
Linguistic Structure of Kinship Terminology in Boro

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Abstract

Kinship terminology plays an important role in Boro society, representing both family relationships and broader social connections. They represent not only close relationships with family, but also cultural values and social ideology of the Boro community. They also express a sense of responsibility, love and respect for one another. Kinship terms are identified chiefly on marriage and blood (descent) relation. This is a traditional means of family relationship and unity that is valued within Boro culture and society. The kinship terms may be analyzed in terms of linguistic structure. They may be classified into two sub-categories: terms of address and terms of reference. Terms of address are used in direct interactions. To construct terms of address, kinship terms are combined with the first-person pronoun to express relationships. In contrast, terms of reference are used to express the kinship relationship indirectly. In this case, kinship terms are combined with second and third person pronouns. This study chiefly aims to explore the linguistic structure of Boro kinship terminology and its relevance in identifying familial and kinship relationships within a social context.

Keywords: Kinship Terminology, Terms of Address, Terms of Reference, Family Bonds, Cultural Values

1. INTRODUCTION

The Boro community, with its unique language and culture, is primarily inhabiting Assam, Meghalaya and a few districts of North Bengal in India. The Bodo community has the largest population in Assam. They have traditionally managed their family and social systems through a patriarchal structure. Lineage is identified according to patrilineal principles, under which sons have the right to become the heads of the household. This tradition appears to be followed in accordance with established social norms. When a child is born, the father's surname is also adopted as an indication of the child's lineage. In this system, there is no place for a maternal surname. Even after marriage, a wife is expected to adopt her husband's family surname. This social practice helps us understand the tradition of patrilineal influence in Boro society.

The kinship terminology of the Boro community reflects a profound link between their social structure and culture. For family relationships, lineage, and social relationships, the Boro community has been using various kinship terms since ancient times. The system of kinship terms underscores not only biological connections but also the intricate connections of respect and responsibility that shape both familial and social relationships. In the Boro community, kinship terminology is closely tied to the notions of hierarchy and respect. Terms of address for family members reflect the importance of age, gender, and social roles. For example, there are distinct terms for elder and younger siblings, as well as for maternal and paternal relatives. These terms convey the expectations for respect between different family members and within the larger community. The terms used to address relatives outside the immediate family—such as aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents—carry significant weight in establishing social roles and responsibilities within the larger kin network. Overall, the kinship terminology of the Boro community is a vital component of their cultural identity, revealing how relationships are constructed and maintained through respect, responsibility, and honesty.

2. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

Although this topic is related to the study of society and culture, the study will primarily focus on analysing the morphological structure of Boro kinship terms. It will also examine the social roles and values associated with the kinship terms traditionally used in Boro society.

3. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is significant as it provides a deeper understanding of how Boro kinship terminology is constructed and its morphological features. The kinship terms are not only linguistic tools but also a reflection of the social, cultural, and familial structures within the community. Additionally, it helps to preserve the linguistic and cultural values of the Boro people, offering insights into their traditional social systems.

4. REVIEW OF PREVIOUS LITERATURE

As observed, there is a lack of remarkable research articles or books on the Boro kinship terminology. Thus, analysis on the linguistic structure of Boro kinship terminology has not been carried out by anybody else. Although a few scholars have conducted preliminary studies highlighting the use of kinship terms in the Boro community. Among them, Endle has made a preliminary effort to describe and identify Boro kinship terms, focusing on structural features of the terms relating to the first, second and third personal pronoun. Endle observed that to express close family relationship, pronominal prefixes of possession are commonly added to nouns (Endle 74). For example, angni a-pha (my father), nangni nam-ma (your mother), bini bi-pha (her/his father). In this example, the pronominal prefix a- is added to the nouns pha, ma and pha which are base of the kinship terms.

Later, Madhuram Baro has also observed that the Boro kinship terms are constructed by way of derivation. The personal pronominal words ang, nwnng and bi are prefixed to the bound morpheme which indicate different social relationships (Baro 66). Thus, Chainary has also observed the similar features in construction of Boro kinship terms. Chainary has observed that Boro kinship terms are formed with a combination of three different personal pronouns (Chainary 112). The three personal pronouns are ang (I), nwnng (you) and bi (she/he) respectively.

5. METHOD OF STUDY

This study adopts a structural approach from the linguistic point of view, aims to explore the kinship terminology and family affiliations within the Boro community. Data were collected through a combination of participant observation, interviews, and focus group discussions with community members.

