

# THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

## Gender Specific Features of Mising Language

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### Abstract:

Gender can be distinguished as a type of noun classification strategy. Gender is a noun class system which is composed of two or three classes; nouns that have human male and female referents tend to be in separate classes. Other nouns that are categorized in the same way in the language may not be categorized by any correlation with natural sex distinctions. The present paper explores the interaction between noun classification and evaluative gender distinction and describes different categories of the linguistic gender in Mising language.

**Keywords :** Gender, Noun, Feminine, Masculine, Animate

### 1. Introduction

Gender is a grammatical category which classifies the nouns including pronouns into some distinct categories. In most cases the division is along the alignment of 'masculine' and 'feminine'. Languages which marked grammatical gender visualize each noun as either 'masculine' and 'feminine' and other word classes such as adjectives and verbs are also bound with the subject or object nouns by gender agreement.

Gender is considered as the most perplexing of the grammatical categories (Corbett, 1999). There is great variability among gender systems across languages. Agreement relations may involve determiners, adjectives, verbs and sometimes even adverbs and conjunctions.

Gender classes can sometimes reflect a semantic category, relating properties of the elements of the class denoted by the noun and the grammatical gender. The most common characteristic expressed by gender is natural sex, followed by the contrast [ $\pm$ animate] and [ $\pm$ rational] (Corbett, op cit). In spite of the fact that gender classes can sometimes reflect a semantic category, and, in fact it is possible to say that gender classes might have originated on the basis of semantics, such motivation does not seem sufficient to provide a definition of gender (Name, 2002). Perhaps, gender is better defined on grammatical basis. Gender can be defined as "a system in which the class to which a noun is assigned is reflected in the forms that are taken by other elements syntactically related to it" (Mathews 1997, Corbett 1991). Gender categorization is not a grammatical prerequisite in Mising, but it maintains a kind of gender system in a broad sense in respect of the higher classes of animate nouns mostly on the basis of natural gender or biological sex.

### 2. Linguistic Background

Almost all scholars agree that Mising language belongs to the great Tibeto-Burman family of language, its other sister languages being Abor, Miri and Dafla. The largest concentration of Mising speaking people is found in parts of upper Assam; mainly in the southern districts of Tinsukia, Sivasagar, Gulaghat, Dibrugarh and on the northern bank of the river Brahmaputra it includes Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Sunitpur. Mising refers to both the language and the speakers of the language. Miri the exonym of Mising; in earlier days, people of Assam used to refer them as Miri. Mising itself may be divided into seven speech varieties, i.e., Pagro, Delu, Dambuk, Oyan, Moying, Samuguriya, Sayang. The present study belongs to the Pagro Sub-group.

### 3. Result and Discussion

#### 3.1. Classification of Nouns – Human vs. Non-Human

Gender distinction of nouns in Mising is largely dependent on two basic categorization of the noun such as +animate and –animate. The nouns of +animate category shows further sub-division of +human and –human.

##### 3.1.1. The +Human Class

The male and female contrast of +human nouns is denoted by means of suppletion. Against some words referring to masculine gender there are corresponding lexical items referring to feminine. For example:

**Masculine**

/milbong/	'male', 'husband'
/ya:me:/	'juvenile boy'
/ao/	'son'
/bíro/	'brother'
/míjng/	'old man'

**Feminine**

/néng/	'female', 'wife'
/mímbír/	'juvenile girl'
/omé/	'daughter'
/bírmé/	'sister'
/miné/	'old woman'

**3.1.2. Gender of Kinship Terms**

Mising kinship terms could be viewed from two angles – (i) terms of address and (ii) terms of reference. Whereas the terms of reference differentiate gender in the same way as in the preceding section the terms of address have a morphological feature of their denoting gender contrast. In the case of the latter, the first syllable of the root forms of the terms of address, except those which have no terms or reference for both the masculine and feminine, is replaced by the prefix {na-} or {ya-}.

**3.1.2.1. Terms of Address****Masculine**

/ba:bu/	Father'
/ba:boi/	Father's youger Brother, Mother's youger Sisters'
	Husband
/babatta/	Father's elder Brother, Mother's elder Sisters'
	Husband
/kakí/	Mother's Brother, Father's Sisters' Husband, Husband's Father

**Feminine**

/ou:yo/	Mother
/yowoi/	Father's younger Brothers' Wife, Mother's younger Sister
/koatta/Atta/	Father's elder brothers' Wife, Mother's elder Sister
/nanyi/	Father's Sister, Husband's Mother, Wife's Mother, Mother's Brothers' Wife

**3.1.2.2. Terms of Reference**

Few more examples of gender distinction for terms of reference by suppletion are given below -

<b>Kinship term</b>	<b>Masculine</b>	<b>Kinship term</b>	<b>Feminine</b>
/ba:bu/ -	/a-bu/ 'father'	/na:né/ -	/a-né/ 'mother'
/ta:to/ -	/a-to/ 'grandfather'	/ya:yo/ -	/a-yo/ 'grandmother'
/ba:boi/ -	/a-bboi/ 'paternal uncle'	/na:nyi/ -	/a-nyi/ 'paternal aunt'
/ka:kí/ -	/a-kí/ 'maternal uncle'	/na:noi/ -	/a-nnoi/ 'maternal aunt'

