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Honorifics and Speech Levels in Meiteiron

N. Pramodini, Ph.D.

Abstract

Meiteiron has a complex and sophisticated honorific system with its lexical and morphological variants. This study attempts to demonstrate the use of honorifics and different speech levels in different contexts. These levels are marked by the use of various lexical and morphological variants. From the functional point of view it will be shown that at least there are five levels of speech in Meiteiron, namely ultrahigh, high, high plain, plain and low, which are clearly marked by the use of different suffixes and lexical items.

Introduction

This paper attempts an analysis of honorifics and organization of speech levels in Meiteiron, with respect to various social and cultural values.

Meiteiron (known as Manipuri officially) is a Tibeto-Burman language spoken in the Indian North-Eastern state of Manipur. It is also spoken in the neighbouring countries Bangladesh and Burma and neighbouring state of Assam by the Meitei or Manipuri inhabitants of these places. It is the lingua-franca and official language of the state. It is the only language of Tibeto-Burman family (spoken in India) recognized by the VIII Schedule of Indian Constitution. This language is also known as or written as “Meithei” (Meitei) to the linguistic scholars in the west.

A clarification is required to be made here regarding the use of the ethnonym Meithei (Meitei) as it is being used wrongly for the language, i.e., Meiteiron. The terminology “Meithei” (Meitei) is the ethnonym while Meiteiron is the glossonym. And Meiteiron and Manipuri are the allonyms of the same language. I have used the glossonym Meiteiron in this paper as it is popularly known by this glossonym.

Variation in Meitei Honorific and Speech Levels System

The analysis of this speech behavior in terms of its ethnographic context shows a significant range of variation in Meitei honorific and speech levels system. The concept of “speech levels” was first propounded by Martin (1964). There have been extensive studies on honorific and speech levels in the language of South East and South Asia, for example, Korean (Sinn 1990; Hwang 1990; Pei 1992) , Japanese (Martin 1964; Miller 1967; Harada 1980; Shibatani 1990; Tsujimura 1996) Javanese (Greetz 1960), Hindi (Jain 1969), Tibetan (Agha 1998).

The present study examines the nature of Meitei indexical expression in particular sentence final forms and honorific vocabulary including the use of address terms, second personal pronouns, verb and nouns. Focusing upon the functional aspects of honorific in a speech event the honorifics can be categorized into an “addressee honorific” and “referent honorific” (Choy 1955 cited in Wang 1990). Both axes of honorifics are either morphologically or lexically expressed in Meiteiron with the “addressee honorific” having developed into a highly complex system as in the case of Korean (Wang 1990).

The hierarchical grades of honorific expression towards addressees in Meiteiron can be analytically organized as series of stylistic contrasts each mode of which is identified by the co-occurrence relationship (Gumperz 1964, Ervin-Tripp 1972) among the sentence-concluding endings, the address terms, the second personal pronoun, verbs and nouns. The honorific system characterized by its grammatically systematized expression differs in their level of speech. This can be made further complicated by the addition of some honorific lexical items which eventually leads to further complication of politeness of different levels of speech. Most options of elaborations, deletions and permutations of parts of the polite expressions concern the strategies of status alignment resulting to different levels of speech.

Etiquette System in Meiteiron

The entire etiquette system in Meiteiron is perhaps symbolized in the way Meiteis use their language. The status and degree of familiarity relationship of the collocutors play very significant roles. Status is determined by many things, namely age, wealth, descent, education, occupation, kinship. The choice of linguistic items and speech styles in every speech act is partly determined by the relative status and/ or familiarity. The degree of familiarity is the sense that whether the collocutors are close and/or long established friends from childhood who have been brought up in the same locality or schoolmates etc. It is also observed that traditional respect for elderly continues to exist, although it is tending towards a decline.

Meitei society has been a culturally vertical and hierarchical society with great emphasis placed on power (kinship, age, sex, rank and status) rather than on solidarity (degree of formality). Due to the decline of aristocracy and shift to democratization however, changes in the language behavior of the younger generation have been observed in contemporary Meitei society. It is possible to describe the present situation as — a younger person socially superior and an older person socially inferior show mutual deference to each other. So, Meitei society can therefore be described as a mixture of traditional vertical social structure with western horizontal structure superimposed as is manifested in the sociolinguistic dynamism.

