

A Comparative Study of the Mechanism to Assign Gender in Sizang, Koireng and Tarao

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Abstract

Many languages of the Tibeto-Burman family do not have grammatical gender. Typologically languages may be classified into those which have grammatical gender, for example, Hindi, Assamese, etc. of the Indo-Aryan languages and those which do not have grammatical gender, for example, Sizang, Koireng and Tarao of the Tibeto-Burman family of languages. What these languages (Sizang, Koireng and Tarao) have is merely a system of biological sex reference, and this is necessary only for specific semantic realization of animate nouns. These languages do not assign gender to each and every noun. Although this feature seems to be peripheral to language structure, an investigation into them gives us many insights to understand the complexities of everyday speech, and also enhances the scope of language typology.

The present paper attempts to show how these languages use mechanism to signal the sex reference which is necessary for specific semantic realization of animate nouns. These languages do not have grammatical gender.

Key words: Tibeto-Burman, Kuki-Chin, grammatical gender, natural gender distinction, Sizang, Koireng and Tarao.

1.0 Introduction

Sizang belongs to northern Chin subgroup under the Kuki-Chin group of Tibeto-Burman sub-family (Grierson, 1904). Koireng was placed under the Kuki-Chin group of Tibeto-Burman sub-family (Grierson, 1904). Kolhreng (Kolren) is placed under Old Kuki by Grierson-Konow and Shafer. The Tarao also belongs to the Old Kuki (Yashawanta, 2010). These three languages are Tibeto-Burman languages which share several linguistic and ethnographic similarities with the languages or dialect of Kuki-Chin.

Since, Kuki-Chin is under the subfamily of the Tibeto-Burman linguistic group, the Chin or Kuki languages are closely related to one another. Though these languages are related, Sizang has no ‘r’ sound whereas Tarao and Koireng have ‘r’ sound.

The present paper attempts to show how these languages use mechanism to signal the sex reference which is necessary for specific semantic realization of animate nouns. These languages do not have grammatical gender.

The following examples will substantiate the above statement.

- Sizang :
- | | |
|--------------------------------|--------------------|
| 1) kə ta-pa ə p ^h a | ‘my good son’ |
| 1poss.child- male3pp good | |
| 2) kə ta-nu ə p ^h a | ‘my good daughter’ |
| 1poss.child- female3pp good | |

It does not show any relevant for adjectives, verbs and pronouns. In the above examples (1-2), the adjective p^ha ‘good’ remains unchanged.

- Koireng :
- | | |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 3) pasəl-te-ha tuy ə-in | ‘The boy drinks water.’ |
| man-small-DET water 3pp-drink | |
| 4) numəy-te-ha tuy ə-in | ‘The girl drinks water.’ |
| woman-small-DET water 3pp-drink | |

In the above examples (3 and 4) it exemplify that there is no grammatical relationship between the nouns and verbs. The verb “in” i.e. drink remains unchanged both in male and female nouns.

Tarao : 5) kipa dili se-no-tu ‘My father will not go to Delhi.’
1pp.father Delhi go-neg.unreal

6) kinu dili se-no-tu ‘My mother will not go to Delhi.’
1pp.mother Delhi go-neg.unreal

Hence, there is no grammatical gender in Tarao also.

2.0 Gender Distinction of Human Nouns

Animate nouns show further sub-division of human nouns and non-human nouns. The male-female contrast of human nouns is denoted by suffixing -pa and -nu to refer to masculine and feminine respectively in all the three languages.

2.1Sizang

Masculine	Feminine
(7) tapa ‘son’	tanu ‘daughter’
(8) nəwpa ‘younger brother’	nəwnu ‘younger sister’
(9) upa ‘elder brother’	unu ‘elder sister’
(10) tupa ‘grandson’	tunu ‘granddaughter’
(11) teakpa ‘father-in-law(female ego)	teaknu ‘mother-in-law(female ego)
(12) suŋpa ‘father-in-law(male ego)	suŋnu ‘mother-in-law(male ego)

The derived noun formed by prefixing ‘ə’ to a verb indicates agentive. For example:

(13) ə+lam = əlam ‘one who dance’ etc.

AGNT+dance

If the gender marker –pa or –nu is added to these derived nouns, then the marker specifies the sex of the doer or agentive.

For example:

- | | |
|---------------|------------------|
| (14) ə-kap-pa | ‘male shooter’ |
| AGNT-shoot-M | |
| (15) ə-kap-nu | ‘female shooter’ |
| AGNT-shoot-F | |
| (16) ə-lam-pa | ‘male dancer’ |
| AGNT-dance-M | |
| (17) ə-lam-nu | ‘female dancer’ |
| AGNT-dance-F | |

Similarly,

- | | |
|-------------|--------------|
| (18) haw-pa | ‘rich man’ |
| rich-M | |
| (19) haw-nu | ‘rich woman’ |
| rich-F | |

Again, some words referring to masculine gender there are corresponding lexical items referring to feminine.

For example:

- | Masculine | Feminine |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| (20) pasəl ‘husband’ | zi ‘wife’ |
| (21) makpa ‘son-in-law’ | məw ‘daughter-in-law’ |
| (22) pu ‘grandfather’ | pi ‘grandmother’ |
| (23) taŋval ‘bachelor’ | ŋaknu ‘damsel’ |

There is no gender distinction in the pronouns.

For example:

(24) key ‘I’	kəw ‘we’
(25) nəŋ ‘you (sg)’	nəw ‘you (pl)’
(26) əma ‘s/he’	əməw ‘they’
(27) əma in-suŋ á om hi s/he house-in loc.stay FP	‘s/he is in the house’

2.2 Koireng (adopted from Yashawanta, 2010)

Interestingly, for human nouns in Koireng also uses the suffix –pa for indicating male and –nu for indicating female.

