

## A Contrastive Study of Select Linguistic Characteristics of Mizo and Manipuri<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Mizo and Manipuri are two important languages mainly spoken in Northeast India. Considered to be Tibeto-Burman languages by most linguists, these two languages show a strong linguistic affinity in terms of phonological, morphological, and syntactic features which hint at their common origin. This paper is a contrastive analysis of the select linguistic characteristics of the two languages to explain the affinity and dissimilarity between the two. The selected linguistic features include case, gender, number, syntax, and vocabulary.

**Keywords:** Manipuri, Mizo, Tibeto-Burman, contrastive analysis.

### 1. Introduction

Manipuri, also known as Meiteilon or Meeteilon, is the official language of the Indian state of Manipur. It is spoken by 17,61,079 people in India (Census of India 2011) and considered to be a language which belongs to the Tibeto-Burman group of Sino-Tibetan family of languages. It is the mother tongue of the Meitei community. Meitei settlement is primarily in the valley of Manipur though many of them are in Assam, Tripura and Bangladesh and Myanmar. Meiteis claim that they have a history of more than two thousand years. Historians believe that the history of Meitei kingdom started in 33 AD with the coronation of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba as their first king. They have their own Scripts (Meitei Mayek) for writing though it was substituted by the Bengali script during the reign of King Garibniwaz in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Only in the recent past this script has been reintroduced in the school curriculum replacing the Bengali script. Available records suggest that the number of phonemes and alphabets Meiteis used changed from time to time.

Mizo, also known as Duhlian or Lushei, is the mother tongue of the Mizos. It is spoken by 8,30,846 people in India (Census of India 2011). Majority of them are in the Indian state of Mizoram while many of them are also in Manipur, Tripura, Assam, Myanmar, and Bangladesh. According to Lalzama, the original home of the Mizos is “somewhere in Tibet and China wherefrom they migrated to Burma and then to Mizoram through many centuries” (120). He

further argues that “Of the various tribes belonging to the Tibeto-Burman race, the Mizo are more identical to the Manipuri, the Burmese and the Kachyen than the others” (124). This is ascertained by the close affinity Mizo language has with the other Tibeto-Burman languages spoken by these communities. Mizo as a language does not have its own script till the arrival of the Christian Missionaries. The absence of the script is the major hurdle in the study of how this language evolved through different historical phases. Linguists and philologists put Mizo and Manipuri as cognate languages under Tibeto-Burman group of the Sino-Tibetan family of languages. Figure 1 shows a schematic chart of the language family that these two languages belong.

