Gender, Number and Case in Uchai

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Abstract

Uchai is a small ethnic group of Tripura speaking a dialectical variant of Kokborok, the language of the Tippera. The paper discusses the major features of gender, number and case system in Uchai. While Section 1 serves as a brief introduction to the paper, Section 2 discusses the various ways of expressing gender differentiation in Uchai. Section 3 presents the morpheme indicating plurality in Uchai. Section 4 deals with different cases and their morphemes found in Uchai. Finally, Section 5, while concluding the paper, focuses on the salient features of gender, number and case system in Uchai, presenting a comparative study with Kokborok.

[**Keywords:** Uchai, gender, number, case, Kokborok]

Introduction

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The major tribal community of Tripura is variously called Tipra, Twipra and Tippera (Tipperah) with reference to the region wherein they have been settled for several centuries. The community speaks Kokborok. Kokborok, one of the Baric languages, has a number of dialects and one such dialectical variant is Uchai. The Uchai, spelt 'Osuie' by Thomas H. Lewin (1869), is a small ethnic group living chiefly in the southern parts of Tripura and has a population of only 2,015 souls in the Census of 2001. Ethnically, however, Uchai is closer to Bru than to Tippera; their tradition makes Bru and Uchai brothers. Linguistically, Uchai belongs to the Bodo group of the Tibeto-Burman sub-family of Sino-Tibetan languages; they now speak a dialectical variant of Kokborok, the language of the Tippera (Brahma, 2011).

The paper is primarily based on the data collected through fieldwork conducted in the Uchai villages of Tripura. The fieldwork consisted mainly of interviews with the native speakers of Uchai language. The persons of different age groups, professions, and sexes have been used as informants and the data have been cross-checked with other speakers of the same variety. Apart from the field study, a few published dictionaries on Kokborok and Bru have also been consulted upon. Moreover, mention must be made of Karapurkar's *Kokborok Grammar* (1976) and Jacquesson's *A Kokborok Grammar – Agartala dialect* (2008) which have been used to cross check the data collected on Kokborok for this paper.

The goal of this study is to analysis the gender, number and case system in Uchai. At the same time, the paper hopes to provide the basic differences between Uchai and standard Kokborok.The study will be useful to the Uchai scholars, general linguists, and to the native speakers of Uchai themselves. The present paper may be looked upon as a keystone for future studies on the Uchai language spoken chiefly in the state of Tripura.

1. Gender

Gender in Uchai is not grammatically marked as it does not affect the grammatical pattern of the language. Gender distinction in Uchai is determined on the natural recognition of sexes. Therefore, Uchai has only natural genders. On the basis

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of semantico-morphological criteria, nouns in Uchai are primarily classified into two classes, viz., animate and inanimate. Animate nouns, both human and non-human nouns, are differentiated for masculine and feminine genders; while all the inanimate nouns are considered neuter in Uchai. Neuter gender is not marked by any marker in Uchai. However, the various ways of expressing gender differentiation in Uchai are as follows:

2.1 In Uchai, the basic kinship terms have two distinct forms for each sex as in many other Tibeto-Burman languages. Thus, the gender distinction among the kinship terms in Uchai is made lexically. Here are a few examples:

/mšaiu/	'daughter'	/mšačla/	'son'
/amoŋ/	'mother'	/pha/	'father'
/hi?/	'wife'	/sai/	'husband'
/mšubroi/	'granddaughter'	/mšukla/	'grandson'
/čoi/	'grandmother'	/ču/	'grandfather'
/abi/	'elder sister'	/ata/	'elder brother'
/kraiyu/	'mother-in-law'	/kra/	'father-in-law'
/atoi/	'younger aunt'	/mama/	'younger uncle'
/hana/	'younger sister'	/phiyoŋ/	'younger brother'
/bačoi/	'elder sister-in-law'	/kmoi/	'elder brother-in-law'

