

**LANGUAGE AND ETHNICITY: A CASE STUDY OF
DEASPIRATION OF THE PLOSIVES AMONG THE MISING-
ASSAMESE BILINGUALS IN DHEMAJI**

Dr. Gayatri Das

Assistant Professor

Department of English

University of Science and Technology Meghalaya

ABSTRACT

This paper would focus on the Assamese spoken by the Mising-Assamese bilinguals. It is a sociolinguistic study of variation of one of the various phonological features showed by the Mising-Assamese bilinguals in Dhemaji. The variability is constrained by a number of linguistic factors as well as social factors. The linguistic factors help in structuring the grammar and the external factors in social differentiation. Though Assamese is the principal language spoken in Assam, its population is multiethnic. The Misings are early bilinguals as they are exposed to both Mising and Assamese before adolescence. They use Mising in their homes and within their community. Assamese is used while interacting with people outside their homes and community. The study explores the variability attached in the grammar of Mising-Assamese bilinguals.

Introduction

This study is a variationist study of the Misings living in the small town of Dhemaji in the easternmost district of Assam. I have taken Dhemaji town as my site for the study as urban spaces are more dynamic as they show much more mixed population compared to the rural settings (Labov, 1972). The town has fairly mixed neighborhoods and under such circumstances, it is necessary to see how a smaller linguistic community constructs its ethnic identity. The rural set-up

among the Misings in Dhemaji is a well-preserved one with all its resources whereas the urban set-up has seen some assimilation with the dominant Assamese community along with the modern amenities. Though there are instances of assimilation and acculturation primarily due to inter-linguistic marriages, on the whole, the community maintains its distinct identity. The study would focus on the Assamese spoken by the Misings in Dhemaji, their role and way of presenting themselves as bilinguals. This would comprise of one of the various phonological issues centering on the Assamese spoken by the Mising-Assamese bilinguals. The language choice of the Mising-Assamese bilinguals changes according to the domains in which the language is used. At home, Mising is used, whereas in schools, market places and other institutions Assamese is the dominant language used. Further, for their schooling, the Mising-Assamese bilinguals either have to attend vernacular Assamese medium schools or they attend the English medium schools as there are still no Mising medium schools. Some local Assamese vernacular schools have introduced Mising as a subject in lower primary vernacular Assamese schools. Colleges generally comprise a mixed population and Assamese serves as the lingua-franca across linguistic groups. A similar picture can be seen in the local markets and important places (such as medical institutions, universities, courts and so forth). However, in the villages where the Misings live in clusters, there is less exposure to Assamese. Thus the role of bilinguality is more salient in the context of the urban Mising community.

Objectives of the study

One of the main objectives of this study is to find out how the dynamic concept of ethnicity has been maintained throughout Dhemaji and in the semi-urban set-up of Dhemaji in particular. Assamese-Mising bilingualism provides an interesting contact situation between typologically distinct languages-Indo-Aryan and Tibeto-Burman. This study attempts to understand the nature of mutual exchange and interactions between two typologically distinct languages in a long-standing bilingual contact setting. The present study seeks to observe the Assamese spoken by Mising-Assamese bilinguals as reflected in deaspiration of voiceless and voiced plosives- [p^h, t^h, k^h, b^h, d^h, g^h] and its participation in the dual linguistic systems.

Dhemaji district is bounded by the state of Arunachal Pradesh, on the east by the Tinsukia district, on the south by the Dibrugarh district, on the south-west by the Jorhat district and on the west by the Lakhimpur district. Misings and Bodos constitute two of the largest groups. Majority

of the ethnic groups though maintain some sort of cultural identity have assimilated linguistically into Assamese identity. Bodos and Misings (among others) however continue to maintain their linguistic identities in Assam. But there is a difference between the two ethnic groups in terms of degrees of awareness of their ethnic distinctness. Since the study focuses on bilinguals, it is pertinent to discuss who a bilingual is. One of the most difficult problems that any study of bilingualism encounters is pinpointing just how bilingual a speaker must be in order to be considered a bilingual. In a language-contact situation, the question of the ethnicity and the identity of the languages concerned play a vital role. A situation may arise in which one community surrenders its affiliation to the dominant community or there may be a mutual combination of both the language and culture. Various studies of ethnicity and identity are discussed in the following lines.