To greet a person for example, lower than oneself or somebody with whom one is intimate, a speaker says (*nəŋ*) *kəmdəwri* ‘how are you’. Notice in this expression there is no honorific marker and the use of second personal pronoun *nəŋ* is optional. But one greets a person superior in age with appropriate terms of address as *tamo(bu) kəmdəwbiri* “brother (H) how are you?”. This expression, of course, is more respectful to the listener because of appropriate use of the term of address (elder brother) and also the use of the honorific marker *-bi-* in the verbal ending. And above all these, note that the *-bu-* marker is suffixed to the form used for the addressees which certainly marks more respect to the listener than without it. The expression *kəmdəwbiri* ‘how are you?’ with honorific *-bi-* in the verbal ending is used for greeting somebody of the same age group with whom one knows slightly or when the speaker wants to maintain some distance with the addressee who is of the same age group with the speaker.

The Principle of Politeness Axis in Meiteiron

Basically what is involved in Meitei honorifics is that the Meiteis pattern their speech behavior in terms of *thaksi-khasi* and/ or *ləmcət bebhar* the principle of politeness axis around which, they organize their social behavior generally.

This principle is a set of norms of usages to be used to elders and juniors. It is, in fact, a cover expression for a whole range of ceremonial speech. A number of words and some suffixes are made to carry in addition to their normal linguistic meaning what might be called a “status meaning” (Greetz 1969), i.e., when used in actual conversation they convey not only their fixed denotative meaning but also a connotative meaning concerning the status of degree of intimacy between the speakers and listeners. For example, *yum* or *səŋgay* ‘house’, *cabə* or *habə* to eat, *cətpə* or *leŋbə* ‘to walk’, *thəkpə* or *phanbə*, ‘to drink’, or ‘to smoke’.

Therefore, several words may denote the same normal linguistic meaning but differ in the status connotation they convey. A speaker intentionally communicates the level of speech in terms of word selection in accordance with the different sociolinguistic situations.

It is pertinent mentioning here that a language is governed not by grammatical rules but also by sociolinguistic rules; that by considering its social meaning and social function, a linguistic expression could be interpreted and described in terms of “communicative competence” (Hymes Language in India www.languageinindia.com 60

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1972) – the ability to choose an appropriate expression for a given occasion depending on what to speak to whom, when, where and how.

The Complex Honorific System in Meiteiron

The complex honorific system is an aspect of Meiteiron that reflects the nature of Meitei society. In other words, the honorifics are significant and an integral part of the grammatical system. They play very important roles in social interaction resulting to different degrees of speech.

Different levels of speech are regularly distributed through age, rank, status etc. It is found that in traditional Meitei society the aristocrats tend to use more meaningfully distinguished speech levels than the commoners. The values of refinement and elegance traditionally associated with the speech variety are attributable by projection as characteristics inherent to the aristocrats as a social class.

The cultural values of repertoire as well as other aspects of aristocratic behavior reciprocally illuminate and motivate each other thus, naturalizing many aspects of aristocratic identity.

The aristocrats, for example, became the arbiter of linguistic standards, thus, culturally the purest forms or most elegant and sophisticated forms of speech are personified as the speech of the aristocrats.

Hence, the ideal standard for speech as well as for other domains of etiquette in modern Meiteiron has always been derived from the behavior and speech of aristocrats. It is entirely possible, therefore, that the monarchy has resulted into a relatively complex honorific system. Aristocracy was known to heavily employ super-polite honorific forms within the family. Although aristocracy was abolished in 1949, the aristocrats today still maintain a distinctly different vocabulary from the rest of other Meiteis for certain items of food, clothing, special terms and suffixes for addressing king and other matters connected with their life styles.

The Limitations of Synchronic Description

Bearing this in mind, a thorough understanding of speech behavior of Meiteis cannot be understood from a synchronic perspective alone but must be analyzed from a diachronic stand point as well. It is a well-known fact that contemporary speech behavior is ultimately a product of historical change. Thus it is apparent that the complex honorific system prevalent in Meiteiron is an aspect of it that reflects the complex nature of Meitei society and culture.

Method

The data for this study largely come from the observation I made in my daily encounters with my own people in different social situations followed by unobtrusive note-taking at every opportunity to record the expression, words, terms, etc. used by dyads in different situations. The

information so obtained was supplemented by the author's own introspection as a native speaker of Meiteiron.

Although the paper does not claim to derive from empirical research or cite much objective data it is nevertheless worth exploring the complex intricate relationship between Meitei community and its honorific system as is manifested in Meiteiron. I wish that I could present a statistically based description of the factors and their relative importance. But I must limit myself for the moment to a subjective estimate based on my own observation.

Morphologically Marked Levels

The classification of sentence-concluding endings into distinguishable levels is the major objective of this section. The different grades of speech in Meiteiron are usually shown in the honorific and graded suffixes, nouns, pronouns and verbs. One of the most outstanding phenomena is the use of verbs. Verbs in Meiteiron can be divided into two portions, namely, base and ending, each generally having two states, polite and plain. By virtue of the semantic function of the morphemes, the polite forms can be further categorized into two categories. They are respect and humble forms. Suffixes are attached to a verb root to convert it into a respect forms or a humble form. Similar situation is reported in Japanese (Ogino, et al. 1995).

