

The Misings and the Question of Adjectives in Mising

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Abstract

Along with a brief historical account of the Misings, an Indo-Mongoloid group of people, this paper attempts at a study of the existence of adjective as separate category or word class in the language spoken by them. There may be a historical explanation for the existence of a small number of words that may be used as adjective in Mising, as in Tibeto-Burman languages, adjective as a distinct word class has not been universally attached. This article mainly presents a brief discussion of the core adjectives in Mising, a Tibeto-Burman language spoken in Assam, India. In doing so, it seeks to present a description of the adjectival expressions in Mising by analyzing the adjectivals in terms of the generalizations drawn in relation to Tibeto-Burman languages in general.

Keywords:

Introduction: The Misings

The Misings, an Indo-Mongoloid group of people, live in the eastern region of the Brahmaputra valley in Assam, India, with habitations scattered now in eight districts of the state, viz. Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Sibsager, Jorhat, Golaghat and Sonitpur. They migrated from the eastern Himalayan regions in Tibet in the hoary past and finally settled in the fertile Brahmaputra valley in Assam after having lived for centuries together in the Siang valley of present-day Arunachal Pradesh

Their Original Homeland

According to a legend of the Misings, the ancestors of the Misings first lived with their offspring at a place called Killing-Kangey which was located somewhere in the upper valley of the Siang River in Arunachal Pradesh. They moved downwards to the lower valley after living

there for many years. The Misings believe that as they migrated from Killing-Kangey they had to cross a very rapid stream. Only after days of prayer and propitiations to the deities by the Mibu, they finally found two very strong creepers holding a gigantic tree near the rapid stream. It was also believed that only the Mili and the Kardong clans of the Misings could cut the creepers and fell the gigantic tree. They cut down the creepers and the tree and with the help of the creepers and the tree they were able to cross the stream. These creepers are referred to as the Manying-Mankong creepers.

Another variant of the same legend describes that the Misings came down from Killing-Kangey with the help of two ladders called Aín Ko:bang (golden ladder) and Murkong Ko:bang (Silver ladder). They might actually refer to the colours of the two creepers. Whatever may be the differences in this part of the myth, most of the variations in the myth conform to the fact that the Misings came down to Regi-Regam from Killing-Kangey. Then they migrated to Karko-Simong, PegaSelek, AgchaSelek and finally, they settled down at DoyitPumi near present day Sadia. According to another legend, once the Pa:dams of Damro village had some quarrel with the Minyongs of Sitang village in which, the Misings aided the Pa:dams. The Minyongs inhabited the north bank of the Siang River and as a precautionary measure, they destroyed the only bridge that was over the Siang River to prevent the Pa:dams from crossing the river. The Pa:dams didn't know how to construct boats and therefore they requested the Misings to help them in constructing some boats. The Misings helped them in the building of two big boats to cross the Siang River. The Pa:dams crossed the river with the help of boats and won the battle against the Minyongs. The two boats were steered by two Mising young men namely Lébang and Tumsík. As the victorious Pa:dams were returning to their village, Lébang intentionally crashed the boat against a big log of wood floating down the Siang River. Lébang's reason for capsizing the boat was his belief that if he did not sacrifice the life of some Pa:dams, the Pityangs (evil spirits of the people killed in a war) of the Minyongs would not spare his life.

The Pa:dams came to know about the deceitful act of Lébang, and they were infuriated with the Misings. This unfortunate episode resulted in the estrangement of the two communities. At the same time, the Minyongs were also extremely angry with the Misings because they also came to know that it was the Misings who had built and steered the boats that helped the

Pa:dams win the war. The Minyongs, too, thus became enemy of the Misings which gave rise to a number of internecine wars. Consequently, the Misings were forced to move away from the vicinity of the Pa:dams and the Minyongs. Leaving their homeland, the Misings first moved to a place near the confluence of the Lohit and the Dibang River. Most of these legends associated with their homeland and migration point toward the fact that the ancient homeland of the Misings should be located somewhere in Tibet which is to the north of their present habitat. Their cognate groups living in present day Arunachal Pradesh too claim their origin from a tribe that settled at Killing in the Bamo-Janbo (Tibet) country. Killing-Kangey is variously referred to as Killing-Lidum, Killing-Litung, Lipin-Petkey. TeliLidung, etc amongst the North-Assam tribes. The Killing-Kangey may be situated somewhere within or outside the North-Eastern boundary of the Indian Territory. According to a version collected by Sachin Roy, the story of the migration of the Minyongs - (the tribe most closely related to the Misings)- also starts from a place near about Telli-Lidung, somewhere in the upper valley of the Siang river. The Pa:dams too place their origin near the source of the Siang River. Therefore, it appears that almost all the cognate groups of the Misings migrated from the north of their present land which fact draws attention to the possibility that their original homeland, at least for one phase of their history, must have been somewhere in Tibet.

