

### **Terms of Address in Meiteilon**

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Speech is constructed in response to the circumstances of the moment and is governed by the dictates of a local-social relationship. Between language and speech lies the social structure. The form of the social relationship regulates the options which a speaker selects at both structural and lexical levels. Every speaker is free to choose linguistic forms from the totality of options his language provides him. The choice of particular linguistic forms is governed by the social relationship between the speaker and the hearer. The canons of choice entail planning procedures, which guide the speaker in the production of, and the listener in the reception of speech.

With this as a background, the present study explores the various linguistic forms of address, the principles of choice, and the factors that govern these principles in Meiteilon society.

Many have studied forms of address in various languages, showing significant aspects of this domain. Languages differ in the kinds of terms they use in addressing a person. Brown and Ford (1964) and Ervin-Tripp (1972) have explored terms of address in American English. In other languages, it has been found that, in addition to names, kinship terms are commonly used as terms of address, e.g. in Bengali (Das 1964), and Hindi (Mehrotra 1977). Some studies show that the choice of a term of address in a particular language depends on cultural values and sociological variables, as can be seen in studies by Brown and Gilman (1960), Brown and Ford (1964), Jonz (1975), Kramer (1975), McIntire (1972), Friske (1978) and Bates and Benigni (1975). Moreover, it has also been found that the use of address terms may vary with the speaker's psychological condition, as reflected in, e.g. one's attitude toward the addressee, or one's self-confidence and self-respect. (Moles 1974). Other published studies say that social changes may cause change in patterns of address, e.g. European countries (Brown and Gilman 1960), in Sweden (Paulston 1976, Mitchell 1979) and Indonesia (Wittermans 1967).

Terms of address in Meitei society are determined by many parameters, such as age, hierarchical differences (e.g. between royalty and commoners), kinship, and socioeconomic status.

*Age:* Age is an important deciding factor for terms of address in Meitei society among non-relatives; being even one day older confers 'senior' status. In other Southeast Asian systems, a difference of even 'one day' makes a person socially older (Ervin-Tripp 1976). In Meitei society even a single minute is counted; for example, in a twin-birth, the first born will be taken as older than the second one. Age can often be a more decisive factor than social status for terms of address. The job of hospital orderly, e.g., is low in prestige, but if an orderly is an older person, then he should be addressed with a senior kin term appropriate to his age:

| <i>Age group</i> | <i>Address terms</i>                                    |
|------------------|---|
| Fatherly old     | mamma 'mother's brother'<br>mamo 'id.'<br>khura 'uncle' |
| Brotherly old    | tada 'elder brother'<br>tamo 'id.'                      |
| Sisterly old     | ice 'elder sister'<br>icema 'id.'                       |
| Motherly old     | ine 'father's sister'<br>ima 'mommy'                    |

In addition, the middle name should follow the address term:

$$\text{Address form} = \begin{array}{|l} \text{khura} \\ \text{tada} \\ \text{ice} \\ \text{ine} \\ \text{etc.} \end{array} + \text{Name (middle).}$$

e.g. /ice mery/, /ice rita/, /khura tomba/

*Hierarchical differences (between royalty and commoners):* This society maintains a clear-cut distinction, in terms of address, between royalty and commoners. The two classes use different systems of lexical items. The speaker must select the appropriate term of address according to his own social status:

| <i>Royal terms</i> | <i>Commoner terms</i>         |                                    |
|--------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| ima-si             | ima<br>imaybemma              | 'mommy'                            |
| aygya<br>pabun     | pabun<br>paji<br>baba<br>papa | 'daddy'                            |
| icem-si            | ice<br>icema                  | 'elder sister'                     |
| yambun             | tado<br>tamo<br>tacew<br>dada | 'elder brother'                    |
| iteym-si           | iteyma<br>iteybema            | 'brother's wife'<br>{iteyma+ibema} |
| ine-si             | ine<br>inebema                | 'father's sister'<br>{ine+ibema}   |

There is a sociolinguistic rule that the royal address terms are maintained for royal males, while they are gradually merging with commoners' address terms in the case of royal females. In olden times (during the reign of the Manipuri kings) this social hierarchy was strictly adhered to, and it is still prevalent, though to a lesser degree. But nowadays, at least among the young, there is a trend toward loosening the distinction between royal and commoner address terms: a royal term may also be extended to a commoner, e. g. in a situation where he/she has become rich, and is being addressed by an intimate friend in a teasing manner.

**Kinship:** Among kin, age is not a significant deciding factor in addressing a person. The kinship relation determines the appropriate address term. Here are two illustrations: (1) Even when a sister-in-law (elder brother's wife) is 15 years junior to ego, she should be addressed as /iteyma/ or /iteybema/ or /iteym-si/. According to the sociolinguistic rule it is not permitted to call her by her given name. (2) Though a wife may be 10 years older than her sister-in-law, the wife should

call her sister-in-law /ice/ or /icema/ or /icem-si/ 'elder sister.' This demonstrates that kinship relations exercise a strong influence on personal address terminology.