In Meiteiron, for example, to show respect the suffix *-pi-~ -bi-* is added to a verb root as *hay-bi-yu* 'please tell (me)' as opposed to *hay-yu* 'tell(me)'. The latter form without *-pi-~ -bi-* suffix is considered plain. And to make it a humble form the suffix *cə - ~-jə* is added to the verb root as

<p>Humble form</p> <p><i>əy hay - jə - ge</i></p> <p>I tell (H) F</p>	<p>Plain form</p> <p><i>əy hay-ge</i></p> <p>I tell F</p>	<p>gloss</p> <p>'I will'</p> <p>tell him/her</p>
<p><i>əy cət -cə -ge</i></p> <p>I go (H) F</p>	<p><i>əy -cət -ke</i></p> <p>I go F</p>	<p>'I will go'</p>

The two types of markers *-pi- ~ -bi-* an *cə ~ jə* are suffixal morphemes; they are actually verb roots meaning *pi* 'give' and *cət (<-cə ~ -jə)* 'go' respectively. That the polite suffixes are related to or have been grammaticalized from the corresponding verb root is very possible although their lexical meanings are highly altered in the suffixes.

A respect form (or a verb root plus respect suffix) is used to refer to the speaker's status. Both the forms, however, convey the speaker's polite attitude to the hearer. Thus, we find quite a

complicated system of honorific expression towards the hearer thereby constituting a system which, manifest the speaker's treatment of hearer.

If one does not maintain such rules of etiquette, it is considered a serious breach of etiquette. In Meitei words it is termed as *ləmcət naydəbə* and/or *bebhar yawdəbə* and/or *thəksi khasi naydəbə*, which, ultimately reflects one's background and upbringing.

As the people advocate the order of superior and inferior, it is quite natural for them to lay emphasis on hierarchy, namely, the difference between friends and acquaintances, between young and old, between men and women, between officials and non-officials, between teachers and students, between masters and apprentices, between masters and servants, etc.

And also while speaking to someone, Meiteis tend to deliberately flatter others and belittle themselves in order to show their great respect to the person concerned or cultural refinement of the speaker. All these differences in the hierarchical structure are manifested in the language use. So, the organization of speech levels can be understood as a consequence of the honorific system embedded in Meitei culture.

Speakers in Meitei speech community can easily identify differences in meaning among various sentence-concluding endings (although they may not be able to explain the rules governing the usages. They also rank the endings in terms of degrees of deference grouping into different levels. Thus an elaborate system of marking social distance and respect is found in the morphology of Meiteiron. The complexity of morphology involves a range of semantic elements and the variations in the system. Regarding the use of suffixes with respect to addressee honorifics, five different grades of speech may be divided. This is most clearly shown in the use of imperative sentences. Ranking and classification of sentence-concluding endings in Meiteiron:

Forms in imperative sentence	Levels
<i>ca – bi - si</i>	Level I (the ultra high level)
<i>ca – bi – yu</i>	Level II (the high level)
<i>ca – si</i>	Level III (High plain)
<i>ca – w²</i>	Level IV (Plain)
<i>ca -jəw³</i>	Level V(Low)

Please note that *ca –* is the verb root of 'eat.' *caw* and *ca -jəw* undergo morphophonemic sound change as the imperative marker *-u ~ -yu* has been changed to *-aw* and *əw* respectively.

Relationship between the Suffixes and Social Categories – Ultra High Level I and Level II

We can now look at the implications of the relationship between the suffixes and social categories mentioned earlier.

The combination of honorific marker *-bi-* with the imperative form *-si-* that is, *-bi-si* is analytically the honorific ending for the referent or more accurately, the subject of the discourse frame. Where the subject's social status is the same as the addressee, as in the imperative mode, the fixed morpheme functions directly to elevate the addressee to the highest or ultra-high level i.e., Level I. The addition of *-si* furthermore forms a key criterion for distinguishing the ultrahigh level from the high level, i.e., Level II. This level is particularly chosen while speaking to elderly persons in public formal occasions, meetings, etc.

For example:

<i>ima</i>	<i>ibemə</i>	<i>phəmphəm</i>	<i>laŋdə</i>	<i>leŋsin-bi-si</i>
mother H		seat	H	move(H) H imp.

‘Mother, would you kindly take your seat?’

However, the use of this level in actual linguistic interaction is interpreted by the speakers as reflecting a high degree of unequal relationship of interlocutors. So it can be viewed as showing respect form of highest degree of deference expressed by the speaker.

