



RESEARCH ARTICLE



NUMBER IN KHELMA

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to study the linguistic structure on number in Khelma language. Number is grammaticalized in Khelma as there is subject-verb agreement present in the language as far as number distinction is concerned. Khelma shows two number distinctions viz. singular and plural like other Kuki-Chin languages. The singular is unmarked, while the plural is morphologically marked for both animate and inanimate nouns in the language. The other morphological processes of number in the language will be discussed in the present paper.

Keywords: *Khelma, Kuki-Chin, Number.*



1.0 Introduction

The Kuki-Chin languages constitute one of the most important subgroups of the Tibeto-Burman language family (VanBik, 2009). Khelma also known as Sakachep is one of the old Kuki tribes of Northeastern parts of India. The term *Khelma/Sakachep* is also used to denote the 'language' spoken by the same tribe. Therefore *Khelma/Sakachep* is the name of the language and the people. It is closely related to Biate, Chorei, Darlong, Hrangkhoh, Kaipeng, Moulson, Ranglong, Vaiphei, etc. It is mainly spoken in Dima Hasao, and South Assam particularly Karimganj and Hailakandi districts of Assam. Like many other tribal languages of Northeast India, Khelma is also one of the lesser known and under documented language. However, the twenty-fourth edition of the Ethnologue (2021) reports Khelma as a Central Kuki-Chin-Mizo of Sino-Tibetan language family of India. Another classification of Kuki-Chin-Naga group as proposed by Bradley (1997), where Khelma may be placed under Old Kuki (not mentioned). It is unfortunate to know that there is no authentic data available regarding the number of speakers of this language. However, the total population of Khelma is estimated about 8,000 respectively, by the native speakers of the respective community residing in Barak Valley of Assam (informants). Unfortunately the population figure of Khelma has not been given in the Census report of India and as per the policy of government of India the number of speakers for those mother tongues which are spoken by lesser than 10,000 persons is not published.¹The reason why Khelma or

other Kuki-Chin languages is not included in UNESCO's list of endangered languages is that, these languages are hardly known to the outside world. Also, according to the native speakers Khelma is known as Sakachep in Barak Valley, Karbi Anglong and also in the neighbouring states like Nagaland, Tripura, Mizoram, etc. except in Dima-Hasao district of Assam.

Khelma does not have their indigenous script and written literature and is yet to be presented for academic exploration in the codified form. They use Roman script to write their language with some modifications. As mentioned that the language is still in infant stage in terms of its available written literature. There is no large amount of work available on Khelma language. However, some of the available works on the language includes C.A. Soppitt's *A Short Account of The Kuki-Lushai Tribes on The North East Frontier*, (2007) which briefly discusses some of the issues of sound structure of the same. Besides, the available literature on this language is Ramdina Lalsim's, *Tribes of N. C. Hills, Assam*, (2005) describing socio-cultural religious, village administration, and some historical aspects of the tribe².

Phonologically, the presence of initial velar nasal η is one of the features of Khelma. Khelma have

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² The present paper mainly follows the Khelma of Barak Valley of Assam. The name of the villages which comes under the Karimganj and Hailakandi districts are Ronpur, Ronpur Khothar, Boruatilla, Zailian, Halam Punjee (Pakala) and Tlangpui (Kalidas Punjee).

¹Acknowledgement



strong agreement system. Gender distinction in Khelma is determined on the natural recognition of sex i.e., gender is not grammatically marked in the language. It has only natural gender. Khelma is verb final language, with dominant SOV word order. In Khelma, an inclusive-exclusive distinction is found in the preverbal system. The categories relevant for agreement in Barak Valley Kuki-Chin languages are person (subject or object) and number (singular or plural) (Paothang Haokip, 2018: 159-210). The present paper attempts to explore the linguistic structure showing the number system of Khelma of Barak Valley.

