



Volume: 2, Issue: 10, 272-281  
Oct 2015  
www.allsubjectjournal.com  
e-ISSN: 2349-4182  
p-ISSN: 2349-5979  
Impact Factor: 5.742

**Pushpa Renu Bhattacharyya**  
Linguist, ILIC Phase-2  
project, Deptt. of English  
and Foreign languages,  
Tezpur University, Napaam:  
784028, Assam, India

## Personal Pronouns in Assamese

**Pushpa Renu Bhattacharyya**

### Abstract

The study attempts to present a holistic description of Personal pronouns in Assamese encompassing their typological classification, morphological variations, syntactic functions, inherent semantic interpretations and use in different context of discourse. Assamese is a Neo-Indo Aryan language, recognized by the constitution of India as one of the official languages spoken in Assam. According to census report of 2011, the total number of native speakers of Assamese being 16.8 million and Assamese is spoken by over 20 million people belonging to heterogeneous speech communities living together. Assamese has been used as a lingua-franca among the non-native speakers of Assam for centuries in respect of trade and commerce, monetary transactions and social contacts. Assamese is agglutinative with a SOV word order. It is a language with nominative and accusative features. The language exhibits subject verb agreement. Personal pronouns play an important role in the language.

**Keywords:** Personal pronouns, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics.

### 1. Introduction

Personal pronouns in Assamese are free forms which can replace or substitute nouns and noun phrases. They are pronounced fully and can function deictically as well as anaphorically. They can also be suffixed with various morphemes like classifiers, plural markers, case markers, particles etc.

### 1.2. Research methodology

The methodology adopted for the research is descriptive. It is corpus-based. The main goal of this type of research is to describe the data collected from various sources.

The researcher has collected data from real life situations. The spoken and the written sources are considered as the primary and the secondary data respectively. The actual utterances are recorded without regularizing or evaluating them. The speakers were from various socio-economic, educational, racial backgrounds with variation in gender, age and social status.

During the collection of the primary data, the researcher paid several visits to academic institutions, research centers, offices, hostels, residential colonies / flats, parks, canteens, restaurants and so on. Valuable information from native speakers' speech habits in informal situations were drawn from the public places like bazars, shopping malls, railway and bus stations etc. Telephonic conversations were also made to obtain more in depth information.

The secondary data were gathered from recorded interviews, from libraries on various subjects of science, arts and commerce and other written materials like newspapers, magazines, books of short stories, dramas, novels, children's literature, personal letters etc., and by watching plays, films and programmes telecast by T.V. channels and broadcast by radio. The data thus collected were sifted, organized, synthesized to be presented in relevant sections of this work for analysis.

The study has used the terminologies conventionally used in general linguistic studies. The examples in Assamese are transcribed in italics using IPA symbols showing morphemic breaks. Each morpheme is glossed in the following line representing its lexical and grammatical information. It is then followed by free translations in English.

### 2. Personal pronouns in Assamese

The term 'Personal' is used to label the class as it is the type of pronouns to which the grammatical category of person applies. The Personal pronoun in the language is a five-term system having a tripartite distinction for person- 1 (first person), 2 (second person) and 3 (third person), with the second and third persons additionally exhibiting a three-term distinction for social status. First person indicates the reference to the speaker, second person to the hearer or addressee and third person is the default term in the system which includes all those excluding the speaker and the addressee. All the categories have singular-plural forms, with the singular

### Correspondence

**Pushpa Renu Bhattacharyya**  
Linguist, ILIC Phase-2  
project, Deptt. of English  
and Foreign languages,  
Tezpur University, Napaam:  
784028, Assam, India

third person category additionally exhibiting gender as well as spatial deictic distinctions of proximal and distal. The

following Table 1 displays personal pronouns.

**Table 1: Personal pronouns**

Person	Singular						plural	
1	<i>mæ</i> 'I'						<i>ami</i> 'we'	
2 <sub>1</sub>	<i>apuni</i> 'you'						<i>apona-lok /-həkəl</i> 'you'	
2 <sub>2</sub>	<i>tumi</i> 'you'						<i>toma-lok</i> 'you'	
2 <sub>3</sub>	<i>tæ</i> 'you'						<i>tə-hət</i> 'you'	
	proximal			distal			proximal	distal
	M	F	NEU	M	F	NEU	NEU	NEU
3 <sub>1</sub>			<i>ek<sup>h</sup>et</i> 's/he'			<i>tek<sup>h</sup>et</i> 's/he'	<i>ek<sup>h</sup>et-həkəl</i> 'they'	<i>tek<sup>h</sup>et-həkəl</i> 'they'
3 <sub>2</sub>			<i>əv</i> 's/he'			<i>təv</i> 's/he'	<i>əv-lok</i> 'they'	<i>təv-lok</i> 'they'
3 <sub>3</sub>	<i>i</i> 'he'	<i>ei</i> 'she'		<i>hi</i> 'he'	<i>tæ</i> 'she'		<i>i-hət</i> 'they'	<i>hi-hət /tahat</i> 'they'

Table 1 exhibits the Personal pronouns in Asamiya as a class of twenty two (22) members (the optional forms are not counted). The empty boxes in the Table 1 represent absence of forms. The first column shows the person categories, with the subtypes of the second and third persons divisible into honorific, familiar and ordinary according to the nature of the social status of referents. The honorific person 2 and 3 are shown with subscripts as 2<sub>1</sub> and 3<sub>1</sub>, the familiar ones as 2<sub>2</sub> and 3<sub>2</sub> and the ordinary ones as 2<sub>3</sub> and 3<sub>3</sub>. Although the pronouns of 3<sub>3</sub> exhibit spatial contrasts of proximal and distal, the distal pronouns are used as default forms, unless two referents in the same context need to be distinguished. The singular forms of 3<sub>3</sub> inherently encode gender differentiations as masculine and feminine, while 3<sub>1</sub> and 3<sub>2</sub> are gender-neutral forms. The plural variants of 3<sub>3</sub> are also used as gender-neutral forms for both male and female referents of human and non-human as well as inanimate objects with appropriate plural markers. The 3<sup>rd</sup> person pronoun has a special high honorific form (3H) *tera*, used specifically to refer to God or a saint or a very revered person.

