

## **Acquisition of Verbal Morphology in Manipuri-speaking Children**

**Dr. Ahanthem Romita Devi**

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### **Abstract**

This research work has been carried out to study the acquisition of Manipuri verb morphology in monolingual children who are in the age range of 2 to 4. The study can thus reveal the actual developmental stages of acquisition of verb morphology across the years of acquisition. The study of the acquisition of verb inflection in Manipuri has also helped in explaining the nature of syntactic development, as the verb in Manipuri carries syntactic load of a sentence since verb inflection, basically, deals with tense and aspect, phi-features and mood.

**Key words:** Tense, Aspect, Verb, Acquisition, Verbal Morphology, Manipuri

### **1. Introduction**

The present research work seeks to study the acquisition of verb morphology in Manipuri monolingual children. The study has examined 25 verb lemmas and has covered the acquisition of verb morphology by Manipuri children within the age group of 2 to 4 years old. Lemma is the term assigned to the abstract base of a lexical entry (lexeme), i.e. to the correlation of (specific) lexical meaning with (specific) phonological material, which creates the lexical sign (Bittner et al. 2003).

Although acquisition of verb morphology has fascinated many researchers, such an attempt has not been made in Manipuri language so far. The reason why this study is necessary is because it can reveal the actual unfolding of the acquisition of verb morphology in the early age group of children. Moreover, acquisition of verb morphology in Manipuri will also offer an insight into the nature of tense and aspect as they emerge in acquisition of Manipuri. This implies that study of the acquisition of verb inflection in Manipuri will also explain the nature of syntactic development, as the verb in Manipuri in as much as it tends to carry the syntactic load of a sentence. The verb inflection, in general, deals with tense and

aspect, phi-features and mood. The present work thus explores the nature and function of each of these properties of the verb in Manipuri.

## 2. Theoretical Background

Different models have been used to study the acquisitional process of verbal morphology. One such model is seen in Bowerman (1976), Langacker (1988), Bybee (1985, 1995), Tomasello (2000 a). Many studies (Karpf, 1991; Dressler and Karpf, 1995) propose a model of self-organisation of developing systems. Such a model envisages a distinction between prototypical and non-prototypical morphology (Dressler and Barbaresi, 1994). The two most important principles of this model are pattern selection and self-organisation. *Pattern selection* means that the child tends to select some forms in some contexts on the basis of token frequency (the occurrence of any form of a lemma is counted as a single token) and saliency (Bates and Mac Whinney, 1987), whereas self-organisation means that children do not merely imitate the input but construct a pattern on their own in reaction to the input. Dressler and Karpf (1995) propose that morphological acquisition can be divided into three main phases of premorphology, protomorphology and morphology proper as under:

1. The premorphological phase can be considered as the phase before the detection of grammatical morphology.
2. The protomorphological phase is the stage where children detect and reconstruct their own morphological patterns of first rules.
3. The morphology proper phase is the last phase in acquisition of verb morphology and manifests a qualitative rise in the child's system of verb inflection, if not quantitatively towards the adult systems.

## 3. Methodology

The proposed study aims to examine the acquisition of verb morphology in Manipuri through these three phases. For this study the spontaneous speech of monolingual 20 Manipuri-speaking children in the data of the age range of 2 to 4 was collected. Each group consists of 10 children irrespective of the gender of the child. Video recordings were made for 2 to 3 hours a month in everyday situations at the homes of the children to ensure play or natural situation of an action like reading picture books, which are familiar to them. The

recordings also focus on the interactions between the children and their family members, and also while they interact with their peer groups.

Like any Tibeto-Burman language, Manipuri tense system seems to denote time in terms of future and non-future. This means that adverbials play a very important role telling the time. As far as aspect is concerned, Manipuri, unlike many languages, does not show clear aspectual distinctions. It can be roughly divided into imperfect and perfect aspects. Imperfect aspect includes simple present and future; present, and past continuous; future perfect; present, past and future perfect continuous. Given the inflectional system of Manipuri, the research work looks at the language of children within the age group of 2-4 years of age with special attention to the inflectional markers:

- 1.-*i/li* present tense marker
- 2.-*re/le* perfect aspect marker
- 3.-*ri/li* continuous marker
- 4.-*kani/gani* future tense marker
- 5.-*o/ro/lo* imperative mood marker