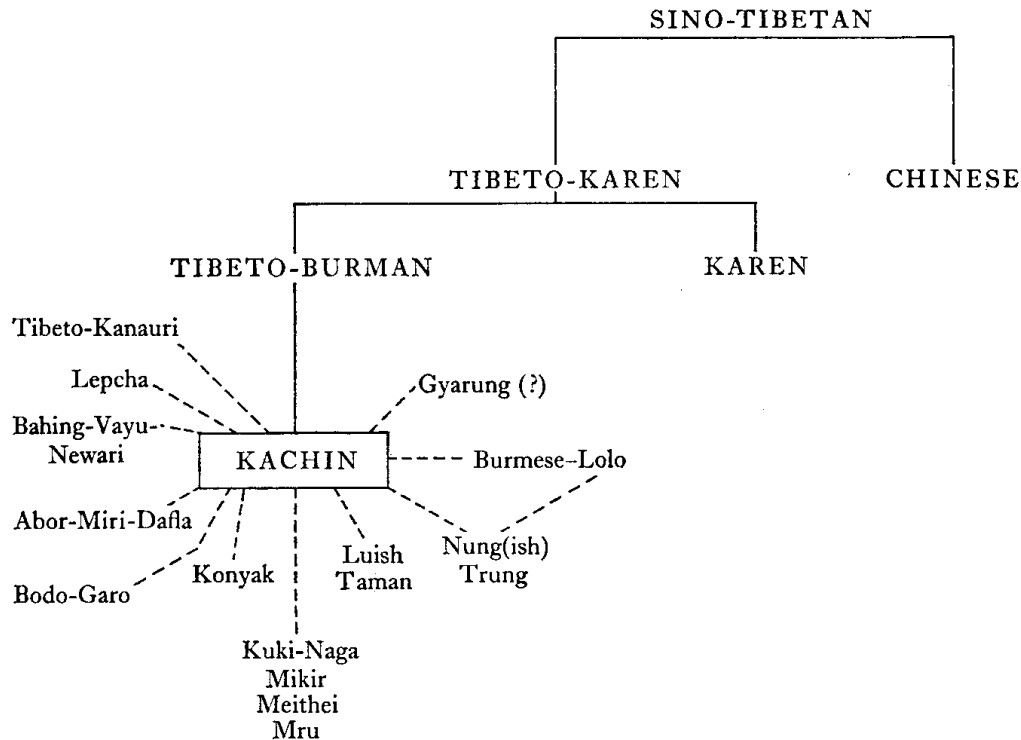


Fig.1: A Schematic chart of Sino-Tibetan groups prepared by Benedict.

Meithei, here, refers to Manipuri(Meiteilon) and Mizo(Lushei) forms part of the Kuki-Naga group in Benedict(1972).

It is not hard to find cognate words in Manipuri and Mizo languages. This suggests the closeness of the two languages apart from the geographical proximity. This paper attempts to study the affinity between the two languages to show that they have a common origin while it will also help the speakers of both the languages to learn the other.

## 2. Contrastive Linguistics

Contrastive studies, according to Kerzeszowski, “has a long history as early as 1000 AD when Aelfric wrote his *Grammatica*, a grammar of Latin and English, based on the implicit assumption that the knowledge of grammar of one language may facilitate the learning of another language” (2). The way how second language is taught by applying Grammar translation

method is also in a sense a contrastive study as two languages (L1 and L2) are contrasted in this method of language teaching. Therefore “the idea of comparing individual languages is not new. Traditional books on foreign language grammars made use of the contrastive approach in comparing constructions or functions of the target language L2 with those of the source language L1. Such comparisons within the framework of traditional grammar have proved to be useful for pedagogical purposes” (Khan 1). Contrastive analysis of languages has been appreciated more in the language pedagogy than in philology though its importance has been proven in both the fields. In this regard Robert Lado says:

We can predict and describe the patterns that will cause difficulty in learning, and those that will not cause difficulty, by comparing systematically the language and culture to be learned with the native language and culture of the student. In our view, the preparation of up-to-date pedagogical and experimental materials must be based on this kind of [contrastive] comparison. (Lado vii)

Lado’s view is given with a purely foreign language(L2) in mind. However, when two cognate languages are contrasted, more similarities are found and learning one of the languages by the speakers of the other language becomes easier. Apart from the pedagogical utility, it also answers many philological questions such as the historical and geographical location of the origin of the languages under discussion.

### 3. Case

Almost all pronouns in both Manipuri and Mizo inflect for the case formation. It can also inflect for the formation of plurals. Tables 1 and 2 show the case inflections in the two languages.

		English			Manipuri		
	Case→	Nomi native	Geni tive	objecti ve	Nominative	Genitive	objective
<b>1st Person</b>	Singular	I	my	me	Ei/ Eina	Eigi	Eibu / Eingonda
	Plural	We	our	Us	Eikhoi/ Eikhoina	Eikhoigi	Eikhoibu/ Eikhoida
	Singular	You	Your	You	Nang/ Nanggi	Nanggi	Nangbu/ Nangbu

<b>2<sup>nd</sup> Person</b>					Nangna		Nangonda
	Plural	You	Your	You	Nakhoi/ Nakhoina	Nakhoigi	Nakhoibu/ Nakhoida
<b>3<sup>rd</sup> Person</b>	Singular	He/ She	His/ Her	Him / Her	Mahak/ Mahakna	Mahakki	Mahakpu/ Mangonda
	Plural	They	Their	Them	Makhoi/  Makhoina	Makhoigi	Makhoibu/ Makhoida
	Singular	It	Its	It	Masi/ Masina	Masigi	Masibu/ Masida

