

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.

14. *ibuŋo iče -gi thəbək - tu əmuk - tə təw- bi - yu*
 dear brother sister-POS work - DET once only do- BEN-COMD
 'Dear brother, please do your sister's work'
15. *ibuŋo iče - gi thəbək - tu əmuk - tə təw*
 dear brother sister- POS work - DET once only do (COMD)
 ' Dear brother do your sister's work'

In examples (14) and (15), the addressee in (14) is likely to do the work sooner than the addressee in (15). The speaker has used the politeness marker *-bi ~ pi* and thus has enhanced the status of the addressee who is younger than the speaker. In example (15) the addressee may feel that the speaker, while asking for a favor, is trying to control or manipulate the addressee, and this may serve as a reason for the hearer to delay or neglect the request of the speaker.

The usage of *-bi ~ pi* suffix may be treated here as a softening device (Brown and Levinson, 1978:5). Here politeness is the temporary avoidance of pressing an obvious power advantage to get willing cooperation from the lower status addressee (Hwang, 1990). The politeness marker *-bi ~ pi* used served here as what Milner has called "verbal lubricants...soothing the vexation of wounded pride and imagined or genuine grievances" (Milner, 1961).

The politeness marker *-bi ~ pi* is utilized either to elevate or to lower the position of the speaker on the social scale. This use derives from its function as a polite/request marker. While making polite/request forms, the status of the addressee is elevated, i.e. the using of the 'hearer-oriented' *-bi ~ pi* raises the status of the addressee.

16. *iče - nə thokpə təw - bi- khro*
 sister-NOM as you please do - BEN- DEF(COMD)
 'Sister, do as you please'

17. əy - bu kəw - bi - rək -u
 I - ACC call - BEN-DTC- COMD
 'Please call me'
18. nəŋ - nə thokpə təw - ro
 you - NOM as you please do - COMD
 'Do as you please'
19. əy - bu kəw - rək -u
 I - ACC call - DTC-COMD
 'Call me'

Examples (16) and (17) are requests directed toward the addressee, who has a higher position than the speaker. Examples (18) and (19) are directed toward an addressee of lower status than the speaker.

Again, in contrast to the earlier examples, there is the usage of *-bi ~ pi*, which is 'speaker- oriented'. This marker raises the status of the speaker above that of the addressee. The politeness marker *-bi ~ pi*, when used in connection with the actions of the speaker, is to be perceived as a speaker-oriented speech form, whereby the position of the speaker is elevated above that of the addressee.

20. nəŋ- gi thəbək - tu əy təw - bi - ge
 your- POS work - DET I do -BEN-INTN
 'I will do your work'
21. wari - du əy həw - dok - pi - yu - rə?
 story - DET I start DIR- BEN- COMD-INT
 'Shall I open the matter?'
22. čak - tu əy thoŋ bi - ro - rə?
 meal-DET I cook -BEN- COMD-INT
 'Shall I cook the meal?'

In examples (20), (21) and (22), the morphological suffix *-bi ~ pi* is used with the implication that the speaker has more power and a greater ability to perform some action than the addressee does. In these cases, the speaker intends to show that he has more power and strength and that the action to be performed is usually not for the benefit of the speaker himself but for the addressee.

23. nəŋ- gi thəbək- tu əy təw - ge
 you-POS work - DET I do - INTN
 'I want to do your work'

24. wari ədu əy həw - dok -u - rə?
 story -DET I start -DIR-COMD-INT
 'Shall I open the matter?'

25. čak - tu əy thoŋ - u - rə?
 meal-DET I cook-COMD-INT
 'Shall I cook the meal?'

In examples (23), (24) and (25), if the speaker is of equal or lower status than the hearer, solidarity prevails between the interlocutors. But whatever the relationship between them, unlike in examples (20), (21), and (22), the act which the speaker is going to perform may or may not be for the benefit of the hearer.