All the singular personal pronouns and the plural first person are basic stems, but the plural second and third person pronouns are derived by suffixation of plural classifiers<sup>1</sup>(Chowdhary 2012:282-283) to oblique stems of the corresponding singular pronouns. The plural classifiers consist of three members *-həkəl*, *-lok* and *-hət* /-hat encoding social register as well as plurality. In orthography, a plural personal pronoun composed of an oblique stem plus a plural classifier are written as one word, but for ease of identification they are hyphenated in the tabular representation above.

**3. Morphology and Syntax of Personal pronouns**

The Personal pronouns are inflected for the grammatical category of case. They further exhibit distinctions for number, gender and spatial deixis of proximity and remoteness. Additionally they have inherent features of honorificity or status super imposed on person category. The fused category of person and honorificity in the language is morphosyntactic as it requires the verb to be in concordial relation with the subject belonging to relevant persons accordingly. The person marker suffixed to the finite verb in a clause is manifested on it by a set of five (5) term distinction. Consequently, the overt presence of the subject other than the third person in the language is optional. The person markers on the finite form of

the verb *pərh* 'read' in agreement with the person category of the subject is shown by Table 2 below.

**Table 2: Declarative verbal form**

1	/-o/	<i>mæ pərh-o</i> 'I read.'
2 <sub>1</sub>	/-e/	<i>apuni pərh-e</i> 'You read.'
2 <sub>2</sub>	/-a/	<i>tumi pərh-a</i> 'You read.'
2 <sub>3</sub>	/-o/	<i>tæ pərh-o</i> 'You read.'
3	/-e/	<i>təv pərh-e</i> 'S/he reads.'

The imperative form of verbs also exhibits agreement with the addressee, i.e., the second person, as displayed by Table 3 in the following.

**Table 3: Imperative verbal form**

2 <sub>1</sub>	/-ək/	<i>apuni bəh -ək</i> 'You sit.'
2 <sub>2</sub>	/-a/	<i>tumi bəh-a</i> 'You sit.'
2 <sub>3</sub>	/-φ/	<i>tæ bəh -φ</i> 'You sit.'

The following Table 4 exemplify the agreement of the verbs with the subjects in optative sentences.

**Table 4: Optative verbal forms**

2 <sub>1</sub>	<i>apuni hək<sup>h</sup>i hə-ək</i> 'Be happy.'
2 <sub>2</sub>	<i>tumi hək<sup>h</sup>i hə- a</i> 'Be happy.'
2 <sub>3</sub>	<i>tæ hək<sup>h</sup>i hə- φ</i> 'Be happy.'

**3.1 Morphology of Personal pronouns**

The grammatical categories associated with nouns in the language are number, gender and case. Following is a brief description on these categories.

**3.1.1 Marking of Case**

Assamese exhibits seven (7) cases- nominative, accusative, dative, genitive, oblique, instrumental and locative case. The first three are core cases which encode subject, direct and indirect objects (Blake 1994: 34, 119). The latter four are non-core cases which encode semantic relations of possession, direction, instrument and location respectively. The latter two are mostly used for encoding adverbial functions. The following Table 5 displays the allomorphs of all the cases.

**Table 5:** Case markers in Assamese

Case	Allomorphs	
	after v-ending stem	after c-ending stem
Nominative	/-ϕ/	/-e/
Accusative	/-k/	/-ɔk/
Genitive	/-r/	/-ɔr/
Dative	/-loi/	/-ɔloi/
Oblique	/-r/	/-ɔr/
Instrumental	/-re/, /-e/	/-ere/
Locative	/-t/	/-ɔt/

All the vowel-ending Personal pronouns *mæe*, *apuni*, *tumi*, *tæe*, *ɛv*, *tæv*, *tae*, *hi*, *ami* functioning as the subject are unmarked for nominative case as exemplified in the following.

(1) *mæe-ϕ agɔte tæv-k lɔg*

1SG-NOM before 3<sub>2</sub>SG:-ACC meet

*pa-is-il-ɔ*

get-IPFV-PST-1

‘I met him/her before.’

(2) *tumi-ϕ tek<sup>h</sup>et-ɔk dek<sup>h</sup>-is-a neki*

2<sub>2</sub>SG-NOM 3<sub>1</sub>SG:-ACC see-IPFV-2 QF

‘Have you seen him / her?’

(3) *ami-ϕ tæv-k dek<sup>h</sup>-is -il-ɔ*

1PL-NOM 3<sub>2</sub>SG:-ACC see-IPFV-PST-1

‘We saw him / her.’

The characteristic feature shared by all these three pronominal forms in examples (1-3) is that they are vowel-ending in forms which remain invariant for nominative case marking unlike the consonant-ending pronouns.

The following shows the marking of nominative and accusative cases respectively to the distal 3<sub>1</sub> and 3<sub>2</sub> pronouns *tek<sup>h</sup>et* ‘s/he(3<sub>1</sub>)’ and *tæv* ‘s/he(3<sub>2</sub>)’.

(4) *tek<sup>h</sup>et-e tæv-k dek<sup>h</sup>-is-il neki*

3<sub>1</sub>SG:-NOM 3<sub>2</sub>SG:-ACC see-IPFV-PST.3 QF

‘Did s/he see him / her?’

Marking of other cases on pronouns than nominative is suffixed to the oblique stems as contrasted with the basic or direct stem. The contrast between the direct and its derived oblique stems of the singular 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sub>3</sub> person pronouns with *ɔ-* ending oblique forms can be analysed by the morphophonemic rule of vowel alternation where by a diphthong is alternated by a monophthong: /*ɔe/* > /*ɔ/*, as in *mæe*>*mɔ-* and *tæe*>*tɔ-*. The 2<sub>3</sub> involves the rule of apocope whereby a final vowel of the base form is deleted in forming its plural counterpart, the rules being *ɔe*>*ɔ* as in *tæe*>*tɔ- hɔt*.

The following shows the direct stems of the singular 1<sup>st</sup> person *mæe* ‘I’ and 2<sub>3</sub> second person *tæe* ‘you with *ɔ-* ending oblique forms inflected for accusative, genitive and dative cases respectively.