**Table 1: Case of Personal Pronouns in Manipuri**

		English			Mizo		
<b>1<sup>st</sup> Person</b>	Case→	Nominative	Genitive	objective	Nominative	Genitive	objective
		Singular	I	my	me	Kei/keimah/K a	Kei/Keimah/ ka
	Plural	We	our	Us	Keimahni/kein i/kan	Keimahni/ke ini/kan	Keimahni/mi n
<b>2<sup>nd</sup> Person</b>	Singular	You	Your	You	Nang/ Nangmah/i	Nang/ Nangmah/i	Nang / Nangmah/ i
	Plural	You	Your	You	Nangni/Nang mahni/in	Nangni/in/ Nangmahni	Nangni/ Nangmahni/ che
<b>3<sup>rd</sup> Person</b>	Singular	He/ She	His/ Her	Him / Her	A /Amah/ani	A /Amah/ani	A
	Plural	They	Their	Them	An/Anni	An	An/Anni
	Singular	It	Its	It	A	A	A

**Table 2: Case of Personal Pronouns in Mizo**

While Manipuri permits the use of “Ei” and “Eina” in nominative case for the first person singular pronoun “I”, “Eina” is more popularly used specially when the verb is transitive. The suffix “-na” indicates nominative case clearly. When the root word “Ei” is suffixed with “-na”, “-gi”, “-bu”, it becomes nominative, possessive and objective respectively. The use of suffix

“-na” in nominative case is optional. There is no change in the form of the pronoun in all three cases in Mizo. The suffix “-ni” is a plural morpheme suffixed to the original root word. There is no gender specification in all the pronouns in all case forms in both Manipuri and Mizo. Unlike English, Mizo and Manipuri have plural forms of the second person i.e., “Nangmani” and “Nakhoi” respectively. When “-na” is suffixed to the noun or pronoun to make it the agent of the sentence in Manipuri, “in” and “an” are suffixed to the feminine and masculine subjects respectively in Mizo to indicate that it is the agent of the verb. Manipuri suffix “-na” and Mizo suffix “-in” or “-an” have same function of indicating the doer/performer of action indicated by the transitive verb in a sentence (Shakespeare 13).

English: I killed him.

Mizo: Keimanka that.

Manipuri: Eina mabu hatli.

However, the Manipuri suffix “-na” is not used when the subject is combined with a complement by a verbal suffix to the complement in Manipuri. Similar affixation is also there in Mizo too.

English: I am a teacher

Manipuri: Ei ojani.

Mizo: Zirtirtu Kani

In the above Manipuri sentence the nominative “Ei” is not suffixed with “-na” as there is no transitive verb. The suffix “-ni” which means “be” is same both at the phonological and semantic level in both Manipuri and Mizo. However, this suffix is added to the complement in Manipuri while it is added to the subject in Mizo. The use of suffix “-na” is not limited to indicate the agent in Manipuri.

English: I am a teacher and he is a student.

Manipuri: Eina ojani aduga mana saatrani.

In the above compound sentence the two subjects are suffixed with “-na” to distinguish from each other. However, if the two sentences are written separately without giving any sense of comparison, “-na” will not be suffixed. At the semantic level, the sentence indicates that “I(not he) am a teacher and he(not I) is a student.” Since the function of the suffix “-na” is not limited to the indication of the agent of verb, its usage is more dynamic than the Mizo “-in” or “-an”.

The use of shortened forms of pronouns is very conspicuous in both the languages. First person “Keimah” can be shortened as “Kei” or “Ka”. Similarly, “Eihak”, “Nahak” and “Mahak” in Manipuri can also be shortened as “Ei”, “Nang” and “MA” respectively.

#### 4. Gender

Both Manipuri and Mizo have the tendency of ending in “-i” and “-a” for feminine and masculine personal names respectively. Chaobi, Laibi, Pikpi, Phajabi, etc., in Manipuri are

common female names while Tomba, Chaoba, Paakpa, Naoba, Nganba, etc., are common names of men. In Mizo, Ruata, Mawia, Zotea, Moitea, Suaka, Liana, etc., are some of the common popular names while Mawii, Ruati, Zuali, Kimi, Diki, etc., are some popular female names. No pronoun indicates gender in both Mizo and Manipuri. The “-i” ending for feminine gender and “-a” ending in Masculine is not fixed in both Manipuri and Mizo with reference to the common nouns referring to familial relations.

