

An Ethno-Linguistic Study of Curse Utterances in Meitei Society of Manipur

Dr. Ch. Sarajubala Devi
NERIE-NCERT, Shillong
sarajubala@yahoo.com

Abstract

Through curse the addresser expresses his/her inner feelings and attitudes towards the hearer, when s/he is angry or dissatisfied of the behavior of the hearer. Curse by its nature are associated with one's culture, tradition and religion. This study attempts to look into the characteristics and functions of the curse utterances in Meiteilon, the language of Meiteis in Manipur. Few examples of Meiteilon curse are examined through the concepts from Speech Act theory and Ethnography of communication, and try to find out the underlying social and cultural principles.

Keywords: Curse, Speech Act, Meiteilon, Cultural value, Belief system

Introduction

Cursing is a characteristic of almost every society. However, it varies from society to society depending on their belief, culture and power relation. And selection of the cursing words also depends upon the available socio-religious belief of the community. Moreover, curse utterances are a remarkable linguistic form. Meiteilon (Manipuri language) has numerous curse expressions. This paper intends to highlight the characteristics and functions of curse utterances in Meitei society of Manipur by examining specific examples with concepts from speech act theory and ethnography of communication. The selected examples illustrate that the curse utterances have creativity and verbal flexibility within rather strict morphological and syntactical rules. The examples are collected from few individual elders of the community.

The relationship between a language, its speakers, listeners and their thought and culture has been a topic of interest among socio-linguists for a long time. In this regard many writers like Sapir argue that language and culture are inextricably related, and that it is not possible to understand or appreciate one without knowledge of the other (Sapir: 1929, 207). Likewise, communicative functions of the cursing patterns are understood from the context in which they are said.

The Meiteis of Manipur strongly believe in cursing. Cursing culture among the Meiteis has emerged from their strong belief in supernatural power that every phenomenon is controlled by a supreme god. He is also believed to be the source of justice and truth therefore, while an individual feel injustice at the same time there is no means to control the happening, she can neither use physical force nor there is no immediate authority/person to punish the culprit, he/she calls upon this supreme god or other agents to punish the culprit.¹ While calling the supreme god, the individual also wishes the particular form of punishment to be happened to the culprit. At the same time calling upon the supreme god and wishing the culprit to meet some accidents like death or pain in the specific way the curser wish for, involves not only the socio-religious aspect but also the choice of words which is appropriate in the context. The act of cursing is always conditioned by the socio-religious and linguistic system of the particular community. Therefore, the study of the culture of cursing is not only the sociological but it is also the domain of linguistics as appropriate cursing words are to be selected in appropriate situation.

Speech Act and Curse Utterances in Meitei Society

According to Austin's Speech Act Theory (1962), utterances have three kinds of meaning-locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary. These three meanings of a Speech Act try to delimit the functions of language. He further states that sociocultural rules of the community decide the way how a speech act is to be performed, for him the 'felicity conditions' (Austin 1962) for a performative to be successful are – a conventional procedure exist for doing whatever is to be done, it will decide what must be said by whom in which circumstances. Next all the participants will follow the procedure mentioned and finally all the partners will get the necessary intentions, thoughts and feelings. Cursing is one of the 'behaviors' meaning it has to be understood as a social behaviour therefore need to be interpreted or understood in the socio-cultural context. Therefore, Curse utterances can help to understand the cultural identity, the belief system and ways of thinking of a group of people (Vanci- Osam U 1998). It is hoped that this study will help us to understand to what degree, and in what forms, these rules are realized in the speech act of cursing in Meitei society.

Curse utterances can be a very rich source for the verbal reflections of a community's cultural identity, as they reveal many aspects of the language, culture, and way of thinking of the people who belong to the speech community. It is also to be known that the speech acts found in cursing are not universal as one community's culture and belief is different from other. Indian epics have many examples of using curse in many cases by the Brahmins, the Rishis, also by women, for example in Ramayana, despite Ravana captured Sita ,he did not dare to touch her(Sita) as he was cursed by Rambha to explode his heads if he touched any woman without her consent.

¹ Meiteis believe in numerous gods, ranging from household deities to different countryside deities. Among all the *Atiya Mapu Sidaba* is the most supreme god. They all are considered as the guardians who always stand for truth and justice.

Also in Mahabharata Lord Krishna died in the hand of a low caste hunter as he was cursed by Gandhari for helping the Pandavas and ruining Kauravas. In the present day we see curse being mostly used by the powerless to cause some harm to the powerful ones. Curse in Meitei Community are numerous. There are various situations and settings where cursing occurs in this society. In extreme cases people use curses to unidentified/unknown individual i.e. the addressee is unknown to the addressor for example, when a motor cyclist rides his bike very rude, an onlooker may curse him like-

Curse: /nəŋda eksident thoktuna siro/
“May you meet an accident and killed yourself”.