#### **4. Tense and Aspect in Manipuri**

Thoudam (2006), in his book ‘Problems in Analysis of Manipuri language’, discusses the problems faced by scholars in segmenting the tense system of Manipuri language. According to him, the established approaches cannot be used to analyze Manipuri tense system because “time is universal and tense is grammatical”. Thus, the time at which certain action has been performed or has remained incomplete seems to be the crucial point for analyzing the tenses of Manipuri. He further says that there is a misconception about the tense and tense logic in the language. Many scholars refer that there will be no language on earth which has no tense distinction. Such statements are fallacious and cannot be relied upon. The scholars who propose strong statement about the properties of human language seem to be confused about *time* with *tense*. It seems that they have a misconception of the subject-matter. We know that time is universal and *tense is grammatical*. It is for this reason

that we say that *Time is grammatically marked for Tense*. Therefore, tense must have markers. It should also be noted that in this languages there are cases where the past and future tense markers of those scholars who claim that there is tense are found attached to the same root.

Tense in Tibeto-Burman languages, in general, is not so distinct as it is in languages like English, Hindi, Sanskrit, etc. Tense in this language is not so clear. Thus, we feel that it must be analyzed in a different way. In the precise words of Comrie (1985a), 'tense is grammaticalized expression of location of time'. we can look at a particular form in a language noun or verb inflections, relativization processes ways to mark the anaphoric expression etc. and determine whether or not each of these form some grammatical system of the categorical distinction in the language. It is because of such manifestation of the grammatical categories that the researchers have to be careful and should not use any blanket-rule without a meticulous and careful analysis of the categorical entity of the language. it is the time, tense and aspect in Manipuri that needs a very careful analysis. And while doing so, we should not be carried away by the existing approach or analysis available for other surrounding languages such as English, Hindi etc.

#### 4.1. Manipuri Verbal System

Manipuri belongs to the Tibeto-Burman language group. It is a verb final language. It seems that *be* verb is absent in some sentences. This is why it seems that the tense markers appear with the adjective.

##### 1 Adjective (predicative)

tombi	phəjə	-i
tombi	beautiful	pres

'Tombi is beautiful'.

##### 2 Verb

caoba	tum	-i
chaoba	sleep	pres

'Chaoba sleeps'.

It will be interesting to examine when such an inherent distinction between adjectives and verbs emerges in child language and at what stages in language acquisition do verbs and adjectives show corresponding inflection.

Another important feature, we can mention here about the tense and aspect in Manipuri is that the language has a tendency to shorten forms by deleting some of the constituent particles (Thoudam, 2006). This is one of the key areas and we need to examine this feature of the language carefully. For example  $\chi A\gamma\leftrightarrow\nu i$  is the shortened form of the phrase,  $\chi A\gamma\epsilon \eta A\psi\beta\leftrightarrow\nu i$ . Here  $\chi A\gamma\epsilon \eta A\psi\beta\leftrightarrow$  functions as a noun phrase and it cannot be separated.

In Manipuri, distribution of the infinitive marker is phonologically conditioned. The infinitive form of the verb occurs with the marker ‘-pə’, if the preceding sound is voiceless (i.e. ‘cət-pə’ ‘to go’, ‘kək-pə’ ‘to cut’); or ‘-bə’ if the preceding sound is a voiced one (i.e. ‘cen-bə’ ‘to run’, ‘yeŋ-bə’ ‘to look’). The finite form will occur with other tense and aspect markers. The study also seeks to examine the acquisition of verbs in different TAM (tense, aspect and mood). This is very important and this will help to analyze and document the development of inflection during different stages of language development.

#### 4.2. Tense System

Like any Tibeto-Burman language, Manipuri tense system seems to denote the reference of time in terms of future and non-future. This means that the adverbials play a very important role in telling the time. Traditional Manipuri grammarians have held firmly that Manipuri has three tense – present, past, and future; each of which is again classified into four different aspects accordingly to the way(s) or process(es) the action is done in these tenses– indefinite, continuous, perfect, and perfect continuous.

Example:

##### Present Tense

- |    |      |       |        |     |     |     |
|----|------|-------|--------|-----|-----|-----|
| 3. | rozi | ŋəsi  | bəzar  | -də | cət | -li |
|    | rozi | Today | market | loc | go  | asp |
- Lit: ‘Rozi goes to the market today’. ‘Rozi went to the market today’.