<b>English</b>	<b>Manipuri</b>	<b>Mizo</b>
Father	Papa/Paba	Pa
Mother	Ima	Nu
Grandfather	Pupu/Ipu	Pu
Grandmother	Ibok	Pi
Daughter-in-Law/ Married Woman	Mou	Mo
Son	Ichanupa	Fa Pa
Daughter	Ichanupi	Fa Nu
Sister	Iche/Echan	Unaunu
Brother	Iyamba(Elder brother) Inaonupa(Younger brother)	Unaupa
Brother-in-law	Ibai/Itei/Isen	Makpa
Sister-in-Law	Iteima/Inamma	Mo
Uncle	Khura/Ipanthou	Patea/Papuia/Putea
Aunt	Inê/Indomcha	Nutei/Ni
Father-in-law	Ikubok	Pugawa
Mother-in-law	Inembok	Pizawn
Nephew	Imaknipa	Vahpa
Niece	Imou/ichanupi	Vahnu/Tu
Widow	Lukhra	Hmeithai
Widower	Pakhra	Does not exist
Wife	Nupi	Nupui
Husband	Nupa	Pasal

**Table 3: Common Nouns Referring to Familial Relations**

From the above words it is clear that, except for a few, common nouns do not follow “-i” and “-a” ending regularly as gender marker both in Mizo and Manipuri. Mizo words such as “Nu”, “Mo”, “Fa Nu”, etc., are feminine gender but these words do not follow the “-i” ending pattern. Similar is the case in Manipuri too. Common nouns indicating familial relations in

Manipuri exist (except in few cases like “Khura”, “Khaton”, etc.) with a possessive morpheme prefixed to indicate the relation.

Manipuri Word	Meaning in English	Mizo Word
Ima	My Mother	Ka Nu
Nama	Your Mother	I Nu
Mama	His Mother	A Nu
Ichanupi	My Daughter	Ka fanu
Nachanupi	Your Daughter	I Fanu
Machanupi	His/Her Daughter	A fanu
Ibok	My Grandmother	Ka Pi
Nabok	Your Grandmother	I Pi
Mabok	His/Her Grandmother	A Pi

**Table 4: Some Manipuri Common Nouns Contracted with Possessive Pronouns and Their Mizo Counterpart**

The prefixes “I-”, “Na-” and “Ma-” in Manipuri mean my, your and his/her respectively. This is true for Manipuri words like “iche,” “nache”, “mache”, “iyamba”, “nayamba”, “mayamba”, etc. However, these words cannot have a free morpheme or free root if divided into two morphemes. For example, “Ima” cannot exist as a root or free morpheme in the absence of “I-” in the beginning. This is a marked difference from Mizo. Therefore, A J Primrose finds it very peculiar to find the double possessive in Manipuri: “one of the first peculiarities which strikes one is the double possessive which is prefixed to certain nouns (Primrose 2). This peculiarity is not found in Mizo.

## 5. Number

Plural nouns are formed in Manipuri by suffixing “-sing” to the singular noun. Plural suffixes in Mizo are “-te”, “-ho” and “-zong”. Sometimes two of these suffixes can be combined or duplicated. However, the singular form can also give the plural sense according to the contexts.

English Word	Manipuri Word		Mizo	
	Singular	Plural Form	Singular	Plural Form
Book	Lairik	Lairiksing	Lekhabu	Lekhabu(te)
Guava	Pungtol	Pungtolsing	Kawlthei	Kawlthei(te)
Mango	Heinou	Heinousing	Theihai	Theihai(te)
House	Yum	Yumsing	In	In(te)

**Table 5: Nouns and Their Plural Forms**

When the number of the noun is known, the plural morpheme “-sing” is omitted in Manipuri. Cardinal numbers follow the noun it qualifies while ordinals always precede the noun. “-suba” is suffixed to the cardinals to form ordinals in Manipuri.