The polite suffix *-bi ~ pi* has another usage in (26), (27), (28), and (29). In these cases, the addressee has more power and thus has the capacity to do favors for the speaker.

26. khura ibuŋo - nə can - bi -bə dəgi əy - su kánno- jə-re
 dear uncle -NOM favored- BEN- INF from I also benefited-BEN-PFT
 'I am benefited as I was favored by uncle'

27. ičema lāk - pi - pa dagi əy nuŋay - jə- re
 sister come -BEN-INF from I happy - BEN-PFT
 ‘I am happy indeed as you favored me by coming’
28. isor - nə thəwjan - bi - bə dəgi əy niŋbə thun- jə- re
 God- NOM blessed -BEN-INF from I hope reach -BEN-PFT
 ‘My dreams are fulfilled as God blessed me’
29. nəŋ- bu nuŋsi ədu - nə háy - bi - bə - ni
 you -ACC love - DET-NOM say -BEN- INF- COP
 ‘I said it because I love you’

2. The -čə ~ jə suffix:

The -čə ~ jə suffix in Meiteilon is also one of the most productive suffixes, having manifold functions, and in general contrasting with the -bi ~ pi suffix. Usually these two suffixes are used reciprocally, i.e., if one interlocutor in a speech act uses -bi ~ pi, the other responds with -čə ~ jə in formal situations.

- 30(a) əy - gi phayl - si əmuk - ta yeŋ - bi - yu
 I -POS file - DET once only look - BEN- COMD
 ‘Please look at my file’

- 30(b) yani əy yeŋ - jə - ge
 yes I look -POL-INTN
 ‘Yes, I will see it’

- 31(a) ŋəsi - di məpan čət - pi - rə - nu
 today-DET outside go-BEN-DUR-NEG
 ‘Please do not go out today’

- 31(b) hoy əy ŋəsi čət - čə - rə - roy
 yes I today go -POL -DUR -NEG
 ‘Yes, I will not go out today’

32(a) mətəm saŋnə - ləw - bi - gə - nu

time long take-BEN-INTN-NEG

'Please do not take much time'

32(b) mətəm saŋnə - ləw - jə - roy

time long take-POL-NEG

'I will not take much time'

In examples (30), (31) and (32), both the participants in the speech act acknowledge the status and power of the other. The initiator begins with a polite form and the respondent replies politely. Either the initiator raises the status of the addressee, while the respondent lowers his status by using *-čə ~ jə*, or the interaction may be considered reciprocal i.e. since the respondent feels that he has been shown respect, so it is his duty to pay respect towards the addressor.

33(a) əy - gi phayl - si əmuk - tə yeŋ - u

I -POS file - DET once only look-COMD

'Look at my file'

33(b) əy yeŋ - ge

I see - INTN

'I will see it'

34(a) ŋəsi - di məpan čət - lə - nu

today-DET outside go-DUR-NEG

'Do not go outside today'

34(b) əy ŋəsi čət -lə - roy

I today go-DUR- NEG

'I will not go out today'

- 35(a) mətəm saŋnə - ləw - gə - nu
 time long take -INTN-NEG
 ‘Do not take much time’

- 35(b) mətəm saŋnə - ləw - roy
 time long take - NEG
 ‘I will not take much time’

In examples (33), (34) and (35), both the participants in the speech act are of equal status, or even if the interlocutors are not of equal status, solidarity prevails between them and hence no politeness markers are required. But non-polite speech forms are generally not used to the superiors.

When the -čə ~ jə suffix is used in an addressee-oriented situation, it indicates that the status of the speaker is lower than that of the addressee. The speaker uses -čə ~ jə to show respect to the addressee.