### Past Tense

4. rozi ηəraŋ bəzar -də cət -li  
rozi yesterday Market loc go asp  
'Rozi went to the market yesterday'.

### Future Tense

5. rozi (həyeŋ) bəzar -də -kəni  
rozi tomorrow market loc fut  
'Rozi will go to the market tomorrow'.

In the sentences (3) and (4), the verbs along with the morphemes do not exhibit any difference with regard to tense. It is the adverbials 'ηəsi', 'today' and 'ηəraŋ', 'yesterday' in sentences (3) and (4) respectively, which mark the differences in the meaning of the tenses, in the sentences. In the sentence (5), the adverbial tomorrow is optional, because the future tense marker '-kəni' denotes the time reference clearly. In the case of present tense and past tense, putting an adverbial is essential to denote the time of action or event. Thus, it is certain that the classification of tenses e.g. present, past, and future by trying to decode them from the morphological marker, is not found in Manipuri. Some more examples are given below to look at the system closely.

6. bHarat ca thək -kH -i  
bharat tea Drink def asp  
'Bharat has taken tea (very definite)'.

7. bHarat ca thək -l↔m -i  
bharat tea drink im.pst asp

'Bharat has taken tea (Completed already)'.

8. bharat ca thək -l↔m -gəni  
bharat tea drink im.pst Fut  
'Bharat may have taken tea (but not sure)'.

In the sentence (6) given above, the suffix '-kH' indicates 'definite-action-complete' (just like the action was witnessed by the speaker). Another suffix '-ləm/-rəm' in (7) denotes 'action already completed' (remote completion of the action) but it ('-ləm'/'-rəm') cannot be an ending in a sentence. The co-occurrence of '-ləm' and '-gəni' ('-kəni') indicate 'doubt of an action'.

### 4.2.1. Aspect

Manipuri, unlike many languages, does not show clear aspectual distinctions. It can be roughly divided into imperfect and perfect aspects. Imperfect aspect includes ‘present and ‘future’; present, past and future continuous; while the perfect aspect includes present, past and future perfect and the past simple. Perfective aspect is the aspect that deals with a completed action. Perfect aspect includes the actions that are completed in present, past, and future time (includes present, past and future perfect). It, however, also seems to include the past indefinite and since the action referred in this aspect is completed one; it is marked as perfect aspect.

#### 4.2.1.1. Present and Past Tense

##### Present Indefinite (Simple) Aspect

It expresses simple statement, habitual meaning and universal truth. The markers ‘-i’, and ‘-li’ are allomorphs. We would like to mention this point for the sake of clarity here that in Manipuri only a few consonants can occur in word final position. These consonants are [p], [t], [k], [m], [n], [l], and [ŋ] (Singh, 2000, Chapter II, 13). The marker ‘-i’ occurs if the preceding sound is a vowel or the sounds [p], [k], [m], and [ŋ]. The allomorph ‘-li’ occurs if the preceding sound is [t], [n], and [l]. For example:

##### Universal Truths

9. numit -nə noŋpok -tə ta -i  
sun Nom West loc set Asp  
‘The sun sets in the west’.

##### Habitual

10. məhak gitar khoŋ -i  
he guitar play asp  
‘He plays guitar’.

##### Present Simple

- 11 nəŋ bəzar -də cət -li  
You market Loc go asp  
‘You go to the market’.

### Continuous (Progressive) Aspect

The continuous aspect is indicated by ‘-ri/-li’ (‘-ri’ occurs after vowels while ‘-li’ occurs after consonants) in Manipuri. In other words it expresses the action that is in progression at the time of speaking.

### Present Continuous

12. əi phi su -ri  
I Clothes wash prog  
‘I am washing clothes’.
13. məkhoi wari ta -ri  
they story listen prog  
‘They are listening to a story’.

### Past Continuous

If the time reference changes and some action is referred to be described as being in continuation in the past-time and thus not at the time of speaking, it would bring the continuous event in the past tense in Manipuri as given below:

14. əikhoi (ηəran) lai yek -li  
we yesterday picture painting Prog  
‘Yesterday, we were painting a picture’.

### Future Continuous

Moreover, the future continuous tense will be shown in Manipuri if the time reference is changed for some action that will be in continuation in the future-time and thus the time that will follow after the time of speaking. For example:

15. məkhoi (həyeη) lai yek -kəni  
they tomorrow picture painting fut.  
‘They will be painting a picture tomorrow’.