**Table 6:** Singular 1<sup>st</sup> person pronoun

Direct	Oblique	Case	Word form
<i>mæe</i>	<i>mɔ-</i>	Nominative	<i>mæe-ϕ</i>
		Accusative	<i>mɔ-k</i>
		Genitive	<i>mɔ-r</i>
		Dative	<i>mɔ-loi</i>

**Table 7:** Singular 2<sub>3</sub> person pronoun

Direct	Oblique	Case	Word form
<i>tæe</i>	<i>tɔ-</i>	Nominative	<i>tæe-ϕ</i>
		Accusative	<i>tɔ-k</i>
		Genitive	<i>tɔ-r</i>
		Dative	<i>tɔ-loi</i>

In the context of *i*-ending second person pronouns (as in Table 8 and 9) the suffixation of case markers leads the direct form to assume an *a-* ending oblique form. Subsequently, it undergoes vowel harmony rule, thereby alternating its preceding vowel *u* by *o* as in *tumi*>*toma-*, *apuni*>*apona-* to which case markers are suffixed.

**Table 8:** Singular 2<sub>1</sub> person pronoun

Direct	Oblique	Case	Word form
<i>apuni</i>	<i>apona-</i>	Nominative	<i>apuni-ϕ</i>
		Accusative	<i>apona-k</i>
		Genitive	<i>apona-r</i>
		Dative	<i>apona-loi</i>

**Table 9:** Singular 2<sub>2</sub> person pronoun

Direct	Oblique	Case	Word form
<i>tumi</i>	<i>toma-</i>	Nominative	<i>tumi-ϕ</i>
		Accusative	<i>toma-k</i>
		Genitive	<i>toma-r</i>
		Dative	<i>toma-loi</i>

However, the plural first person form with *a-* initial preceding vowel exhibits assimilation and hence requires no further alternation as exhibited by Table 10. Thus, the case suffixes can be attached to the oblique stem as in the case of the others.

**Table 10:** Plural 1<sup>st</sup> person pronoun

Direct	Oblique	Case	Word form
<i>ami</i>	<i>ama-</i>	Nominative	<i>ami-ϕ</i>
		Accusative	<i>ama-k</i>
		Genitive	<i>ama-r</i>
		Dative	<i>ama-loi</i>

Some personal pronouns in Asamiya exhibit suppletions. The difference between the singular 1<sup>st</sup> person *mæe* ‘I’ and its plural counterpart *ami*, as already noted, cannot be accounted for by any regular phonological rule and is assumed as an example of suppletion. Suppletion is also very much evident in the 3<sub>3</sub> singular pronoun, where the oblique stem is totally different from the direct stem as shown in Table 11.

**Table 11:** Singular (PROX) 3<sub>3</sub> person pronoun

Direct	Oblique	Case	Word form
<i>hi</i>	<i>ta-</i>	Nominative	<i>hi-ϕ</i>
		Accusative	<i>ta-k</i>
		Genitive	<i>ta-r</i>
		Dative	<i>ta-loi</i>

The derivation of the alternate plural form of 3<sub>3</sub> (Table 11) involves a multiple process of suppletion, suffixation and vowel harmony as in *hi>ta-hŌt>ta-hat*.

The following exemplifies the occurrence of both the direct and indirect stems of singular 3<sub>3</sub>.

(5) *hi- φ ta-k mat-is-il*

3<sub>2</sub>SG:M-NOM 3<sub>2</sub>SG:M-ACC call-IPFV-PST.3

‘He called him.’

It is important to note that the *h-* initial 3<sup>rd</sup> person form used for referents of neuter gender also are realized as *ta-* initial suppletive forms. For example, the accusative case marked form *tak* in the following is used as a substitute of the clausal object.

(6) *[etia ki kər-ŋ] ta-k-e ħab-is-ŋ*

Now QF do-1 DEM-ACC-EMP think-IPFV-1

‘I am thinking about what to do now.’

An example of epenthesis is also found whereby a vowel is inserted in word final position. The 3<sub>3</sub> form *i* used as both masculine and neuter gender shows vowel insertion yielding derived oblique plural forms as in Table 12.

**Table 12:** Singular (DIST) 3<sub>3</sub> person pronoun

Direct	Oblique	Case	Word form
<i>i</i>	<i>ia-</i>	Nominative	<i>i- φ</i>
		Accusative	<i>ia-k</i>
		Genitive	<i>ia-r</i>
		Dative	<i>ia-loi</i>

**3.1.2 Marking of Number**

Number distinction has no grammatical bearing on the language. The morphological processes associated in the formation of plural forms of the various subclasses of pronouns are illustrated in the following.

All the singular forms of personal pronouns are inherently singular. The plural 1<sup>st</sup> person *ami* is a suppletive form of the singular *mæ*. The morphological processes canonically associated in the formation of plural pronouns are suffixation of plural classifiers or plural markers, reduplication, coordination and compounding. The following are some examples of pluralization of personal pronouns.

• **Suffixation of plural classifiers:**

*apuni* ‘you’ (SG) > *apona-ħəkəl/-ħəb/-lok* ‘you’ (PL),

*tumi* ‘you’ (SG) > *toma-lok* ‘you’ (PL),

*i / ħi* ‘he (PROX / DIST)’ (SG) > *i -hŌt* (PROX) / *ħi-hŌt* (DIST) ‘they’.

• **Suffixation of plural markers :**

*i/ei* ‘it’ > *i-/ei-bor /bilak* ‘these’,

*ħi / ħei* ‘that’ > *ħi / ħei-bor / -bilak* ‘those’.

• **Coordination :**

*tæ* ‘you’ *mæ* ‘I’ > *tæ aru mæ* ‘you and I.’

• **Compounding :**

*tæ* ‘you’ *mæ* ‘I’ > *tæ mæ* ‘you and I.’

• **Suppletion:**

*mæ* ‘I’ > *ami* ‘we’,

*ħi* ‘he’ > *tahat*, ‘they’ (*ħi>ta*)+*hŌt*>*tahŌt*>*tahat*.