36. əy thəbək - tu təw - jə - ge
 I work - DET do -POL-INTN
 ‘I wish to do the work’

37. əykhoy khənnə - jə - ri
 we discussing -POL-PROG
 ‘We are discussing (the matter)’

38. mə -nə thəbək - tu təw - jə - ge háy
 he-NOM work - DET do -POL-INTN say
 ‘He says he will do the work’

In examples (36), (37) and (38), the speaker recognizes the superiority of the addressee. He therefore acknowledges the addressee’s presence or power at the time of the interaction. This usage is appropriate for use with superiors like one’s elders, boss, teachers and other status superiors. But this does not mean that such speech forms are completely reserved for those of higher status. This speech form can also be

used to the youngsters and people of a lower status. In such cases it indicates politeness without the usual tone of deference.

39. əy thəbək - tu tǝw - ge

I work - DET do - INTN

'I will do the work'

40. əykhoy khənnə - ri

we discussing -PROG

'We are discussing (the matter)'

41. mə - nə thəbək - tu tǝw - ge háy

he -NOM work -DET do -INTN say

'He says he will do the work'

In examples (39), (40) and (41), the speaker may be of higher or equal status than the addressee. This pattern is usually directed towards inferiors and if directed toward someone of equal status then it usually occurs in an informal setting where solidarity prevails.

The -čǝ ~ jǝ suffix can also be used in an addressor-oriented situation. When it is used in such a situation, it signifies that the status of the speaker is superior to that of the addressee.

42. nəŋ phurit - tu lǝw - jǝ - ro

you shirt -DET take -BEN-COMD

'You have the cloth'

43. čak - tu nəŋ čá - jǝ - ro

meal -DET you eat -BEN-COMD

'You eat the meal'

44. thəbək - tu ma tǝw - jǝ - sənu

work -DET he do-BEN-COMD+ wish

‘ Let him do the work’

In examples (42), (43) and (44), the addressee is of lower status. The *-čə ~ jə* suffix is used here not as a politeness marker but to give permission to have the shirt, eat the meal, or do the work. It is used by people higher on the social scale (either in age or in social position). Among equals the use of this form is rare.

45. *nəj phurit - tu ləw -ro*
 you shirt -DET take-COMD
 ‘ You have the cloth’

46. *čak - tu nə čá - ro*
 meal -DET you eat-COMD
 ‘ You eat the meal’

47. *thəbək - tu ma təw - sənu*
 work -DET he do -COMD
 ‘ Let him do the work’

The examples mentioned in (45), (46) and (47) are similar to the examples in (42), (43), and (44) cited above in that the speaker is of higher status than the addressee. The only difference is that the suffix *-čə ~ jə* is not used here. Such speech forms are usually directed towards those of a lower status.

3. The *-si* suffix:

The suffix *-si* in Meiteilon morphology has the basic meaning ‘let’, but it also has additional uses. If we analyze the marker *-si* semantically, we conclude that it is directed toward equals and toward those of a higher status irrespective of social status and age on formal occasions. The point to be made here is that for equals this *-si* marker is used without the polite marker (*-bi ~ pi*) but for those of a higher status this polite marker is obligatory.

48. čak čá - si
 food eat-SUG
 'Please have a meal'

49. ča thək - si
 tea drink - SUG
 'Please have tea'

In examples (48) and (49), the speaker is asking the addressee to have a meal or tea. The statements can carry two interpretations: it can be speaker inclusive or can be speaker exclusive i.e. the action of having a meal or having tea can be with or without the speaker. Here the speaker of equal status with the addressee.

The suffix *-si* is speaker dependent. Certain social parameters need to be taken into consideration. For example, if the speaker happens to be a close friend of the addressee but has a different social status (education, economic etc.), the speaker would use *-si* suffix in order to show that one sense he is an equal of the addressee (because they are close friends), but at the same time acknowledging the superiority of the addressee in some other sense (e.g. social status).

