

LOTHA LANGUAGE VARIATION AND EVOLUTION: AN ETHNOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS BASED ON FISHMAN'S THEORY

Y. Philip¹ & Thungyani Ovung²

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Abstract: The study examines the variation and evolution of the Lotha language from an ethnolinguistic perspective, using Joshua A. Fishman's theory of language maintenance, language shift, and the Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS) as its principal theoretical framework. Lotha, also known as Kyong, is a Tibeto-Burman language spoken predominantly by the Lotha Naga community of Wokha District, Nagaland. The study explores the ways in which geographical, historical, social, educational, religious, and multilingual factors have shaped the linguistic development of Lotha while simultaneously influencing its role in the construction and preservation of ethnolinguistic identity. Particular attention is given to geographical and village-based dialectal variation, phonological and tonal distinctions, morphological and syntactic characteristics, lexical borrowing, and language contact with Nagamese, English, and Hindi. The study also traces the historical evolution of Lotha from an orally transmitted language through missionary intervention, the introduction of Roman script, Bible translation, formal education, and subsequent post-Independence socio-linguistic developments. Using Fishman's framework, the study evaluates the vitality of Lotha across different social domains, including family, religion, education, community institutions, literacy, and public communication. The findings indicate that while Lotha

¹ Y. Philip is a PhD research scholar at Mahatma Gandhi University, Meghalaya, INDIA.

² Thungyani Ovung is an assistant professor at Don Bosco College (Autonomous), Maram, Manipur, INDIA. Correspondence regarding this article must be sent to: roseyani07@gmail.com

continues to function as an important marker of cultural identity and remains relatively strong in rural family and community contexts, its position is increasingly challenged by urbanization, English-dominated education, multilingualism, intergenerational transmission gaps, and growing code-switching among younger speakers. At the same time, churches, schools, cultural organizations, literary production, and emerging digital platforms provide significant opportunities for language maintenance and revitalization. The study argues that linguistic variation should not necessarily be viewed as a sign of decline, but as evidence of the adaptability and historical development of a living language. Ultimately, the continued vitality of Lotha depends upon strengthening intergenerational transmission, expanding its functional domains, promoting literacy and documentation, and encouraging its meaningful use in contemporary communication. In accordance with Fishman's perspective, the preservation of Lotha is inseparable from the preservation of Lotha cultural identity, collective memory, and heritage.

Keywords: Lotha language; ethnolinguistic identity; language variation; language shift; Fishman's GIDS

Introduction

Nagaland is home to a rich mosaic of Tibeto-Burman languages spoken by various Naga tribes. Among them, the Lotha language locally known as Lohta or *Kyong*, as Kumar and Braja (2005) state, "Nrüng or Southern Lothas call themselves Kyong" (p. 26), occupies a significant place as the mother tongue of the Lotha Naga community, primarily inhabiting Wokha District. Ngullie (2022) says, "Lotha is a generic name and refers to both the linguistic group and the ethno-cultural entity. Linguistically, Lotha has been classified under the Ao group of the Naga sub-branch of the Tibeto-Burman languages" (p. 202). From an ethnolinguistic perspective, language functions not merely as a communication tool but also as a marker of ethnic identity and cultural continuity. It is well accepted understanding that minority languages survive when they remain central to community identity and everyday social interaction. The Lotha language therefore represents both a linguistic system and an important symbol of cultural belonging for the Lotha Naga people. According to Fishman (2010):

The differences between regions and disciplines begin with the very definitions of the terms *ethnicity* and *[ethnic] identity*, extending

to all the ramifications of these terms for the social, psychological, economic, political, and cultural interactions within and between groups of human beings” (p. 3).

As with many indigenous languages, Lotha has undergone processes of variation and evolution shaped by geography, migration, missionary influence, education, and contact with other languages such as Nagamese, English, and Hindi. In the words of Kikon (2002), “The Lothas have got only one language which is called ‘*Kyong-yi*’ by themselves. Lothas are not having any difference among the Lotha between upper and lower Lothas except some slight differences in “accent” (p. 35). Fishman’s theory of Reversing Language Shift helps explain how indigenous languages adapt to social change while maintaining their role in ethnic identity and cultural heritage. He emphasizes that language is not merely a communicative system but a core marker of ethnic identity, cultural continuity, and community solidarity. The survival of minority or indigenous languages depend primarily on intergenerational transmission within families and community institutions rather than solely on formal educational policies. “Odd as it may seem, speech communities can in fact dwindle down to a handful of elderly speakers before they recognize that they are facing the extinction of their heritage language” (Fishman, 2010, Eds., p.34).