Assamese is one of the easternmost Indo-Aryan languages. It is the state official language and also used as the link language among various communities. It has dialectal variance too which are called Eastern and Western dialects. The Misings are bilingual in Mising and Assamese. They use Mising in their homes and in the community and Assamese while interacting with people outside their homes and their community.

Grierson (1909) also mentions about the prevalence of prevalence of bilingualism among the Misings. The Misings though have maintained ethnic separateness of home life, they also participate in the various community events. Here, the ethnicity assimilates into one as a whole and can be redefined as what one does in the present discourse rather than the historical or ancestral recollections alone. Thus the Misings have a dual identity. Misings are one of the largest groups residing in Dhemaji.

The Misings have settled in the plains, they are found maximally in Dhemaji and its neighboring districts (adjoining Arunachal Pradesh). They have continued to maintain their linguistic identity even after a long co-existence (may be many decades) with the Indo-Aryan language, Assamese. In contrast, many of the groups such as Lalungs, Sonowal Kacharis, the Ahoms, etc. have almost lost their linguistic identity. Not just the younger generations, the older generations too have failed to present a strong identity of their respective communities. The Misings though have maintained their linguistic identity have also been successful in playing a vital role in the dominant Assamese community by participating in the various community practices.

Mising-Assamese Bilingualism

The Misings become bilinguals between the age 5-7 years when they begin to interact with non-Misings. Till 5-7 years, they can be considered as monolinguals in Mising. The Misings can thus be considered as early bilinguals. Early bilinguals are those who are exposed to both languages before adolescence. Deaspiration of voiceless and voiced plosives- [p^h, t^h, k^h, b^h, d^h, g^h] have been selected as the variable for the purpose of this study.

A total of twenty-five speakers were recorded through sociolinguistic interviews. Out of this, a small sample was extracted which consisted of twelve speakers. The twelve speakers consisted of three age groups:

(i) 20-35 years, (ii) 36-55 years, and (iii) 56 years and above.

In each age group, there are four speakers-two males and two females of which one male and a female were interviewed from each of the two neighborhoods-Karicuk and Ratanpur. Data from two Dhemaji Assamese speakers including the interviewer were also taken for comparing with the Mising Assamese speakers from Janata nagar.

Data and methodology

The primary data for the study was collected from a small number of Mising families from Dhemaji town comprising of the neighborhoods-Karicuka and Ratanpur. The sample is kept small so that in-depth observations can be made about the linguistic behavior of the Misings in a variety of social settings. The data was collected through socio-linguistic interviews (see Labov 1984). Each interview ranged from one hour to 90 minutes. A total of thirty people were interviewed, out of which only twelve speakers were transcribed for the present study. The total duration of data used for the study is around fifteen hours and forty-five minutes. The data was recorded with the help of Sony IC Audio Recorder (model: ICD-UX513F/BC E). An external Sony microphone was used to diminish the impact of background disturbances on the recordings.

A series of modules were prepared to carry out the sociolinguistic interviews. Flood and hardships are the topics that centered on the oldest group of speakers. Witch-craft and ghost stories also clicked among both the middle-aged and eldest age group speakers. Movies, forms of entertainment and all were the topics of discussion among the youngest age group speakers. The linguistic analysis of select phonological variables is carried out using Goldvarb rule program.

Deaspiration of the plosives

Phelps (1975) has discussed the phonetic variants of the diaspirate roots in Sanskrit with respect to the Grassmann's Law. Phelps tries to bring the problem to account for the alternation in aspiration in stems that begin and end with underlying aspirates, such as bhudh-, dhugh-, and dhadh-. After a consonant, h represents aspiration and elsewhere, h represents a voiced laryngeal continuant. He brings forth Hoard's analysis where Hoard (1973, cited in Phelps, 1975, p. 448-449) suggests that the different patterns of deaspiration are due to the boundaries that occur before the suffixes. He proposes the following rules.

