Gender marking in Yimkhiung: A Preliminary Analysis

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Abstract

Gender is a category of considerable importance in all languages (Haig, 2000) yet often it has been considered as a trivial topic. In some languages gender is central and pervasive, while in others it is totally absent (Corbett 1991: 1). Therefore, this paper is an attempt to describe the gender system found in Yimkhiung, a Tibeto-Burman language spoken in North-East India. The paper aims to discuss how gender is marked, and the kinds of markers employed in distinguishing the masculine and feminine gender with regard to human and non-human entity.

Keywords - Yimkhiung, Tibeto-Burman, natural gender, lexical gender.

1. Introduction

The term 'Yimkhiung'[1] (ISO 639-3: yim) refers to both the people as well as the language. Previously, they were known by the name Yimchunger/Yimchünger. It is a lesser known language spoken mainly in Shamator and Kiphire districts of Nagaland, a linguistically diverse state. As per 2011 census the total population of the Yimkhiung is recorded as 74,647[2]. The language comprises of five varieties namely; Chirr, Mukury, Longpur, Phenunger, and Langa which are unintelligible. In this regard, Langa is used as the standard variety. Therefore, the data for this paper is based from the Langa speakers of Shamator district

The language belongs to Tibeto-Burman (henceforth TB) and it is classified under Ao group as "Yimchungrü" by Burling (2003). Like other Naga languages, Yimkhiung does not have its own script. They use roman letter with an addition of the vowel 'ü'. The language exhibits its TB feature where it shows agglutinative as well as tonality. Structurally, it is verb final and exhibit postposition. Further, there is no verb agreement or grammatical gender in the language

2. Methodology

The data for this study is drawn from primary and secondary source. Primary source includes sentences, narratives, and personal interview with the native speakers from Shamartor district during the researcher field trip in the month of August, 2022. Further, the data were also consulted with native speakers in Kohima town. Secondary source were obtained from thesis, articles, journals and books.

3. Previous work

As aforementioned, Yimkhiung is an under studied language. The only linguistic work on morphology was done by Raguibou and Borah (2021) "Morphology of Yimchunger". They briefly described on gender under nominal categories. In their data they presented four gender markers namely /-puʔ/, /-pe/, /-puŋ/ and /-tre/. The marker /-puʔ/ was marked for masculine; /-pe/ for feminine; /-puŋ/ for non-human masculine and /-tre/ for non-human feminine. The present study is in agreement with their findings and aims to provide detail description on the present paper.

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[1] They also called themselves as Yimkhiungrü.

[2] https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yimkhiung_Naga.

Gender in Yimkhiung

The word gender is derived from "Latin genus, via Old French gendre, and originally meant 'kind' or 'sort'" Corbett (1991:1). Hockett (2006: 231) defined gender as "classes of nouns reflected in the behavior of associated words". Doleschal (2015: 1159) defined gender marking "as a way of explicitly signalling that a linguistic expression refers to a male or female being (person or animal)". As such, gender "relates to the property of extra-linguistic (i.e "natural" or "biological") femaleness or maleness" (Hellinger & Bußmann, 2001:6)

Singh (1985: 121) pointed out that "most languages and dialects of the Tibeto-Burman family do not have grammatical gender". Likewise, gender in Yimkhiung is determined on the basics of natural or biological sexes as male and female. Further, like other TB languages such as Bodo and Hajong (Narzary, 2017), Sümi (Mughalivi, 2021) inanimate entities are unmarked. Therefore, gender marking in Yimkhiung is found only in animate entity. In human nouns gender is classified into two categories namely morphological and lexical. On the other hand, non-human nouns are marked only morphologically. It is to be noted that, gender marking in human and non-human entities are expressed by using different gender markers.

The study analyze four main markers namely /-puʔ/, /-pe/, /-puŋ/ and /-tɹe/. Besides these markers, Yimkhiung also employ markers such as /-la/, and /-paʔ/ in proper noun; /-to/ and /-lə/ is expressed for distinguishing non-virgin and virgin females [-human].

