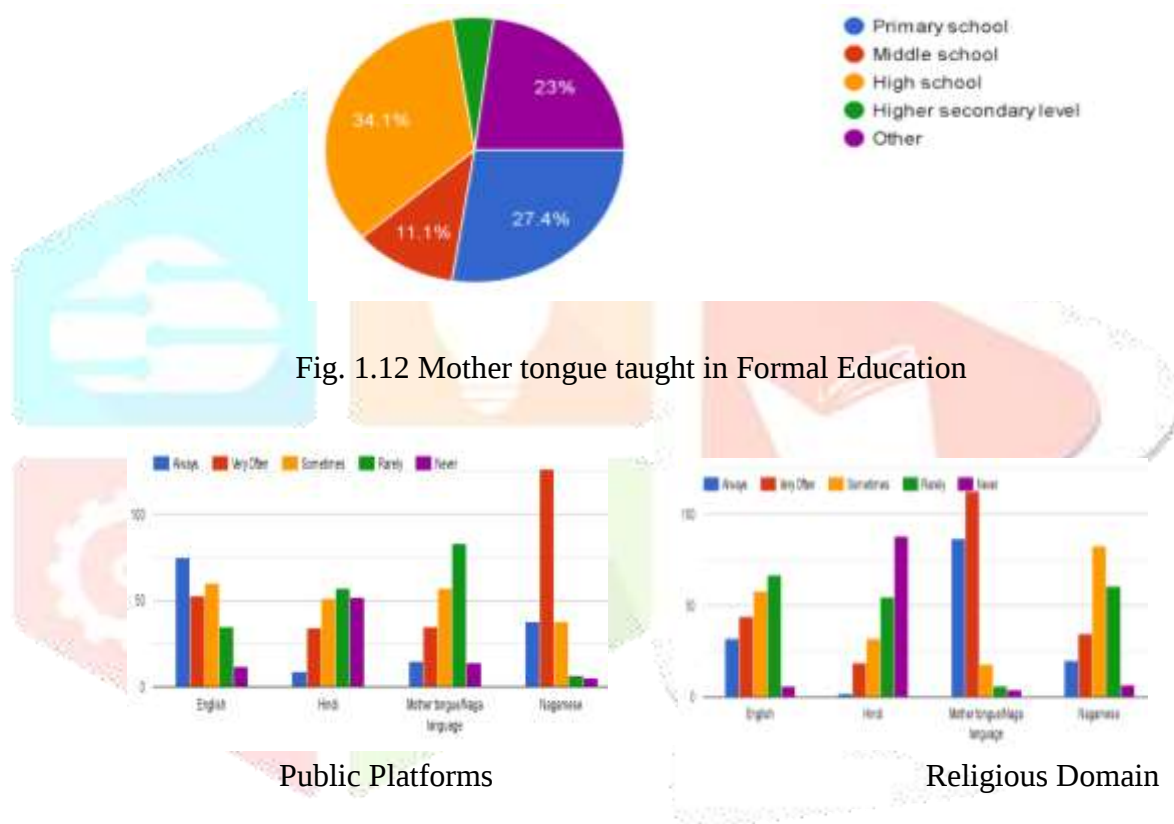


Fig. 1.13 Use of languages in Formal Setting

Majority of the respondents do feel that they are responsible for the threat as they overuse Nagamese and even forget to use their own mother tongue in conversations with their family. This shows that it is indeed not the language which causes the threat but it is the people who are responsible for the threat of Nagamese to one's indigenous languages. The extensive use of Nagamese in all the domains has brought the people in such a situation where their very own language is affected to the point that it has been listed as an 'endangered' language.

