

A Comparative Study of Gender Marking System in Biate and Thadou

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Abstract: The aim of the paper is to present a comparative study of gender marking system in Biate (ISO 639-3:biu) and Thadou (ISO 639-3:TCZ), two Kuki-Chin languages spoken in North east India. Biate is an endangered language spoken in the Southern Jaintia Hills, Meghalaya and western Dima Hasao, Assam by 19,000 speakers (Ethnologue 2019). Thadou is also a Kuki-Chin language spoken mainly in the North-Eastern part of India including Manipur, Nagaland, Assam and some parts of Myanmar by 1,90,595 speakers according to 2011 census of India. In both these languages, gender is marked with only the animate nouns. Gender is only a lexical feature in the two languages. They do not have grammatical gender. For example, in Biate, gender distinction for human beings is made by adding /pa/ for 'masculine' and /pui/ or /nu/ or /ni/ for 'feminine'. In Thadou, in the case of nouns having generic names, male and female are indicated by the suffix -pa and -nu respectively. In other words, the suffix -nu indicates female while -pa indicates male. This paper aims to investigate the nature of gender marking in both the languages, their role in showing grammatical relationships and different strategies applied in finding the gender markers for the masculine and feminine genders of the two languages.

Keywords: Biate, Thadou, Gender markers, Comparative study, Kuki-Chin languages.

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I. Introduction

Biate (ISO 639-3: biu) and Thadou (ISO 639-3: TCZ) are languages spoken in North-East India. They both linguistically belong to the Kuki-Chin sub-group of the Tibeto-Burman language family. Biate is one of the acknowledged tribes in North-East India. It represents the language as well as the people. There are several possible interpretations of the term "Biate," but the most widely accepted one appears to be "worshippers," alluding to a shared or diverse god worshiped by their ancestors dating back thousands of years. As a result, they deduced Biate as *Bia* 'worship' and *Te* 'people' which we can be literally translated as 'worshippers'. It is an undocumented endangered language spoken mainly in Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya and Dima Hasao district of Assam by 19,000 speakers (Ethnologue 2019). In the district of Dima Hasao, Biate is spoken in Fiangpui village which is the headquarter of the entire Biate community from Assam and Meghalaya. On the other hand, Thadou is one of the recognized tribal languages in Manipur. The name of the language 'Thadou pao' directly translates to 'Thadou language'. The language's name, however, has been up for controversy because of two radical factions that hold opposing views: one is adamantly in favour of Thadou, while the other is in favour of Kuki. The language is mainly spoken in the North-Eastern part of India including Manipur, Nagaland, Assam and some parts of the Myanmar by 1,90,595 speakers according to 2011 census of India. Biate have close affinities with other Kuki-Chin languages like Hrangkhoh, Ranglong, Hmar etc. Thadou also has close affinities with Vaiphei, Gangte, Simte etc.

II. Methodology

The linguistic data for the article is gathered from two sources: primary and secondary. Mostly, the primary approach is used for data collection. For the Biate data, personal interviews were taken in Fiangpui, Dima Hasao district of Assam where the native speakers of Biate language are concentrated. Data for Thadou has been given by the co-author as a native speaker of the language. Apart from these, data was gathered from secondary sources such as books, journals, thesis and internet sources.

1. LANGUAGE CLASSIFICATION

Biate and Thadou belongs to the Kuki-Chin sub-group of the Tibeto-Burman language family. Grierson sub grouped Biate and Thadou along with other similar languages under the Kuki-Chin family in the linguistic

survey of India where he classified many languages under different families. He placed Biате under the Old-Kuki Chin and Thadou under the Northern group.