The paper is structured as follows, in (§3.1) morphological gender marking in animate [+ human] is discussed, in (§3.1.1) gender marking in agentive noun is discussed, in (§3.1.2) kinship term and common noun, in (§3.1.3) gender in pronominal, in (§3.1.4) gender marking in proper noun, in (§3.1.5) lexical gender, in (§4) morphological gender marking in animate [-human] is discussed, in (§ 4.4) virgin and non-virgin distinction is described and section 5 provides conclusion.

3.1 Morphological gender marking in animate [+human]

In morphological marking, the gender is expressed by /-puʔ/ for 'male' and /-pe/ for 'female' which is derived from the kinship term /puʔɹə/ 'father' and /peɹə/ 'mother'[3].The morphemes /puʔ/ and /pe/ do not bear any complete meaning when it occurs on its own therefore they function as bound morphemes.

As Doleschal (2015: 1167) opines "affixation is arguably the most varied and best studied means of gender marking". Similarly, in Yimkhiung the markers /-puʔ/ and /-pe/ can be either prefixed or suffixed to the generic form to distinguish the gender in humans. However, prefixation is found to be more productive. It is also to be noted that the markers /-puʔ/ and /-pe/ is marked only for human entity.

In Yimkhiung, gender marking in humans can be found in agentive noun, kinship term, pronominal, and personal name which are morphologically marked by using /-puʔ/ and /-pe/ to specify specific gender. On the other hand lexical distinction is found in few kinship term and common noun which consist of opposite term (§3.1.5).

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[3] The kinship term /puʔɹə/ and /peɹə/ is the general term for father and mother in Yimkhiung.

3.1.1 Agentive noun

The agentive noun can be morphologically marked by /-puʔ/ and /-pe/ to indicate specific gender in Yimkhiung. Generally, the agentive noun takes the nominalizer /-ɹə/. However, in gender marking, the agentive noun undergoes a morpho-phonological change whereby the nominalizer /-ɹə/ in the generic form gets deleted when it is suffixed by the gender marker as shown in table 1. For instance, the generic form for singer is /kʰəntsʰəɹə/ which is derived from the verb /kʰəntsʰə/ meaning 'sing' and this generic form can be referred to both the genders in general. However, in order to specify the specific gender as male and female singer, the gender marker /-puʔ/ and /-pe/ is suffixed to the generic form to form gender distinction. In this process, the final syllable /-ɹə/ or the nominalizer gets deleted and becomes /kʰəntsəpuʔ/ meaning 'male singer' and /kʰəntsəpe/ 'female singer'.

Generic form	Masculine	Feminine
/kʰəntsəɹə/ 'singer'	/kʰən-tsʰə-puʔ/ song-do-M 'male singer'	/kʰən-tsʰə-pe/ song-do-F 'female singer'
/saŋjuɹə/ 'teacher'	/saŋju-puʔ/ teach-M 'male teacher'	/saŋju-pe/ teach-F 'female teacher'
/akʰeɹə/ 'student'	/akʰe-puʔ/ student-M 'male student'	/akʰe-pe/ student-F 'female student'

Table 1: Gender marking in agentive noun

Given examples (1) to (3) provided paired sentential form for masculine and feminine gender of agentive noun.

1) a.   kʰəntsʰə-pe   ʧu   i-məjamɹə   aʔ
        sing-F   TOP 1SG.POSS-friend   COP
        'The female singer is my friend.' (elicited)

   b.   kʰəntsʰə-puʔ ʧu   i-məjamɹə   aʔ
        sing-M   TOP 1SG.POSS-friend   COP
        'The male singer is my friend.' (elicited)

2) a.   ha   akʰe-pe   ʧu   akʰekʰi-ʧʰiŋ   tsə-tak   laʔ
        DEM.PROX   student-F   TOP   study-PP   good-SUPR   DECL
        'This female student is very studious.' (elicited)

   b.   ha   akʰe-puʔ   ʧu   akʰekʰi-ʧʰiŋ   tsə-tak   laʔ
        DEM.PROX   student-M   TOP   study-PP   good-SUPR   DECL
        'This male student is very studious.' (elicited)