### Perfect Aspect

Perfect tense indicates an action, which has definitely been completed at the time of speaking. If we try equating the simple past tense on the basis of aforementioned explanation of the completion of the event/action, we would say that the simple past tense too indicates an action that has already taken place. The perfect tense in Manipuri is denoted by the suffix ‘-

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*re/-le*’ (depending on the sound that precedes the marker, i.e., ‘*-re*’ will occur after any vowel and ‘*-le*’ will occur after consonants).

16. rina lairik ədu Pa -re  
rina Book def read perf  
‘Rina has read the book’.
17. haudoŋ -nə uci -bu hat -le  
Cat nom rat acc kill perf  
‘The cat has killed the rat’.

### Past Simple

18. əi N↔raN tu (-kh) -i  
I yesterday run def asp  
‘I fell yesterday (completed action)’.

Other suffixes ‘*-kh*’ and ‘*-re*’ together indicate certainty of the completion of an action in Manipuri. We, however, must mention that ‘*-kh*’ is optional unless we want to emphasize that the action is definitely completed. For example:

19. m↔hak cithi tha (-kh) -re  
he letter send def perf  
‘He has sent the letter’.

In the sentence (19) given above, the speaker is sure about the action being complete. Semantically, ‘*-re/-le*’ and ‘*-kh*’ and ‘*-re*’ are different, which will be a little clear after considering the two sentences given below.

20. ↔NaN skul -d↔ c↔t -le  
child School loc go perf  
‘The child has started going to school’.
21. ↔NaN skul -d↔ c↔t (-kh) -re  
child school loc go def perf  
‘The child has gone to school’.

As we can see in sentence (21) that the child has gone to school, and is not present at home at the moment. This aspect marker ‘*-re/-le*’ can also be used in a very specific situation, like reporting an action that is a completed action or informing of departure/absence of someone/something in the place where the speech is taking place.

For example:

22 m↔hak ↔si dukan -d↔ c↔t -le  
He that shop loc go perf  
'He has gone to that shop'.

23 ↔i c↔t -le  
I go perf  
'I am leaving'. Lit: 'I have left'.

We can see in sentence (22) that during a conversation between A and B about a certain person C, A sees C going to a particular shop, and then informing B that this person C is going there. Sentence (23) is used in the context of taking leave, saying at the time of departure, informing 'I am leaving' or 'I have left'.

#### 4.2.1.2. Future Tense

Future tense can be described as an action/situation that may happen after the point of speaking on the time scale. In other words, this refers to the point of reference of action in time that would take place after the moment of speaking or after the present moment. This implies that the action has not taken place yet, and thus, it is unrealized. The aspect marker '-k↔ni/-g↔ni' is used to denote the future tense in Manipuri. The phonological conditioning is that '-k↔ni' occurs after a voiceless sound, while '-g↔ni' occurs after a voiced sound.

24 ↔i pot yom -g↔ni  
I thing pack fut  
'I will pack the things'.

25 sunita kolej -d↔ lak -k↔ni  
sunita college loc Come fut  
'Sunita will come to the college'.

If we examine the above two sentences (24) and (25), it becomes clearer that '-k↔ni/-g↔ni' is used for an unrealized action in future time. It will be very interesting to examine the acquisition of such phenomena of tense and aspect in Manipuri-speaking children.

#### 4.2.2. Mood

As far as the mood as a grammatical category is concerned, imperative mood seems to be marked very clearly in Manipuri. It is of two types namely, command and respect.

Command forms are ‘-u/-ru/-lu’ or ‘-o/-ro/-lo’.

26. O lairik pa -ro  
 pro book read comd  
 ‘(you) read the book.’

Request forms are ‘-pi/-bi’ and they are used along with command markers.

27. ca -bi -yu  
 eat hon comd  
 ‘Kindly eat or Please eat.’

These two types of mood are relevant for the present study because they seem appear in children’s speech and are morphologically marked.

## 5. Data and the Analysis

The data has been collected after grouping the 20 subjects into two age groups namely 2-3 years of age and 3-4 years of age groups. As mentioned in the previous section each group comprises of 10 children.

NAME	N	MEAN	STD. DEV.	MINIMUM	MAXIMUM
I/li	10	2.80	.919	1	4
Ri/li	10	2.20	.632	1	3
Re/le	10	2.30	.675	1	3
K↔ni/g↔ni	10	1.70	.483	1	2
O/yo	10	2.50	.707	1	3

Table 1: Descriptive statistical scores of inflection in Group 1.