2.2 The human nouns other than the kinship terms and the animate nouns specify the difference in sex by adding a gender marker that indicates maleness or femaleness usually after the noun. The morphemes generally used to indicate masculinity and femininity are /čla/ and /broi/ respectively. Here are few examples:

	Male	Female
man	/čla/	/broi/

Human Nouns:

Hindu	/hindu čla/	/hindu broi/
Muslim	/muslim čla/	/muslim broi/

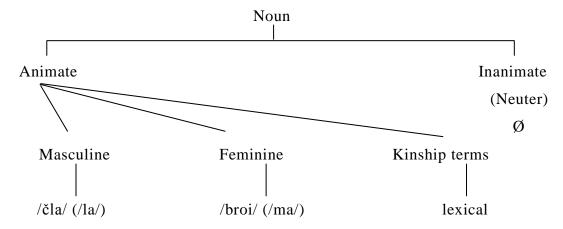Language in India www.languageinindia.com
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	Christian	/khrisčan cla/	/khrisčan broi/

Animals:

deer	/mšoi čla/	/mšoi broi/
horse	/korai čla/	/korai broi/
elephant	/maiĵuŋ čla/	/maiĵuŋ broi/
monkey	/mukhra čla/	/mukhra broi/
lion	/khraŋsiŋ čla/	/khraŋsiŋ broi/

Birds:

owl	/taukhu čla/	/taukhu broi/
crow	/taukha čla/	/taukha broi/
duck	/taukhõ čla/	/taukhõ broi/
pigeon	/pharu čla/	/pharu broi/
sparrow	/čuriha čla/	/čuriha broi/

2.3 However, there is an exception to this general rule in a few words. In Uchai, the morphemes /la/ and /ma/ are sometimes used to indicate maleness and femaleness respectively. Here are a few examples:

/tau la/ 'cock'	/tau ma/ 'hen'
/šoi la/ 'dog'	/šoi ma/ 'bitch'
/mšu maĵla/ 'ox'	/mšu ma/ 'cow'
/blai čla/ 'male cat'	/blai ma/ 'female cat'
/wau? malla/ 'male hog'	/wau? ma/ 'female hog'

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Uchai gender system may be represented as in the diagram given below:

```
                              Noun
           ┌───────────────────┴───────────────────────┐
        Animate                                      Inanimate
                                                      (Neuter)
                                                         Ø
    ┌────────────┬──────────────────────┐
 Masculine     Feminine           Kinship terms

 /čla/ (/la/)  /broi/ (/ma/)         lexical
```

2. Number

In Uchai, two number distinction, viz., singular and plural can be found. Like gender, number is also not a grammatical category in Uchai as it does not affect the other constituents of the sentence. The verbs have no plural form, neither derivative nor grammatical.

3.1 While the singular noun is always unmarked, the plural in Uchai is usually formed at the morphological level by suffixation of plural morpheme /rau/ to the singular form. The plural morpheme /rau/ is used with animate nouns, both human and non-human, as well as with inanimate nouns. Here are few examples:

/mšačlarau/	'boys'
/blairau/	'cats'
/čuriharau/	'sparrows'
/phaikhorau/	'spoons'
/athukroirau/	'stars'

3.2 However, when reference is made to an indefinite, large number of people or things and uncountable nouns, plurality is expressed by adding after the noun a collective adjective /gbangma/, which is a free form meaning 'many,' 'much,' or 'a lot of.'

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/manoi gbangma/	'many things'		
/thoi gbangma/	'much blood'		
/watoi gbangma/	'lot of rain'		

3.3   The morpheme indicating plurality occurs after the morpheme indicating masculinity or femininity, if the relevant gender morpheme is present. For instance,

/taularau/	'cocks'	/taumarau/	'hens'
/toukhõčlarau/	'drakes'	/toukhõbroirau/	'ducks'
/koraičlarau/	'horses'	/koraibroirau/	'mares'
/šoilarau/	'dogs'	/šoimarau/	'bitches'
/khraŋsiŋčlarau/	'lion'	/khraŋsiŋbroirau/	'lioness'

4. Case

Case is an inflectional category of noun. The case in Uchai shows the semantic relationship between the nouns to which they are added with the verb and also between two nouns. The case in Uchai is realised by adding suffixes to the nouns and pronouns or to the number affixes to denote case relations. However, when the case affixes are used after the stem, it does not affect the phonetic shape of the stem. Uchai has nine distinct cases: Nominative, Accusative, Dative, Genitive, Ablative, Locative, Instrumental, Associative, and Intrusive.