Heinou *taret* (seven mangoes)  
*Taretsuba* (seventh child)

In Mizo also, like Manipuri, the plural morphemes suffixed to the nouns are omitted when the cardinals follow the nouns to indicate the number. Ordinals in Mizo are formed by suffixing “-na” to the cardinals and they(ordinals)follow the noun they qualify.

Theihai-te (mangoes)  
 Theihai Panga (five mangoes)  
 Lalpa Sawmna (tenth Chief)

While case suffixes always follow the plural morpheme in Manipuri, the plural morphemes follow the case suffix in Mizo (Shakespeare 113).

## 6. Counting System

Manipuri and Mizo numerals show certain phonological similarities which are characteristic of Tibeto-Burman.

English	Manipuri with transcription	Mizo with transcription	No. Of Similar Vowels And Consonants
One	Ama/əmə/	Pakhat/pək <sup>h</sup> ət/	V=2, C=0
Two	Ani/əni/	Pahni/ pəni/	V=2, C=1
Three	Ahum/əhum/	Pathum/pət <sup>h</sup> um/	V=2, C=1
Four	Mari/məri/	Pali /pəli/	V=2, C=0
Five	Manga/məŋɑ:/	Panga/pəŋɑ:/	V=2, C=1
Six	Taruk/tərək/	Paruk/pərək/	V=2, C=2
Seven	Taret/təret/	Pasari/pəsəri/	V=1, C=1*
Eight	Nipan/nɪpɑ:n/	Pariat/pərijɑ:t/	V=2, C=1
Nine	Mapal/mɑ:pəl/	Pakua/pək <sup>h</sup> uə/	V=2, C=1
Ten	Tara/tərə:/	Sawm/sə:m/	V=0, C=0

**Table 6: Manipuri and Mizo Numerals**

V=Vowel, C=Consonant

The above table shows that the pronunciation of the numerals shows a significant similarity at both phonological and semantic levels.



## 7. Syntax

The Manipuri sentence structure permits S+O+V structure normally. However O+S+V structure is also permitted.

English: I love him.

Manipuri: Eina Mabu Nungsi. (OR, Mabu Eina Nungsi.)

The above two sentences have same meaning and are grammatically acceptable in Manipuri. However, the first sentence is more popular than the second one. This sentence structure is also available in Mizo though the interchangeability between the subject and object is not permitted.

Mizo: Lal in a that.

The places of direct object, indirect object and subject are interchangeable in Manipuri. However the position of the verb (at the end of the sentence) does not change. The Manipuri equivalent of the English sentence ‘I give him a book’ can be written as either of the following.

Eina mangonda lairik ama pi. (S+ O<sub>i</sub>+O<sub>d</sub>+V)<sup>2</sup>

Eina lairik ama mangonda pi. (S+ O<sub>d</sub>+ O<sub>i</sub>+ V)

Lairik ama Eina mangonda pi. (O<sub>d</sub>+S+O<sub>i</sub>+ V)

Lairik ama mangonda Eina pi. (O<sub>d</sub>+O<sub>i</sub>+S+V)

Mangonda Lairik ama Eina pi.(O<sub>i</sub> + O<sub>d</sub>+S+V)

Mangonda Lairik ama Eina pi.(O<sub>i</sub>+S+ O<sub>d</sub>+V)

All these sentence structures are permitted in Manipuri. However, this flexibility is not permitted in Mizo though some changes in the sentence structure is permitted to some extent. The sentence “I gave a cloth to Zotea” may be written in Mizo as:

Zotea puan ka pe.

Ka in puan Zotea-pe.

### 7.1. Interrogative Pronouns and Questions

Manipuri	English	Mizo
Kari	What	Eng nge
Kana	Who	Kha/tunge
Karamba Matamda/ Karamkanda	When	Engtik/ Laiin
Kadaida	Where	Khawiah
Kamdouna/Kamaina	How	Engtin nge
Karamba	Which	Chu

**Table 7: Interrogative Pronouns**

Interrogative sentences in Manipuri are formed by inflecting the verb. Usually, the verb is suffixed with either “-bra” or “-pra”. In Mizo it is formed by putting “em” at the end of the declarative sentence.