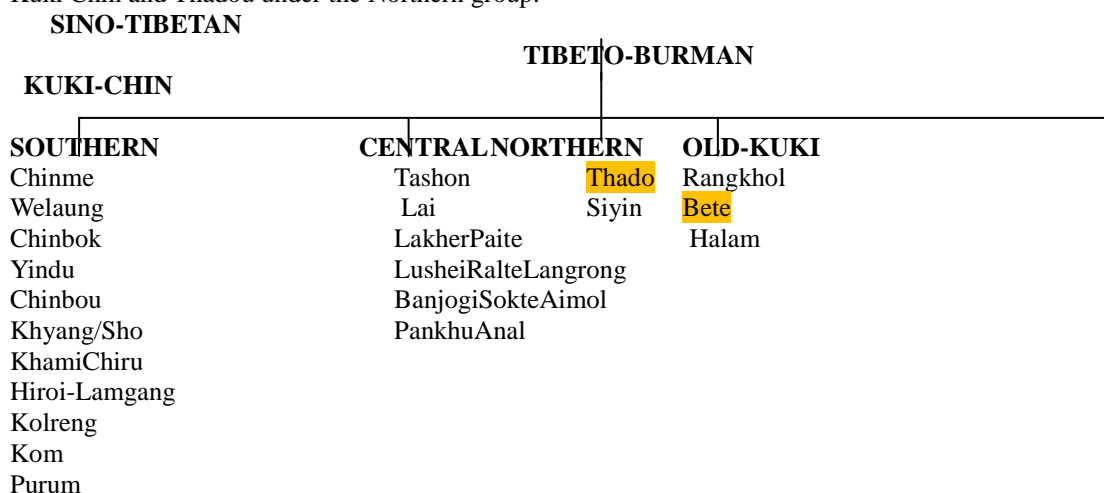


Figure 1: Grierson classification of Kuki-Chin languages (1904)¹

III. GENDER: THEORITICAL BACKGROUND

The grammatical category of gender divides nouns including pronouns into many types. The three primary nouns: feminine, masculine and neuter gender are referred to as grammatical gender. Classification of nouns into three genders accounts for pronominal reference and adjectival concord. Theoretically, it is independent of sex. Natural gender, in contrast, refers to the classification of nouns on the basis of biological sex, as male or female, or animate and inanimate (Stanley, 1997). The majority of the Tibeto-Burman languages lack grammatical gender; instead, natural gender is frequently used in the family. Not all languages in the world have a gender-specific feature. According to Corbett (1991) Gender in some language is central and pervasive, while in others it is totally absent.

2.1 GENDER IN BIATE AND THADOU

Gender in both the languages is marked only with the animate nouns. Biате and Thadou, like many other Kuki-Chin languages, lack grammatical gender. For example, in Biате, gender distinction is made by suffixing *-pa/-pu* for ‘masculine’ and *-nu/-pi* for ‘feminine’. In Thadou, the case of nouns having generic names, male and female are indicated by the suffix *-pa/-pu* ‘masculine’ and *-nu/-pi* ‘feminine’ respectively.

GENDER IN HUMAN NOUNS

Gender distinction for human nouns is made by suffixing *-pa/-pu* for ‘masculine’ and *-nu/-pi* for ‘feminine’ respectively in both Thadou and Biате. It is important to note that the gender markers *-pa/-pu* and *-nu/-pi* are derived from the lexical term *pa* for ‘father’, *pu* for ‘grandfather’, *nu* for ‘mother’ and *pi* for ‘grandmother’. The examples for the gender marking in human nouns are illustrated in Table 1.

MASCULINE			FEMININE		
Biате	Thadou	Gloss	Biате	Thadou	Gloss
<i>lom-pa</i>	<i>zi-pa</i>	‘husband’	<i>lom-nu</i>	<i>zi-nu</i>	‘wife’
<i>e-pa</i>	<i>pa</i>	‘father’	<i>e-nu</i>	<i>nu</i>	‘mother’
<i>reŋ-pa</i>	<i>leŋ-pa</i>	‘king’	<i>reŋ-nu</i>	<i>leŋ-nu</i>	‘queen’
<i>ulianpa</i>	<i>u-pa</i>	‘elder brother’	<i>unainu</i>	<i>u-nu</i>	‘elder sister’
<i>tar-pu</i>	<i>teʔ-pu</i>	‘father-in-law’	<i>tar-pi</i>	<i>teʔ-pi</i>	‘mother-in-law’
<i>epu</i>	<i>pu</i>	‘grandfather’	<i>epi</i>	<i>pi</i>	‘grandmother’

Table 1: Gender in Human Nouns

1. LEXICAL ITEMS

There are also human nouns that distinguish their gender by using opposite lexical items in both the languages.

¹Grierson, G. A 1904 ‘Linguistic Survey of India’ (vol. III Part III)

as seen in Table 2.

MASCULINE			FEMININE		
Biate	Thadou	Gloss	Biate	Thadou	Gloss
<i>ɪlaŋval</i>	<i>gollhaŋ</i>	‘bachelor’	<i>anroŋ</i>	<i>nuŋaʔ</i>	‘spinster’
	<i>paŋoŋ</i>	‘widow’		<i>meiʔai</i>	‘widower’

Table 2: Lexical items

2. PROFESSIONAL TERMS

In case of the professional terms, for both native terms as well as borrowed terms, the male and female gender are indicated by adding the morphemes *-pa/-pu* for ‘masculine’ and *-nu/pi* for ‘feminine’ respectively as shown in Table 3. Interestingly, the use of gender markers *-pi* and *-pu* is not very productive in Biate, whereas in Thadou, both *-pa/-pi* and *-nu/-pi* can be used. However, *-pi* and *-nu* is preferred as it is more formal and serves as an honorific marker.