These legendary stories of their migration provide us also with some valuable information about the directions and stages of their migration. The stories of migration prevalent among the Pa:dams, the Pa:sis and the Minyongs narrate the same routes, areas of settlement, points of association and interaction as they followed the Misings on that journey at different point in history. They, in a way, confirm the reliability of the migration stories prevalent among the Misings. The Pa:dam story of the migration mentioned that the Pa:dams came across a group of people who identified themselves as Pegu and Doley at Killing-Kangey. The Pegus and Doleys vacated their land and moved downwards following the course of the Siang River to the plains finding it inconvenient to live with the Bomis (now called Pa:dams) as close neighbours. In the Yamne valley, the Bomis found a number of Mising groups such as Dadi, Dai, Nalem, Najong, Leying, Parak. Moying, Sayang, Donga, and Naro who moved away from that place, as it became very overpopulated, and followed the course of the river Siang towards the Plains. According to the Pa:si story of migration, as they crossed the Siang River at Kugpir-Pigo, they

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found the place called Pegu, which is situated in Karko area near Siluluak. As it already has been stated that the place called Pegu was beyond the Kugpir-Pigo in the upper valley of the Siang river, and a pond known as Pegu-Siyeng or Pegu-Sirung near Karko exists till date. These facts bear testimony to the claim that the Pegus had been there and took the same route that was taken later by the Pa:dams while migrating downwards the valley.

Since the only convenient place found by the Pa:dams, Minyongs and the Pa:sis to cross the Siang River was Kugpir-Pigo, it appears that the Misings must have crossed the Siang River at the same place. After crossing the Siang River at Kugpir-Pigo, perhaps they spread up to Damro and Dambuk area. It may be noted here that the Shayang clan of the Misings are believed to have originally inhabited in the Pasha-Shayang hills near Dambuk. Moreover, the Dambuk clan of the Misings also migrated to the plains of Assam relatively recently from Dambuk Arunachal Pradesh.

It may be clearly mentioned here that even though it has become difficult to identify many places mentioned in the context of the earlier stages of their migration, especially those areas where the Misings no longer lived by the beginning of the twentieth century, the places mentioned in the later stages of their migration can be easily and confidently identified. Since their migration occurred group by group at different times the Pagro group of the Misings is the earliest migrants. Because of group rivalry, the more adventurous groups accommodated themselves by moving further down the Siang valley. In doing so, most groups of the Misings set foot on the plains of Assam in search of fertile and cultivable land, and they constituted the main bulk of the present day Mising tribe of the Brahmaputra valley. Only a small number of Mising people are at present living along the foot hills of the Siang belt of Arunachal Pradesh, and that too mostly in the East Siang District adjoining the plains of Assam.

Settlement in Assam

After their migration to Assam, the Misings followed mainly the course of the Brahmaputra, gradually spreading to other stretches of land lying on the banks of its tributaries like the Dihing, Disang, Dikhow, the Subansiri, the Ranganadi, the Dikrong, etc. They are, therefore, basically a riparian tribe, but erosions of the river Brahmaputra have forced a section

of Misings to move to other places away from rivers. Their population has some concentration in the districts of Dhemaji, Lakhimpur and the Majuli subdivision of the Jorhat district. There is a small population of Misings in Arunachal also. Tracing the common origin of the Tani tribes of the Tibeto Burman families of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, N.Lego writes, “the Adis, Apatanis, Hill Miris, Lobas, Mishings, Nishis, Puroiks and Tagins of Arunachal Pradesh (India), Asom (India) and Tibet (China) belong to the great Tani group of Tibeto-Chinese family of Mongoloid stock. Linguistically, they speak the languages of Upper Assam group of Tibeto-Myanmarese.”

Lego further contends that genealogically the Adis, Apatanis, Hill Miris, Misings, Puroiks and Tagins universally accept “Abo-Tani” (the father of mankind) as their common ancestor. Thus the Misings were originally hill tribes inhabiting the Dibang valley of Arunachal Pradesh. Once they were part of the Adi group of tribes living in the undivided Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh. During the first phase of their settlement in Assam the Misings might have been referred to as “Miris” by the non-Misings of that time. In opposition to their wish, they are still officially recorded as “Miri” in the Indian Constitution. In his “A History of Assam” Edward Gait interpreted the meaning of the term “Miri” as “go between” in relation to the fact that the Misings used to play the role of interpreter for both the hill tribes and the plains people, who were ignorant of the languages of each other. But N.C. Pegu contends that “The proposition that the word “Miri” is derived from the improper intonation of the word “muroi”—an ambiguous term denoting the socio-religious functions prevalent among the “Pa:si-Minyongs”, the “Pa:dams”, the Galongs of the Abor hills and the Misings of the plains—is generally agreed upon to be genuine.”