• **Aphaeresis :**

*ei* ‘she (PROX)’ > *ihŌt* ‘they (PROX)’, (*ei>i*)+*hŌt*> *ihŌt*

• **Apocope :**

*tæ* ‘you (SG)’ > *tħŌt* ‘you (PL)’, (*tæ > tħ*) +*hŌt* > *tħŌt*

**3.1.3 Marking of Gender**

Gender in pronouns of Asamiya is found to be only restrictively grammatical. Gender in personal pronouns is indicated only in case of 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular ordinary forms, which involves prothesis e.g., *i* ‘he (PROX)’ > *ei* ‘she (PROX)’ and suppletion e.g., *ħi* ‘he (DIST)’ > *tæ* ‘she (DIST)’.

**3.2 Pronominal enclitics**

The morphosyntax of pronouns in Asamiya will be incomplete without the description of the unique pronominal enclitics exhibited by the language. In terms of this, an enclitic attached to kinship terms encodes a concordial relationship between the possessor modifier and the kinship term used as the possessed head. The language exhibits, a set of five-term pronominal enclitics. Apart from kinship terms, it, however, includes one non-kinship term *ħok<sup>ħi</sup>* ‘friend’. Each of the five enclitics shown in Table 13 below, has two phonologically conditioned allomorphs, with the vowel-ending forms taking /-k/, /-ra/ and /-r/ and consonant-ending forms taking /-ek/, /-era/ and /-er/ respectively.

**Table 13:** Pronominal enclitics

Person	Enclitic	Word form
1	-φ	<i>deuta-φ</i> ‘my father’, <i>ħok<sup>ħi</sup>-φ</i> ‘my friend’
2 <sub>1</sub>	-(e)k	<i>deuta-k</i> ‘your father’, <i>ħok<sup>ħi</sup>-ek</i> ‘your friend’
2 <sub>2</sub>	-(e)ra	<i>deuta-ra</i> ‘your father’, <i>ħok<sup>ħi</sup>-era</i> ‘your friend’
2 <sub>3</sub>	-(e)r	<i>deuta-r</i> ‘your father’, <i>ħok<sup>ħi</sup>-er</i> ‘your friend’
3	-(e)k	<i>deuta-k</i> ‘his/her father’, <i>ħok<sup>ħi</sup>-ek</i> ‘his/her friend’

As seen from the Table 13 excepting first person, there are overt enclitics for all the person categories. The kinship terms thus formed can occur in all the syntactic positions with different case markings. In case of the the first and second person categories the overt presence of the possessor modifier is optional. But for the 3<sup>rd</sup> person, which can have a wide range of referents, the presence of the pronominal possessor is obligatory.

(7) (*toma-r*) *deuta-ra-e toma-k mat-is-e*

2<sub>2</sub>SG-GEN father-2<sub>2</sub>-NOM 2<sub>2</sub>SG-ACC call- IPFV-3

‘Your father is calling you.’

(8) *(tu-r) deuta-r-ɔk kɔt<sup>h</sup>a-tv ko-b-i*2<sub>3</sub>SG-GEN father-2<sub>3</sub>-ACC matter-CL tell-FUT-2<sub>3</sub>

‘Tell your father about the matter.’

However, as the kinship terms for 2<sub>1</sub> and 3 personal pronouns are syncretized, the possessor modifiers are obligatory to resolve ambiguities. In order to avoid ambiguity in such cases, the possessor needs to be expressed overtly. e.g.,

(9) *apona-r deuta-k-ɔk bat-ɔt lɔg*2<sub>1</sub>SG-GEN father- 2<sub>1</sub> -ACC way-LOC meet*pa-is-il-ɔ*

get-IPFV-PST-1

‘I met your father on the way.’

(10) *ta-r deuta-k-ɔloi sit<sup>h</sup>i lik<sup>h</sup> -is -ɔ*3<sub>3</sub>SG:M-GEN father-3<sub>3</sub>-DAT letter write-IPFV-1

‘I am writing letter to his father.’

#### 4. Semantics of pronouns

There are different semantic theories of language with conflicting views and concepts. But this study looks at the inherent aspects of meaning of Personal pronouns outside the framework of any theory and dwells on the meaning properties of the pronominal elements which combine to form a NP with a pronoun as the head with or without dependents. The basic meaning of a pronoun lies in the fact that it is a pro-form or substitute of a noun phrase. It is a device, as found in all languages, that helps in avoiding repetition.

Componential analysis of the Personal pronouns with the inherent binary values for animacy (animate/ inanimate) and humanness (human / non-human) along with the three-term specifications for spatial deixis (proximal / distal / far distal), honorificity or social status (honorific /familiar /ordinary), sex (male / female / unisex) and number (singular / dual / plural) associated with some are represented in tabular forms where necessary in the discussion that follows.

The most important meaning of a personal pronoun in Assamese is its deictic meaning. Being inherently definite in expression, the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> person pronouns are used deictically in the sense pointing to the person present at the utterance and also orienting those persons to the speaker in conversations, but always in relation to the moment of speech only. e.g., *mɔe* ‘I’, *tɔmalɔk* ‘you(PL).’

As observed by Masica (1991:251) the third person pronouns are basically ‘deictics’ or ‘demonstratives.’ The third person pronouns as the rest of the referents other than 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> person additionally distinguish spatial deixis as in *i-hi*, *ei-tae*, *ɛv-tɛv*, *ek<sup>h</sup>et-tek<sup>h</sup>et* the former of each indicating proximity and the latter remoteness. Following the lines of assumptions in Goswami (2004) there is a correlation between the initial form of a pronoun and the encoded meaning of the composite whole. For example, while *h-* or *t-* has a distinct meaning of remoteness / distance as in *hi*, *tae*, *tek<sup>h</sup>et*, *tɛv* on the other hand *i-* or *ei-* signals the meaning of proximity as in *ɛv*, *ek<sup>h</sup>et* and so on.

The feature of anaphora is not an inherent property of Personal pronouns, but the 3<sup>rd</sup> person pronoun can be used anaphorically when an antecedent is present as exemplified by (11).

(11) *mina-e rina-k ko-is-il [ze*

Meena-NOM Reena-ACC say-IPFV-PST.3 COMP

*tae -ɔ hɔnkal-e gɔr-ɔloi za-bɔ]*3<sub>3</sub>SG:DIST:F-NOM early – ADVL house-DAT go- FUT.3

‘Meena told Reena that she would go home early.’

