GENDER IN MEITEILON

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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) ətchhi lərki gana gaker skul jati hai

Good girl song school go copu.

(A good girl goes to school singing a song)

(2) ətchha lərka gana gaker skul jata hai

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) /mææk fazaba pakheq əma iroi-ri/
    handsome boy one swimming
    (A handsome boy is swimming)

(4) /mææk fəzəbi laisabi 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 pakheq 'boy' agrees with -a 'masculine marker', and in (4) the noun laisabi 'girl' agrees with -i 'feminine marker'. But with animals there is no agreement between noun and adjective, as in sentences (5)-(7).

(5) /əŋəŋba sən-bi əma sæzik ca-ri/
    red cow-she one grass eating
    (A red cow is grazing)
(6) /əŋəŋba ən-laba əma əzık 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:

(8) /ei ərəo əzəba əma pam-y/
I lily nice one like
(I like a nice lily)

(9) */ei əzəbi ərəo əsi pam-y/
*I like this nice lily

(10) /məhak-na əcəuba yum əma ləi/
he big house one buy
(He buys a big house)

(11) /ei əsəŋba əmbal əsi pam-y/
I green lotus this like
(I like this green lotus)

(12) */ei əmbal əsəŋbi əsi pam-y/
*I like this green lotus