But there is a wave of opinions in favour of the view that the term “Miri” was already in use among the hill tribes of Arunachal Pradesh to refer to a group of men proficient in reciting the rhapsody called “a:bang” in which the creators of the universe, the progenitors of the people and the ancestors are described in words and sentences that belong to the older form of the Mising language at the time of performing a ritual. This opinion is further supported by the fact that the Pa:dams, Minyongs and other cognate tribes call their priest as “Miri”. The Misings also use the same term to denote a particular type of ritual man as “Miri”. Therefore, in all probability, during the first phase of their migration to the plains the Misings might have

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introduced themselves as the followers of the “Miri” priest to the people living in the plains. In contemporary usage, the term “Miri” has been replaced by the appellation “Mising” meaning man belonging to the group of pure relative by blood. To refer to somebody who does not belong to the community by birth is called “mipak” meaning non-Mising.

The Mising Language

Mising is an Eastern Tani language of the Tibeto-Burman (TB) language family (Sun, 1993). There are 587,310 speakers of Mising, as per the 2001 Census of India, inhabiting some eight Assamese districts of: Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Sonitpur, Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Jorhat, and Golaghat. They are also found to inhabit the north-eastern border areas that separate the state of Raunchily Pradesh from Assam. Misings are often called Mishing or Miri by their neighbouring communities and the constitution of India still refers to them by the ethnonym ‘Miri’. According to Doley and Post (2009), there are nine regional varieties of Mising, with the possible existence of one or two more varieties not yet fully attested: Pago, Dale, Joan, Saga, Moojij, Dambug, Samuguria, Tamargoja, and Bonkual. The Samuguria, Tamargoja, and Bonkual varieties have largely given way to the Indo-Aryan *lingua franca*: Assamese. The dialect examined here is PagroMising, which is spoken in and around the Lakhimpur and Dhemaji districts of Upper Assam.

Adjectivals in Mising

In Mising, the presence of non-nominalized adjectivals as copular complements (where verbs cannot show up) and the absence of nominalized adjectivals (where nouns can show up) indicate a distribution distinct from nouns and verbs. This distribution suggests that Mising ‘has’ an independent adjectival category. To the extent that Mising differs from Magar, it also points towards a difference from the proto-type proposed by Noonan (1997). This also for the moment calls into question the hypothesis that proto-Tibeto-Burman had no independent category of adjective (1997).

Recent scholarship by Enfield (2004) on Lao and Post (2008) on Thai also suggest that, in MSEA languages, adjectives may have a distribution distinct from verbs. Bhat & Pustet (2000:757-758), Evans (2000:714) and Prasithratsint(2000:268) discount the presence of

adjectives in these languages. In fact, it would be possible to explain this class of adjectives in Mising as a consequence of areal diffusion, as proposed for many other Tibeto-Burman languages.

It may not be, however, necessary to go so far afield. There is internal evidence that suggests that the criteria by which an independent category of adjectives is determined is dubious. The determining criterion is the presence of non-derived nominalized adjectivals as copular complements. The distinction depends on:

ADJL + COP (possible)

vs.

* VERB+COP (impossible)

The hypothesis of a distinct class of adjective in Mising will not hold if ‘ə’ is not copular, and there is evidence that it may not be functioning as such in the constructions in examples (1a) and (1b). There are number reasons for such observation-first, in these constructions ‘ə’ is cliticized as it is not an independent element and in certain environments it merges completely with the stem:

aku- ə [_u#+ ə>oo].

Secondly, ‘ə’ in these constructions is not functioning as a copula *per se*. It expresses “new information for which the mind is unprepared,” what DeLancey (1986) has called mirativity.

(1a) mimbir-də təŋor-ə
 girl-DEF clever-MIR
 ‘The girl is clever!’ (new information)

(1b) mimbir-də kaŋ-kan-ə
 girl-DEF look-good-MIR
 ‘The girl is beautiful!’ (new information)

Thirdly, the distribution of the mirative ‘ə’ with adjectivals in nominal predicates (2d) is not the same as the distribution of ‘ə’ for nouns (2a)-(2c):

(2a) bi kou ə
 3 boy COP
 ‘He is a boy.’

(2b) bi kou ai
 3 boy COP.ANT
 ‘He was a boy.’

(2c) ŋo koo ə
 1 boy COP
 ‘I am a boy.’

(2d) bi kaŋ-kan-ə
 3 look-good-MIR
 ‘He is good-looking!’

There is no first person form which one expects of a mirative (3). We are generally not unprepared for information about ourselves.

(3) *ŋo kaŋ-kan-*ə
 1 look-good-MIR

There is no anterior form as for the copula in nominal predicates (4)-

(4) *bi kaŋ-kan-*ai
 3 look-good-MIR.ANT

The reduction of the phonological form suggests that the ‘ə’ is a suffix. The distribution and the meaning of ‘ə’ correlate with a mirative. The combination of these two factors suggests

that ‘ə’ may not be a copula. If that is the case, then our criterion for distinguishing a distinct adjective category does not hold.

Conclusion

In conclusion, if Mising does not have a separate adjective category, aside from its very small set of ‘core’ adjectives, it parallels what we have found in Magar and conforms to the prototype suggested by Noonan for Tibeto-Burman (1997). It then supports the hypothesis that adjectives were not part of the proto-language. There are still unexplained differences between the two Tibeto-Burman languages; particularly the treatment of borrowings of property terms— but that deserves another paper.

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