In the context of the Lotha language, the strong relationship between language and ethnic identity reflects Fishman’s argument that language functions as a symbol of ethnolinguistic identity. Lotha serves not only as a communication medium but also as a repository of oral traditions, clan histories, ritual vocabulary, and cultural memory. The continued use of folktales, proverbs, hymns, and ceremonial speech aligns with Fishman’s view that language sustains cultural heritage and collective identity. The vulnerability of Lotha language can be gauged with the application of Fishman’s Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS)

Joshua A. Fishman’s Ethnolinguistic Theory

Fishman highlights the importance of domain-specific language use, meaning that languages survive when they are actively used in different social domains such as the family, religion, education, and community life. Joshua A. Fishman’s theory of language maintenance and shift provides an important framework for examining the vitality and evolution of minority languages. His Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS) evaluates the position of a minority language according to its use across institutional, educational, community, and family domains. Lotha language is an endangered language. We can use Fishman’s model to gauge the level of vulnerability of Lotha

language. According to Fishman language vitality is closely associated with the cultural identity, social practices, and intergenerational continuity of the Lotha Naga community. Fishman (1991) argues that reversing language shift requires attention to the social domains in which a language is transmitted and used, with intergenerational transmission occupying a particularly important position.

Stages 1–2: Institutional and Public Domains

Fishman's higher stages emphasize the expansion of a minority language into regional and national institutional domains, including government, education, media, and professional communication. In the case of Lotha, the language has achieved a degree of institutional recognition, including recognition as a Modern Indian Language in certain educational contexts in Nagaland. However, its presence in higher education, administration, professional communication, and wider public institutions remains limited, while English continues to dominate many of these domains.

From a Fishmanian perspective Lotha language need to improve a lot more in institutional and public domains to maintain vitality. Strengthening Lotha in regional media, public communication, literary publication, cultural programmes, and digital platforms could increase its visibility and prestige. Institutional support through research funding, publications, documentation, and cultural programmes could further enhance its functional status. Fishman (2001) emphasizes that language revitalization requires practical strategies appropriate to the sociolinguistic circumstances of individual communities.

Stages 3–4: Local Institutions and Education

Stages 3 and 4 focus on local institutions and formal education. The usage of Lotha language in churches, village councils, cultural organizations, and community associations is satisfactory. The regular use of Lotha in religious services, village meetings, cultural activities, and community interactions can strengthen linguistic attachment and ethnic identity.

Education is equally significant. Lotha language is taught in schools up to Class 12, providing an institutional foundation for language learning. Nevertheless, English becomes increasingly dominant in higher education and professional life. Therefore, strengthening Lotha education requires textbooks, bilingual materials, teacher training, children's literature, and culturally relevant educational resources. Such measures can connect formal education with the linguistic and cultural knowledge acquired within families.

Stages 5–6: Literacy and Intergenerational Transmission

Stages 5 and 6 emphasize community literacy and family transmission. Community literacy can extend Lotha beyond oral communication through books, newsletters, religious publications, dictionaries, children's literature, and cultural materials. Documentation of folktales, folksongs, oral histories, rituals, and customary knowledge can preserve linguistic resources for future generations. Digital platforms can further create new spaces for Lotha-language communication.

Stage 6, Intergenerational transmission, is particularly crucial. In rural areas of Wokha District, Lotha continues to function in family and community contexts, including kinship relations, oral traditions, rituals, and cultural practices. Through everyday communication, parents and grandparents transmit not only language but also cultural values, collective memories, and traditional knowledge. However, there is a serious intergenerational transmission disruption in urban settlements. Nevertheless, changing family practices and increasing dependence on digital entertainment may reduce opportunities for storytelling and direct intergenerational interaction. If children increasingly use dominant languages at home, natural transmission of Lotha may weaken. Consequently, families and community institutions must provide meaningful opportunities for children to hear, learn, and use Lotha.

Community participation plays a central role in language revitalization. Families, elders, scholars, and cultural organizations must work collectively to encourage daily use of the language. Intergenerational interaction is especially important because elders are custodians of linguistic and cultural knowledge. Encouraging children to speak Lotha at home and during cultural events can strengthen both language proficiency and ethnic identity. Fishman argues that successful language revitalization depends largely on community commitment and family-based transmission (Fishman 91).