5.1 Fieldwork and Participant Observation:

The researcher spent an extended period within Boro villages, participating in daily life to observe family structures and kinship interactions. This intensive approach allowed for a deeper understanding of the kinship terms and family relationships. During data collection, in-depth structured interviews were conducted with elders, family heads, and members of different age groups to understand their perspectives on kinship terms, family and lineage. The recorded data have been analyzed for understanding the linguistic structure of kinship terms.

5.2 Focus Group Discussions:

The discussion was held with small groups from various segments of the Boro community to receive collective views on kinship terminologies and use in day-to-day family relationships. This method allowed for the examination of the linguistic structure of kinship terminologies.

6. FINDINGS

Based on the detailed discussion of kinship terminology and family affiliations in Boro society, the following findings are achieved:

- a.** Boro society follows a patrilineal kinship structure, with familial ties traced through the paternal line.
- b.** However, there is also a matrilineal relationship, as kinship terminology reflects relationships on both the father's and mother's sides.
- c.** Boro kinship terms represent a duality between patrilineal and matrilineal affiliations. Terms for relatives on the father's and mother's sides, as well as distinctions between genders, are essential in forming family connections and social roles, indicating a multifaceted kinship structure.
- d.** Kinship terms in Boro society are compound structures, typically formed by combining a personal pronoun (indicating the speaker's perspective) with a kinship term (denoting familial roles). This structure is consistent across both terms of address (directly used with family members) and terms of reference (used in the third person).
- e.** Gender plays a crucial role in Boro kinship terminology. The distinction between male and female relatives is made explicitly through terms like "Abwu" (grandfather) and "Abwi" (grandmother). These gender-based distinctions reinforce familial roles and expectations within the community.
- f.** Certain kinship terms in Boro society are independent lexical units, such as Bazwi (wife of the elder brother) and Gumwi (husband of the elder sister). These terms do not require pronouns to form a complete kinship reference and are used as standalone terms.
- g.** Boro kinship terminology is more than just a linguistic feature; it carries cultural and social significance. These terms reflect deeply familial values of respect, authority, and responsibility.

They help to define family hierarchies, interactions within families, and reinforce the community's cultural identity.

- h.** Boro kinship terms follow a consistent linguistic structure, with a clear pattern of combining pronouns with kinship nouns. This structure facilitates an understanding of the social connections between individuals, whether addressing a relative directly or referring to them indirectly.

7. DISCUSSION

7.1 The discussion focuses on the analysis of the linguistic structure of kinship terminology.

The study is primarily confined to an examination of the structural characteristics and linguistic features of these terms. The Boro community follows a patrilineal societal structure, where kinship terminology is closely tied to the patrilineal kin group. This kin group is defined within the family circle and is based on genetic relationships. Social norms and customs play a crucial role in validating kinship terminology, which is generally determined by both the father's and mother's sides. The kinship terms associated with the father's kin group are defined by patrilineal descent and the kin relationships established through marriage. An individual is considered part of the kin generation of their father by birth, and, according to social convention, children are affiliated with the patrilineal descent of the father.

7.1.1 Kinship terms from Father's Blood Relations

In Boro society, specific kinship terms are used to define relationships on the father's side of the family. For instance, the paternal grandfather is referred to as Abwu, and the paternal grandmother as Abwi. The father's younger brother is called Dada in the Eastern Boro dialect or Adwi in the Western Boro dialect, with no difference in meaning between the dialects. The wife of the father's younger brother is called Adwi in the Eastern dialect or Madwi in the Western dialect. The father's elder brother is referred to as Ayong, and his wife is also called Ayong. The father's elder or younger sister is called Anwi, while her husband is addressed as Amai. The paternal great-grandfather is also called Ayong. These kinship terms emphasize a direct connection to the father's side of the family.