Deaspiration of Consonants (DC)

[+asp] → [-asp] / ____ #

Grassmann's Law (GL)

[+asp] → [-asp] / ____ V(C) [+Root^{+asp}]

Bartholomae's Law (BL)

+voice	-voice	+voice	+voice
		→	
+asp	-cont	-asp	+asp

(Phelps, 1975, p. 449)

I will refer to Dhemaji Assamese as DA and Dhemaji Mising-Assamese as DMA.

Deaspiration in Dhemaji Mising-Assamese

The overall distributions of deaspiration for both voiceless and voiced plosives are shown in Table 1.

No.	Variable		d	a	Total
1.	(d,a)	%	56.2	43.8	
		(N)	769	599	
		Total			1368

Deaspirates-d, Aspirates-a

TABLE 1 Overall distribution of deaspiration of plosives

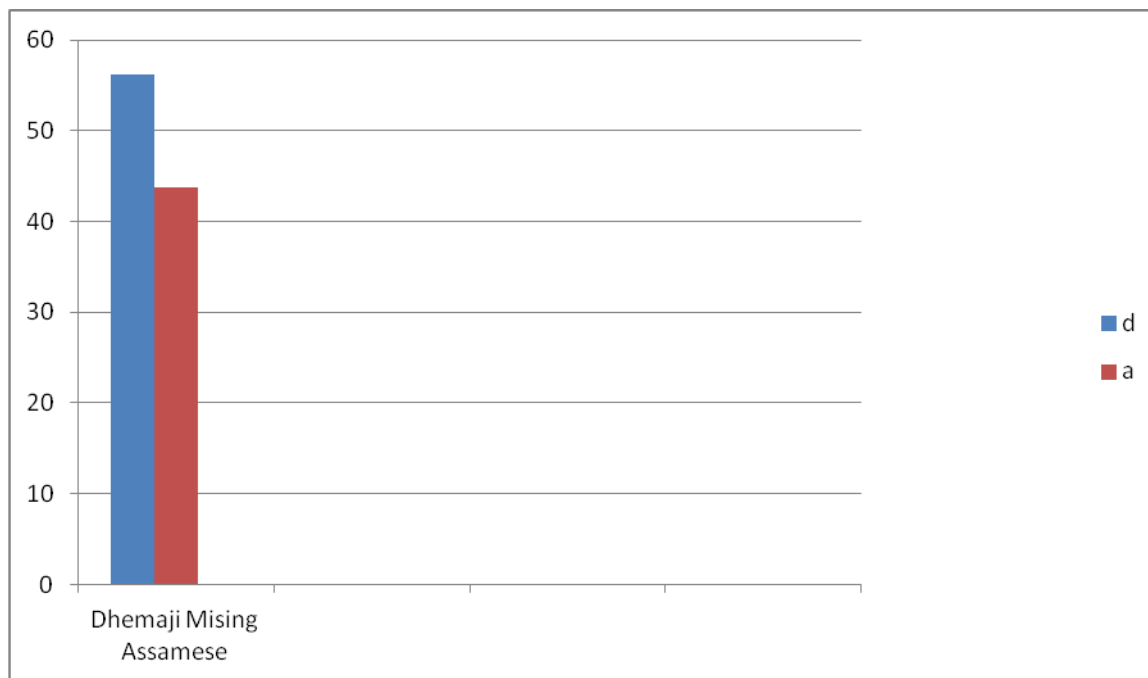


FIGURE 1 Deaspiration in DMA

It is seen that in case of aspirated plosives, when the application value is taken as d, out of 1368 tokens, 769 are realized as deaspirates and 599 remain the same. Of the 769 tokens, 757 are Assamese origin words and 12 are of other origin. And of the 599 tokens, 503 are of Assamese origin, 96 are from other sources. Three factors turned out to be significant. Out of which, two

factors are linguistic which are word-position and word-origin. The remaining one is a non-linguistic factor which is about speakers. Their log likelihood and significance level details are given below.

