GENDER IN MEITEILON

Chungkham Yashawanta Singh

Jawaharlal Nehru University

Typologically languages may be divided into those which have grammatical gender (e.g. Indo-European languages) and those which do not (e.g. Finno-Ugric, Chinese, Mongolian, Tibetan, Burmese, Lushai, Ao, etc.). In this second group of languages, one may include a language like modern Persian, which has completely lost its original Indo-European system of gender. Among gender languages, two gender systems distinguishing masculine and feminine, and three gender systems distinguishing masculine, feminine and neuter, are the most common, although developments in these classificatory systems vary widely from language to language.

Grammatical gender is a surface syntactic means for classifying nouns according to their suffix, the correlation between natural sex and grammatical gender being secondary and imperfect (Fodor 1959, Ibrahim 1973). In this gender resembles nominal class systems, since concord or agreement is the most paramount criterion in either type of system. Gender languages have three basic word classes (Ibrahim 1973, Poplack, Pousada, Sankoff 1982):

1. Words with unmarked or marked inherent gender (nouns)

2. Words with marked concord gender (adjectives, etc.)

3. Those with neither (invariable constituents)

Meiteilon, a Tibeto-Burman language of Assam, has limited
gender agreement and limited gender marking on nouns.

1. Noun-adjective gender agreement

We may say roughly that there are three types of agreement
phenomena (Greenberg 1978). The first is that of a noun with its
immediate modifiers in the noun phrase, e.g. adjective, demonstrative
and numeral. The second is predicate agreement, that of a subject noun
with its predicate adjective or demonstrative. Greenberg (1963:93)
has found that gender agreement between noun and verb is far less
frequent than agreement in person and number. The third type of
agreement is in anaphoric use.

In French and Spanish, determiners, most adjectives, and
pronouns must agree in gender with the head noun; participial verbs
also reveal agreement under certain conditions.

In Hindi the noun must agree with adjectives and verbs.

Hindi (1) ǝtchh<u>i</u> lǝrk<u>i</u> gana gaker skul jat<u>i</u> hǝi

          good   girl   song   school   go   copu.

          (A good girl goes to school singing a song)

     (2) ǝtchh<u>a</u> lǝrk<u>a</u> gana gaker skul jat<u>a</u> hǝi

          good   boy   song   school   go   copu.

          (A good boy goes to school singing a song)

English, on the other hand, has no grammatical (non-anaphoric) gender: the nouns of English cannot be classified in terms of agreement with articles, adjectives or verbs (Palmer 1978, Hockett 1976, Gleason 1966, Ibrahim 1973, Greenberg 1978).

Meiteilon does not have a full grammatical gender system. However, some very restricted agreement is maintained, that is human nouns must agree in gender with their immediate adjectives; non-human and inanimate nouns show no gender agreement with modifiers or verbs. (Adjectives may freely precede or follow nouns.)

(3) /məsək   fəzəba̲   pakhəŋ   əma   iroi-ri/

     handsome   boy   one   swimming

     (A handsome boy is swimming)

(4) /məsək   fəzəbi̲   ləisabi   əma   iroi-ri/

     beautiful   girl   one   swimming

     (A beautiful girl is swimming)

These two sentences show the agreement between human nouns and adjectives; in (3) the noun pakhəŋ 'boy' agrees with -a 'masculine marker', and in (4) the noun ləisabi 'girl' agrees with -i 'feminine marker'. But with animals there is no agreement between noun and adjective, as in sentences (5)-(7).

(5) /əŋaŋba   sən-bi   əma   səzik   ca-ri/

     red   cow-she one   grass   eating

     (A red cow is grazing)

(6) /əŋaŋba   sən-laba   əma   səzik   ca-ri/

     red   cow-he   one   grass   eating

     (A red bull is grazing)

(7) /hui-əmom   əcəuba   əma   sida   tum-li/

     dog-she   big   one   here   sleeping

     (A big bitch is sleeping here)

There is also no agreement with inanimate objects:[1]

(8) /əi   θəro   fəzəba   əma   pam-y/

     I   lily   nice   one   like

     (I like a nice lily)

(9) */əi   fəzəbi   θəro   əsi   pam-y/

     I   nice   lily   this   like

     *(I like this nice lily)

(10) /məhak-na   əcəuba   yum   əma   ləi/

     he   big   house   one   buy

     (He buys a big house)

(11) /əi   əsəŋba   θəmbal   əsi   pam-y/

     I   green   lotus   this   like

     (I like this green lotus)

(12) */əi   θəmbal   əsəŋbi   əsi   pam-y/

     I   lotus   green   this like

     *(I like this green lotus)