And sometimes, the cursing may be not from the victim himself/herself but from another third person who is not related with the victim at all. For example, while seeing a victim in the crowd who is seriously bitten by a group of gangsters, any person among the crowd may curse the gangsters with a wish like-

Curse: / nəkhoybusu noŋma sumaina laknaba oiyuko/
“May you also be tortured in the same manner (by some more powerful group) someday”.

The act of cursing does not necessarily require a specific time or place. It can be done at any time and in any circumstance. Although the act of communication in most speech acts takes place between at least two participants/interlocutors, this is not essential with curse utterances. A person may curse someone who is not present in that setting or someone whom he/she even does not know.² In this regard, the person who uses curse language does not expect any response or reaction at all from the person he/she addresses (Vanci- Osam U 1998). Curses are subject to the basic laws of communication (verbal), self-promotion and manipulation, the role of curses in the conflict situation is to demonstrate negative emotional reactions such as anger or hatred at the same time inability to use physical force. The basic function of curse is to get relief from the feeling of helplessness and by uttering curses the speaker calms down psychologically. However, it seems that the person who utters curse is calling the unknown powerful agent to fulfill his/her wishes. In this regard, the addresser assumes that there is an omnipresent God, and he will act accordingly, for he is just.

In addition to the interlocutors, there may be an audience present in a Speech Act. In the act of cursing, there may or may not be (an) apparent receiver(s) or even audience as well in the

² Such cases may occur when an unknown person may do some harm to the person or his/her property. For instance, when someone has stolen the property of an individual, the individual may curse the person without knowing who the person is exactly.

setting. In such setting sender's role is limited to one participant as the receiver and the audience even they are present in the setting, are neither supposed to, nor are expected to, respond or talk, and consequently the sender utters as if he/she is talking to himself/herself. Therefore, curse utterances are just like expressive monologues in which the sender reacts to an external stimulus, a feeling, or a problem, without attending to the listener's comments, which may be minimal or absent (Ervin Tripp, 1968). According to U.V. Osam, 1998.....the silence of the audience creates the setting as ritual-like atmosphere where addresser made his/her prayer with one sentence uttering many times what he/she like. In this way the person who curses is fully entitled to use the appropriate words for what he/she wishes to happen to his opponents. Because, the person thinks that he/she has been subjected to unjust treatment, thus feels anger, pain, and despair. In this way curser's role is not to involve himself/herself in the revenges but someone. For example-

Curse: /əybu maŋhan takhəliba nəkhoydadi utki mapei oina tumba oiyu/
"My destroyers! May you all be reduced into ash."³

Since it is beyond his/her own power, ability, and authority to punish the one(s) or the thing (s) that he/she blames or holds responsible, he/she strongly wishes that the person or the thing will be punished somehow by the supreme god who is always there for justice. Therefore, the person usually asks for God's help.⁴ In this way the wishing and choice for the particular 'form', 'type' and 'nature' of the punishment to be given to the wrong doers is really a cultural and linguistic norms as it emerges from a particular specific socio-religious system for calling a powerful agent like god. Therefore, the study of cursing in Meitei society involves both sociological and linguistic approaches.

Following are the example of the curse utterances in Meitei society as classified under the various speech functions.

(I) There are curse which call for god only without wishing any form of punishment. In this regard, the individual seeks the help of almighty to give suitable punishment. Considering the culture of the Meitei community, it may be mentioned that there is the supreme god who is always there for justice. Therefore, justice is requested from him in the form of punishment which is deserved by the offender.

The Examples are:

³ To make one reduced into ash is seen only after the advent of Hinduism in Manipur in 18th Century, perhaps this is the rough translation of Sanskrit Shaap / Vasma/

⁴ The example of curse utterances is seen in Manipuri society in day-to-day life. As the law and order situation is not very good, there is the killing/murder, or any other degree of crime. In this situation when the existing government authorities can not do the justice, the victim always call upon the God to punish the criminal.

1. / isornə nəŋbu dəndi pibə oirəsənu/ “May the God Punish you.”
Goal: to bring ill fate/misfortune to the person.
Cultural background: Associated with religious beliefs.
2. / əməm əŋən k^hayribə isornə ubə oiyu/ “The god of cosmos will see the truth.”
Goal: to bring ill fate/misfortune to the person.
Cultural background: Associated with religious beliefs.

(II) Apart from the supreme guardian gods, Meiteis also believe the evil spirits, therefore, some of the cursing also call upon the evil spirit while the individual wish to punish the culprit at the highest degree.