One of the most important characteristics of the Personal pronoun is its honorific form used to express politeness, respect and/or formality, as contrasted with the familiar form indicating cordiality and/or equality and the ordinary form encoding informality and/or casualness and/or intimacy. These divisions help in classifying the referents in terms of their social status. Asamiya also exhibits special honorific / high honorific 3<sup>rd</sup> person pronoun form *tera* ‘s/he’ which is used to refer to God. Another specific pronoun used to refer to ‘the almighty’ is *hizɔna* ‘He’. e.g.,

(12) *toma-r upɔɔt tera - r / hi -zɔna-r kripa*2<sub>2</sub>SG -OBL on 3<sub>H</sub>-GEN / 3<sub>3</sub>SG-CL(HH) -GEN blessings  
*hɔdae t<sup>h</sup>ak-ɔk*

always keep -OPT

‘May God always shower His blessings upon you’

Only two ordinary third person singular pronouns *i/hi* ‘he’ and *ei/tae* ‘she’ in Asamiya express the distinction of biological sex – male and female respectively, while the rest belonging to the other two categories along with the 3<sup>rd</sup> person plural forms encode unisex, and the inanimates are bereft of any sex distinction .

There is a strict collocational relations between 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> person pronouns with plural classifiers in forming plural personal pronouns. Out of the three plural classifiers *-hɔkɔl*, *-lɔk*, and *-hŌt/-hat*, the first two are associated with honorificity, politeness or respect, whereas *-hŌt*, often realized as *-hat* has the connotation of endearment or informality. The first two collocate with 2<sub>1</sub> pronoun as in *apona<sup>h</sup>ɔkɔl*, *aponalɔk*, with the former additionally taking 3<sub>1</sub> as in *ek<sup>h</sup>ethɔkɔl*, *tek<sup>h</sup>ethɔkɔl*. The classifier *-lɔk* also collocates with 2<sub>2</sub> as in *tomalɔk* and 3<sub>1</sub> as in *ɛlɔk*, *tɛlɔk*, while *-hŌt / -hat* collocates only with the 3<sub>3</sub> as in *tɔhŌt/tahat*, *ihŌt* and *hihŌt*. Consequently, interchange of plural classifiers is not acceptable. The following combinations of pronouns and plural classifiers are anomalous:

*\*apona<sup>h</sup>Ōt*, *\*tɛhɔkɔl*, *\*hilɔk*

It must be mentioned in this context that in the most formal situation and specially in Vaishnab Sattriya (monastery) culture of Assam another 2<sup>nd</sup> person plural pronominal form *apona<sup>h</sup>ɔb* is used, where the 2<sub>1</sub> pronoun is suffixed with the [+HON] classifier *-ɔb*.

It is seen in case of some plural Personal pronouns that plural markers are additionally used to encode different senses. For example, 3<sub>3</sub> suffixed with a plural marker implies ‘the people like them’, e.g.,

(13) *ħihŌt-bor-e ama-r ki k<sup>h</sup>joti kor-ibɔ*

3<sub>3</sub>PL:DIST-PL- NOM 2PL-GEN QF harm do-NF

*par-ib-ɔ*

can-FUT-3

‘What harm can the people like them do to us?’

In case of 1<sup>st</sup> person plural pronoun suffixed with a plural marker as in *ami-bor*, the meaning is that of inclusiveness ‘we (INCL)’, e.g.,

(14) *ami-bor ħɔsa-koi-e murk<sup>h</sup>ɔ*

1PL-PL really-ADVL-EMPH fool

‘We (I and you) are really fool!’

Whereas, its possessor form *amar-bor* implies ‘our (exclusive)’ to refer to 1<sup>st</sup> and some 3<sup>rd</sup> person referents like associates / relatives of the first person, as contrasted with the simple plural possessor pronoun *amar* ‘our’. e.g.,

(15) *ama -r - bilak- ɔr unnɔti -ei nɔ-ho-e*

1PL-GEN-PL-GEN prosperity-EMPH NEG-happen-PRES.3

‘There is no prosperity for people like us.’

The following Table 14 presents a componential analysis of the singular 3<sup>rd</sup> person pronouns on the basis of its semantic features. The blank space in the table indicates that the semantic feature is absent or not applicable.

**Table 14:** Componential analysis of singular 3<sup>rd</sup> person pronouns

PRO	AN	HUM	M	PROX	HON	FAM	ORD
<i>ek<sup>h</sup>et</i>	+	+	±	+	+		
<i>tek<sup>h</sup>et</i>	+	+	±	-	+		
<i>ɛv</i>	+	+	±	+		+	
<i>tɛv</i>	+	+	±	-		+	
<i>i</i>	±	±	+	+			+
<i>ei</i>	±	±	-	+			+
<i>ħi</i>	±	±	+	-			+
<i>tæ</i>	+	±	-	-			+

### 5. Pragmatics of Personal pronouns

Coulmas (2007:57) observes, ‘Language choice is rooted both in society and the individual and the extent to which individual and social factors are effective is itself variable.’ Depending on the demands of the situations many socio-psychological factors play a crucial role in the selectional process of words in a particular language. According to Gazdar (1979:1-3) ‘socio-pragmatics is the sociological interface of pragmatics, where the meaning of the utterance is treated as the difference between the original context and the context arrived at by uttering the sentence’.

Personal pronouns are characterized by different shades of meaning pertaining to appropriate contexts and the performative view or role relationship between the interlocutors. The variability in the use of pronouns is conditioned by both demographical and contextual factors. Demographic factors refer to honorificity, age, caste, gender and education etc., while contextual factors refer to correlatable formal and informal differentiation.

This section describes the usages of Personal pronouns with pragmatically determined meanings. It is worth noting that the distal Personal pronouns are used in speech and writing as the neutral or default forms, unless the distinction of proximity is not required by the context of discourse to refer to the one who is contextually present and/or near and absent/or out of contextual situation as in the following.