Linguistic Classification

Lotha belongs to the Tibeto-Burman branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family. Within the Naga linguistic cluster, it shares affinities with other Central Naga languages but retains distinct phonological and lexical features that mark its identity. Scholars of Naga linguistics observe that Lotha exhibits tonal characteristics typical of Tibeto-Burman languages, where pitch variation can alter meaning. The language is primarily agglutinative, with suffixes playing a central role in grammatical construction. For example:

1. Tonal distinction (pitch changing meaning):

- *Erü* /əʔʳɜ:/ – Border (ʔ ʲ ʔʰaʊ didju: 'ɛvə əʲ'skeɪp ||)
- *Erü* – /əʔɜ:/ intestine (ʲɛs || hi 'faʊnd ɪt ɒn ðə ʲ'stɪɪt ||)
- *Bena* /ʔʰbəna/ - to fulfil
- *Bena* - /bəna/- to hold, carry
- *Chüa* - /tʃɜa/- to die
- *Chüa* - /ʔʰtʃɜa/- to throw down

Table 1: Change in tone alters the meaning of the word

Rüma- /ʔʰrɜma/	High Tone	To eat (Tiger attacks and eats a cow)
Rüma /rɜma/	Mid Tone	Endure
Nran /ʔʰnran/	High Tone	Not matured
Nran /nran/	Mid Tone	Calf

2. Agglutinative structure with suffixes:

- *Maka*- /maka/ Scold, chide, Rebuke Vs *Makhona makhona*- Reproach
- *Kvüria*- /kvɜria/ Weak, thin Vs *Kvüri-tɜsangri* /kvɜri:tsaŋɾi/ -Slim
- *Kyoa* /kjɔa/ - help Vs *Kyochi* /kjɔtʃi/ - aid
- *Kyonka* /kjɔka/- increase Vs *Kyongyak* /kjɔŋjak/ -excess
- *Limha* /limha/- world, earth Vs *Limhatsü* /limhatɜ:/- Global, universal
- *Lanso* /laŋɔ/- guide Vs *Lansoe* /laŋɔi:/ - Scout, pilot

3. Verb with suffix:

- *Tsoa* – eat
- *A- na*-tsoala- I am eating

From Fishman's ethnolinguistic perspective, linguistic classification also contributes to cultural identity formation. A distinct linguistic structure reinforces the cultural boundaries that differentiate one community from another. The youth and urban dwellers are losing familiarity with these tonal distinctions due to code-switching. Hence gradually they are losing the accurate meanings causing language decay.

Geographical Variation and Dialectal Differences

“...No two people speak exactly alike” ((Edwards, 2013, p. 3). Although Lotha is spoken within a relatively concentrated geographical area, dialectal variations exist across villages in Wokha district. These differences arise due to topographical separation like hills, forests, limited historical mobility, village-based political autonomy and clan-based settlement patterns. According to Ngullie and Khyriem (2022):

Lotha has a number of dialectal variations. However, the linguistic variation observed is mainly at the phonological level, that is, the variation in the phonological forms and the accent of the speaker. The phonological variation can be attributed to regional differences, that is, it varies from village to village (p. 35).

Fishman (2010), argues that dialectal diversity within a language community is common in societies where villages historically functioned as relatively independent social units. Such variation does not necessarily weaken linguistic identity; rather, it reflects localized cultural histories while maintaining overall mutual intelligibility.

Village-Based Dialects

“Lotha has seven dialects. They are Liyo and Nrüng (Shiang, 2011, p. 317). Each Lotha village traditionally functioned as an independent socio-political unit. As a result, speech patterns developed distinct phonetic and lexical variations. “The language has “six vowels namely /i/, /e/, /a/, / /, /o/, /u/. Nasality is not phonemic in Lotha. Like other Tibeto-Burman languages it is a tonal language with three registers tones (Low, Mid, and High)” (Basu et al., 2016, p.317).

Table 2: Examples of tonal contrast in Lotha:

<i>Tone</i>	<i>Example</i>	<i>Meaning</i>
<i>High tone</i>	<i>Eryu- /əɾ'ju/</i>	<i>rain</i>
<i>Mid tone</i>	<i>Eryu /əɾju/</i>	<i>waist</i>
<i>Low tone</i>	<i>Eryu /əɾju/</i>	<i>junction</i>
<i>High tone</i>	<i>Yia /'jia/</i>	<i>come</i>
<i>Mid tone</i>	<i>Yia /jia/</i>	<i>to hook</i>
<i>Low tone</i>	<i>Yia /jia/</i>	<i>one word</i>
<i>High tone</i>	<i>Era /ə'ra/</i>	<i>thirsty</i>
<i>Mid tone</i>	<i>Era /əra/</i>	<i>latch</i>
<i>Low tone</i>	<i>Era /əra/</i>	<i>fever</i>

These examples demonstrate that a change in pitch (tone) can produce different meanings, even though the consonants and vowels remain the same. Some villages pronounce certain vowels with sharper tonal distinctions, while others exhibit softer articulation. But Basu et al., (2016) asserts overall:

...Nucleus vowel duration of Lotha vowel /a/ i.e. 'a' is higher than other vowels like Ao language and on the other hand duration of vowel / / i.e. 'ac' is smaller than others like Nagamese language. "It has been found that duration of vowel followed by nasal consonants i.e. V_N are smaller than duration of N_V and V except /e/ i.e. 'e'. And in all the cases duration of /u/ i.e. 'u' is smaller irrespective of nasal context" (p. 320).