Step-up:

(Log likelihood= -630.605 Significance=0.000)

Step-down:

(Log likelihood= -630.605 Significance=0.293)

Chi-square/cell=1.3814

Linguistic Factors on deaspiration

The role of the word position and the word origin were the significant linguistic factors for deaspiration among the Dhemaji Mising bilinguals.

Role of word position on the deaspirates

Among all the positions in a word, the non initial positions especially medial position favors more of deaspiration of plosives as shown in Figure 2.

/d,a/ Effects of word position on deaspiration of plosives

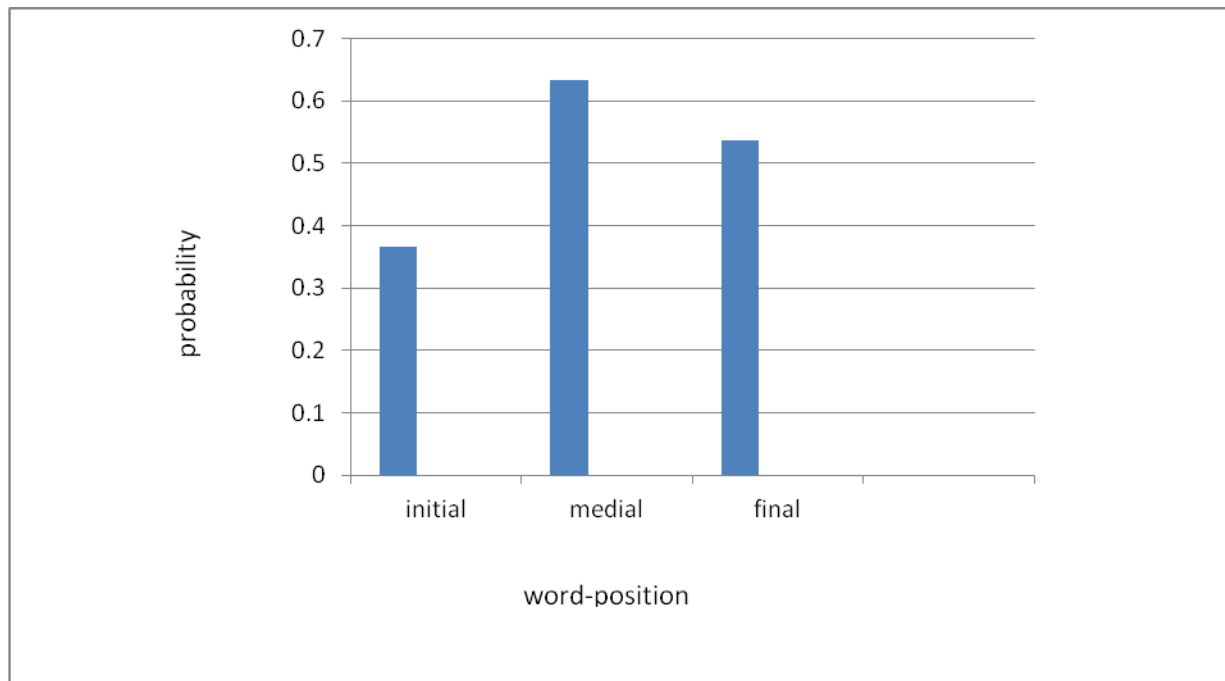


FIGURE 2: Effect of word positions on deaspirates and no change

In Figure 2, it is seen that aspirated plosives deaspirate more in the medial and final positions.

/a/			
Word positions	underlying representations	Surface representations	Gloss
Initial	b ^h abtu	b ^h abtu	‘the feel’
	b ^h ut	buṭ	‘ghost’
	k ^h ela	kehla	‘game’
medial	ip ^h ale	ip ^h ale	‘on the one hand’
	eip ^h ale	eipale	‘this side’
	ut ^h i	uṭih	‘get up’
Final	muk ^h tu	muktu	‘the face’
	hahṅkh	hahṅk	‘guts’
	duk ^h	duk ^h	‘sad’

TABLE 2: Examples showing deaspirates and no change across word positions

Role of word-origin on the deaspirates

The second significant linguistic factor is word origin. Assamese origin words favor more deaspiration than others which is shown in Table 3. This may be due to the absence of aspirates in their phonemic inventory.