(16) *tɛv -ɔ n -ah -il*

3<sub>2</sub> SG: DIST-NOM NEG- come-PST.3

*zetia ɛv-e-i kam-bor*

as 3<sub>2</sub> SG:PROX.-NOM-EMPH work-PL

*kor-ibɔ lag-ib-ɔ*

do-NF need-FUT-3

‘As s/he (DIST) has not turned up, s/he (PROX) will have to do the tasks.’

### 5.1. Power and solidarity

The dichotomy of power and solidarity are the two important factors which are assumed to determine the selection of the polite and the familiar personal pronouns, known as Vous, popularly known as V and Tu, popularly termed T following the French forms (Brown & Gilman: 1960). According to this concept, power involves the asymmetric relations, while solidarity involves the symmetric relations. T is used by more powerful ones to address the less powerful ones, while the less powerful one uses V in his reply. Where there is solidarity, T form is used reciprocally. Brown and Gilman have shown how social hierarchy is reflected in the use of the personal pronouns in French and their equivalents in other European languages.

An attempt is made here to throw light on how the factors of power and solidarity determine the choice of addressing forms of personal pronouns in Assamese and also to identify the changing trends of this pattern with the changing social lifestyles of the speakers. There are three addressing forms of Personal pronouns in the language, viz., honorific *apuni*, familiar *tumi* and ordinary *tæ*. Here also the generalized basic pattern follows the norm of power and solidarity, whereby the father/ husband or the head of the household is expected to be addressed by the honorific *apuni* by the other members of the household and in return the addressee uses the familiar *tumi* or the ordinary form *tæ*, symbolizing a relationship of power. The relationship of power holds true also for between the employer and the employee. The determining variables are biological factors like blood relations, age, gender and emotional feelings like love, hatred, besides social, professional or economic status. The opposite behavioural practices of addressing forms traditionally have been considered something which in an ideal situation go against the norm. However, there may be a reverse situation when the addressee is younger than the addresser, but higher in social / formal status as between a sister-in-law and a brother-in-law. Here the social / formal status is given priority to age. The norm of power is also expressed when one is addressed with the familiar form *tumi*, but the addressee in turn uses the ordinary form *tæ*, as in between a parent and a child or between an owner of the house and a servant/manual labourer. The norm of solidarity is encoded when two interlocutors

address one another by the same form, which may be the familiar or ordinary personal pronoun. The reciprocal use of the honorific form between two interlocutors additionally encodes a formal social relationship, while the use of the familiar form and the ordinary form expresses respectively cordial and intimate relations.

However, there may be a shift in the use of one particular form to a higher form depending on the demand of the context of discourse like a formal situation. It is very important to note that the shifting procedure occurs in a systematic order only, i.e., serially and gradually step by step, without breaking up or jumping over the hierarchal order of the categories of the various forms. A shift may take place from a higher to a lower form depending on demands of social or psychological feelings like anger, frustration, prompting one to make sarcastic remarks using this. The former is a progressive shifting, if it takes place from lower to higher form as in the following Figure 1. a.

**Figure 1. a: Progressive shift**

<i>təe</i> 2 <sub>3</sub> →	<i>tumi</i> 2 <sub>2</sub>
<i>tumi</i> 2 <sub>2</sub> →	<i>apuni</i> 2 <sub>1</sub>

The shift from a higher to a lower form, known as regressive shift is represented by the following Figure 1.b.

**Figure 1.b: Regressive shift**

<i>apuni</i> 2 <sub>1</sub> →	<i>tumi</i> 2 <sub>2</sub>
<i>tumi</i> 2 <sub>2</sub> →	<i>təe</i> 2 <sub>3</sub>

A stranger in the beginning of a conversation may use the honorific form of pronoun to an addressee, but over a period of time when an intimacy develops between them, the addressee switches over to either familiar or ordinary form leading to a regressive shift.

It is also possible in a situation where the social distance between an addressee and the addresser is so slight that the consideration of power and social status do not apply. The shift may be regressive also when the addressee is in an aggressive mood or wants to signal contempt or emotions like hatred, for s/he assumes that the usual form may not be able to reflect his / her exact emotional or sentimental feelings.

A child may address his / her parents by 2<sub>3</sub> singular form *təe*. But, s/he is forbidden to use the referring singular forms of 3<sub>3</sub> (i.e., *i / hi* 'he (PROX/DIST)', *ei / tae* 'she (PROX/DIST)' to refer to his / her parents in any context.

Coulmas (2007:54) opines that childhood, youth, middle age and later life are not objective, immutable stages of human existence, but affected by socio demographic changes and culturally shaped classifications. Age cohorts are marked by very pronounced divisions concerning social roles, rights, obligations and behavioural patterns that are considered appropriate. The following exemplifies a conversation between a mother and her daughter named Meera.

(17) Mother: *mira hu- l-a neki*

Meera sleep-PST-2<sub>2</sub> QF

'Meera, are you asleep?'

Meera: *Õ tae-φ hu-l-e*

yes 3<sub>3</sub>SG:DIST:F-NOM sleep-PST-3<sub>3</sub>

'Yes, she has fallen asleep.'

In the above example (17) Meera is responding to her mother's query by referring or indicating indirectly to herself as *tae* 'she'. Though Meera is responding to her mother's question, at the same time indirectly informing her refusal to answer her mother's further queries also. In fact, indirectness is also related or associated with politeness.

The combination of intimacy and dominance is typical in the relationship between a parent and a child. The following example (18) is an utterance of a mother indirectly telling her little daughter to study by using her pet name in place of the second person pronoun.

(18) *mazoni-e no -pərh-ile mazoni-r*

Mazoni- NOM NEG – study – NF Mazoni –GEN

*mak- e mazoni – k mar-ib-ɔ*

mother-NOM Mazoni- ACC beat-FUT-3

'If Mazani does not study, Mazani's mother will beat Mazani.'

In Asamiya it is seen that the wife in a family uses the honorific 3<sub>1</sub> forms *ek<sup>h</sup>et* 'he' or *tek<sup>h</sup>et* 'he' or the familiar 3<sub>2</sub> forms *əv* 'he' or *təv* 'he' to refer to her husband. The use of the former set by a husband to refer to his wife is socially disapproved and is used only jokingly or sarcastically indicating the patriarchal domination in the society and hence can be taken as an expression of power. However, the 3<sub>2</sub> forms *əv* 's/he' or *təv* 's/he' is used by both the spouses reciprocally, thereby additionally encoding solidarity.