The existence of this level seems to be related to the community's own hierarchical cultural tradition. It is noted that this level was used mostly while speaking to higher status persons - aristocrats, nobles, etc., as a mark of high respect in the traditional Meitei society. The folk conception reflects the ruling class speakers' propensity to differentiate themselves from commoners, thereby reinforcing their linguistic differentiation from commoners.

Thus, the content and semantic of the use of this level is strongly and closely related with the traditional class membership. Therefore, this level is not usually found in daily encounters of the people. Its usage is largely confined to highly formal public meeting, occasion etc. particularly while speaking to elderly and/or highly respected persons in the contemporary society.

Current Situation

Today most of the youngsters in their generation do not seem to be using the level II as this usually means formality and respect with elders and persons of superior status. It is used with all strangers unless they are very young. So, the use of level II does not necessarily signal respect or even politeness but simply social distance with strangers. It can be shown, for example, in enquiring about something by a speaker to another person (of whom both of them are strangers to one another).

Speaker	<i>tamo</i>	<i>kərigumbə</i>	<i>əmətə</i>	<i>həŋ - jə - ge</i>
	brother	something		ask (H) F

‘Brother may I ask (you) something’

Listener *-kəri oy - bi - rə - bəno?*

What is (H) Asp Inf Q
'What is it?'

The above exchange shows very well that the usages are not necessarily polite but signals only that the parties involved do not know each other well. Note that, in the expression used by the speaker, he uses an honorific morpheme *-jə* (which I have categorized as a humble form) while the listener uses the honorific suffix *-bi-* (which has been categorized as respect form).

These forms usually mean formality with strangers and less acquainted persons and respect with known people. When this form is used for the strangers or less acquainted persons the choice is made according to situations and speaker's mood and listener's age, appearances and manner. It is also observed that these forms are used among "cultured" families in which parents feel the need to cultivate or inculcate good demeanors to their children. In such families, we find children usually speak polite expressions to their parents and elderly persons. Such children who have been taught "good" manners are expected to grow up as well-behaved children. However, in most of the families the use of such form is decreasing to a great extent. We even get the report that the older people express their unhappiness over younger peoples' relaxed use of honorifics.

With change in social vicissitudes, such usage which was once highly valued, now have grown out of date, while a more democratic and liberal form of behavior which reflects the new order emerges. Such usages in the behaviour pattern of politeness expression manifest changes in our social life, in the people's psychological state and current convention of our society. Thus a generation gap in the use of honorific usage of speech is often felt both by elder and younger people.

Age and Gender

As the high forms indicate high respect when used between colleagues it would seem too solemn and serious. Normally two adult speakers of the same sex and about the same age group, with the same kind of job do not address each other with the polite form. When they do adopt this form, it can be ascertained that they do not have a close relationship or the relation between them is rather strained. However, some speakers of older generations use the level II in conversation with speakers with whom they have intimate relationship. Such people are being branded as old-folks by new generations.

Generally speaking, those who are in the 40s with good educational background adopt high forms. A speaker can be judged with respect to his or her profession and level of education, cultivation of his behavior and speech on the basis of form he or she uses. The great discrepancy in using honorific nowadays depends not only on education, age and situational factors but also upon an individual's value system. It is evident from the speech of individuals of "noble descent" who minimize the use of high level, while others, not of "noble birth" place much value upon such usage. It has been mentioned earlier that in cultivated families parents teach their children to use high level accordingly.

Other Levels

The remaining forms by contrast, have developed into separate distinct levels by elevating or lowering their positions from the plain position in the total hierarchy of speech levels. The use of sentence-concluding endings without suffix *-bi-* that is , with *-si,-u* and *-jəw* are classified as high plain, plain and low and their levels are categorized as level III, level IV and level V (for example, high plain *ca-si*, plain *caw* and low level *cajəw*, the verb root taken is *ca-* ‘eat’). The expression with *-si* ending, that is, level III, conveys an ambiguous meaning of non-deferential and non-condescending. It is mostly used when speakers, in their view, feel it unnecessary or irrelevant to use the above high levels and also at the same time they do not want to show impoliteness to the addressee. Further, the speaker does not want to put him in an uncomfortable situation. It is mainly used for an addressee with whom a speaker establishes a vague interpersonal relationship.

In such ambiguous or vague situations, participants are social equals in terms of one value scale, but in a subordinate-superordinate position, according to another. Individuals can avoid difficulties or embarrassment involved in either proclaiming their equality or acknowledging their superiority or inferiority by using the suffix *-si*. By doing so, they neither indicate respect or disrespect, or unwanted familiarity or undue advantage, but can avoid stiffness of the expressions. Therefore, it has been leveled as plain high.