Binomial Varbrul			Deaspiration and no change			
Total N			Application/Total 769/1368			
Word origin	Factor weight	App/Total $\frac{d}{d+a}$	Input and Weight	Best Step Up	Best Step Down	N (tokens)
Assamese	0.531	0.60	0.61	0.531	0.531	757/1260
Others	0.192	0.11	0.24	0.192	0.192	12/108

Table 3: Effect of word origin on the deaspirates and no change

/a/			
Word origin	Underlying representations	Surface representations	Gloss
Assamese	nimɔk ^h	nimɔk	'salt'
	hahɔk ^h	hahɔk ^h	'guts'
	hɔndek ^h	hɔndek	'doubt'
Others	bilib ^h	bilib ^h	'believe'
	risip ^h	risip	'receive'
	sap ^h	sap ^h	'clean'

TABLE 4: Examples showing deaspirates and no change

In Table 4, the examples of deaspirates and no change are shown.

Sociolinguistic Factors on deaspiration

The role of the speaker was proven to be a significant sociolinguistic factor among the Dhemaji Mising Asamese bilinguals.

Variation in deaspiration across speakers

Among the speakers, Rupa (u) belonging to the middle age group (36-55yrs) favors more deaspiration than others as shown in Figure

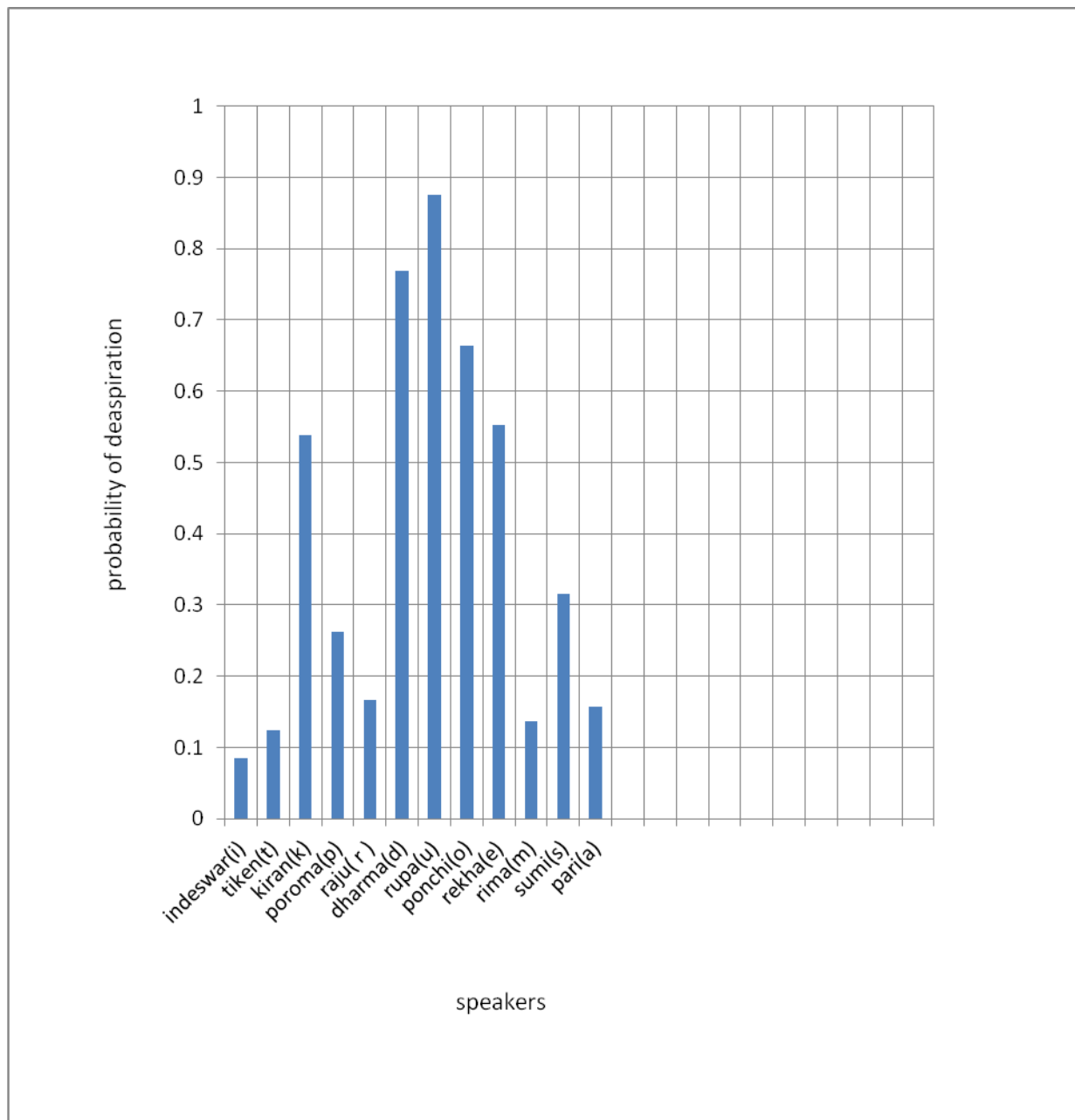


FIGURE 3: Deaspiration across speakers

Table 5 shows the examples of tokens showing deaspiration and no change across speakers.

Speakers	Underlying representations	Surface representations	Gloss