## 5.2. Formality and informality

Formality and informality are the two most important stylistic dimensions that are very much related to the process of speech act. Shifts in use of pronouns are found in both spoken and written forms.

A child may address his / her mother with *təe* (2<sub>3</sub>) but in front of or the presence of others or in a formal situation the child shifts to *tumi* (2<sub>2</sub>). The same holds true for a mother who generally addresses her child with *təe* switches to *tumi* in a formal situation. It is also found in written texts like a letter in which a child addresses his mother by *tumi*, although he addresses his / her mother as *təe* in normal speech. A mother who addresses her grown up son /daughter with *təe* in speech, may use *tumi* in a formal situation like writing a letter. The same situation also arises between spouses who normally use *tumi* reciprocally. In a formal situation or in front of elders, the wife may switch to *apuni*(2<sub>1</sub>)

## 5.3. Modesty and politeness

Modesty and politeness are manifested in the contexts of conversation by the way the conversation is managed and structured by its participants. The use of plural forms of pronouns helps render the dimension of modesty and politeness. While answering to a question 'How are you?', a person may answer to his / her addresser (SG) with the plural form like the following :

(19) *aponalok - ɔr ahirbad - ɔt mo-r ɣal*

2<sub>1</sub> PL: HON -GEN blessing –LOC 1SG-GEN well

'With your (PL) blessings I am well.'

In an informal situation a speaker may utter the following sentence with the 1<sup>st</sup> person singular pronoun as the possessor in a normal communicative context.

(20) *mō-r lora-tō-e porik<sup>h</sup>a –t*

1SG-GEN boy-CL-NOM examination-LOC

*ḥal kor-is-e*

good do-IPFV-3

‘My son has done well in the examination.’

But, in a formal situation the speaker prefers indirectness as an expression of respect, modesty and politeness and may utter the same sentence using its plural form *amar* implying modesty.

(21) *ama-r lora-tō-e porik<sup>h</sup>a –t*

1PL-GEN boy-CL-NOM examination-LOC

*ḥal kor-is-e*

good do-IPFV-3

‘Our son has done well in the examination.’

Other such examples are shown by the following.

(22) *ami-ḥ ḥik<sup>h</sup>ja-r muljō nō - zōn -a-r*

1PL-NOM education-GEN price NEG-know-NF-OBL

*babe azi omutōptō*

for today regretful

‘Today we regret for not recognizing the value of education.’

(23) *etia ami -ḥ ah-ō*

now 1PL -NOM come-1

‘We take leave now.’

The use of the plural form for 1<sup>st</sup> person in place of the singular form in passive sentence in place of active in conversations is a device used by the Vaishnab Sattriya(monastery) culture of Assamese for expression of politeness and modesty. e.g.,

(24) *ama-r ḥat - mut<sup>h</sup>i ḍor-a ho-l*

2PL-GEN rice-CL catch-NF become-PST.3

Lit. ‘The rice was taken by us.’

‘I have had my meal.’

The high honorific pronoun *tera* ‘He’ (3<sub>H</sub>) is used only to refer to a saint, God or a very revered person, may be used in certain contexts in an expression of extreme politeness to avoid directly addressing some elderly or highly revered persons, e.g.,

(25) *terahōkol-e ba ki k<sup>h</sup>a-e*

3<sub>H</sub>PL-NOM DIS QF eat-3

Lit. ‘What will be taken by them?’

‘What will you take?’

The same may also be used sarcastically for a referent in certain contexts, when one is annoyed by the behaviour of the referent.

(26) *tera-e etialoike ḥu-i as-e*

3<sub>H</sub> – NOM still sleep-NF be-3

‘That fellow is still sleeping.’

The 3<sup>rd</sup> person proximal pronouns *əv* or *ek<sup>h</sup>et* ‘he’ may function as an idiomatic expression when these are used as referring terms ‘my wife / husband’ by spouses to refer to each other. A wife may refer to her husband as *əv* or *ek<sup>h</sup>et* ‘my husband’ in accordance with whether she addresses her husband with *tumi* or *apuni*. Whereas the husband invariably uses *əv* ‘my wife’ only to refer to his wife. The plural possessor modifier *ama-r* is used by some. e.g.,

(27) *ek<sup>h</sup>et -ḥ bōzar-oloi go-is-e*

3<sub>1</sub>SG -NOM market- DAT go-IPFV-3

‘My husband has gone to the market.’

In the following example (28) the head noun refers to either the husband or the wife.

(28) *(ama-r) əv-ḥ ḍfis -ōr pōra*

1PL-GEN 3<sub>2</sub>SG-NOM office-OBL from

*ah-i pa-is-e*

come-NF get-IPFV-3

‘My husband / wife has returned from his / her office.’

The plural form of the proximal singular 3<sup>rd</sup> person pronoun may be used to refer to the children of the speaker.

(29) *ama-r ihōt ḡōr - ot n-a-e*

1 PL-GEN 3<sub>3</sub>PL house-LOC NEG-be-3

Lit. ‘ Our they are not at home.’

‘Our children are not at home.’

The 1<sup>st</sup> person plural possessors in conjunction with few specific classifiers may be used idiomatically as kinship terms to refer to one’s daughter/ wife, son or husband.

(30) *ama-r-zōni-e putōla ḥal pa-e*

1PL-GEN-CL(SG:F)-NOM doll good find-3

‘Our girl / daughter likes dolls.’

(31) *ama-r - tɔ -e miṯ<sup>h</sup>ae muk<sup>h</sup>-ɔt -e*

1PL-GEN-CL(SG:M)- NOM sweet mouth-LOC-EMPH

*ni-di-e*

NEG-give-3

‘Our boy /son doesnot like sweets.’

(32) *tɔ - r- zɔn -ɔk k<sup>h</sup>ɔbɔr-tɔ di-l-i ne*

3<sub>3</sub>SG-GEN-CL (SG:M)-ACC news-CL give -PST-3<sub>3</sub> QF

‘Have you delivered the news to your husband?’

Following are the two examples where the pronoun is used with a classifier in a pejorative sense or with the sense of mirth while referring to the spouse.

