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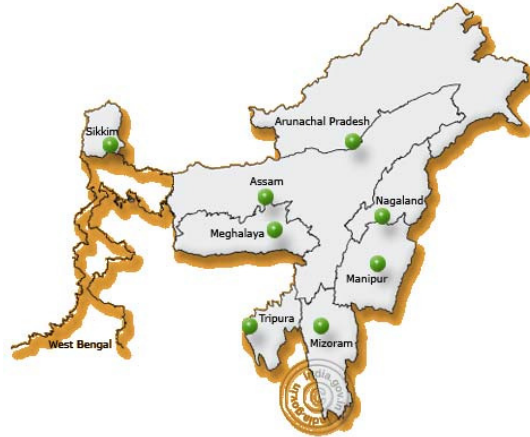
**Noun Classification System in Mizo**

**Atanu Saha, M.A.**

# Noun Classification System in Mizo

## Atanu Saha, M.A.

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### Abstract

This paper investigates the Noun classification system of Mizo language. After the initial analysis a lot of interesting things have been found which are described in the paper. Like any other classifier language, the Mizo classifier system is highly productive. In case of borrowing from other languages, the noun categorization components fit well into the new words.

### Introduction to Mizo, a Language of the Tibeto-Burman Family

Mizo is a Tibeto-Burman language spoken by over half a million people (approximately 539,000 in India, 1,000 in Bangladesh, and 12,500 in Myanmar). The language is spoken throughout Mizoram, parts of southern Manipur and the eastern Zampui hills of Tripura.

Mizo is a dependent marking language and the word order is SOV. It is a tonal language. There have been several descriptive works on its sound system in general (e.g., Henderson 1948, Bright 1957, Burling 1957, Weidert 1975), and its tone system has been described and analyzed by native speakers (Chhangte 1986; Fanai 1989, 1992) as having four tones: High, Low, Rising (=LH) and Falling (=HL).

Mizo is a classifier language and it has both Noun classifiers and Numeral classifiers. Only animates in the language takes up Noun classifiers, inanimate are not classified. The distinctions for Noun classifiers are mainly made by Gender Markers in [+Human] while the classifiers for [-Human] are Gender Markers and Change of State like pre and post-reproduction as well as prenailed/horned or post-nailed/horned. The distinction for Numeral classifiers is made from the

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shapes and size of the objects.

There has been an interesting observation in Mizo where the numeral classifiers for mass nouns [+cumulative] take a state of action.

## CLASSIFIERS IN MIZO

### Noun classifier

In order to describe the noun phrase construction in a language it is obligatory to investigate whether the language is a noun class language or a noun classifier one. In both cases there are some categorization devices which occur in surface structures under specific conditions and entail some features of the entity to which an associated noun refers.

In general a noun classification system is realized by agreement relations in the sentence, noun classifiers are often independent words and can be used separately in a noun phrase or clause in compare to a noun class system which is typically consists of countable number of classes and each noun in that language belongs to one class. There is some semantic basis of classifying nouns into gender class and often be some constituent outside the noun itself must agree into gender with a noun. Agreement can be within the other elements of the noun phrase.

The system of categorization of nouns in Mizo reveals the fact that the language is a classifier language. The evidences for this proposal are as follows:

1. It is a fact that in noun classifier language every noun does not necessarily take a noun classifier and a noun in the contrary can occur with more than one classifier.

In Mizo [pa] is a classifier used to denote masculinity and it comes with human nouns especially. But it may also occur with professional nouns as under:

Zirtirtu-pa  
*Teacher-CL*  
Male teacher

zirtirtu-nu  
*teacher-CL*  
female teacher.

We can also describe the classifiers in terms of the following three features:

**1. Obligatory:**

These noun classification devices are sometimes obligatory sometimes not in Mizo and explicit rules can also be formed for their omission. For example in borrowed words classifiers can be dropped.

**2. Productivity:**

These are very productive in the system and even if a new noun comes into the language classifier is more or less fixed to it.