The Examples are:

1. / nəŋdə tinmu laimu oknədunə siro/ “You may die from the punishment of evil.”
Goal: to bring harm / destruction to the person.
Cultural background: Associated with the religious belief system.
2. /lamda thaŋjada saroi ŋaroi oknadənə ŋaoro/ “May go mad by meeting evil spirits on a Saturday of Lamda (last lunar month of Meitei).”
Goal: to bring insane to the person.
Cultural background: Associated with the rituals associated with warding off of evil spirits.

(III) Besides God and Evil, individual (victim) sometimes requests that a third person carry out a punishment. In this case we may bring the situation of what is happening in day to day life of the Meiteis. This type of wish is always dynamic as it is shaped and influenced by the existing socio-political and economic life of the people.

The Examples are:

1. / nəŋdə kəynə caro/ “May you be killed by Tiger⁵”
Goal: to get killed by a tiger.
Cultural background: Associated with the hunting tradition.
2. / nəŋdə misi cadəna siro/ “May you be killed by someone in a barbaric way”
Goal: to bring death to the person.
Cultural background: Associated with bad forms of death (cultural beliefs).

⁵ To killed by a Tiger is something scared for during the hunting expeditions and this is one of the most unwanted kind of death moreover it also tells us that tigers are abound in ancient times

3. / nəŋdə noŋmeina pəndunə siro/ “May you be killed by bullet⁶.”
Goal: to get killed by a bullet.
Cultural background: Associated with the contemporary social unrest.
4. / nəŋdə gari aksident thoktunə siro/ “May you be killed from vehicle accident.”
Goal: to bring death to the person.
Cultural background: Associated with the modern transport system.
5. / nəŋdə kənsər nədəna siro/ “May you catch/get Cancer”
Goal: to get suffering through cancer.
Cultural background: Associated with the understanding of the associated sufferings of a cancer patient and its difficulty to cure.

From these examples, it is known that these types of speech act are very dynamic in nature as it is highly influenced by the existing condition of the society. The form of death wished by the cursers is the most unwanted that is unnatural /premature. What is evident from the above examples is that the nature and form of death wished for is changing from time to time.

(IV) In some curse utterances the individual asked no one either God or Evil or agent to carry out an act of punishment as it is assumed to happen all by itself:

The Examples are:

1. / nəyüm mei cakpə oiro/ “May your dwelling catch on fire”
Goal: to get the house burned.
Cultural background: Associated with the basic human needs.
2. / nəŋdə ləmsi siro/ “May you die in other’s land.”
Goal: to bring death of the person.
Cultural background: Associated with one of the worst form of death (as is considered by the society).
3. / nəŋdə nuŋəiba phəŋdənə lenbə oiyu/ “May you live in sufferings.”
Goal: to bring ill fate/misfortune to the person.
Cultural background: Associated with the concept of welfare.

(V) In some of the curse utterances, the figure being cursed is referred to by name:

⁶ This may be a reflection of the present social unrest (arm conflict) in Manipur.

The Examples are:

1. / (nəŋdə) həyeŋmuk məpəktə tin oinə pək o/ “You may be reborn as an insect.”
Goal: to get reborn as an insect.
Cultural background: Associated with belief of rebirth in an unwanted form.
2. / (nəŋdə) nəmit urənu/ “May you lost your eyes”
Goal: to get blind.
Cultural background: Associated with the concept of disability.
3. / nəŋdə kusti thuŋŋo/ “May you get Leprosy”
Goal: to bring ill fate/misfortune to the person.
Cultural background: Associated with one time out-casted disease.

In some of the curse utterances, the individual is not directly cursed rather curse is for the descendants or his property.

The Examples are:

1. / nəca nəsu mi oidəbə oiyu/ “May your children and grandchildren suffer”
Goal: to bring ill fate/misfortune to the person.
Cultural background: Associated with the family values.
2. / nəŋgi kaoren səŋgol marai taro/ “May your cattle die from incurable disease”
Goal: to bring poverty to the person.
Cultural background: Associated with the tradition of animal herding.

(VI) In some of the curse utterances, the curser is not necessarily the victim of the wrong doers or even not related at all with the victim. Such cases happen when the audience becomes the sympathizer of the victim at situation.

The Examples are:

1. / (miŋondəbu suməinə təubə nəŋdi) məha papi nəŋdə mərai yaorədi phənidi/ “I will be happy if such sinful person dies soon”.
Goal: to bring death to the person.
Cultural background: Associated with belief that wrongdoers suffer in long run.

(VII) Some of the curse utterances can express the wish that a person be punished by suffering great pain instead of dying, as dying is thought to be a remedy for the addressee.

1. / məha papi nəŋdə nəpʊnsi cuppə nuŋaibə ŋamdənə məŋlo/ “May you, (the sinful person) suffer through your life”.
Goal: to bring ill fate/misfortune to the person.
Cultural background: Associated with the universal value of welfare.
2. / nəŋda nəpʊnsi cuppə laithuŋ pək o/ “May you suffer from incurable disease”.
Goal: to bring disease to the person.
Cultural background: Associated with the belief that some disease is subject to a long suffering and the pain is unbearable”.
3. / namito loktaŋ taŋŋo/ “May you be blind”.
Goal: to bring blind to the person.
Cultural background: Associated with the sufferings and handicaps of being blind.