3) a.   hoʧu   tsʰaŋju-puʔ   ʧu   tsʰaŋjukʰi-ʧʰiŋ   tsə-tak   laʔ
        DEM.DIST teach-M   TOP   teach-PP   good-SUPR   DECL
        'That male teacher is very good in teaching.' (elicited)

b. hoʧu   tsʰaŋju-pe   ʧu   tsʰaŋjukʰi-ʧʰiŋ   tsə-tak   laʔ
    DEM.DIST teach-F   TOP   teach-PP   good-SUPR DECL
    'That female teacher is very good in teaching.' (elicited)

3.1.2 Kinship term and common noun

Under this category, few kinship term and common noun [+human] of opposite genders are marked by the human gender markers /-puʔ/ and /-pe/ by means of prefixing and suffixing (§ table 2). As shown in the given table 2, opposite kinship term such as 'father' and 'mother', father's elder brother and father's elder sister employs prefixation where the makers /puʔ-/ and /pe-/ is prefix to the nominalizer /-ɹə/ as /puʔɹə/ and /peɹə/, /puʔto/ and /peto/. On the other hand, suffixation is employed in /jamkʰənpuʔ/ 'husband' and /jamkʰənpe/ 'wife', /kiuloŋtsʰəpuʔ/ 'king' and /kiuloŋtsʰəpe/ 'queen'.

Masculine	Feminine
/puʔ-ɹə/ M-NMLZ 'father'	/pe-ɹə/ F-NMLZ 'mother'
/jamkʰən-puʔ/ married-M 'husband'	/jamkʰən-pe/ married-F 'wife'
/puʔ-to/ M-big 'father's elder brother'	/pe-to/ F-big 'father's elder sister'
/kʰimo-puʔ-ɹə/ without spouse-M-NMLZ 'widower'	/kʰimo-pe-ɹə/ without spouse-F-NMLZ 'widow'
/kiuloŋtsʰə-puʔ/ king-M 'king'	/kiuloŋtsʰə-pe/ king-F 'queen'

Table 2: Gender marking in kinship term and common noun

3.1.3 Pronominal

When it comes to pronoun, similar to most Naga languages the third person singular is distinguished for gender. In Yimkhiung, it is marked by suffixing the human gender marker /-puʔ/ and /-pe/ with /aɲiʔ/ as /aɲipuʔ/ and /aɲiʔpe/. In this manner, the third person singular male is expressed by /aɲiʔpuʔ/ 'he' while for female it is expressed by /aɲiʔpe/ 'she'. Given example (4) exemplify the third person female occurring as the subject and example (5) provides for third person male.

4) aɲiʔpe   ʧu   i-məjam-ɹə   aʔ
    3SG.F   TOP   1SG-friend-NMLZ   COP
    'She is my friend.' (elicited)

5) aɲiʔpuʔ   nə   nə   məkʰiak   laʔ
    3SG.M   FOC   2SG   know   DECL
    'He knows you.' (elicited)

3.1.4 Proper noun

Proper noun like personal names such as male and female are also morphologically marked in Yimkhiung. Female names are commonly marked by /-la/ while some male names are marked by /-paʔ/[4] as shown in table 3. It is observed that gender marking in female names is found to be more consistently marked than male names. Some male names without the male marker are also found to end with /kiu/, /kʰiung/, and /to/ carrying semantic meaning to the name.

Interestingly, it is found that even in other Ao group[5] such as Ao, Sangtam and Chang the same female marker /-la/ is employed in female names. For instance, 'Sentijungla' is a female name in Ao; 'Changsola' in Chang, and 'Thsidipila' in Sangtam. Further, in Ao the male name is also specified by /-pa/ as 'Toshimongba'.