4.1   Nominative

The nominative case is the case of the surface subject of the verb. The most widely accepted function of the nominative case is to mark the subject of the sentence. It has no overt marker or case-suffix and thus, has the zero format and is equal to the stem.

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/aŋ a čawoi/

> I eat fish.

/abo člamsa klaiye thaŋmi/

> The boy fell down.

/amoŋ mai šoŋwoi/

> My mother cooks rice.

4.2   Accusative

The accusative case is the case of the direct object of the verb. The accusative case suffix is realised as /no/.

/abo člamsano reŋgale/

> Call the boy.

/abo broimsano ho?di/

> Send the girl.

/saĵaram sandyatino hanyau?woi/

> Sajaram loves Sandhyati.

4.3   Dative

The dative case is the case of the indirect object of the verb and it is usually associated with 'the act of giving.' The direct object does not add the case suffix when the indirect object in the same sentence has the case suffix. It is expressed as /no/ suffixed to the noun or pronoun.

/nni kolom aŋno ridi/

> Give me your pen.

/abo daktarbai čuŋno mthi riyau?mi/

> The doctor gave us medicine.

/noren ĵau?stam yapha?mi hirabotino/

> Naren presented a ring to Hirabati.

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4.4   Genitive

The genitive case indicates that the noun to which it is suffixed is the possessor of something. So, it reflects a possessor-possessed relationship. The noun in genitive is always in collocation with other nouns. The genitive case suffix is realised as /ni/.

> /garini čaka/
>> Wheel of a car.
>
> /ramni iskul le hakča wose/
>> Ram's school is far away.
>
> /bloŋni taurau sriŋ khe toŋha/
>> Jungle's birds remained silent.

4.5   Ablative

The ablative case specifies the point in space to where the subject is transferred at the culmination of the action identified by the verb. Therefore, the ablative is the case of separation from the source in performing the action mentioned by the verb. This case suffix is realised as /ni/.

> /bo nou?ni bakho? ye phaiha/
>> He came out of the house.
>
> /čung kuwani toi khauwoi/
>> We fetch water from well.
>
> /abo mša bloŋni pherau ye phai toŋha/
>> The tiger came returning from jungle.

4.6   Locative

The locative case indicates the location of a person, thing or animal in space or time, or of an event or action identified by the verb. It is expressed by adding the marker /wo/ to the noun.

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/aŋ hatiwo thaŋnai/

I will go to market.

/taurau nou?khawo be toŋwoi/

Birds fly in the sky.

/bo post ophiswo thaŋwoi/

He went to the post office.

4.7 Instrumental

The instrumental case indicates the instrument used in carrying out an action identified by the verb. Hence, this case relates the instrument to the verb in the sentence and it is realised as /bai/ suffixed to the nouns.

/bo teksibai phai msei/

He came by a taxi.

/aŋ kolombai se soiwoi/

I write with a pen.

/bo čabibai abo tala no phiyaudi/

Open the lock with a key.

4.8 Associative

The associative case expresses the accompaniment of a person or an animal with the subject in doing the action of the verb. It is realised as /bai/ suffixed to the noun.

/bo čla abai mai čaha/

He eats rice with fish.

/aŋ apabai pa thaŋha/

I went with my father.

/nayami sambaraibai phainai/

Nayami will come with Sambarai.

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4.9   Intrusive

The intrusive case specifies an intermediary object through which the action is executed. It is expressed by suffixing /doi/ to the noun.

/bo mkhodoi nu?ha/

He saw through the hole.

/abo lama hathairaudoi se laiwoi/

The road passes through the hills.