*Status:* Status is another deciding factor: terms of address are chosen according to the addressee's status (in this society kinship terms are extended to non-kin). Some very common kinship terms are given in the following two columns:

| <i>Higher status</i> | <i>Lower status</i> |                    |
|----------------------|---------------------|--------------------|
| pabuŋ                | khura               | 'daddy' or 'uncle' |
| tamo                 | tada                | 'elder brother'    |
| icema                | ice                 | 'elder sister'     |

The terms in the first column are usually used to address persons of higher status, while those in the second are used with people of lower status. That is, /khura/, /tada/, and /ice/ are used, e.g. to orderlies, peons, physical workers, clerks (lower level), shopkeepers, rickshaw drivers, etc., while /pabu/, /tamo/, and /ice/ are generally used toward higher ranking officers, to older persons of the same rank, a friend's father, brother or sister, etc. It is unusual to use /khura/ or /tada/ toward a friend's father or brother. But /ice/ can be addressed to both higher and lower status persons and the term /ima/ also is generally used toward any elderly woman, as well as to a friend's mother.

*Various address terms to a husband:*

Meitei society has an interesting social grammatical rule which dictates that a wife should not call her husband by name. She chooses instead from various terms:

a. Some wives call their husbands /tamo/ 'elder brother', which was commonly used until quite recently. It is still to be heard, but less frequently.

b. Some call their husbands by their professional title, for instance /o ja/ 'teacher' or /dokter/ 'doctor'. Other common professional address terms are 'engineer' and 'advocate.' This mode of conjugal address is a new phenomenon in the society.

c. Some use /tabiri-bra/<sup>1</sup> 'are you listening to me?' as an address term; Hindi speakers also use /suniye/ 'please listen' as an address term. In earlier times this (/tabiri-bra/) was very widely used.

<sup>1</sup> /taribra/ /tabiribra/: /ta-/ (root) 'listen', /-ri-/ 'progressive aspect marker', /-bi-/ 'honorific marker', /-bra/ 'question marker.'

d. In the royal family and the royal male line, wives address their husbands as /səmkhwa/.

e. An important linguistic phenomenon is that wives borrow address terms which are used by the younger brothers and sisters of their husbands. The brothers and sisters address their elder brothers as /tamo/ or /tada/ or /tacəw/; the wives use this term, adding an additional lexical item /moy/ < /məkhoy-gi/ 'theirs' (their brother), which precedes /tamo/ etc.

$$\begin{array}{c}
 \text{moy} \\
 \uparrow \\
 \text{məkhoy-gi} \\
 \text{'theirs'}
 \end{array}
 +
 \begin{array}{|c|}
 \hline
 \text{tamo} \\
 \text{tada} \\
 \text{tacəw} \\
 \hline
 \end{array}
 \longrightarrow
 \begin{array}{|c|}
 \hline
 \text{moy-tamo} \\
 \text{moy-tada} \\
 \text{moy-tacəw} \\
 \hline
 \end{array}$$

f. The wives switch to /moy-pabuŋ/ or /moy-baba/ ('their father') after having a child. The child addresses his father as /pabuŋ/, /baba/ or /paji/, which is borrowed by his mother in addressing the father.<sup>2</sup>

*Address terms  
used by other  
members of family*

tamo (by sisters/brothers)  
dada  
tada  
tacəw  
'elder brother'

pabuŋ (by sons/daughters)  
baba  
papa  
paji  
'daddy'

*Address terms  
used by wives*

moy + tamo  
dada  
tada  
tacəw

moy + pabuŋ  
baba  
papa  
paji

In cases where there are neither brothers/sisters nor sons/daughters, wives will use the term that is used by their husband's closest relative.

*Wife to brother-in-law:*

A social distance is maintained between a wife and her brother-in-law. The wife cannot address him directly, and they are not permitted to talk

<sup>2</sup> This common phenomenon is called *teknonymy*. [Ed.]

face-to-face in a close family. But in an open family the brother-in-law may address her directly or call her by name. As a general rule, direct discussion between them does not occur. The address term for brother-in-law is /itəy/.

*Wife to father-in-law:*

It was formerly taboo for a wife to speak face-to-face with her father-in-law, and distance was maintained between the two. Now there is a considerable change in the social custom: no distance need be maintained, and they may talk freely, just like father and daughter. With the change in society brought about by education, they look upon and treat each other as 'father' and 'daughter.' She addresses her father-in-law as /pabuŋ/, /paji/, or /baba/ 'daddy', as she addresses her real father. The reference term for a father-in-law is /iku/.