Masculine	Feminine
/ʧʰipoŋ-paʔ/ chipong-M 'Chipongpah'	/tsəɹi-la/ tsuri-F 'Tsurila'
/hanpʰu-paʔ/ hanpʰu-M 'Hanphupa'	/hanpʰu-la/ hanphu-F 'Hanphula'
/tsʰanʧi-paʔ/ thsanji-M 'Thsanjiba'	/soʃi-la/ soshi-F 'Soshila'

Table 3: Gender marking in Pronoun

3.1.5 Lexical gender

Lexical gender refers to those lexical specifications of noun which carries "the semantic property [female] or [male] respectively, which may in turn relate to the extra-linguistic category of referential gender (or "sex referent")" (Hellinger & Bußmann, 2001:7)". 'It is an important parameter in the structure of kinship terminologies, address term, and a number of basic, i.e. frequently used personal pronouns' (ibib, 2001). Though some kinship term and common nouns takes gender markers as discussed in the above sub-section, yet some are morphologically unmarked. Such nouns are lexically realized for gender by their meaning. These instances are found in kinship or address term and in opposite lexical pairs as in shown in table 4. Further, in Yimkhiung most address term takes the non-relational marker /a/ which can be dropped when it occurs with the personal pronoun (§ example 7-10).

Masculine	Feminine
/apə/ 'grandfather'	/aʧi/ 'grandmother'
/akʰiuŋ/ 'elder brother'	/aʧʰi/ 'elder sister'
/akə/ 'uncle'	/aɲi/ 'aunty'
/atʰɹənəŋtsən/ 'refers to a young man'	/anənəɹə/ 'young lady'

Table 4: Lexical gender marking

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[4] Orthographically it is usually written as 'pa' or 'ba' however phonetically it is realized as /paʔ/.
[5] Burling (2003) classification.

Examples of lexical term in sentential form are illustrated in (6) to (11).

6) apə   nə   a-tsʰəɹətsʰəɹə-po   kʰiak
    grandfather AGT   3SG-POSS-grandchildren-PLU   DOM
    məŋəʔməhi ʧĩʔ-to
    bless   give-PST
'The grandfather blessed his grandchildren (when they visited him)'. (elicited)

7) i-ʧĩ   nə   nə-ki   ʧipə   jukʰian   kʰian
    1SG.POSS-grandmother AGT 2SG-DAT forefather story   narrate
    huʔ-paʔ
    show-IRR
'My grandmother will narrate a folkstory to you.' (elicited)

8) aɲiʔpuʔ   ʧu   i-kʰiuŋ   azopə   aʔ
    3SG.M   TOP   1SG.POSS-brother   elder   COP
'He is my elder brother.' (elicited)

9) atəso   i-ʧʰi   ʃe   kuʃaŋ-nə   jin-a-tsəʔ-a   paʔ-to
    earlier 1SG.POSS-sister   also kushang-AGT   sell-SEQ-eat-SIM   SEQ-PST
     'Earlier my sister (elder) was also sold by Kushang.' (text)

10) i-ɲi   soʃila   nə   hiŋ   kiak   kʰuk   laʔ
    1SG-aunt soshila AGT thread weave can   DECL
'My aunty Soshila can weave.' (elicited)

11) atʰɹənəŋtsəŋ   kʰəlaŋ-ʧunə api-ʧu kʰite məɹəʔte tsʰə-to   təʧʰo
    young man   one-AGT   her-TOP very like   happen-PST   HRY
     'A young man happened to like her.' (text)

4. Morphological gender marking in animate [-human]

Gender marking in non-human is morphologically marked, yet it is limited. There are two main markers for expressing gender in animate [-human] noun namely: /-puŋ/ and /-tɹe/ by suffixing to the generic form as shown in table 5. The marker /-puŋ/ is marked for masculine and /-tɹe/ for common feminine gender. Generally, in most speech discourse the generic term is expressed for both the gender. However, the gender markers are expressed when the distinction for specific gender arises as in domesticated animals such as dog, pig, chicken etc. It can also be expressed for birds and non-domesticated animals as well.

