

Politeness and power: An analysis of Meiteilon suffixes

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INTRODUCTION

Meiteilon has many features that correlate with power relationships. Among these features are the use of verb suffixes, which relate to culturally defined hierarchies of status. Meiteilon morphological suffixes not only indicate politeness but also manifest cultural categories of rank and power relations.

Speakers of Meiteilon organize relationships into different categories using an elaborate system of morphological markers such as the alternations between *-bi ~ pi*, *čə ~ ja*, *si*. These markers reveal information about rank and status. When Meiteilon speakers shift into status indexing speech, they use different suffixes than in common speech.

The suffix *-bi ~ pi* is an honorific suffix in Meiteilon. When *-bi* is followed by command suffix, it both indicates a request and functions as an honorific marker.

1. čak cá - bi - ro
 rice eat - HON-COMD
 ‘Please have your meal’

When *-bi* is followed by the intensive suffix *-ge ~ ke*, it functions as benefactive marker.

2. əy thəbək-tu təw bi-ge
 I work -DET do -BEN-INTN
 ‘I will do the work’ (for you)

čə ~ jə is the reflexive suffix in Meiteilon.

3. tomby -nə isiŋ ədu thək -čə-y
tombi-NOM water DET drink-REF-PRT
'Tombi drank the water herself'
4. čawbə-nə layrik ədu pà-jə-y
chaoba-NOM book DET read-REF-PRT
'Chaoba read the book himself'

When the reflexive suffix -čə ~ jə occurs with the intensive suffix -ge ~ ke, it functions as a politeness marker, as in

5. əy čak ča-jə-ge
I rice eat-POL-INTN
'Let me eat the meal'
6. əy isiŋ thək - čə-ge
I water drink -POL-INTN
'Let me drink water'

The suffix -si is a suggestive suffix in Meiteilon and marks an action about to be performed.

7. ča thək-si
tea drink-SUG
'Let's drink tea'

Linguistic and interactional data are combined here with ethnographic data about Meitei society and cultural beliefs to show how micro-interactions which index status are linked both to larger cultural ideologies about power.

I will discuss the difference between polite speech forms and non-polite speech forms and see how Meiteis and Meiteilon speakers have

the two different speech forms and how power relations between the interlocutors is reflected in these speech forms.

1. The *bi* ~ *pi* suffix

The *-bi* ~ *pi* suffix is an honorific or politeness marker in Meiteilon morphology. In general the suffix *-bi* ~ *pi* is used to make request to a person of supposedly higher status. However, as a general rule in the Meitei speech community, this honorific suffix *-bi* ~ *pi* is required in any situation, whatever may be the relationship between the interlocutors. The form is used for youngsters and individuals of lower status; in these cases, it indicates politeness but without the usual tone of deference. Using of this form of speech in such a context may be visualized from the conversational contract view of politeness in Fraser (1990). In this approach, politeness is an ongoing process; it is the socially expected norm of behavior and participants in conversation are generally aware that they are required to act within the dictates of this code of expected behavior. Being polite is not predicated on making the hearer make feel good but rather on conforming to socially agreed upon codes of good conduct. The Meiteis are ceremonious people and in their intercourse with persons they adhere to certain conventions. Meiteis who generally use polite forms are regarded as cultured.

8. əy-gi pepər ədu əmuk - tə yeŋ- bi - yu

I -POS paper-DET. once only look-BEN-COMD

'Please look at my paper'

9. əy- nə háy - ri - bə- si tá - bi - yu

I -NOM say - PROG -INF-DET listen-BEN-COMD

'Please listen to me'

10. čə - si əmuk- ta thək -pi-yu
 tea-DET once only drink-BEN-COMD
 'Please drink the tea'

In examples (8), (9) and (10) the *-bi ~ pi* politeness marker is used in two situations: one, when a speaker makes a request to a person from whom a favor is sought and, another, when a speaker talks to a person of higher status.

11. əy - gi pəpər - du yeŋ- u
 I -POS paper - DET look-COMD
 'Look at my paper'
12. əy - nə háy -ri - bə - si tá - w
 I -NOM say-PROG-INF-DET listen-COMD
 'Listen to me'
13. čə - si thək - u
 tea - DET drink- COMD
 'Drink the tea'

Examples (11), (12) and (13) are without the politeness marker *-bi ~ pi*. This omission occurs when the speaker is more powerful than the addressee either in age or in social position.

There is another usage of the *-bi ~ pi* form, which indicates volitional politeness (Ide 1989) and which is intended to use linguistic acts to achieve specific goals. In this case, the politeness marker is used independent of one's social position. The use of polite form is manipulative, as the user's intention here is to attain specific objectives and goals. This strategy has a certain level of effectiveness within Meitei society because, even though this usage may be recognized as manipulative, the use of politeness marker *-bi ~ pi* still makes the hearer feel good, as his status is raised a bit.