

KINSHIP TERMINOLOGY IN LEPCHA

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ABSTRACT

Lepcha being a language of the Tibeto Burman language family exhibit structural traits of the of the kinship terminological system realised in the Indian subcontinent. Kinship terminology has been analysed by different scholars from different points of view like, generation, sex, affinity, collaterality, relative age, polarity, affinity, etc. The present paper examines the Lepcha kinship terminology keeping the existing structural criteria in view along with culture and language specific aspects into consideration.

KeyWords:

Denotative, Classificatory, Bilineal, Eskimo Kinship, collaterality

1. INTRODUCTION

Lepchas are the original inhabitants of Sikkim and are mostly settled in north Sikkim (Dzongu district). They are also settled in the Darjeeling district of West Bengal. The Lepcha language (which is also known as Rongaring/Rongring/) belongs to the Tibeto Burman language sub-family under Tibeto-Chinese language family. It is placed in the non-pronominalised group of the Himalayan languages under the Tibeto-Burman sub-family. As per the existing records of language census, Lepchas are considered scheduled tribes pertaining to the states of Sikkim and West Bengal. Existing literatures on Lepcha speaks of Lepcha as an endangered speech community.

2. THE DEMOGRAPHIC STATUS

According to 2001 census, total Lepcha population in India was 50,629. The population strength of Lepcha in Sikkim is 35, 728 according to 2001 census and 14,721 in West Bengal according to 2001 census. [http://www.census India. gov. in/ Census _ Data _ 2001 /census_Data_online/ Language/partb.htm] Lepchas are also settled in Bhutan (Samasti district)---the population strength being 2,000(2001 Van Driem) and

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in Nepal (Ilam district)--- the population strength being 1,272 (1961 Census) [according to website : <http://www.ethnologue.com>]

Apart from Sikkim and West Bengal, Lepcha is also spoken in Bhutan (lower valleys in the West and South) and Nepal (Mechi zone, Ilam district). In Nepal Lepcha is recognized as an official nationality by the Govt. of Nepal. In both these countries they are mainly agriculturalists, pastoralists and are followers of traditional religion and Buddhism (lamaist).

3. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

Kinship terminology being ‘one of the universals of human culture’, has been defined as cultural terminology that comprises words to describe familial relationships.

Lepcha being a language of the Tibeto Burman language family exhibit structural traits of the of the kinship terminological system realised in the Indian subcontinent. Kinship terminology has been analysed by different scholars from different points of view like, generation, sex, affinity, collaterality, relative age, polarity, affinity, etc. The present paper examines the Lepcha kinship terminology keeping the existing structural criteria in view along with culture and language specific aspects into consideration.

According to Murdock (1949:97-99) “Kinship terms are technically classified into three different ways --- by their mode of use, by their linguistic structure and by their range of application ... As regards their use, two kinds of terms namely a term of address and a term of reference are employed. As regards linguistic structure, kinship terms are classified as elementary, derivative and descriptive and as regards their range of application, they are differentiated as classificatory and denotative.” Taking cue from the existing literatures, the present study will essentially concentrate on the ‘linguistic structure’ and on the ‘range of application’ of the Lepcha kinship terminology. Data of this study has been collected from Kalimpong subdivision of Darjeeling district.

4. THE STUDY

4.1. *The Linguistic Structure*

Lepcha kinship terminology when analysed from the point of view of linguistic structure, can be said to have elementary term, derivative term and descriptive term.

Lepcha has **elementary kinship terms**, that is, an irreducible word like *abo* ‘father’, *amo* ‘mother’, *avo* ‘husband’, *ayu* ‘wife’ etc. “which cannot be analysed into component lexical elements with kinship meanings” (Murdock:1949; 98).

The **derivative kinship terms** in which the term is “compounded from an elementary term and some other lexical element which does not have primarily a kinship meaning” (Murdock: *ibid*) is attested in Lepcha. For example, *tugrikAp* ‘son’ *tAyukAp* ‘daughter’, *namkAp* ‘nephew/neice’ (< *akAp* ‘Hu br So’/ ‘Wi br So’,etc).

Lepcha exhibit forms like, *anom-iŋ* ‘cousin’(<*anom* meaning ‘El Si’ and *iŋ* meaning ‘Yr br’/ ‘Yr Si’) known as **descriptive terms** which “combines two or more elementary terms to denote a specific relative”(Murdock : *ibid*).

4.2. The Range of Application

Regarding the range of application, Lepcha kinship terms can be distinguished in terms of **denotative** and **classificatory** sets.

The single kinship category based on generation, sex, and genealogical connection that applies to an individual relation is referred to as **denotative term** in literatures on kinship terminology. Thus the terms *abo* ‘father’, *amo* ‘mother’, *avo* ‘husband’, *ayu* ‘wife’ are the instances of denotative terms in Lepcha kinship terminological system. Apart from indicating only one person, a denotative term may also apply to “several persons of identical kinship connection, as do the Eng. words like ‘son’ , ‘daughter’, ‘brother’, ‘sister’, ‘son-in-law’, ‘daughter-in-law’.” Such a category has not been realised in Lepcha.