2.0 Number in Khelma

Number is the most underestimated of the grammatical categories. It is deceptively simple, and is much more interesting and varied than most linguists realize (Greville G. Corbett, 2004). Tibeto-Burman languages exhibit typical linguistic features in nominal morphology. In particular gender, number is grammatically insignificant, no agreement between verb and its argument except in few Kuki-Chin languages (Kh. Dhiren Singha, 2015, International Journal of Dravidian Linguistics. Vol.44 No 2). Khelma exhibits the typical features of Kuki-Chin languages as number is grammaticalized i.e. subject-verb-agreement is present as far as number is concerned. Khelma has two number distinctions viz. singular and plural. The singular form of noun is unmarked in the language. The plurality in the language is expressed by adding plural morpheme to the singular form. It can also be seen that the plural marker is used with both animate and inanimate nouns in the language.

2.1 Pluralization of Noun in Khelma

In Khelma, the affix *-nei* is the general plural marker. The nouns are pluralized by affixing *-nei* to the singular form. The affix *-nei* is attached to the root to form pluralization in both animate and inanimate nouns as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Pluralisation of Noun in Khelma

	Khelma	Gloss
Human	<i>pasal-nei</i> boy-PL	'boys'
	<i>nupaŋ-nei</i> girl-PL	'girls'
	<i>u-pa-nei</i> elder- male- PL	'elder brothers'
	<i>u-nu- nei</i> elder- female- PL	'elder sisters'
	Inanimate nouns	<i>in-nei</i> house-PL
<i>par-nei</i> flower-PL		'flowers'
<i>lek^habu- nei</i> book-PL		'books'
<i>t^hin^hkuŋ- nei</i> tree-PL		'trees'

Animate nouns	<i>meŋ-ŋei</i> dog-PL	'cats'
	<i>ui-ŋei</i> dog-PL	'dogs'
	<i>vok-ŋei</i> pig-PL	'pigs'
	<i>sakor-ŋei</i> horse-PL	'horse'

From the above Table 1 it can be seen that the singular nouns are pluralised by affixing the plural morpheme *-ŋei* in the language. The same plural marker *-ŋei* is used for human, animate and inanimate nouns respectively.

2.2 Pluralization of Personal Pronoun

In Khelma the personal pronouns are pluralized by suffixing the morpheme *-ni*, such as, *kei* '1SG' vs. *kei-ni* '1PL' (exclusive) and *əi-ni* '1PL' (inclusive)', *nəŋ* '2SG' vs. *nəŋ-ni* '2PL' and *əma* '3SG' vs. *ənni* '3PL' as shown in Table 2. It is observed that the plural suffix *-ni* may be derived from the Proto Tibeto-Burman numeral **nyi* 'two' (Matisoff, 2003).

Table 2: Pluralization of Personal Pronoun

Khelma			
Singular	Gloss	Plural	Gloss
<i>kei</i>	'I'	<i>kei-ni</i> (EXCL) / <i>əi-ni</i> (INCL)	'we'
<i>nəŋ</i>	'you'	<i>nəŋ-ni</i>	'you' (PL)
<i>əma</i>	's/he'	<i>ən-ni</i>	'they'

In Table 2, the personal pronoun in Khelma is pluralized by suffixing the morpheme *-ni* in all the first, second and third person respectively.

2.3 Pluralization of Kinship terms

In Khelma, the kinship terms is pluralized by adding the generic plural morpheme *-ŋei* to the kinship terms without any exceptions as shown in the Table 3.

Table 3: Pluralization of Kinship terms

	Khelma	Gloss
Consanguinal kinship	<i>nai-</i> <i>pasal-</i> <i>ŋei</i> child- male-PL	'sons'
	<i>nai-nupa-</i> <i>ŋei</i> child- female- PL	'daughters'
	<i>pu-ŋei</i> grandfather- PL	'grandfathers'
	<i>pi-ŋei</i> grandmother - PL	'grandmothers'
	<i>tar-pu-ŋei</i> old- grandfath	'father-in-laws'



Affinal kinship	er-PL	
	<i>tar-pi-ŋei</i>	
	old- grandmot her-PL	'mother-in- laws'
	<i>moinu-ŋei</i>	'daughter- in-laws'
	<i>makpa- ŋei</i>	'son-in- laws'
	son-in- law-PL	

In the Table 3 it can be seen that the kinship terms is pluralized by affixing the plural marker in the language. In Khelma, the plural morpheme *-ŋei* gets suffixed to the kinship terms to pluralized the consanguinal kinship and affinal kinship terms.