7.1.2 Kinship Terms Used for the Children of the Father's Siblings

In Boro society, when referring to the children of the father's elder or younger brother, different kinship terms are used depending on the age relative to the addressee. If the child is older than the addressee, they are called Ada (elder brother) or Abo (elder sister). If the child is younger than the addressee, they are referred to as Phongbai (one's younger brother) when using the first-person pronoun, Nwng-Phong (your younger brother) for the second-person pronoun, and Bi-Phong (his/her younger brother) for the third-person pronoun. The same system applies to female children. For example, Anao or Agwi (younger sister) is used for the first-person pronoun, Nwng-Nanao (your younger sister) for the second-person pronoun, and Bi-Nanao (his/her younger sister) for the third-person pronoun. In these terms, the initial words Nwng (you) and Bi (she/he) represent the personal pronouns, while the latter part of the word indicates the specific kinship relationship. This illustrates that kinship terms in Boro society are composed of two distinct parts: a personal pronoun and a kinship-indicating term.

7.1.3 Kinship Terms for Descendants and Gender Distinction

When an individual has multiple blood-related brothers, they call the children of their elder brother as Biadwi (nephew) when introducing them to second and third persons. For example, Biw Angni Biadwi Phisa (He is my nephew). This kinship term is passed down to the children of the nephew as well, maintaining the continuity of the family tree. In this case, the individual refers to their

nephew's male child as Abwu (grandson) and their female child as Abwi (granddaughter) when addressing them directly. In collective terms, the individual refers to both male and female grandchildren as Phiswu (grandchild), with gender distinctions made by using Phiswula for males and Phiswuzw for females. The term Phiswu is a commonly used kinship term (for both male and female grandchild). The term has two distinct morphological components- Phiswu and la (la derived from zwla, meaning male). Thus, Phiswuzw constitutes two distinct words- Phiswu and zw (refers to female children).

7.1.4 Kinship Terms used for the Maternal Kin Group

In Boro society, the structure of kinship is not confined solely to patrilineal relationships; rather, it also encompasses various kinship relations formed through marriage and social conventions. Some of these relationships can be observed to follow a matrilineal structure. An individual from the father's kin group uses specific terms to address and maintain relationships with members of the mother's kin group, as detailed below:

The mother's father is called Abwu, and the mother's mother is called Abwi. These two terms are used by persons concerned for direct address. In both the Eastern and Western Boro dialects, the mother's younger sister is referred to as Madwi. Similarly, the mother's younger sister's husband is called Dada in the Eastern Boro dialect and Adwi in the Western Boro dialect. The mother's elder sister is addressed as Ayong, and her husband is also called Ayong. Both the mother's elder and younger brother are referred to as Amai, while their wives are addressed as Anwi. This structure emphasizes the matrilineal connections that define social and kin relations within the Boro community, highlighting the role of the mother's side in maintaining familial ties. The above mentioned terms are used by the person concerned directly. In contrast, in the case of indirect or distant address, kinship terms are combined with second and third person pronouns for addressing the person concerned. For example, in the case of second person, Nwng (you)-Bwu (kinship-based term) refers to your grandfather, Nwm-Bwi (your grandmother), Nw-Mai (your maternal uncle), Nwma-Nwi (your maternal aunt), etc. Similarly, in the case of third person Bi (she/he)-Bwu (her/his grandfather), Bi-Bwi (her/his grandmother), Bi-Mai (her/ his maternal uncle), Bima-Nwi (her/his maternal aunt) etc.

8. LINGUISTIC STRUCTURE OF KINSHIP TERMINOLOGY

It is mentioned in the above that the linguistic structure of kinship terminology of the Boro community consists of two morphological components: the first part is a personal pronoun, while the second part is a noun. This typology is consistently applied across both categories of kinship terms.

8.1 Typology of Kinship Terms in case of addressing someone directly

The kinship terms of address are formed by combining the first-person pronoun with the relative kin term, referring to a person with a close relationship to the speaker. When directly addressing a kin member, the speaker must first use the first-person pronoun as the word-initial element (e.g., Ang meaning "I"), followed by the kinship term that represents the immediate relative to the addressee. This typology is created through the process outlined below:

- i. Ang (I)-Pha (father) becomes Apha (my father).
- ii. Ang (I)-Iong (father's elder brother or mother's elder sister) becomes Aiong (my father's elder brother or my mother's elder sister).
- iii. Ai (mother) is used as the syllabic nucleus to address one's mother.
- iv. Ang (I)-Bwu (grandfather) becomes Abwu (my grandfather).