NAME	N	MEAN	STD. DEV.	MINIMUM	MAXIMUM
i/li	10	4.60	.966	4	6
ri/li	10	3.50	.850	2	5
re/le	10	3.80	.919	2	5
k↔ni/g↔ni	10	2.60	.699	2	4
o/yo	10	4.30	.949	3	6

Table 2: Descriptive statistical scores of inflection in Group 2.

### Correlation Matrix

	-i/-li	-ri/-li	-re/-le	-kani/-gani	-o/-yo
-i/-li	1.000				
-ri/-li	.650	1.000			
-re/-le	.645	.364	1.000		
k↔ni/g↔ni	.688	.667	.781	1.000	
-o/-yo	.047	-.408	.383	.000	1.000

Table 3: Correlation matrix of Group 1.

	-i/-li	-ri/-li	-re/-le	-kani/-gani	-o/-yo
-i/-li	1.000				
-ri/-li	.000	1.000			
-re/-le	-.476	.142	1.000		
k↔ni/g↔ni	.395	.187	-.138	1.000	

-o/-yo	.024	.620	.586	.369	1.000
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Table 4: Correlation matrix of Group 2.

Group 1-Group 2

Variable	Mean (x1)	Std. Dev.	T-value	Mean (x2)	Std. Dev.	Probability
i/li	2.80	.919	4.2691	4.60	.966	
ri/li	2.20	.632	3.8812	3.50	.850	
re/le	2.30	.675	4.1600	3.80	.919	
k↔ni/g↔ni	1.50	.527	3.9736	2.60	.699	
o/yo	2.50	.707	4.8099	4.30	.949	

Table 5: Descriptive Comparative Statistical Score of Group 1 and Group 2

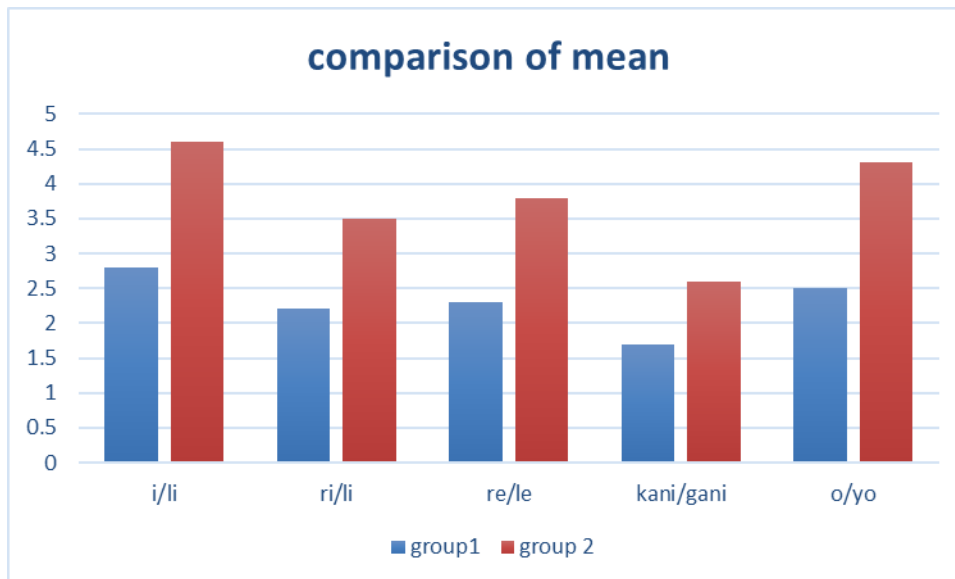


Fig.1. Comparative histogram of the means of the two age groups for all the variables.

The fifth section presents a cross-sectional analysis of the data in the two age groups that have been selected for the work. The first part of this paper deals with the structures of tense and aspect system of Manipuri. The descriptive statistical data have been provided in different tables. The first two tables depict increase in the use of inflectional markers as the

age increases. The hypothesis postulated by Karpf, (1991) and Dressler and Karpf, (1995), that children tend to select some forms in some contexts on the basis of token frequency (the occurrence of any form of a lemma is counted as a single token) and saliency (Bates and MacWhinney, 1987) have been found attestable as similar reasons seem to dominate the patterns of acquisition in Manipuri too. Another assumption of this approach is self-organization, which means that children do not merely imitate the input but construct a pattern on their own in reaction to the input. The statistical scores in the two tables show that the present tense marker *'-i/-li'* is the most consistent marker in all the age groups of children followed by the imperative marker *'-o/-ro/-lo'*, which is then followed by the perfect aspect marker *'-re/-le'*. This consistent pattern is evident in all the age groups with an increase of use along the line of the increase of the age. The study, thus show that inflectional markers are expected to appear in following order:

*'-i/-li' > '-o/-ro/-lo' > '-re/-le' > '-ri/-li' > '-k↔ni/-g↔ni'*.