Indeswar(i)	ip ^h ale	ip ^h ale	‘on the other hand’
	dighɔlgɔrar	ɖigɔlgɔrar	‘a place name’
	pask ^h ɔ	paskɔh	‘five hundred’
Tiken(t)	p ^h ars	p ^h ars	‘first’
	dek ^h ale	ɖekale	‘showed’
	gab ^h uru	gaburu	‘an adult girl’
Kiran(k)	zɔt ^h estɔ	zɔt ^h estɔ	‘enough’
	dek ^h a	dek ^h a	‘see’
	bud ^h bar	buɖbar	‘wednesday’
Poroma(p)	kunp ^h ale	kunpahle	‘which side’
	kɔt ^h a	kɔt ^h ah	‘talk’
	eip ^h aledi	eip ^h aledi	‘this side’
Raju(r)	pɔtahrɔr	pɔt ^h arɔr	‘paddy field’
	hudibɔ	hud ^h ibɔ	‘ask’
	ɔb ^h igiota	ɔb ^h igiota	‘experience’
Dharma(d)	ip ^h ale	ipahle	‘on one hand’
	ut ^h i	uɖih	‘get up’
	ek ^h ɔn	ek ^h ɔn	‘one’
Rupa(u)	taihtu	ɖaihtu	‘the place’
	gab ^h uru	gabuhru	‘an adult girl’
	g ^h ɔrɔt	g ^h ɔrɔt	‘at home’
Ponchi(o)	eip ^h ale	eipale	‘this side’
	ut ^h ile	uɖihle	‘get up’
	eik ^h ini	eik ^h ini	‘this part’
Rekha(e)	huk ^h i	huki	‘happy’
	hud ^h ile	hud ^h ile	‘ask’
	sang ^h ɔr	sangɔr	‘a typical Mising house’
Rima(m)	kɔt ^h a	kɔt ^h ah	‘talk’
	p ^h utile	p ^h uɖile	‘burst’
	gutk ^h ai	gutk ^h kaih	‘accumulate’
Sumi(s)	sɔp ^h a	sɔp ^h a	‘clean’
	akak ^h i	akakih	‘eighty one’
	mut ^h ɔte	muɖɔte	‘overall’
Pari(a)	hip ^h ale	hip ^h ale	‘the other side’
	bɔnd ^h ɔ	bɔndɔh	‘close’
	g ^h ɔrɔr	gɔrɔr	‘house’