(33) *ama-r -zɔna-e k<sup>h</sup>ɔbɔr-bɔr nitɔu pa-e*

1PL-GEN-CL(SG:M)-NOM news-PL everyday find-3

‘My husband gets the news daily.’

(34) *ama-r-gɔraki-k huɖ-i-he agbarh- ibɔ*

1PL-GEN-CL(SG)-ACC ask-NF-EMPH proceed-NF

*par-ɔ*

can-1

‘I can proceed after taking my wife’s consent only.’

#### 5.4. Inclusiveness and exclusiveness

In some context of discourse the speaker presents himself / herself according to the company s/he is in. The following is an utterance made by a teacher addressing his / her students in a preparatory classroom. The use of ‘we’ here indicates inclusiveness used as a strategy to be more intimate with the students.

(35) *azi ami -φ gɔs-ɔr biḥɔje pɔrh -im*

today 1PL-NOM tree-GEN about read-FUT.1

‘Today we (you and I) will learn about plants.’

The following exemplifies the use of *ami* ‘we’ by a parent for expressing disapproval for his/her child’s unwillingness to study. Here, the plural 1<sup>st</sup> person pronoun is used instead of 2<sup>nd</sup> person pronoun *tumi* or *tɔe* as an expression of contempt or indirect order.

(36) *ami -tɔ kitap nɔ - pɔrh-ɔ -ei*

1PL-EMPH book NEG- read -1 -EMPH

Lit. ‘We do not read books!’

‘You do not read books.’

According to Coulmas (2007:56-57) ‘from a sociolinguistic point of view, parents is interesting as a stylistic register which is chosen by its speakers to manage a particular kind of social interaction between an adult and a child’. Children are

sensitive to role relationships expressed through language and the social system underlying these relationships influences children’s speech from their earliest childhood. The following exemplifies an utterance of a mother used while feeding a child.

(37) *etia ami-φ mas k<sup>h</sup>a-m dei*

now 1PL-NOM fish eat-FUT.1 DIS

Lit. ‘We shall take fish now.’

‘You have to eat fish now.’

In the above example *ami* ‘we’ sounds superficially as inclusive, but not in reality. Because, the act of eating is supposed to be performed by the child only. It is, in fact, an expression of solidarity where the speaker is concerned with the interpersonal relationship (i.e., a feelings of socially close to each other) between the mother and the child.

#### 5.5. Generic sense

The personal pronouns can be used to encode a generic sense as in the following.

(38) *ami-φ porist<sup>h</sup>iti-r dah*

1PL-NOM situation-GEN slave

Lit. ‘We are slave of a situation.’

‘One is bound to a situation.’

(39) *aɔna-r bjɔbɔhar-ei aɔna-r porisɔe*

2<sub>1</sub>SG-GEN behaviour- EMPH 2<sub>1</sub>SG -GEN identity

‘Lit. ‘Your behaviour is your identity.’

‘One’s behaviour is one’s identity.’

(40) *tɔma-k zɔdi ratipua bisɔna-t-e sah di-e*

2<sub>2</sub>SG-ACC if morning bed-LOC-EMPH tea give-3

*ki-no beja*

INT-EMPH bad

Lit. ‘If you are served tea on bed in the morning, What’s wrong?’

‘What is wrong if one is served tea on bed in the morning?’

#### 5.6. Specific sense

The repetition of words has some rhetorical value. Repetition of pronouns lends emphasis as exemplified in the following.

(41) *apuni -φ aɔna-r tikɔt dek<sup>h</sup>-ua- ɔk*

3<sub>1</sub>SG-NOM 3<sub>1</sub>SG-GEN ticket see-CAUS- IMP.2<sub>1</sub>

‘You show your ticket.’

The possessive second person singular forms *aponar*, *tomar* and *tor* are habitually used by some speakers interspersed in their utterances. However, these words have no semantic value, but can be taken to be some breaks for arranging the flow of thoughts as in English ‘well!’. e.g.,

(42) *kali aponar mæ-φ bazar- çloi*

Yesterday SH 1SG-NOM market-DAT

*za-ute pør -i hat-kʰɔn*

go-NF fall-NF hand – CL

*aponar han-il*

SH break –PST.3

‘Yesterday, well-- when I was out for shopping, I fell down and my hand was-- well-- broken.’

### 5.7. Metaphoric sense

A personal pronoun may be used as metaphors to map seemingly unrelated concepts by way of comparison to convey an intended effect.

(43) *mæ tumi ho-bo nɔ-ar-ɔ*

1SG 2<sub>2</sub>SG be-NF NEG-can-1

Lit. ‘I cannot become you.’

‘My nature is different from you.’

(44) *tumi tumi nɔ - hɔ-e*

2<sub>2</sub>SG 2<sub>2</sub>SG NEG-be-3

Lit. ‘You are not (the) you.’

‘You are not the same I knew before.’

### 6. Some observations

The study reveals that a significantly higher number of young people (especially the age group of 15-25 and 26-36) use ordinary forms of personal pronouns like *tæ*, *i/hi*, *ei/tae* than the elder ones (i.e., age group of 37-47, 48-58, 59-69) who prefer familiar forms like *tumi*, *εɔ*, *tεɔ* in the same context of discourse. Females use ordinary forms more than males, completely ignoring their age, occupation, education, social status etc. While interacting with opposite gender, the males make use of the ordinary forms less than females who can easily switch to ordinary forms in their spontaneous speech habits. Males irrespective of any differences of age, occupation and social status are found to have used more pronouns in their speech than females. Males used the 1<sup>st</sup> person plural form of pronoun in an exclusive sense whereas female speakers tend to use the same form of pronouns in an inclusive sense. The lots of use of ordinary forms of pronouns are not accepted by people even in overhearing situation like in telephonic conversations.

The secondary data reveal that some contemporary short story writers prefer to use proper or common nouns more than personal pronouns in their narratives taking a device to

consciously avoid selecting a specific pronoun out of the tripartite category that might reflect his personal perception about the protagonist of the story.

### 7. Conclusion

The foregoing was an attempt to present the main features of Personal pronouns in Assamese in terms of the forms and functions of some marked grammatical categories. The study shows that Personal pronouns play an important role in the language.

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