In Lepcha the kinship terms like, *bujyu* ‘Gr fa’ *mujyu* ‘Gr Mo’ *afet* ‘father-in-law’, *anyufet* ‘mother-in-law’ , *thikuŋ* ‘Gt Gr fa’, *nyukuŋ* ‘Gt Gr Mo’, *anom-iŋ* ‘cousin’, *namkAp* ‘neice/nephew’ applies equally to a male ego and female ego which are known as **classificatory term** being defined by generation, sex and genealogical connection. Murdock (*ibid*) rightly puts it as, “It is primarily through the liberal use of classificatory terms that all societies reduce the number of kinship categories from the thousands that are theoretically distinguishable to the very modest number, perhaps 25 as an approximate average which it has everywhere been found practicable to recognise in actual usage.”

A set of Lepcha classificatory terms is presented below.

1. *anum* ‘El br’
 - ‘Wi El Br’
 - ‘Hu El Br’
 - ‘Wi El Si Hu’
 - ‘Hu El Si Hu’

2. *anom* ‘El Si’
 ‘Wi El Si’
 ‘Wi El Br Wi’
 ‘Hu El Br Wi’

3. *iŋ* ‘Yr Br’
 ‘Yr Si’
 ‘Wi Yr Br Wi’
 ‘Wi Yr Si Hu’
 ‘Hu Yr Br’
 ‘Hu Yr Br Wi’
 ‘Hu Yr Si Hu’

4. *bAtim* ‘Fa El Br’
 ‘Fa El Si Hu’
 ‘Mo El Si Hu’

5. *mAtim* ‘Mo El Si’
 ‘Fa El Br Wi’
 ‘Mo El Br Wi’

6. *aku* ‘Fa Yr Br’
 ‘Fa Yr Si Hu’
 ‘Mo Yr Si Hu’

7. *anyu* ‘Mo Yr Si’
 ‘Fa Yr Si’
 ‘Mo Yr Br Wi’
 ‘Fa Yr Br Wi’

8. *azyɔŋ* ‘Mo El Br’
 ‘Mo Yr Br’
 ‘Wi Yr Br’
 ‘Wi Yr Si’

9. *myɔk* ‘son-in-law’
 ‘Yr Si Hu’ (for both male ego and female ego)

10. *azɔŋ* ‘El Br Wi’
 ‘El Si Hu’
 ‘Wi Yr Br’
 ‘Wi Yr Si’

‘Hu Yr Si’

11. *nyɔm* ‘Yr Br Wi’ (for both male ego and female ego)

(for both male ego and female ego)

12. *namkʌp* ‘El /Yr Br So’

‘El/Yr Si So’

‘El/Yr Br Da’

‘El/Yr Si Da’

(for both male ego and female ego)

13. *akʌp* ‘Wi/Hu Br So’

‘Wi/Hu Br Da’

‘Wi/ Hu Si So’

‘Wi/Hu Si Da’

(for both male ego and female ego)

14. *kubzɔŋ* ‘Gr So’

‘Gr Da’

This is pertinent to mention in this connection that of the six basic patterns of kinship terminologies proposed by Morgan (1871), the above analysis of Lepcha kinship terminology conform to the ‘*Eskimo kinship*’ pattern which consists of both classificatory and descriptive terms. The system also distinguishes between lineal relatives, i.e., line of descent by descriptive terms and collateral relatives, i.e., related by blood but not directly in the line of descent, by classificatory terms. Scholars trace this ‘*Eskimo kinship*’ pattern in societies having exogamous patri clans and matri clans. Lepcha being a bilineal tribal society conform to this social structure where males reckon their descent through father and the females through their mother. Therefore to recollect Kroeber (1909), the identical kinship terms when viewed as a linguistic phenomenon, owes its basis to some ‘psychological mechanism’ that governs identification and differentiation in human perception.

Mukherjee (1981:66) observes, “As regards structural principles on criteria, which have led to the development of terminological system of the tribes of India, criteria of generation, sex, affinity, collaterality and relative age are important for the patrilineal tribes; the criteria of generation, sex, affinity, collaterality bifurcation and polarity of matrilineal tribes and the three criteria, namely, generation, sex, affinity for the polyandrous tribes.” Cross-cousin marriage seems to be an important factor in the study of kinship terminology. Of the four systems mentioned by Lowie (1929) Lepcha seems

to conform to the features of *Bifurcate Collateral* system where Fa, Fa Br, Mo Br, each has a separate kinship term.

4.3. Conclusion

Mukherjee (1981: 39) by studying the kinship terminology of the Tibeto-Burman tribes like Adi, Angami, Naga, Ao-Naga, Rengma Naga, Sema Naga, Perum, Garo, Lakher, Lushai, Thado, Kuki, Riang, states, "... the tribes belonging to the Tibeto- Burman and the Dravidian linguistic family system very largely conform to classificatory system of relationship and those of the Indo-Aryan and the Austro-Asiatic linguistic family system to denotative system of relationship". But the present study of Lepcha kinship terminology reveals that Lepcha being a Tibeto-Burman language share features of both denotative and classificatory system of relationship.

List of Abbreviations used

Fa= Father
Mo=Mother
Br=Brother
Si=Sister
Hu=Husband
Wi=Wife
So=Son
Da=Daughter
El=Elder
Yr=Younger
Gt=Great
Gr=Grand

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