This developmental trend is evident when we look at the complete statistical scores of the two age groups. Among the five inflectional markers under investigation, the present tense marker *-i/-li* seems to be the most frequently used maker as compared to the other markers. The future tense marker *-k↔ni/-g↔ni* is the least frequent variable. The reason for the present tense marker being the most frequent marker across the age group is also because the marker *-i/-li* is the most productive one. The only difference in the data of the two age groups is that there is an increase in the use of the variables with the increase in age. The trend, is moreover, is maintained across all the two age groups.

The details of the t-test results are given in the table 5. This test is carried out to obtain the computed t value for all the inflectional markers and then to find out the significance of the difference of means in the three groups. In reference to the tabulated t at degree of freedom 18 for P=0.05, the computed t-value for the age groups 1 and 2 are significant. The reason behind this result is that owing to the wide age gaps between group 1 and 2 the computed-t shows significant development in terms of the acquisition of inflectional marker in Manipuri. Another noticeable difference is that the tabulated-t value is more with regard to the inflectional markers *'-ri/-li'* *'-re/-le'*, and *'-k↔ni/-g↔ni'*, in comparisons to other variables.

Correlation coefficient was also calculated to establish the correlation between the acquisitions of the five inflectional markers in Manipuri. When we look at the first group, we have observed an interesting trend in terms of correlation co-efficient. The highest correlation in this group is between *'-re/-le'* and *'-k↔ni/-g↔ni'*, which means that if the perfect marker *'-re/-le'* is acquired then the future tense maker will also emerge in the child's speech. Similar relation is seen between the variables *'-i/-li'* and *'-ri/-li'*, *'-i/-li'* and *'-re/-le'* and *'-i/-li'* and *'-k↔ni/-g↔ni'*, and *'-ri/-li'* and *'-k↔ni/-g↔ni'*. The only negative correlation that is found in this age group is between the variables *'-ri/-li'* and *'-o/-ro/-lo'*, which implies that acquisition of one will hamper the development of the other. This shows an inverse relation between the two variables, which implies that if the progressive marker *'-ri/-li'* is acquired first then the imperative marker *'-o/-ro/-lo'* will not be acquired and vice versa.

For the second group, the highest positive correlation is found between the variables *'-ri/-li'* and *'-o/-ro/-lo'*. Such a correlation is also there between the variables *'-re/-le'* and *'-o/-ro/-lo'* and *'-k↔ni/-g↔ni'* and *'-o/-ro/-lo'*. Unlike, the first group, the second group shows negative correlation that has been between *'-i/-li'* and *'-re/-le'* and *'-re/-le'* and *'-k↔ni/-g↔ni'*.

Apart from these tables, the MEAN of the five variables obtained for the two groups are represented in the form of histograms. As mentioned earlier, the y-axis indicates the means of respective age group and the three groups are given on the x-axis. An observation of these figures shows a gradual increase in the use of the inflectional markers along with the increase in age. A noticeable increase in the use of the future tense maker is found in children within the age group of 3 to 4 as compared to the children in the first group. The future tense is treated more like an 'unrealized' aspect, and due to the mentioned typical nature of this variable the children in the early age group do not really use it that frequently.

## 5. Conclusion

It is evident from the data that have been collected that children of the first group are already in the proto-morphology stage where some inflectional markers have clearly emerged. The qualitative and slight quantitative improvement can be seen in the second age group. This is why they are in the morphology proper stage, where their speech is like that of the adult form. Taking these stages forward, an increase in quality and quantity can be expected from older children where we may find the target structures in further research.

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Dr. Ahanthem Romita Devi  
Assistant Professor  
Department of Foreign Language  
Manipur University  
Canchipur  
Imphal 795003  
Manipur  
[romita.ahanthem@gmail.com](mailto:romita.ahanthem@gmail.com)