The Plain Form – Level IV

The level IV, that is, the plain form is morphologically unmarked in conversation. Semantically, however it is marked as intimate or subordinating. This form is used between age mates. It is also used by adults to children and to adolescents although with older adolescent it will vary depending on the length of the acquaintance. The level IV is generally accepted as indicating a relation between equals. But, in actual use, it can also reflect a hierarchical relationship which, however, is different from those indicated by other forms. If an elderly speaker uses this level to younger person and the latter uses the level II to the former, the level IV used by the elderly speaker implies condescension. The informal grade is used mainly among brothers and sisters within a family. In some families the youngest child would use the level IV to his or her parents, though his or her brothers and sisters use the level II. This is because the youngest child is usually spoiled or pampered.

Level V – The Low Level

The last and final grade that is, the level V is marked by the addition of suffix *-cə - ~-jə*. The level V or the low level is also used in indicating hierarchical relationship, which, however, is different from those indicated by the other high levels, in that this level is exclusively used by speakers who have higher status and /or senior persons while speaking to lower status and/or junior persons, particularly in acts of speech which the higher status persons and/or senior

persons favor the lower status addressees to do something or for doing something. Further, the use of this level also may mean that the speakers give permission or approval for doing something.

It is to be noted that this level is never used by the younger and /or lower status speakers to senior and/or higher status addressees with regard to addressee honorifics. It is also worth noting here that the same suffix *-cə- ~ -jə-* which signals low level is also used as a humble suffix or self-lowering suffix with regard to “referent honorifics” particularly “subject honorific” as *əy - hay -jəge* ‘I will tell (him)’. The use of this suffix on the other hand elevates the status of the addressee.

Ambiguities

Note that we do find some ambiguities regarding the use of this morpheme *-cə- ~ je-* which indicates low level in some contexts. Interestingly enough, the same suffix also indicates ‘self’. For example, *nəη təw - jəw* ‘you do it’ could be interpreted in two ways. The first interpretation of ‘you do it’ is of level V, of which the addressee or the subject of the sentence frame is being favored or given permission or approval to do something. The expected outcome is that the addressee eventually gets some benefit⁴ for performing the act. The second interpretation has nothing to do with the level V but it indicates exclusively that it is a simple reflexive sentence which is manifested in the verb form.

However, such ambiguities and confusions could be disambiguated in two ways. First, by adding ‘self’ to the sentence in question preferably after the pronoun, for example, *nəη nəsanə təw jəw* ‘you do it yourself’. Second, the context of the sentence frame and interlocutors concerned help us in deciphering the right meaning of the expression. So, the participants concerned, their background and also background of the speech act are very crucial in deciding the exact and expected meaning when the suffix *-jə-* is used.

Honorific Repertoires and Verbal Endings

The existence of a highly elaborated set of honorific repertoire in Meiteiron seems to be related to the community’s own cultural tradition still preserved till today though some of the linguistic items which were closely associated with the monarch, have been disappeared. There seemed to be a close relationship between social classes and honorific repertoires. It is found that the aristocrats and the nobles tended to use more meaningfully distinguished speech levels than do the commoners.

In view of the co-occurrence relationship between the sentence-concluding endings and honorific repertoires, we will discuss the co-occurrence relationship among the sentence concluding-endings, the address terms, the second person pronouns and other linguistic phenomena particularly verbs and nouns.

In addition to the set of aforementioned linked conjugates there is a group of special words mostly referring to people, their body parts, possessions and actions which co-occur with the conjugates and which act to raise the level of speech indicated by the first inevitable selection one notch higher. In another words, a number of words are made to carry in addition to their normal linguistic meaning what might be called a “ status meaning” i.e. when used in actual conversation they convey not only their fixed denotative meaning but also a connotative meaning concerning the status and/or degree of familiarity between the speaker and listener (Greetz 1960). As a result, several words may denote the same normal linguistic meaning but they differ in their status connotation they convey. Thus, for example, for a house there are three forms, namely, *səŋgay*, *yum* and *khaŋpok* each connoting a progressively higher relative status of the listener with respect to the speaker.

In this regard, one of the most outstanding phenomena is the use of verbs and nouns. Some basic verbs and nouns have honorific and corresponding plain or vulgar forms, which have the same meaning but differ in politeness level. Some sets consist of two or more variants as honorific and plain or vulgar and plain.

Therefore, in Meiteiron, we find the occurrence of honorific forms of several word classes as mentioned above. The multiple honorific lexemes typically can co-occur in utterance thereby resulting into valorizations of speech levels, which ultimately reflects the hierarchical structure of Meitei community. Hence, such lexeme co-occurrences have important consequences for honorific discourse in this language.