Generic form	Masculine	Feminine(common term)
/tʰunu/ 'chicken'	/tʰunu-puŋ/ chicken-M 'cock/rooster'	/tʰunu-tɹe/ chicken-F 'hen'
/kʰiʔnu/ 'dog'	/kʰiʔnu-puŋ/ dog-M 'drake'	/kʰiʔnu-tɹe/ dog-F 'bitch'

/ʃiʔməʧʰi/ 'deer'	/ʃiʔməʧʰi-puŋ/ deer-M 'buck'	/ʃiʔməʧʰi-tɹe/ deer-F 'doe'
/ɣəʔtʰəɹaŋ/ 'blyth's tragopan'	/ɣəʔtʰəɹaŋ-puŋ/ tragopan-M 'blyth's tragopan (male)'	/ɣəʔtʰəɹaŋ-tɹe/ tragopan-F 'blyth's tragopan (female)'

Table 5: Gender marking in non-human noun

4.1 Virgin and non-virgin

A notable gender feature in non-human feminine is that, the females are distinguished on the basis of virgin and non-virgin The marker used for this distinction is marked by /-to/ and /-lə/ by suffixing to the common feminine term. The marker /-to/ is marked for all non-virgin which is homophonous with the past marker[6] specifying that the non-animate female had produced an offspring as shown in table 6. On the other hand, those virgin non-human females which have not produce an offspring are marked by /-lə/. Such distinction can be expressed in domesticated animals, non-domesticated animals and birds that can be distinguished for such distinction.

Feminine (non-virgin)	Feminine (Virgin)
/tʰunu-tɹe-to/ chicken-F-NON.VIR 'hen'	/tʰunu-tɹe-lə/ chicken-F-VIR 'hen'
/kʰiʔnu-tɹe-to/ dog-F-NON.VIR 'bitch'	/kʰiʔnu-tɹe-lə/ dog-F-VIR 'bitch'
/kʰiaknu-tɹe-to/ pig-F-NON.VIR 'sow'	/kʰiaknu-tɹe/ pig-F-VIR 'sow'
/ʧʰi-tɹe-to/ mithun-F-NON.VIR 'she-mithun'	/ʧʰi-tɹe-lə/ mithun-F-VIR 'she-mithun'

Table 6: Non-human ᴠirgin and non-virgin feminine

Interestingly, offspring and without offspring (or virgin and non-virgin) distinction is also found in Sümi (Mughalivi, 2019) belonging to Angami-Pochuri[7] group. In Sümi, there are three markers for marking non-human female namely /ali/, /ani/, and /aqu/ (§ table 7). The markers /ali/ and /ani/ is employed for marking those female which have not produce an offspring and /aqua/ is marked for those female animate [-human] with an offspring.

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[6] ʧiʔ-to 'gave', see example 6
[7] Burling 2003 classification.

Neutral	Marker	Neutral + Marker
/awu/ 'chicken'	/li/, /ali/	awuli/ ali 'female chicken'
/aʃe/ 'deer'	/ali/	aʃe ali 'female deer'
/awo/ 'pig'	/ni/, /ani/	awoni/ ani 'female pig'
/atsi/ 'dog'	/ani/	atsi ani 'female dog'
/kʰosa/ 'cat'	/qu/, /aqu/	akʰosaqu/aqu 'mother cat'

Table 7: Non-human female marking in Sumi (ibib, 2019, p.65-66)

5. Conclusion

This study has shown that Yimkhiung like any other Tibeto-Burman languages exhibit natural gender and lacks grammatical gender. Further, inanimate gender is also unmarked. In human, gender distinction is expressed in two ways: morphological and lexical. Morphologically, it is expressed by suffixing or prefixing /puʔ/ and /pe/ to the generic form where the former is marked for male and the latter for female. Moreover, it is observed that the gender markers expressed for proper nouns is exhibited even in other Ao group such as Ao, Sangtam and Chang. Additionally, virgin and non-virgin [-human] distinction is also observed in other Naga languages such as Sümi from Angami-Pochuri group. Thus, Yimkhiung shared similar gender features with the other Naga languages as well as Tibeto-Burman languages.

Abbreviations

AGT-   agentive
DAT-   dative
DECL-   declarative
DEM-   demonstrative
DIST-   distal
DOM-   direct object marker
F-   female
FOC-   focus
HRY-   hearsay
IRR-   irrealis
M-   male
PLU-   plural
POSS-   possessive
PP-   post position
PST-   past
PROX-   proximate
SEQ-   sequential converb suffix
SG-   singular
SIM-   simultaneous converb suffix
SUPR-   superlative
TOP-   topic
NMLZ-   nominalizer
NON-VIR-   non-Virgin
VIR-   virgin

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