/sita tailãdoi toi sa?khlai woi/

Sita threw water through the window.

From the above discussion, it becomes clear that Uchai has nine cases; and five different markers are employed to denote the case relations.

5. Conclusion – A Comparison between Uchai and Kokborok

Gender in Uchai is not grammatically marked but determined on the natural recognition of sexes. Animate nouns, both human and non-human nouns are differentiated for masculine and feminine genders, while all the inanimate nouns are considered neuter in Uchai. Those animate beings which make no distinction for male and female fall under the common gender. While the gender distinction for basic kinship terms are made lexically, the other animate nouns, both human and non-human nouns, are differentiated by adding a gender marker /čla/ and /broi/ indicating masculinity and femininity respectively. In few exceptional cases, the morphemes /la/ and /ma/ are used to specify maleness and femaleness respectively.

As in Uchai, Kokborok also has only natural gender; and the gender markers are suffixed to the noun root. Again, the gender distinction for basic kinship terms in Kokborok is also made lexically. However, to indicate masculinity, the morpheme /jəla/ is suffixed to animate nouns, both human and non-human. But Kokborok has three morphemes to specify

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femininity — /ĵuk/ used with human nouns, /ma/ with animals and /bur}y/ with birds (except for /t↵gma/ 'hen') as observed by Karapurkar (1976).

Like gender, number is also not a grammatical category in Uchai. While the singular noun is always unmarked, the plural in Uchai is formed by adding the suffix /rau/ to the singular form both with animate human and non-human nouns, as well as inanimate nouns. However, in case of indefinite, uncountable nouns plurality is expressed by adding after the noun a collective adjective /gbangma/, meaning 'many,' 'much,' or 'a lot of.' It is also to be noted that the plural morpheme always occurs after the gender marker, if any.

The Kokborok number system is similar to that as found in Uchai. The differences, however, arise in case of the plural morphemes used in Kokborok. Plurality in Kokborok is expressed by suffixing a collective adjective to the noun meaning 'many' or 'much'. The plural morpheme added to the human noun is /s↵ŋ/, while /r↵k/ or /kəbaŋ/ are used after non-human animate and inanimate nouns. The plural morphemes used in Kokborok not only express plurality but also might mean 'remainder in a group' (Karapurkar, 1976).

The case in Uchai can be considered as an inflectional category, especially of nouns and also pronouns. The case identifies the role of nouns and pronouns in relation to other parts of the sentence. It is used in the analysis of word classes or their associated phrases to identify the syntactic relationship between words in a sentence through such contrasts as nominative, accusative, etc. (Crystal, 1980). Uchai has nine distinct cases, viz., nominative, accusative, dative, genitive, ablative, locative, instrumental, associative, and intrusive. However, five different markers are employed to denote the case relations.

The Kokborok case system is similar to that of Uchai. The cases in Kokborok as in Uchai are differentiated on the basis of the semantic relationship which the noun to which they are added has with the verb and not on the basis of the form of the case-suffixes (Karapurkar, 1976). Though the case markers of accusative and dative, genitive and ablative, instrumental and associative are similar both in Uchai and

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Kokborok, yet they are classified as six distinct cases on the basis of meaning. The following table will elucidate the point:

Case	Marker	
	Uchai	Kokborok
Nominative	/Ø/	/Ø/
Accusative	/no/	/n˩/
Dative		
Genitive	/ni/	/ni/
Ablative		
Locative	/wo/	/˩/
Instrumental	/bai/	/bai/
Associative		
Intrusive	/doi/	/tui/

The case forms in Uchai as well as in Kokborok are obtained by adding the case suffixes to the base, which is equal to the nominative case form, in the singular, and to the base containing the plural formant, in the plural. The case suffixes are post posed to the base; so, all the case markers in Uchai and also in Kokborok are postpositional. Uchai, along with Kokborok, as an SOV language, maintains the characteristics that Greenberg (1963) has attributed to such language — languages with normal SOV order are post-positional.

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