MASCULINE		FEMININE		GLOSS
Biate	Thadou	Biate	Thadou	
<i>daktor-pa</i>	<i>daktor-pu</i>	<i>daktor-nu</i>	<i>daktor-pi</i>	‘doctor’
<i>pastor-pa</i>	<i>pastor-pu</i>	<i>pastor-nu</i>	<i>pastor-pi</i>	‘pastor’
<i>zirtirtu-pa</i>	<i>zilkuy-pu</i>	<i>zirtirtu-nu</i>	<i>zilkuy-pi</i>	‘teacher’
<i>isuak-pa</i>	<i>soʔ-pa</i>	<i>isuak-nu</i>	<i>soʔ-nu</i>	‘servant’
<i>inru-pa</i>	<i>guʔsa-pa</i>	<i>inru-nu</i>	<i>guʔsa-nu</i>	‘robber’

Table 3: Professional terms

ii. GENDER IN ANIMATE NON-HUMAN NOUNS

The gender of non-human nouns in both the language is not typically indicated, but if it is necessary to do so, then *-tsal/-tʰlaŋ* is used to indicate masculine and *-pui* is used to indicate feminine in Biate. Similarly, in Thadou *-tsal* for masculine and *-pi* for feminine are suffixed to the generic noun. In the case of Biate, the suffix *-tsal* and *-tʰlaŋ* are used to denote horned and hornless animals respectively. On the other hand, in the case of Thadou, it is significant to note that the suffix *-pi* for feminine gender is more closely related with motherhood rather than feminine gender. For instance, a young dog is simply called *uitsa* and not *uitsa-pi*. In other words, animals with the suffix *-pi* are considered to be female and to have given birth. Additionally, animals with higher qualities, superior or larger in size are also indicated by the suffix *-pi*. For example, *sai-pi* for ‘elephant’, *kei-pi* for ‘tiger’, *sam-pi* for ‘python’ and *vom-pi* ‘bear’.

Generic Name		MASCULINE		FEMININE		GLOSS
Biate	Thadou	Biate	Thadou	Biate	Thadou	
<i>meŋ</i>	<i>meŋ-tsa</i>	<i>meŋ-tʰlaŋ</i>	<i>meŋ-tsal</i>	<i>meŋ-pui</i>	<i>meŋ-pi</i>	‘cat’
<i>ui</i>	<i>ui</i>	<i>ui-tʰlaŋ</i>	<i>ui-tsal</i>	<i>ui-pui</i>	<i>ui-pi</i>	‘dog’
<i>vok</i>	<i>voʔtsa</i>	<i>vok-tʰlaŋ</i>	<i>voʔtsal</i>	<i>vok-pui</i>	<i>voʔ-pi</i>	‘pig’
<i>sihal</i>	<i>siʔal</i>	<i>sihal-tʰlaŋ</i>	<i>siʔal</i>	<i>sihal-pui</i>	<i>siʔal-pi</i>	‘fox’
<i>kel</i>	<i>keltsa</i>	<i>kel-tsal</i>	<i>kel-tsal</i>	<i>kel-pui</i>	<i>kel-pi</i>	‘goat’
<i>si-al</i>	<i>boŋ</i>	<i>sial-tsal</i>	<i>boŋ-tsal</i>	<i>sial-pui</i>	<i>boŋ-pi</i>	‘cow’
<i>seloi</i>	<i>loi</i>	<i>seloi-tsal</i>	<i>loi-tsal</i>	<i>seloi-pui</i>	<i>loi-pi</i>	‘buffalo’
<i>sarku</i>	<i>saku</i>	<i>sarku-tsal</i>	<i>saku-tsal</i>	<i>sarku-pui</i>	<i>sarku-pi</i>	‘porcupine’
<i>saipui</i>	<i>saipi</i>	<i>saipui-tsal</i>	<i>saipi-tsal</i>	<i>saipui-nu</i>	<i>saipi</i>	‘elephant’

Table 4: Gender in Animate Non-Human Nouns

iii. GENDER IN INSECTS, BIRDS, WORMS AND REPTILES

Gender is not indicated for insects, birds, worms and reptiles in both the languages with exception of hen and cock where *-k^hoŋ* indicates masculine and *-pui* indicates feminine in Biate and in Thadou-*tsal* and *-pi* are used to indicate masculine and feminine. This is shown in Table 5, Table 6 and Table 7.