Despite these differences, mutual intelligibility remains high among speakers, reinforcing the shared ethnolinguistic identity of the Lotha community.

Phonological Variation

"Lhotā Nāgā has been very aptly characterised as a 'hilly language'. Sentences are sometimes spoken in waves of sound..." (Witter, 1888, p. 12). Phonological variation in Lotha includes tone distinctions, consonant shifts, and vowel length variation. Over time, increased interaction between villages through education and church activities has contributed to partial standardization. Acharya in 'Lotha Grammar' gives a description of the phonology, morphology and syntax of Lotha. He claimed ten case markers in Lotha, namely nominative, accusative, instrumental, dative, benefactive, allative, ablative, sociative, genitive and locative..." (Qt. in Ngullie, 2022, p.203).

From Fishman's perspective, institutions such as schools and churches often play an important role in standardizing minority languages, particularly when they become centers for literacy and community communication.

Morphological and Syntactic Features

Lotha morphology is characterized by agglutination, postpositions rather than prepositions, and a verb-final sentence structure. "The simple noun with o or to "on," and we or the postpositions..." (Witter, 1888, p. 22). Subject + Object + Verb (SOV) structure is typical of many Tibeto-Burman languages so too Lotha. For example:

The examples in (1) and (2) illustrate the SOV word order in Lotha, where the subject precedes the object followed by the verb:

1. 'Abvüho helped Mesa' (S O V)
(Subject- Verb- Object)
Abvüho -na mesa nzanchicho
(Subject- Object-verb)
IPA transcription: /abvəhə/ (S) /na / /mesa/ (O) /ŋ zantʃɪtʃə/ (V)
abvəhə-ERG mesa helped-SPST
2. The tiger attacked the cow (SOV)
Subject- verb- Object
Mhorü na mangsü rümcho
Subject- Object- Verb
IPA transcription: /m̥ ɔrɜ/- /na/ /maŋsɜ/- /rəm-tʃə/
Subject -Object- Verb
Tiger-DEF.SG-ERG
Cow-DEF.SG
Attack-SPST

Language evolution has introduced syntactic simplifications, particularly in urban areas where younger speakers increasingly code-switch with Nagamese or English. Fishman describes such multilingual interaction as a common stage in language contact situations.

Historical Evolution

(i) *Pre-Colonial Period*: Before British contact, Lotha existed solely as an oral language. Folktales, war chants, ritual hymns, and agricultural songs were the primary vehicles of linguistic transmission. Oral traditions served as the main mechanism of intergenerational transmission. Fishman identifies family and community storytelling traditions as crucial for maintaining indigenous languages across generations. "The Christian missionaries not only changed the faith of the people but also brought along with them an important factor of modernization and that is education" (Kikon, 2002, p.2, 3).

(ii) *Colonial and Missionary Influence*: According to Fishman, religious institutions often become key agents of language preservation because literacy and ritual practices reinforce language use in everyday community life. The arrival of American Baptist missionaries in the 19th century marked a turning point. "Some early missionaries knew (some of) the languages of the minorities. Literacy in the minority mother tongue was sometimes attempted because some believed that the way to the soul was through the mother tongue"

(Skutnabb-Kangas qtd. in Fishman, 2010, p. 43). Missionaries introduced Roman script, Biblical translations, and formal education systems. “The study of the Lotha Naga was first taken up by the British who undertook various expedition into the Lotha territory” (Kikon, 2002, p.23, 24).

(iii) Post-Independence Developments: You are born into a specific ethnic group, and this circumstance decides what your mother tongue (or tongues, if your parents speak different languages) will initially be. But what happens later to your ethnicity, your identity, and your language(s) and how they are shaped and actualized is influenced by economic and political concerns and by your social circumstances and later life (Skutnabb-Kangas qtd. in Fishman, 2010, p.55).