**3. Independence:**

Like any other classifier language Mizo classifiers can be used as independent word. Example: - pa which is a human masculine classifier is also used as the word for father with a different tone.

The following table will help us to look at the Noun Classification system of Mizo more closely.

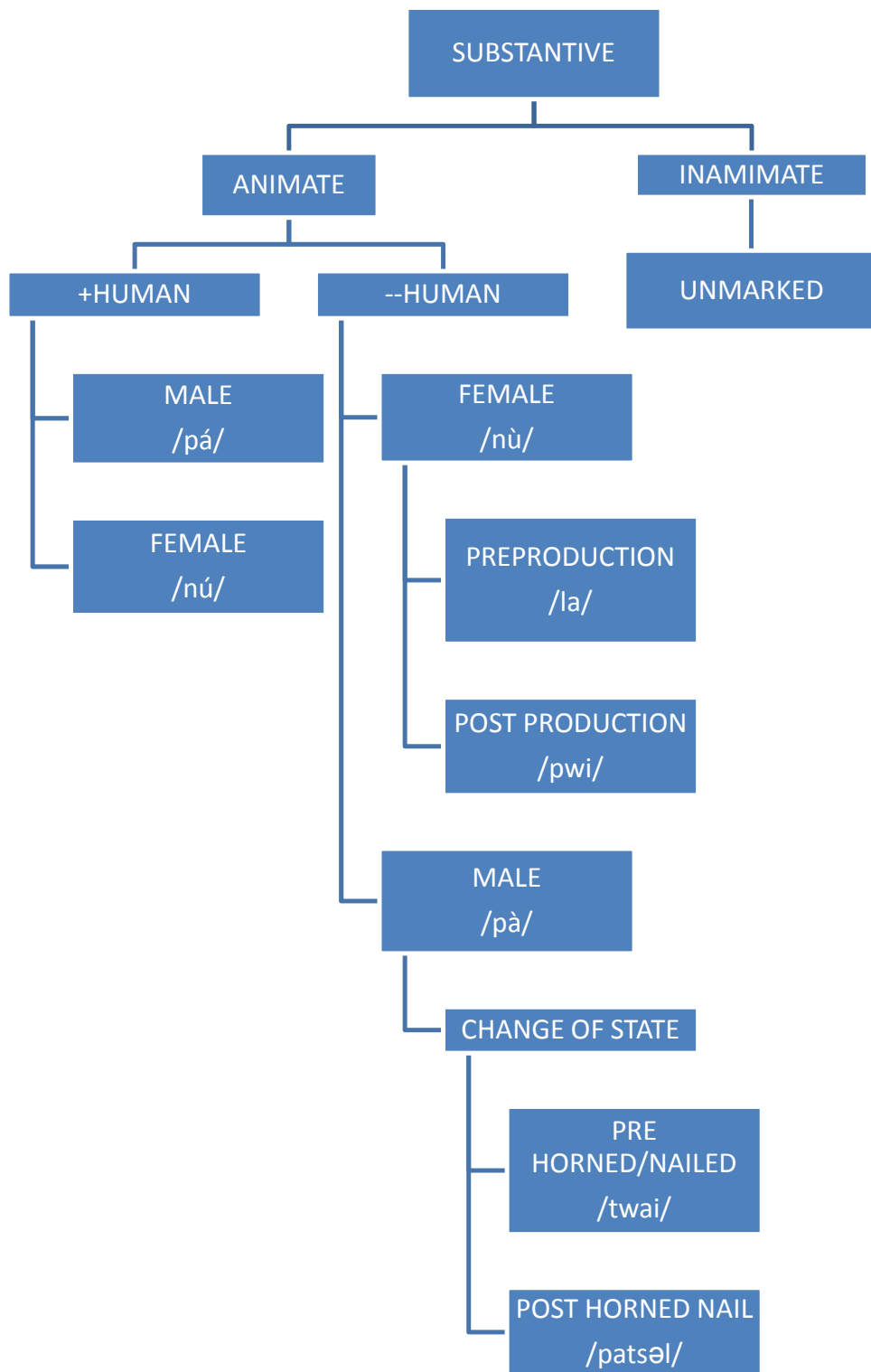


Table 1: Noun Classification System in Mizo

## Description of Data

1. Classifier for human male is /pá<sup>h</sup>/. This is tonal language and that's why tone distinction is very important.
2. Human Female classifier is /nu<sup>h</sup>/.
3. /pá/ and /nú/ are also words for father and mother respectively [with high tone].
4. For the common distinction between male and female animates, classifiers are /pà/ and /nù/ [with a falling tone] accordingly.
5. Animate classifiers are also distinctive in case of change of state (reproductive stage and coming out of nail).

I> Horned animals like sheep, goat, and cow take the classifier /patʃəl/ with them.

II> /patʃəl/ is attached as a classifier to the animals having a nail at the back of leg (cock).

Classifiers are different in case of pre-reproduction and post reproduction stages for animates. Before reproduction male animate classifier is /twai/ and female is /la/. After reproduction they are /tʃəl/ and /pwi/ respectively.

6. For proper names there are distinction between male and their female counter parts. Classifier /-a/ is adjoined to male names and /-i/ with a female name.

## NUMERAL CLASSIFIERS

Numeral classifiers are morphemes that appear only next to a numeral or quantifier; they can be classified in terms of animates, physical properties, functional properties, arrangements and cultural elements and so on.

However in order to differentiate a noun classifier language from a numeral classifier we need to take a look whether classifier can be raised from the noun to numeral. If it can be raised then it's surely a numeral classifier language. In our Mizo case this is true.

Consider the following:

mí            pak<sup>h</sup>at  
CL            NUM (one)  