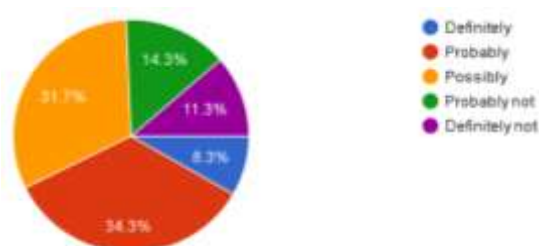


Fig. 1.14 Nagamese, responsible for the level of attrition of mother tongue

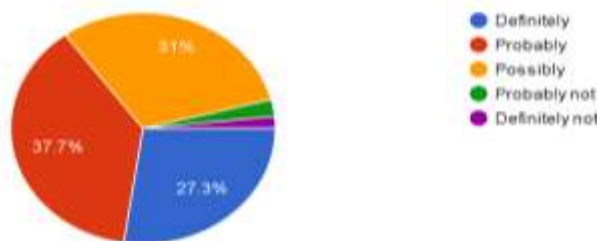


Fig. 1.15 Co-existence of Nagamese and Naga languages

VII FINDINGS

The findings of the research shows that Nagamese is indeed a threat to the Naga languages as majority of respondents who took part in the questionnaire have agreed that Nagamese is a threat to their mother tongue. It is found out that the casual/informal domain is where Nagamese is mostly used, it is the friends who influence the respondents the most to learn Nagamese since a friend's circle has people from different tribes even friends who share the same mother tongue use Nagamese to communicate with each other to include everyone in the conversation. The use of Nagamese in entertainment purposes and media is also increasing lately and the attitude of the people towards it is positive as the sole purpose of news and entertainment is for everyone to understand it, and hence Nagamese becomes the preferred language.

In the family domain, it is found that mother tongue is the most used language but Nagamese comes to a close second which is not a positive response and it is the younger generations especially the Generation Z which uses Nagamese because they are exposed to the language at a very early age and live in a society where Nagamese is used for all forms of communication. The data also shows that the majority of respondents have never learned their mother tongue in their formal education due to lack of teachers and educational materials.

In the formal setting - religious domain, mother tongue is used more and Nagamese less as compared to the family domain. In both job and market domain, Nagamese is the most preferred or likely to be used language as in such domains, everyone hails from different linguistic backgrounds and so Nagamese is required to bridge the communication gap, though in few formal institution/job domains such as education, healthcare, banking, government offices, etc, English is mostly used. It is also realized that code-mixing is done more often than code-switching because the respondents find it easier to use some words of Nagamese rather than their mother tongue. It is also seen that it is the younger generations who get reprimanded for speaking in Nagamese by their parents and elders. Majority of respondents agreed that Nagamese has hindered the learning of their mother tongue and made them speak less in it while the ones who are against it are the ones who have strong command over their mother tongue and are confident in themselves to not let Nagamese intervene in the usage of their other tongue. Majority of respondents do not want a new common language as shown and prefer Nagamese to be the common language as Nagamese is needed to bridge communication to various Naga tribes and non-Nagas.

Almost all the questions in the questionnaire are asked to find out the level of attrition caused by Nagamese on the respondents' mother tongue or first language and it is seen that Nagamese poses as a threat as it is extensively used by the respondents in many domains. Thus, it can be concluded that Nagamese is a threat but it is not the language that is causing the problem here, it is the people who overuse the language going beyond the domains that it is affecting other languages especially the indigenous languages. So, it depends on individuals to manage the use of the languages appropriately, effectively and consciously in all possible domains to avoid the loss or shift of a language.

VIII CONCLUSION

The study concludes that Nagamese is indeed a threat to the Naga languages and the main factor of this threat is due to the spread and constant use of Nagamese in almost all the domains. It is not only in the field of trade and commerce but in government offices and parliament, religious setting, educational system and healthcare, social media and especially in the institution of family where the younger generations mostly converse in Nagamese has made Nagamese a threat to the Naga languages and identity. The younger generation have made English and Nagamese their main priority languages and have failed to acknowledge their mother tongue, discarding it without understanding its importance as a cultural identity for them. As mentioned earlier, the loss of a language is part of the loss of whole cultures and knowledge systems including philosophical systems, oral literary and musical traditions, environmental knowledge systems, medical knowledge and important cultural practices and artistic skills which is a part of an individual's identity, their cultural identity. The world stands to lose an important part of the sum of human knowledge whenever a language stops being used. With this caution in mind, one should have the zeal to learn more about one's mother tongue, its rich history and connection to cultural practices and traditions as well as oral literary and musical traditions. The present generation should be taught to love and learn their mother tongue. Nagamese is required to communicate with everyone around us but it should not be done at the cost of our mother tongue, as much as we put efforts to use and learn Nagamese, we should also put in the same efforts and dedication to learn more about one's mother tongue.

Thus, from the study it is found that Nagamese is a threat to the Naga languages but that does not mean that Nagamese should be viewed in a negative way as hindering or replacing one's mother tongue because the language is part of the Naga history which has helped the Nagas for years bridging the communication gap. So, what the Nagas can do is manage to use both the languages in the domains where it is required and avoid overusing it, follow the necessary methods and steps to preserve their mother tongue and understand that both languages are needed where Nagamese is used to foster communication and the Naga languages to represent the cultural identity of the Nagas.

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