The use of honorific words marks relationship of respect, thus typifying speech as a marker of social relationships. Relying on a native speaker’s metalinguistic abilities we can construct a paradigm of correspondence between honorific and non-honorific lexeme as:

<i>bebhar yawbə</i> (Honorific)	gloss	<i>bebhar yawdəbə</i> (Non-honorific)
<i>caythəbə</i>	‘to bath’	<i>irujəbə</i>
<i>habə</i>	‘to eat’	<i>cabə</i>
<i>phanbə</i>	‘to drink’	<i>thəkəpə</i>
<i>səŋgay</i>	‘house’	<i>yum</i>
<i>səna həkcaŋ</i>	‘body’	<i>həkcaŋ</i> etc.

Distinct deference foci are indexically projected from several lexeme positions in an utterance. The constituency of overall deference in discourse depends on the congruence of deference effects marked independently by several honorific lexemes.

For example,

<i>pabuŋ</i>	<i>kədaydə</i>	<i>leŋ</i>	<i>-bi-ru-bə-no</i>	<i>kəri hani?</i>
Father	where	go H	(H) Asp. Inf.Q	what eat H

‘Father where have (you) been’, ‘what would you like to have?’

In the above expression an honored person (father) is clearly motivated in the discourse context provided by the utterance. The honorific noun phrase kin term *pabuŋ* ‘father’ and topic deferring verbs *leŋbə* H and *habə* H both index deference to the father. It is, therefore, constructed easily as congruent with person deferred to by every other honorific lexeme in the utterances. If deference relations can be projected from several possible locations in an utterance, then, the overall constituency of honorific effects generally depend on the congruence (or lack thereof) of several instances of deference marking, often within the same sentence frame. (Agha 1998)

Choice between Non-honorific and Honorific Forms

As it has been discussed above that the choice between non-honorific and honorific forms (both respect and humble forms) is determined by the relative status between participants. It is also closely related to the choice of address terms and use of second person pronouns. The terms of address, reference and the kinship terms in Meiteiron is so finely differentiated and their choice is governed by complicated sociolinguistic factors.

Along with honorific forms of speech the appropriate use of terms of address is always considered most polite. The appropriate use of polite forms and terms of address always express modesty and humility on the part of speakers. For example, in asking or enquiring about something a speaker asks a person who is much senior to the former (probably in his father’s age group) as *kərigumbə əmətə hayjəge* ‘May I tell you something?’ This expression is culturally inappropriate as there is a substantial age gap between the collocutors. The right way would be to use the proper term of address for the person concerned such as *khura* ‘uncle’ or *pabuŋ* ‘father’ as the case may be. For example, *pabuŋ kərigumbə əmətə hayjəge* ‘Father may I tell-you something?’. If the addressee looks uneducated, unsophisticated etc. the speaker would choose the address form *khura* ‘uncle’.

Similarly, if an addressee, from his physical appearances and speech looks educated or as a person with a high status in the estimate of the speaker he would be choosing the address from *pabuŋ* ‘father’. There are occasions that if appropriate forms of address are not used the addressee might feel offended and respond in a very crude manner. However, the above expression is a right polite form of asking if collocutors are of the same age group. Hence, age does still play a vital role in choosing and deciding which forms of speech should be used for whom. So, the use of address terms signals power relationship between the speaker and hearer, in addition to expressing respect or deference by the addressee.

Finally, the choice of appropriate forms of address or absence of address term is subject to a complex set of interdependent factors. In conjunction with this usage it is also important to note that the choice of address forms also show some categorization of people. The address forms given above namely, *khura* and *pabuŋ* refer to some distinction of low versus high status.

Though status and age seem to be of prime importance, other factors also have to be considered including kin relation, degree of familiarity, gender, situational setting (i.e. in public or at home).

In an asymmetrical relationship, the sociolinguistic rule prohibits the lower status speaker from using second person pronoun *nəŋ* ‘you(sg)’ *nəkhoj~noy* ‘you(pl)’ to call or to refer to a higher status addressee unless an insult is meant. However, Meiteiron does possess a polite form of second person pronoun that is *ədom* or *əsom* which actually mean direction ‘that side’ or ‘this side’. Meitei sociolinguistic rule permits that this form is to be used only between two collocutors of the same age group and also who are strangers or less acquainted persons. This is not used between closed circles. If it is used in such circles, the speaker is being ironical with the addressee.

Since Meiteiron lacks universally applicable second person pronoun, it utilizes a variety of address forms such as first name, title, affectionate terms and kinship terms for superiors and elderly addressees. It may be noted that the extensive use of kinship terms in place of pronoun is regarded as a special unique feature of Meiteiron as in Korean (Hwang 1990) Thai (Palakornkul 1975).