After Indian independence in 1947, English became the official language of Nagaland. “From 1947 onwards the government of India introduced a series of developmental programmes...” (Kikon, 2002, p.7). At the same time, Nagamese emerged as a lingua franca among Naga tribes. “It will be very difficult to live in Nagaland without a working knowledge of Nagamese” (Baishya, 2021, Abstract). Fishman describes such situations as language shift, where dominant languages expand into social domains previously occupied by indigenous languages.

Lexical Borrowing and Language Contact

“Lotha has no script of its own and has adopted the Roman script introduced by the British and the American Missionaries in the late 19th century” (Ngullie, 2022, p. 35). Language contact has significantly shaped Lotha evolution. Borrowings from Nagamese, English, and Hindi reflect the multilingual environment of Nagaland. Fishman emphasizes that borrowing does not necessarily weaken a language; rather, languages adapt through lexical expansion while maintaining structural identity.

Sociolinguistic Variation: Language use in Lotha society varies by age, education, and social context. Older speakers tend to preserve traditional vocabulary, while younger generations incorporate English and Nagamese through code-switching. Church institutions remain central in preserving written Lotha through hymns, sermons, and Bible reading. Fishman’s theory highlights the importance of social domains, especially family and religion, in sustaining minority languages.

Language Standardization Efforts: Efforts toward the standardization of the Lotha language include the development of school textbooks, Bible translations, and a growing body of literary production, all of which contribute to establishing a more uniform and widely accepted linguistic

form. These initiatives align closely with the theoretical framework of Joshua A. Fishman, who emphasizes that minority languages must extend their functions into formal domains such as education, religion, and literature to ensure their long-term vitality. By institutionalizing Lotha in these domains, the community not only strengthens its linguistic structure but also reinforces its ethnolinguistic identity and intergenerational transmission.

Contemporary Challenges

Urbanization, English-dominated education, inter-tribal marriages, and reduced transmission in nuclear families present challenges for the Lotha language. Joshua A. Fishman stresses that the most critical factor in language survival is intergenerational transmission within the family. If children grow up speaking dominant languages at home, the risk of language shift increases. Moreover, the growing preference for English language and Nagamese in daily communication further marginalizes Lotha in informal domains. The weakening of community-based cultural practices also reduces natural contexts where the language is actively used and transmitted. Without conscious revitalization efforts, these trends may gradually lead to a decline in both fluency and cultural attachment among younger generations.

Digital Evolution: The digital era offers both opportunities and challenges for minority languages. Social media enables informal writing in Lotha, though inconsistent spelling increases variation. Fishman's framework suggests that new communication domains, including digital platforms, can support language maintenance if communities actively promote standardized forms. As Bolinger (1975) continues:

There is no limit to the ways in which human beings league themselves together for self-identification, security, gain, amusement, worship, or any of the other purposes that are held in common; consequently, there is no limit to the number and variety of speech communities that are to be found in a society (Qt. in Edwards, p. 333).

Cultural Identity and Language: "In today's world, with many small languages still scattered about the globe, a very large number of small language communities show no sign of rising ethnic consciousness" (Fishman, Eds., p. 37), but amidst challenges, for the Lotha Naga community, language is a key marker of clan lineage, oral heritage, ritual identity, and historical memory. Fishman's ethnolinguistic theory emphasizes that language preservation is closely tied to cultural pride and collective identity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the evolution and variation of the Lotha language reflect a dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity within the Lotha Naga community. While geographical isolation historically produced dialectal diversity, these variations have not weakened the core linguistic identity of the community. Instead, they demonstrate the adaptability and resilience of Lotha as a living language. From tonal distinctions to agglutinative structures, the linguistic features of Lotha continue to serve as markers of ethnic identity, reinforcing Fishman's view that language is central to cultural continuity and group belonging. At the same time, the influence of dominant languages such as English, Nagamese, and Hindi highlights the ongoing process of language shift. Changing social conditions, especially urbanization, formal education, and intergenerational language preferences, have reduced the functional domains of Lotha in certain contexts. However, as Fishman emphasizes, language decline is not inevitable if communities actively sustain intergenerational transmission. Institutions such as family, church, and community organizations remain crucial in preserving the language, particularly through oral traditions, religious practices, and local communication.

Finally, the future of the Lotha language depends on conscious revitalization efforts and its expansion into modern domains. Educational materials, literary production, and digital communication provide new opportunities for strengthening linguistic vitality. If supported by strong community commitment and cultural pride, Lotha can continue to thrive as both a means of communication and a symbol of ethnolinguistic identity. In line with Fishman's theory, the preservation of Lotha ultimately rests on its continued use in everyday life, ensuring that it remains a living repository of the community's history, values, and collective memory.

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