- v. Ang (I)-Bwi (grandmother) becomes Abwi (my grandmother).
- vi. Ang (I)-Mai (maternal uncle) becomes Amai (my mother's elder or younger brother).
- vii. Ang (I)-Nwi (mother's elder or younger brother's wife; also refers to father's elder or younger sister) becomes Anwi (my mother's elder or younger brother's wife and my father's elder or younger sister). The aforementioned kinship terms are composed of two distinct words: the first is a first personal pronoun, and the second refers to specific individuals within the kinship network.

8.2 Typology of Kinship Terms in Reference use

Kinship terms are formed by combining a bound base that refers to a kinship relationship with second and third-person pronouns to create terms of reference. These compound words consist of two distinct lexical entities, each carrying its own grammatical and semantic function. When combined, they form a new lexical structure. The terms of reference for second-person pronouns are as follows:

- i. Nwng (you)-Pha (father) becomes Nwngpha or Nwmpa (your father).
- ii. Nwng (you)-Ma (mother) becomes Nwngma or Nwma (your mother).
- iii. Nwng (you)-Da (elder brother) becomes Nwngda (your elder brother).
- iv. Nwng (you)-Bo (elder sister) becomes Nwngbo or Nwmba (your elder sister).
- v. Nwng (you)-Phong (younger brother) becomes Nwngphong or Nwmpa (your younger brother).
- vi. Nwng (you)-Anao (younger sister) becomes Nwnganao (your younger sister).
- vii. Nwng (you)-Bazwi (wife of elder brother) becomes Nwngbazwi or Nwmbazwi (your elder brother's wife).
- viii. Nwng (you)-Gumwi (husband of elder sister) becomes Nwnggumwi (your elder sister's husband).
- ix. Nwng (you)-Mai (mother's elder or younger brother) becomes Nwngmai or Nwmai (your mother's elder or younger brother).
- x. Nwng (you)-Ma-nwi (mother's elder or younger sister) becomes Nwmanwi (your mother's elder or younger sister's husband; also refers to your father's elder or younger sister).

The structure of kinship terms with third-person pronouns follows a similar pattern. For example, Bi (He/She)-Pha (father) becomes Bipha (His/Her father), Bi (He/She)-Ma (mother) becomes Bima (His/Her mother), and Bi (He/She)-Da (elder brother) becomes Bida (His/Her elder brother), and so on. In these examples, the second part refers to the kinship term, while the initial part, the third-person pronoun, is directly combined with the kinship term to create the reference term.

8.3 Independent Kinship Terms: Bazwi and Gumwi

As demonstrated in examples mentioned above (vii) and (viii), the kinship terms Bazwi (wife of the elder brother) and Gumwi (husband of the elder sister) are independent lexical entities. These terms specifically denote kinship relationships and function across all persons, without the need for pronoun combinations. For instance, in the sentence Ang-ni Gumwi (My elder sister's husband), Ang represents the first-person pronoun (i.e., I), -ni- is used as a genitive case marker, and Gumwi independently refers to "my elder sister's husband." Similarly, in both the second and third persons, the same structure applies.

9. NEUTRAL KINSHIP TERM FORMATION

A few neutral kinship terms are used in the Boro society. The composition of these terms can be described as follows:

- i. Bi-hau-sw (father-in-law): "Bi" is the third-person pronoun, likely indicating "he", "Hau" seems to refer to the noun class base for "father-in-law" and "Sw" is a marker indicating the kinship relationship, pointing to the father-in-law relationship specifically.
- ii. Bikhunzw (wife's father): The pronoun "Bi" is again used for third-person reference. In this term

“Khunzw” could be a noun class base for mother-in-law. “Zw” is a marker indicating female gender.

- iii. Bihamzw (son’s wife): The “Bi” component is once again used as a third-person pronoun, and “Hamzw” likely refers to a term for son’s wife, likely from a different noun class base. In these examples, the kinship is constructed using a framework where the pronoun indicates the perspective (third-person) and the second component points to the specific kinship relationship (father-in-law, son’s wife, etc.), with a suffix or marker finalizing the meaning. This neutral structure efficiently expresses family relationships without explicitly stating a direct familial role, making the kinship term both indirect and precise in its context.

10. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This study on the structure of kinship terminology and family relationships in Boro society provides a clear understanding of the social and familial relationships prevalent within the community. Kinship terms reflect not only familial relationships but also broader cultural values, including family or lineage affiliations, mutual respect, and social hierarchies. Through fieldwork, interviews, and linguistic analysis, this research highlights the ways in which the kinship system influences and shapes both individual identities and collective social structures.

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