50. čak čá -w
 food eat - COMD
 'Have a meal'

51. ča thək - u
 tea drink - COMD
 'Have tea'

In examples (50) and (51), mentioned above, the speaker is superior in status to the addressee. The statement is speaker exclusive i.e. the speaker will not participate in the action of having a meal or drink-

ing tea. These statements are usually only directed towards those of inferior status, occurring rarely among those of equal status; and, if it is used with equals, then it occurs only in informal settings where solidarity prevails. But if the speaker is addressing a superior, then the honorific marker *-bi ~ pi* is used along with suffix *-si*.

52. imaybemə ɲayhaktəŋ phəm - bi - si
 mother(+HON) sometime sit - HON-SUG
 ‘Mother, please be seated for a while’

The suffix *-si* when used along with the honorific marker *-bi ~ pi* indicates a high degree of respect toward the addressee. This pattern is used with a high status addressee in a formal setting, as for example in interview situation wherein the addressor wants an answer from the addressee. It is also used in talk shows in radio and on TV, announcements, public gatherings, etc.

53. pabuŋ-nə award-si kəmdəw-na phəŋ-bi-rək-pə-no əmuk-tə
 father-NOM award-DET how - NOM get - HON-DTC-INF-COMD once only
 tak - pi - si
 tell -BEN -SUG
 ‘Father, would you please tell us how you got this award?’

54. imaybemə léŋsin -bi - si
 mother move(+HON)- HON-SUG
 ‘Mother, please be seated.’

55. həwjik əykhoy oja dəgi pawkhum tá - bi - si
 now we teacher from answer hear-BEN-SUG
 ‘Now we will listen the answer from our teacher.’

The examples in (53), (54), (55) are the most polite speech forms in Meiteilon. Use of the suffix *-bi ~ pi* along with suffix *-si* is the most polite speech form in Meiteilon.

There are categories of nouns which are also made polite by the addition of suffix *-si*. These nouns are considered more polite and are used with the descendants of the King by commoners. In earlier times when the monarchy was the prevalent form of government in Manipur, such forms were usually directed toward royalty and nobles. The suffix *-si* was added to nouns in order to address or to refer to king's primary and secondary kin.

Kin term	Gloss
pabuŋ si	'father'
ima si	'mother'
iton si	'uncle'
ičẽm si	'sister (elder)'

However, with the abolition of the monarchy, the power exercised by the royalty has been considerably reduced. Nonetheless royal descendants are still honored despite their lowered status. The suffix *-si* is still used along with the kin terms in addressing the royal descendants.

Table 1 summarise the uses of this morpheme.

TABLE 1. Functions of politeness suffixes

morpheme	function (volitional politeness)	speaker position lowered	politeness value (deference)
-bi ~ pi	verb+bi+COMD	verb+bi+COMD	verb+bi+COMD
-čə ~ jə	verb+čə+INTN	verb+čə+INTN	verb+čə+INTN
si	verb+si	verb+bi+si	verb+bi+si

Conclusions

The central purpose of this paper is to examine certain suffixes in Meiteilon which serve as politeness markers. The suffixes *-bi ~ pi*, *-čə ~ jə*, and *-si*, despite their different meanings and functions, are used in Meiteilon as politeness markers. It has been shown how power relationships between the interlocutors are reflected in the usage of these suffixes. Respect towards those with more status is shown by using polite speech forms. These politeness markers are usually directed to those who are older or of higher social status. An important point to be noted here is that in Meitei society politeness markers are not only used by inferiors to superiors but can also be used by superiors to inferiors to show their cultural refinement.

This paper is essentially an exploratory study. These preliminary findings will hopefully serve as a basis for further investigation.

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ABBREVIATIONS:

ACC=accusative, BEN=Benefactive, COMD=Command, COP=Copula, DEF=Definitive, DET=Determiner, DIR=Directional, DTC=Deitic, DUR=Durative, HON=Honorific, INF=Infinitive, INT=Interrogative, INTN=Intensive, NEG=Negative, NOM=Nominative, PFT=Perfect, POL=politeness, POS=Possessive, PROG=Progressive, SUG=Suggestive, REF=Reflexive

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