Biate	Thadou	Gloss
<i>p^harvali</i>	<i>vapal</i>	'pigeon'
<i>va-ak</i>	<i>va-a?</i>	'crow'
<i>vatok</i>	<i>vatot</i>	'duck'
<i>tokorai</i>	<i>vahoŋ</i>	'peacock'
<i>riki</i>	<i>kipi</i>	'parrot'
<i>rimu</i>	<i>mu</i>	'eagle'
<i>ik^huai</i>	<i>k^hoi</i>	'bee'
<i>dumade</i>	<i>ŋeŋtsal</i>	'firefly'
<i>p^helep</i>	<i>mit^ha?</i>	'butterfly'
<i>sajir</i>	<i>si?mi</i>	'ant'
<i>ik^hai</i>	<i>k^haolaŋ</i>	'cockroach'
<i>uifom</i>	<i>t^hak^hoŋ</i>	'mantis'
<i>riluŋ</i>	<i>luŋmetso</i>	'caterpillar'
<i>riti</i>	<i>tsiŋliŋ</i>	'centipede'

Table 5: No gender marking in insects and birds

MASCULINE			FEMININE		
Biate	Thadou	Gloss	Biate	Thadou	Gloss
<i>ar-k^hoŋ</i>	<i>a?-tsal</i>	'cock'	<i>ar-pui</i>	<i>a?-pi</i>	'hen'

Table 6: Gender marking in birds

iv. REPTILES

In case of reptiles also gender is not indicated in both Biate and Thadou. Table 7 shows the list of reptiles in both the languages.

Biate	Thadou	Gloss
<i>ole</i>	<i>ole</i>	'crocodile'
<i>satel</i>	<i>sumkoŋ</i>	'tortoise'
<i>irul</i>	<i>gul</i>	'snake'
<i>in-ot</i>	<i>daidep</i>	'lizard'
<i>utrok</i>	<i>ukeŋ</i>	'frog'
<i>sak^himuk</i>	<i>gulpi</i>	'cobra'

Table 7: Reptiles

v. UNIVERSE TERMS

In universe terms, Biate and Thadou do not exhibit grammatical gender as it is shown in table 8. In the context of Biate, it is important to note that the term 'earthquake' also goes by the name '*ninu-pui*'. The *-pui* in this instance, however, refers to the earthquake's magnitude rather than the gender marker that is applied to non-human nouns.

Biate	Thadou	Gloss
<i>ini</i>	<i>nisa</i>	'sun'
<i>it^hla</i>	<i>l^ha</i>	'moon'
<i>arsi</i>	<i>a?si</i>	'stars'
<i>sum</i>	<i>mei</i>	'clouds'
<i>it^hlaŋ</i>	<i>moul</i>	'mountain'

<i>i^hli</i>	<i>hui</i>	'air'
<i>tuiduŋ</i>	<i>vaduŋ</i>	'river'
<i>tuipui</i>	<i>tuik^haŋlen</i>	'ocean'
<i>tuik^haŋlian</i>	<i>tuik^haŋlen</i>	'sea'
<i>ramtsar</i>	<i>nelgam</i>	'desert'
<i>ninu</i>	<i>liŋpi</i>	'earthquake'
<i>rua</i>	<i>go</i>	'rain'
<i>nim ikai</i>	<i>munkai</i>	'land slide'
<i>irial</i>	<i>giel</i>	'hailstones'
<i>ripui</i>	<i>pul</i>	'pandemic'
<i>k^huari</i>	<i>van ki^hiŋ</i>	'thundering'
<i>k^hot^hlar</i>	<i>kolp^he</i>	'lightening'

Table 8: Universe Terms

vi. NEUTER GENDER

All the inanimate nouns are considered as neuter gender. Consider the following examples in table 9.

Biata	Thadou	Gloss
<i>tukver</i>	<i>mu^hoŋ</i>	'window'
<i>kotk^har</i>	<i>kot</i>	'door'
<i>zalmun</i>	<i>zalk^hun</i>	'bed'
<i>meiser</i>	<i>t^haomei</i>	'lamp'
<i>lek^ha</i>	<i>lek^ha</i>	'book'
<i>t^hiŋkuŋ</i>	<i>t^hip^huŋ</i>	'tree'
<i>tui</i>	<i>tui</i>	'water'
<i>tsi</i>	<i>tsi</i>	'salt'
<i>dar</i>	<i>da</i>	'bell'

Table 9: Neuter gender

IV. CONCLUSION

Gender is not a universal feature in the structure of the languages of the world. Corbett (1991) rightly pointed out that in some languages gender is central and pervasive, while in others it is totally absent. Biata and Thadou do not have grammatical gender. Gender is only a lexical feature and has no role in showing grammatical relationship between the nouns and other categories in the sentence. In both the languages, gender is only marked for animate nouns. Gender for human nouns is made by suffixing the morpheme *-pa/-pu* for 'masculine' and *-nu/-pi/-ni* for 'feminine' respectively in both the languages. For non-human animate nouns in Thadou, the masculine marker is *-tsal* and the feminine marker *-nu*. In Biata, the masculine marker is *-tsal* but the feminine marker is *-pui*. In case of insects and birds, gender is not marked in both the languages.

SYMBOLS

- ŋ: Velar nasal
- ʔ: Glottal stop
- ^h: Aspirated
- ts: Alveolar affricate

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