From the above examples it is known that curse utterances express the wish of the addressee so that the addresser may suffer in ways deemed appropriate to the addressor. The form of punishment can vary in at least seven ways in Meitei society.

As mentioned earlier, curse utterances have no truth value. When the curse utterance is produced, it is not possible to see whether the desired punishment as per wishes of the addressor will happen or, if it does, to what degree the punishment will occur. What is important here is that the performer calms down by uttering them, and psychologically he/she feels more at ease thinking that what he/she has wished will be realized one day. In other words, the perlocutionary act is not for the person whom the curse is aimed at, but for the performer. This is what Austin mentions as evincing emotion: “We may evince emotion in or by issuing an utterance as when we swear; but once again we have no use here for performative formulas and the other devices of illocutionary acts. We might say that we use swearing for relieving our feelings” (Austin 1962, 105). Therefore, curse utterances, like swear utterances, are unique in that they produce certain consequential effects upon the feelings of the speaker, but not of the audience or anyone else as happens in the case of most other speech acts.

Norms of Interaction and Interpretation in social Context

Though the cursing culture is a part of the larger socio-religious belief of the folk, it is more often heard from the people who are powerless, the utterance of this kind is common where there is repression, oppression and exploitation of the individual. It does not mean that it does not occur in other cases. However, cursing does not occur without a belief of harming other by calling god when someone is really helpless. Cursing by calling god is used as a weapon of weak to take revenge to the superior one.

Conclusion

This study has attempted to address Manipuri curses by employing Speech Act criteria. Curse utterances show many similarities with other speech acts, yet they also show a number of differences. One such difference is that in cursing, a perlocutionary act is directed toward the sender (addressor) rather than a receiver (addressee). Another observation about cursing in Meitei society is the correlation between the social background of a person and the use of this speech act as it is used by those as weapon of the weak.

Generally, the use of curse utterances in speech does not seem proper and refined, and it projects personal traits such as rudeness and aggressiveness in the addressor at the same time there is the politeness and request in the case it call upon the god to punish the wrong doers as s/he desired. Therefore, despite the negative images associated with curse utterances, they are still a commonly occurring speech act in colloquial speech because of their routine-like nature.

Curses can be considered one of the important sources for reflecting on cultural identity and belief. In Meitei society, it is the socio-religious belief of the society that sustains and survives the cursing culture. It is through this particular speech Act that weaker people who are subjected to discrimination and exploitation gets relief from the unwanted situations.

From this study it is also known that curse utterances provide us with a rich source of data to observe the dynamic nature of the Manipuri society and language. It would not be wrong to say that curse utterances will continue to exist as verbal customs and traditions, with few modifications in our fast changing world. Curses will survive as long as the concepts of goodness as a symbol of justice exist in human relationships.

References

- Brown, P and Levinson, S (1987). *Politeness: Some Universals in Language*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Demianova Yulia (<https://zenodo.org/record/11326/files/study.pdf>): Cursing as a part of Ukrainian Conflict Talk.
- Ervin Tripp, S.M. (1968). An Analysis of the interaction of Language, topic and listener. In *Readings in the Sociology of Language*, ed. J.A.Fishman, The Hague, Mouton
- Hymes, D. (1874). *Foundations in Sociolinguistics: An Ethnographic Approach*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Jay, Timothy (2000). *Why we Curse: A Neuro Psycho Social Theory of Speech*, John Benjamin Publishing Company, Philadelphia/Amsterdam.
- Pramodini, N. (1989). *Social Grammar of Meiteilon*, Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Department of Linguistics, Manipur University.

- Sharifi, Sh, E. Shima (2012). Assessing Speech Acts of Curses and Prayers in Persian, *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, Vol.2, No. 9, pp 1911-1916, September 2012.
- Sarajubala, Ch. (2002). *Language and Culture in Meitei Society*, Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Department of Linguistics, Manipur University.
- Savile-Troike, M. (1982). *The Ethnography of Communication, An Introduction*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Searle, J.R (1969). *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*, Cambridge University Press.
- S. Shahla, K. Amir (2012). Thematic Roles and Grammatical Features of Cursing and Blessing Speech Acts in Kurdish (Ilami Dialect), *Studies in Literature and Language*, vol 5, No. 1, 2012, pp 54-58.
- Vanci- Osam U (1998). May You Be Shot With Greasy Bullets: Curse utterances in Turkish, *Asian Folklore Studies*, Volume 57, 1998:71-86
- Wardough, R. (1986). *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- =====