(28) ki-pa	‘my father’
(29) ki-nu	‘my mother’
(30) sok-pa	‘slave (M)’
(31) sok-nu	‘slave (F)’

From the above example it is seen clearly how the genders are distinguished. Most of the kinship terms are suffixed with –pa or –nu in common. Very few words are found referring to masculine gender and their corresponding lexical items referring to feminine, e.g. kitərpi ‘mother-in-law’, kitərpu ‘father-in-law’. The first syllable ki- is derived from kəy ‘I’ and ki- is also a first person pronominal marker which is prefixed in all the kinship terms. All the kinship terms are used by irrespective of both the males and females.

There is no gender distinction in the pronouns. For example:

(32) kəy ‘I’	kəyni ‘we’
(33) nəŋ ‘you(sg)’	nəŋni ‘you(pl)’
(34) əma ‘s/he’	ənmani ‘they’

2.3 Tarao (adopted from Yashawanta, 2002)

In Tarao also the suffix –pa is used for indicating male and –nu for indicating female.

(35) ki-pa	‘my father’
(36) ki-nu	‘my mother’
(37) ə-pa	‘her/his father’
(38) ni-nu	‘your mother’

Similarly, there is no gender distinction in the pronouns. For example:

(39) kəy ‘I’	kəyni ‘we’
(40) nəŋ ‘you(sg)’	nəŋni ‘you(pl)’
(41) əma ‘s/he’	əmma ‘they’

3.0 Gender Distinction of Non-human Nouns

The suffix –cəl is used to indicate male non-human nouns for Koireng and Tarao languages whereas Sizang uses the suffix –təl to indicate male. The suffix –puy is commonly used to indicate female non-human nouns in Sizang and Tarao languages whereas the suffix –pi is used in Koireng to indicate female nonhuman nouns.

3.1 Sizang

With non-human nouns the masculine markers -təl, -luy (male fowl), -bal (large bird) are used to refer to male, and feminine marker –puy is used to refer to female.

For example:	Masculine	Feminine
(42) khuy-təl ‘bull’		khuy-puy ‘cow’
(43) vok-təl ‘boar’		vok-puy ‘sow’
(44) uy-təl ‘dog’		uy-puy ‘bitch’
(45) utoŋ-bal ‘peacock’		utoŋ-puy ‘peahen’
(46) ak-luy ‘cock’		ak-puy ‘hen’

3.2 Koireng

In Koireng it is marked by suffixing –cəl for male and –pi for female.

For example:	Masculine	Feminine
(47) serat-cəl ‘bull’		serat-pi ‘cow’
(48) saypi-cəl ‘male elephant’		saypi-pi ‘female elephant’
(49) ŋaytoŋ-cəl ‘male cat’		ŋaytoŋ-pi ‘female cat’

Another suffix –təŋ is commonly used for male pig and tiger.

Thus,

(50) wok-təŋ ‘male pig’ wok-pi ‘female pig’

(51) humpi-təŋ ‘tiger’ humpi-pi ‘tigress’

Again, the male-female contrast in bird is indicated by suffixing –bar for male. But –pi to indicate female remains unchanged.

For example:

(52) waak-bar ‘male crow’ waak-pi ‘female crow’

(53) artok-bar ‘duck’ artok-pi ‘drake’

It is to be noted that the male animal indicating suffix –cəl is also used for indicating male insect and the suffix –pi for female insect.

3.3 Tarao

In Tarao also it is marked by suffixing –cəl for male and –puy for female.

For example:

Masculine

Feminine

(54) sil-cəl ‘bull’

sil-puy ‘cow’

(55) uy-cəl ‘dog’

uy-puy ‘bitch’

(56) vok-cəl ‘male pig’

vok-puy ‘female pig’

For birds, the male indicating suffix –khoŋ is used; the suffix –puy is used to indicate female.

For example:

(57) ar-khoŋ ‘cock’

ar-puy ‘hen’

(58) usək-khoŋ ‘male sparrow’

usək-khoŋ ‘female sparrow’

Again, the male-female contrast in birds is indicated by suffixing –bar for male but –pi for indicating female remains unchanged.

4.0 Miscellaneous

For the designation or professional terms, the usage is similar to the gender distinctions of human nouns. Most of the items are compound words. There are a group of human common nouns which usually do not refer to any gender. In other words, they are gender neutral. If the context demands distinguishing gender of such nouns it is so done by appropriate suffixing as mentioned above. Otherwise some terms including some of the professional terms are gender neutral. Usually, the inanimate objects are not distinguished for gender. All inanimate objects are neutral in gender. However, arbitrary sex-assignment, meaning thereby gender-assignment to such objects or abstract things is not uncommon in these languages.

5.0 Conclusion

On the whole, Sizang, Koirang and Tarao, like most languages of the Tibeto-Burman family, do not have grammatical gender. Yet, some similarities reflecting the common origin and development have been noted. Suffix -pa for male human and -nu for female human nouns are commonly used. The names of the personal pronouns of the three languages are same. Again the suffix -cəl is commonly used by Koirang and Tarao to indicate male non-human nouns and the suffix -puy is commonly used by Sizang and Tarao to indicate female gender. In this paper, it is shown that the languages of cognate groups have due influence on each other.

Abbreviations

FP = Final particle; loc = Locative; pl = Plural; sg = Singular; M = Male; F = Female; AGNT = Agentive; neg = negative marker; unreal = Unrealized aspect; DET = Determiner.

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