a             man

We don't have to mention even the word for human unlike a noun classifier language like English.

### **Mizo numeral classifier system**

1. Human nouns occur with the classifier [mí].
2. For elongated objects like cigarette, bamboo, wood and battery [tlɔ:n] is used.
3. Round objects come with [púm]
4. Flat objects such as paper and plywood take [p<sup>h</sup>e:k] as classifier.
5. For tree and flower classifiers are [ku:ŋ] and [pa:r] respectively.
6. [tʃi] is used to denote kind of things i.e. kind of stories etc.
7. Pieces of objects take the classifier [t<sup>h</sup>ém].
8. For fruits, egg yolk, eye ball , orange seeds etc. [mú] is used as classifier
9. Food grains are referred by the classifier [fa:ŋ].
10. [zai] is used to denote small elongated objects like hair, wire , and thread etc.

#### Interesting observations:

1. Numeral classifiers can be reduplicated as the following:

Paŋ        pa:r    pa:r    k<sup>h</sup>ət  
*Flower*            *CL*    *NUM (one)*  
One flower

t<sup>h</sup>iŋkuŋ            kuŋ    k<sup>h</sup>ət  
*tree*                    *CL*    *NUM*  
One tree

**This reduplication in general is visible for things like tree and its byproducts.**

2. Another interesting construction in the noun phrase can be seen for some nouns e.g. rice, water etc.

Bu?	p <sup>h</sup> ur	k <sup>h</sup> ət
Rice	CL-action of	NUM (one)
	<i>carrying rice in a basket</i>	

One traditional basket of rice.

tui	kət	k <sup>h</sup> ət
Water	CL:action of carrying	NUM (one)
	<i>Water in two buckets with a bamboo pole</i>	

Two buckets of water

The same phenomenon occurs with the classifiers in mass nouns [+CUMULATIVE] where mass nouns are classified as a state of action. This is interesting because the action predication seems to be attached with the head noun and serves the purpose of a classifier. However it is not the case that main predication can be dropped even if these phrases are used at sentence level. This is true for mass nouns and indeed a strong case of grammaticalization as well.

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