*Names and various combinations:*

In an asymmetrical relationship, various combinations of names can be used. Meiteilon is as varied as Hindi, which has nine possibilities, according to Abbi (1985). Consider the following permissible patterns:

1. Shri/Shrimati + Full Name
2. Mr/Miss + Full Name
3. Mrs + Husband's Name + Full Name
4. Mr/Mrs/Miss + Middle Name (MN)
5. Middle Name
6. Surname
7. Middle Name
8. Kinship Term + Middle Name
9. Profession + Middle Name
10. Oja

In general, the surname is not used for address in Meitei society. Traditionally, the surname should precede the middle name (MN), with the final name Singh/Meitei for males or Devi/Chanu for females. This last name is optional for both males and females — some may use it and some may drop it. Dropping the last name is a new trend among both males and females. Below is an example of how a full name is written:

|                |                    |                  |
|----------------|--------------------|------------------|
| Chungkham      | Yashawanta         | Singh/Meitei     |
| Nahakpam       | Aruna              | Devi/Chanu       |
| <i>Surname</i> | <i>Middle Name</i> | <i>Last Name</i> |

The process is more complex in the case of married women; there are two varieties:

- a. Chungkham *Ongbi* Nahakpam Aruna Devi
- b. Nahakpam *Ningol* Chungkham Aruna Devi

The italicized words '*Ongbi*' and '*Ningol*' in this syntagm indicate the social status of a woman, i.e. married. In the case of unmarried women ('Miss'), '*Ongbi*' and '*Ningol*' do not occur. Some people use '*Ningol*' for 'Miss', as long as they drop *Devi/Chanu*; '*Ningol*' and *Devi/Chanu* cannot occur together in the case of 'Miss.' The full name can be written in various patterns:

- a. Surname + Middle Name + Last Name
- b. Surname + Middle Name
- c. Middle Name + Surname
- d. Middle Name + Surname<sup>3</sup>
- e. Surname + *Ningol* + Middle Name (for 'Miss' only)

The most common address part of a name is the middle name, and another common element is the kinship term. When a person is introduced the middle name is used. Even children give only middle names when asked their names.

Pattern 8 is generally used in asymmetrical relationships between relatives as well as non-relatives. Pattern 9 is used in symmetrical as well as asymmetrical relationships.

Pattern 10 is especially interesting. The address term /*oja*/ 'teacher' is a very simple linguistic item which is widely accepted in this society; it can be used by any speaker to any unknown addressee (in either a symmetrical or an asymmetrical relationship). By using this term, the speaker assumes an intimate relationship with the addressee.

#### *Expressive terms:*

There are two very common expressive terms:

- a. /*ibema*/ 'madam', 'Miss' or 'Mrs'
- b. /*mema*/ 'my dear'

<sup>3</sup> Every surname, without exception, ends with the consonant /*m*/, but following a new custom, some people delete the final /*m*/:

|                 |      |                |             |
|-----------------|------|----------------|-------------|
| <i>ciŋsubam</i> | ---> | <i>ciŋsuba</i> |             |
| <i>niŋombam</i> | ---> | <i>niŋomba</i> |             |
| <i>məyɛnbam</i> | ---> | <i>məyɛnba</i> |             |
| <i>pawnam</i>   | ---> | <i>pawna</i>   |             |
| <i>wahɛnbam</i> | ---> | <i>wahɛnba</i> | <i>etc.</i> |

Thus: Mr. Rajen Chingsuba, Mr. Tolen Ningomba *etc.*

These terms are used by both sexes to address their female juniors, both intimates and strangers. These are also terms of affection, and are used in various sociolinguistic situations. For example, parents prefer to address their daughter as /ibema/, rather than /mema/, in lieu of her pet name or school name. In another example, both sexes will address any younger female stranger as /ibema/. The term /mema/ is also used by parents and by elders, both intimates and strangers. Even boys may teasingly address any girl as /mema/. An illustration:

/mema,      kəday      cət-li-no/  
                      where      go-asp-Q  
 'Hi honey, where are you going?'

There is also an expressive term for males; it is /ibuno/ 'my dear', 'sir' or 'Mr.' Older men and women use it to address their male juniors, although they can also call them by name. If a man's name is not known, this term can safely be used without showing disrespect.

#### *Conclusion*

This study shows that age is not a deciding factor for terms of address among relatives, while it is a strong factor among non-relatives. It also demonstrates that young people now under 20 years of age have developed new sociolinguistic patterns. They do not take account of age, kinship relations, or other factors, and instead bluntly address their elders. But it is an interesting reflection on their psychology that they do use the terms /tamo/ 'elder brother' or /icema/ 'elder sister' with their elders to show their respect.

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