With respect to kinship terms, it is a language of relationship in which appropriate terms of address and honorific are determined according to relationship between speakers and addressees. In view of the ideal co-occurrence relationship between the sentence-concluding endings and forms of address the endings are always used without any address form (that is, zero address term), the verbal skills originally required for the strategic use of such an ambiguous speech are encoded in the local saying as *nəmhay toubə*.

For example, if a sentence *cəwkri sidə leŋsinbiyu*, ‘Please be seated in this chair’ is used to an elderly person who is as old as one’s own father, though the sentence sounds quite acceptable in English, such use of sentence would be considered a breach of etiquette on the part of the speaker as he does not use any suitable address term according to addressee’s age, background etc.

In any social encounters those who know each other open their conversation by the appropriate term of address. Addressing a person with the suitable term of address is equivalent to recognition of status or to put it differently addressing is similar to presentation of respect. The addressee so addressed by the appropriate term of address feels elated that his status is recognized and demonstrated by the addressor without his having to do it himself.

It may be argued that even if there is influence of western mode of thinking and life style, the Meitei traditional way of establishing relationship still holds sway. Appropriate use of kinship terms of address does maintain and enhance smooth functioning of the collocutors in particular and the society at large. Thus, the appropriate use of address term and second person pronoun (to whom to use and to whom not to use) does facilitate interpersonal contact by removing conflicts

and interest between interlocutors thereby promoting their co-operation and respect for one another.

Status

The importance of status in encounters is not only signaled by verbal, lexical honorifics and the appropriate use of terms but also by the suffixation of a morpheme *-bu* to address terms as *oja-bu* 'teacher (H)', *mamə-bu* 'uncle (maternal)' and *doctor-bu* 'doctor(H)'. It is possible that this suffix is a grammaticalized form of noun root *-pu* 'master or lord', as the lexical meaning is still retained. It was particularly attached to the address terms while speaking to social superiors such as kings, princesses, nobles and people of advanced age during the monarchy. The function of the *-bu* suffix is of considerable interest as the suffix on human nouns obviously, indicates high respect or dignity of the great to the addressee in direct address.

However, the great discrepancy in using this honorific suffix nowadays depends on newly emerged status, namely educational, occupational and economic status. It is, therefore, attached to the people whom, the speaker thinks he or she deserves to receive it. People such as teachers, doctors, engineers and to some extent elderly persons by virtue of his/her status or by virtue of his/her seniority receives this suffix along with the appropriate address terms.

Co-occurrence of Levels of Address

In terms of the relationship between Meiteiron and Meitei culture, it is of great interest to note that all the levels of speech classified except the low level can co-occur with all the honorific words thereby resulting in the levels into more deferential speech forms. The last level, the low level, as the terminology implies, is indeed a low level. This is evident from the fact that there are certain syntactic constraints which do not permit the honorific words to occur with the low level functionally with regard to addressee honorific.

Socially, speakers who have higher status and/or senior in age will obviously not use the honorific words while adopting the level V to speak to low status and/or junior persons.

Linguistically as this level is indicated by the occurrence of $\sim cə \sim jə$ morpheme, its occurrence will predict exclusively the occurrence of ordinary words. With regard to conjugates, the most honorific form of speech or highest level of speech is revealed in the level I and next higher level is expressed in level II.

These two levels can be made more deferential and polite by the employment of honorific or status words. The most polite form of speech therefore is the employment of as many honorific words as a sentence is permitted to take by the Meitei sociolinguistic rules.

For example,

Level I *pabuŋ sənəkhyə luk ha-bi-rəsi*
 father H meal eat(H) Asp. Imp
 ‘Respected father would you kindly take (your) meal’

Level II- *səna - ibemə səŋgay-romdə khorŋsanəbə leŋkhət-pi-ro*
 madam (H) house(H) towards goH get upH
 ‘Respected madam would you kindly get up for going home’.

Needed - Mastery of Sociolinguistic Rules

It is important to know that the appropriate use of high levels demands mastery of many sociolinguistic rules, the knowledge of large lexicon of honorific and syntactic arrangements. It is also to be noted that the honorific words may co-occur with all levels excepting the low level. So a final look at the aspect of use of high levels reveals considerable differences in the use of number of honorific forms used. As mentioned above, the remaining levels except the last one can also be similarly made more deferential by replacing the ordinary words by honorific words. The example given below demonstrates this.

ice ca thək - si
 sister tea drink Imp
 ‘Sister have tea’

Notice this high plain level or level III can be made more deferential by replacing the ordinary word(s) by honorific word(s) as for example:

icemə ca phan - si
 sister H tea drink (H) Imp
 ‘Respected sister, please have tea’

Similarly, the level IV can also be made more deferential by the replacement of ordinary words by honorific words. For example,

ice cət - lo
 Sister go Imp
 ‘Sister go’

ice mə leŋ - ŋo
 sister(H) go(H) Imp
 ‘Sister go’

Notice that the use of this level IV in conjunction with honorific words forms a nice compromise between respect and familiarity.