**3.1.3. Gender Neutral Terms**

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 using attributively some gender distinguishing words such as /milbong/ 'male' and /néng/ 'female' or 'wife' for feminine. They are usually put attributively, but sometimes predicatively also with some common nouns. For some nouns it is possible to use them both attributively and predicatively. For examples:

**3.1.3.1. Attributively****Gender neutral form**

	<b>Masculine</b>	<b>Feminine</b>
/ami:tani/ 'man'	/milbong ami:tani/ 'man'	/né:ng ami:tani/ 'woman'
/ko:/ 'child'	/milbong ko:/ 'child male (=boy)'	/néng ko:/ 'child female (=girls)'
/ru:tom/ 'chief'	/milbong ru:tum/ 'male chief'	/né:ng ru:tum/ 'female chief'

**3.1.3.2. Predicatively**

/ko: milbong/	'child male (=boy)'
/ko: né:ng/	'child female (=girl)'
/tumbo milbong/	'widower'
/tumbo né:ng/	'widow'

**3.1.3.3. Attributively only****Permissible**

/milbong ko:kang/	'male children (=boys)'
/né:ng ko:kang/	'female children (=girls)'

**Not Permissible**

/ko:kang milbong/	'children male'
/ko:kang né:ng/	'children female'

It may be noted that some common nouns undergo a semantic shift if the gender distinguishing word is put in the predicative position, i.e., /ami milbong/ 'husband of someone', /ami né:ng/ 'wife of someone' etc.

### 3.1.4. Gender of Human Class of Animate Nouns

The gender of the higher class of –human class of animate nouns is morphologically marked by {-bo} (derived from /abo/ ‘father’) for masculine and {-né} (derived from /ané/ ‘mother’) for feminine gender. The morphological process is not merely a process of suffixation, but a morphological unification of the two final syllables of two different words by way of aphaeresis resulting in a portmanteau formation of words compounded with the further feature that the initial syllable of the root morpheme is deleted. To be precise the last syllable of a common noun is blended with the first syllable of /abo/ or /ané/ in a typical way of compounding. For example:

<b>Gender neutral forms</b>	<b>Masculine</b>		<b>Feminine</b>
/iki:/ ‘dog’ + /abo/ ‘father’	= /ki:bo/	/iki:/ + /ané/ ‘mother’	= /kiné/
/sité/ ‘elephant’ + /abo/	= /tébo/	/site/ + /ané/	= /tené/
/péjab/ ‘duck’ + /abo/	= /jabbo/	/pejab/ + /ané/	= /jabné/
/eyég/ ‘pig’ + /abo/	= /yégbō/	/eyég/ + /ané/	= /yegné/
/menjég/ ‘buffalo’ + /abo/	= /jégbo/	/menjég/ + /ané/	= /jegné/
/gure/ ‘horse’ + /abo/	= /rebo/	/gure/ + /ané/	= /rené/

However, exclusion occurs in /porog/ ‘fowl’ of which the masculine form is /rokpo/ instead of /rogbo/, while the feminine form follows the same device as illustrated in the preceding section. On the other hand, the speakers have an option to use one form for the other as follows:

/milbong iki:/	for /ki:bo/
/milbong péjab/	for /jabbo/
/milbong menjég/	for /jégbo/
/néng gure/	for /rené/
/néng eyég/	for /yégne/
/néng menjég/	for /jégne/

### 3.1.5. Gender-Neutral +Animate Nouns

The gender neutral +animate class of nouns under –human category includes those nouns which can by no means be classed in terms of ‘male’ or ‘female’; e.g.,

/tapum/	‘worm’
/dorkang/	‘earthworm’
/popír/	‘butterfly’
/ongo/	‘fish’
/tabí/	‘sanke’
/merang/	‘ant’
/tatig/	‘frog’

However, these nouns also are occasionally distinguished by using /milbong/ and /néng/ when specially required but this those not seem to be a regular structure.

### 3.1.6. Gender of –Animate Nouns

Usually, the –animate class of nouns do not distinguished gender, they are gender-neutral. However, arbitrary sex-assignment, meaning thereby gender-assignment to such objects or abstract things or even to the parts of the body is also not uncommon in the language. The size, shape, dimension etc. of the objects only nationally determine the gender of such nouns. Here literary conventions are the rule. For example:

/po:lo/	‘moon’, conceived as masculine
/do:nyi/	‘sun’, conceived as feminine
/longé/	‘the thumb’ conceived as feminine
/pédong/	‘rainfall’ conceived as feminine
/yongmo/	‘iron’ conceived as masculine

## 4. Conclusion

The gender distinction is not a grammatical requirement in Mising; the gender of the nouns have no bearing upon the ‘adjectives’ and ‘verbs’. As we have shown that the gender reference in Mising is nothing but the biological sex reference of the +animate nouns. Therefore, it is restricted to the human nouns and the higher class or non-human animate nouns. Some words refer to ‘female’ and thus they are feminine. A host of other words are gender-neutral; to refer to their masculine counterpart some words referring to ‘male’ can be used attributively or predicatively. Similarly, to refer to the feminine, words referring to ‘female’ have to be so used. Mising does not have a neat system of affixation to derive feminine forms out of root masculine forms on a regular basis. Thus, it appears that the gender distinction in Mising is only a requirement of meaning.

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