TABLE 5: Examples of tokens showing deaspiration and no change across speakers

Total N Application/Total->		Dhemaji Mising Assamese 769/1368	
		/d/	
Factor groups	Factors	Factor weight	N(Tokens)
Word position	Initial	0.366	306/668
	Medial	0.633	21/33
	Final	0.536	442/667
Word origin	Assamese	0.531	757/1260
	Other	0.192	12/108
Preceding phonological context	Vowels	0.494	477/821
	Consonants		
	Rhotics	0.46	31/73
	Plosives	0.506	199/367
	Fricatives	0.712	36/47
	Laterals	0.358	11/28
	Diphthongs		
	Pause	0.490	15/32
Following phonological context	Vowels	0.507	681/1190
	Consonants	0.454	88/178
	Plosives		
	Laterals		
	Diphthongs		
Speaker	Rupa (u)	0.875	235/267
Neighborhood	r	0.493	106/410
	k	0.503	663/958
Age group	1	0.446	58/242
	2	0.460	491/708
	3	0.598	220/418
Gender	m	0.543	402/722
	f	0.452	367/646

TABLE 6 Summary of constraints of deaspiration in DMA

Deaspiration cannot be compared between the DA and DMA as there are no instances of deaspiration in the Dhemaji Assamese data. The linguistic constraints which are significant for the deaspiration of the plosives (voiceless and voiced) are word position and word origin. And the only non-linguistic factor that turned out to be significant is speaker. Speaker Rupa belonging to the age group 36-55 years showed more use of deaspiration in her speech. The reason can be accounted to her place of birth. She was born in a village near Sissiborgaon which is exclusively a Mising village. She went to Assamese medium school and after her marriage shifted to Karicuk. This place represents a mini Mising locality where there is the common prayer place and also the traditional house. This place thereby is a home away from home where all the Mising rituals and also the language is very much intact.

Conclusion

This paper focuses on the Assamese spoken by the Mising Assamese bilinguals in Dhemaji town. The study explores the internal as well as the external constraints which give rise to the variability in the Assamese of Mising Assamese bilinguals. The present study draws its data from a well-structured sample from the Mising Assamese bilinguals and Assamese monolinguals. The existing descriptions of Assamese provide near categorical account of the phonological processes. Comparing with this given account, the present study of Mising Assamese bilinguals shows the overall rule application of these phonological processes to deviate from that of the Assamese grammar in their Assamese. These processes are also constrained by non-linguistic (social factors) such as speaker, neighborhood, age-group and gender. I have discussed about the process of deaspiration to be found among the Mising Assamese bilinguals. It is noted that deaspiration is not seen in the Assamese data. Whereas in case of the Mising Assamese bilinguals, it is seen that there exists variability in this process. This signal towards two grammars interacting-Assamese and Mising. The significant constraints are word-position, word-origin and speaker. Through a comparison of the Mising Assamese bilinguals and the non-Misings in Dhemaji, the study has demonstrated the behavior of Misings reflecting their dual linguistic identities-one as Mising and the other as Assamese through their use of language. It has also demonstrated that the arrows of influence are bidirectional. The study has suggested the possibility of interaction of two grammars in the Assamese speech of Mising Assamese bilinguals.

APPENDIX –I
CODING SCHEME

1. Variables

- | | |
|---|--|
| a | Voiceless and voiced aspirated plosive |
| d | Voiceless and voiced unaspirated plosive |

2. Word position

- | | |
|---|---------|
| i | Initial |
| m | Medial |
| f | Final |

3. Word origin

- | | |
|---|---------------------|
| a | Assamese |
| o | Borrowing or others |

4. Speaker ID

- | | |
|---|----------|
| i | Indeswar |
| k | Kiran |
| t | Tiken |
| r | Raju |
| p | Poroma |

d Dharma

o Ponchi

s Sumi

u Rupa

m Rima

e Rekha

a Pari

b Bijumoni

g Garima

5. Neighborhood

k Karicuk

r Ratanpur

j Janata Nagar

6. Age group

1 20-35 years

2 36-55 years

3 56 years and above

7. Gender

m Male

f Female

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