For example, a person having high status speaking to friend with whom s/he has intimate relationship or a person with a lower status speaking to his/her friend with whom she/he has intimate relationship, would opt for this level with honorific words.

This level is particularly chosen in order to show his/her intimacy with the addressee and honorific words are employed in order to show him/her (the address) respect for his/her status. In such situation where participants are social equals in terms of one value scale but in a subordinate-superordinate position according to another, individual can avoid difficulties by using honorific words in the level IV. The use of level IV with ordinary words would be too ordinary to use to such addressees. The level IV with ordinary words is, therefore, confined to intimate friend circles where status intervention is not there and among brothers and sisters within families.

It is also important to note that as one moves up the level ladder from low level to ultra high level, the manner of speaking changes too. Like in Javanese (Greetz, 1960), the higher the level one is using, the more slowly and softly one speaks and the more evenly in terms of both rhythm and pitch and also in terms of more employment of honorific words. As on the whole, the higher conjugates tend to be longer than the lower ones. The high levels, when spoken correctly with their permissible number of honorific words have a kind of most elegant and pomp which can make the simplest conversation seems like a great speech. As mentioned earlier the aristocrats are the arbiters of such usages, so they were confined to the aristocrats. One could easily identify that a person belongs to this category of people from his or her style of speech.

Summary and Conclusion

The above description of the speech –levels has emphasized the necessity and importance of treating honorifics in their ethnographic context because a speech system is an integral component of whole socio-cultural system.

It has been shown that different structures of speech levels may be socially distributed according to major social categories, such as kinship, age, sex status. In particular, different distribution of honorific repertoires according to class membership is worthy of notice. The aristocrats tend to use more meaningfully distinguished speech levels and more complex and formal rules than do the commoners. The content of honorific speech is strongly correlated with traditional class membership.

In this study, the classification of speech alternates into distinguishable speech levels has been the major objective. The hierarchical levels of honorific expression towards addressees in Meiteiron that addressee honorific has been organized and identified the “co-occurrence relationship” (Gumprez 1964: Ervin Tripp 1969,1972) among the sentence-concluding endings, the address terms, second personal pronoun, other linguistic phenomena , namely verbs and nouns. Among these the morphological variants of sentence- concluding endings occupy the most important position in Meiteiron addressee honorifics.

There are five graded levels of sentence-concluding endings in Meiteiron, namely ultrahigh (level I), high (level II), high plain (level III), plain (level IV) and low level (level V) in Meiteiron addressee honorifics.

Another discovery concerns the close relationship between social status and honorific repertoire. As it has been observed that in traditional Meitei Society the aristocrats tend to use more meaningfully distinguished honorific repertoire than do the commoners, this fact leads to the conclusion that an adequate description of speech levels must be based upon a socially defined group.

Some shifts in the usages of honorifics have been observed. The gradual shift presupposes the co-existence of old and new systems. The parameters which govern the usages of honorifics in the contemporary society are of different types, namely educational and economic status. The significant role played by age in the earlier system seems to have decreased to some extent. The gradual breakdown of traditional hierarchical system in the Meitei Society has frequently brought about difficult circumstances in which the social relationship between interlocutors is not as clearly defined as it was in the past. For example, age and traditional hierarchical ranked system were undoubtedly more important factors in the past than they are today. In the past even some days difference in age and difference in the traditional ascribed status were sufficient to call for a different level of speech.

Honorific system is used in the contemporary society for enhancing one's own honor rather than that of interlocutors. In this context, the educated, cultured and urban dwellers by adopting the polite expression earlier used by aristocrats differentiate themselves from others, thereby reinforcing their linguistic differentiation from the commoners of the present day society. Thus, highly educated people are expected to use appropriate honorific expression. They use polite expression as means of showing their social status to others.

The crucial point is that people are expected to speak in an appropriate way according to their respective roles in society. Some people, for example, police personnel and contractors are relatively free from these expectations. It may, therefore, be safely concluded that the secondary function of honorific usage is to indicate the speaker's social status (Ogino, et al. 1985).

However, admittedly, the pattern of speech levels and highly elaborated honorific repertoires in Meitei community is a product of the historical background of the then princely state of Manipur. Its major portion, however, reveals traditional patterns of addressee honorifics found throughout in the speech community.

Notes

Abbreviations used in this paper.

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Honorifics and Speech Levels in Meiteiron

(H)	-	honorific suffix
H	-	any honorific word
F	-	Future marker
Q	-	question marker
Inf	-	Infinitive marker
Asp	-	Aspect
sg	-	singular
pl	-	Plural

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