English: Have you read the book?

Manipuri: Nang lairik adu parabra?

Mizo: Lekhabu chu I Chhiar tawh em?

Questions in Manipuri are formed by inserting an interrogative pronoun before the verb while the same is placed at the beginning of the sentence in Mizo.

English: What are you doing?

Manipuri: Nang kari touri?

Mizo: Eng nge I tih mek a?

## 8. Vocabulary

That Manipuri and Mizo are cognate languages is so conspicuous when we find the abundance of cognate words. A list of words of everyday use that has a certain degree of affinity are selected and compared here. The following table shows the closeness of the vocabulary of the two languages.

English	Manipuri	Mizo
Skin	Un(unsu)	Vun
Face	Mai	Hmai
Eye	Mit	Mit
Beard	Koi	Khabehtml
Mustache	Koi	Hmuihtml
Ear	Nakong/Peng	Beng
Nose	Naton	Hnar
Hand	Khut	Kut
Finger	Khutsa	Kutzungtang
Leg	Khong	Ke
Toe	Khongsa	Kezungtang
Nail	Khujin	Tin
Teeth	Yaa	Ha
Tongue	Lei	Lei
Body Hair	Tu/Tuhao/Mun	Hmul
Neck	Ngak	Nghawng
Chest/ Breast	Thabak/ Khom	Awm/ Thnute
Back	Tung/Nangan	Hnung
Waist	Khwang	Kawng

Palm	Khubaak	Kutphah
Knee	Khu-U	Khup
Abdomen	Puk	Pum
Neck	Ngak/ Ngaksham	Nghawng
Bone	Saru	Ruh(Human bone) Saruh(Animal bone)
Head	Kok(Lu)	Lu
Hair	Sam	Sam
Teeth	Yaa	Haa

**Table 8: Names of Human Body Parts**

English	Manipuri	Mizo
Animal	Sha	Sa
Domestic animal	Yumsha	Ransa
Wild Animal	Lamsha	Ramsa
tiger	kei	sakei
deer	shaji	sakhi
dog	hui	ui
leopard	Kabo-kei	keite
monkey	yong	zawng
elephant	samu	sai
rhino	Samu ganda	samak

**Table 9: Names of Animals**

The words listed in table 8 and 9 are the ones that could have been in use since the beginning of the civilization of the two linguistic communities. These words are also not considered as loanwords by the speakers of both the languages.

## Conclusion

Mizo and Manipuri show a number of morphological and syntactical similarity. Pronouns in both the languages do not indicate gender. Manipuri pronouns inflect with suffixes “-na”, “-gi” and “-bu” or “-da” to form nominative, genitive, and objective respectively. In Mizo case forms are irregular. While “in” or “an” is placed as preposition following the pronoun in nominative case sometimes these are suffixed to the pronoun also. Most pronouns in both the languages have different forms for the same case. There is a tendency of “-i” and “-a” ending for female and male names respectively in both the languages though this is not regular. Plural nouns in Manipuri are formed by suffixing ‘-sing’ to the singular form while plural suffixes in Mizo are “-te”, “-zong”, and “-ho”. However, these suffixes are frequently written as independent words following the noun it modifies. There is a close phonological similarity

between the pronunciation of Mizo and Manipuri numerals, specially, in the vowels. Manipuri sentences are very flexible. A sentence can have many structures by retaining the same meaning. Interrogative sentences in Manipuri are formed by inflecting the verb while it is formed by placing “em” at the end of the affirmative sentence. In terms of vocabulary, Manipuri and Mizo show a number of cognate words as listed in tables 8 and 9. Therefore it will not be difficult for a native speaker of either of the languages to learn the other.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup>The author acknowledges the help provided by C. Lalthangliana Junior in the preparation of this paper.

<sup>2</sup>“S”, “O<sub>i</sub>”, “O<sub>d</sub>” and “V” refer to subject, indirect object, direct object, and verb of the sentence respectively.

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