To honour David Bradley’s considerable contributions both to Tibeto-Burman linguistics and to the broad field of sociolinguistics, this paper will exemplify the contexts in which different Tangsa linguistic varieties are used, in particular their use as mother tongues, as different lingua francas, and as languages in public events such as church services and community festivals.

Tangsa is a group of linguistic varieties spoken both in India and also in Myanmar, where the group has been termed Tangshang since 2003, forming part of the ‘Northern Naga’ or ‘Konyak’ group within the subgroup posited by Burling (1982, 2003) under the name Sal. The name Tangsa was actually coined by Indian administrators in the 1950s (Barua 2013), to group together a number of small Tibeto-Burman speaking...
communities on the India-Myanmar border, in what is now Changlang District of Arunachal Pradesh. In this paper, I generally use the term Tangsa to refer to the whole group, following Indian usage, except when making specific reference to Myanmar, where Tangshang is used.

There are around 80 Tangsa/Tangshang sub-tribes in the Naga Hills on both sides of the international border. They each speak particularly named linguistic varieties, with some varieties being almost identical, while others are mutually unintelligible (for further information about ethnolinguistic diversity in the region, see Morey 2015, in print). I use the term ‘sub-tribe’ to refer to these named varieties, following the general practice in India.

The average population of these sub-tribes is around 1000-1200, with maybe 60% of the total living on the Myanmar side. Around a century ago, almost all of these sub-tribes lived in the more mountainous areas, in villages that were perhaps an average 3-4 hours walk apart. A large number of villages are shown on the 1920s British maps of the Tribal Areas (see Map 10-1); many of those villages are now abandoned. There has been a steady migration down to lower areas, particularly into the plains of Northeast India. There is very little migration from India into Myanmar. Taken together, the Tangsa varieties collectively constitute what is perhaps the largest Tibeto-Burman speaking group in the Patkai Hills.

The naming of these sub-tribes is complex. Each has an autonym, and what may be termed exonyms used by other Tangsa sub-tribes, but in addition to those there is what I term a ‘general name’ used by other Tangsa people and also by non-Tangsa people, the origin of which we do not know (see Matisoff, Lowe and Baron 1996: x for discussion of autonym and exonym). For example the group whose autonym is Shecyü /ʃeʨɯ/ is called Khaikhya /kʰaikʰja/ by the Cholims, Shalke /ʃalke/ by the Mueshaung, and has a ‘general name’ Shangke /ʃaŋke/. In this paper, the autonym is used, with the general name in brackets the first time it is encountered.

Subgrouping within Tangsa is not yet well understood, but there is a group of around 28 sub-tribes, often termed Pangwa in India, that share certain cultural and linguistic features, such as singing the Wihu song, which has its own song language that appears to preserve certain features of a putative proto-language. The Wihu song is associated with a traditional festival performed at the time of planting of upland rice (around January), discussed further below in §10.5. (See Barkataki & Morey 2013 for more discussion of the Wihu song and some of the traditional rituals associated with it).

This paper will examine the sociolinguistic context of the use of Tangsa varieties from a number of perspectives. Firstly, the paper will exemplify individual linguistic practice, in the context of individual family