2.4 Pluralization of Noun Phrase

In Khelma, all the nouns in noun phrase are pluralized by suffixing the plural morpheme. The general plural morpheme *-ŋei* is affixed to the nouns in order to pluralized the noun phrase as shown below.

Affirmative sentences:

- (1) *mortei-ŋei* *hi* *ən-tui*
pineapple-PL DET 3PL-tasty

'Pineapples are tasty.'

- (2) *pasal-ŋei* *ən-indai* *laitak*
boy-PL 3PL-play PROG

'Boys are playing.'

- (3) *nupaŋ-ŋei* *ən-lam* *laitak*
girl-PL 3PL-dance PROG

'Girls are dancing.'

The affirmative sentences from (1) to (3) shows that the noun phrase gets pluralized by suffixing plural morpheme *-ŋei* to the nouns and the person agreement is present in the noun phrase as far as number is concerned.

Negative sentences:

- (4) *mortei-ŋei* *hi* *tui-mak-ŋei*
pineapple-PL DET tasty-NEG-PL

'Pineapples are not tasty.'

- (5) *pasal-ŋei* *indai-mak-ŋei*
boy-PL play-NEG-PL

'Boys are not playing.'

- (6) *nupaŋ-ŋei* *lam-mak-ŋei*
girl-PL dance-NEG-PL

'Girls are not dancing.'

From the above examples (4) to (6), it can be seen that the plural morpheme *-ŋei* is suffixed to the nouns to pluralized them. The plural morpheme *-ŋei* is also suffixed to the verb following the negative particle *-mak*.

Interrogative sentences:

- (7) *lek^habu-ŋei* *ituk-mo a-om*
book-PL how-QP 3SG-EXIST

'How many books are there?'



(8) *tu ui-ŋei mo ən-ni*
 whose dog-PL QP 3PL-COP

'Whose dogs are that?'

It can be seen that from the above examples (7) and (8), the interrogative sentences gets pluralized by suffixing the plural morpheme *-ŋei* to the nouns. The person agreement can also be seen in both the examples.

2.5 Numerals and Quantifiers

In Khelma, when a numeral follows the noun or noun phrase the plural morpheme remains unmarked. It is observed that when the nouns co-occur with the numerals expressing more than one do not take plural marker. The noun precedes the numeral and forms the plural form as shown in the following examples from (9) to (13).

(9) *meŋ innik*
 cat two

'two cats'

(10) *lek^habu minli*
 book four

'four books'

(11) *in rəŋa*
 house five

'five houses'

(12) *ui innik*
 dog two

'two dogs'

(13) *kum minli*
 year four

'four years'

In Khelma, plurality can also be expressed by means of quantifiers. Some of the examples of Khelma quantifiers are shown below.

(14) *par sen-k^hət*
 flower some-one

'some flowers'

(15) *lek^habu tampa*
 book lots

'lots of books'

(16) *sisai tampa*
 rice (uncooked) plenty

'plenty of rice'

(17) *tui ramal a-tom-te*
 water drop 3SG-few-DIM

'few drops of water'

(18) *nupaŋ-te-pal*
 female-DIM-group

'group of girls'



In Khelma, quantifiers usually follows the head noun in the language and the vice-versa is not possible. In other words it can be said that the noun phrase is not flexible and the quantifiers cannot precede the head noun. The mass nouns are usually marked with the plural morpheme *tampa* which means lots/ plenty/ many which is monomorphemic in nature.

2.6 Pluralization of Demonstrative Pronoun

In Khelma the demonstrative pronoun is expressed as *hima* 'this' *soma* 'that'. The plural demonstrative pronoun is formed by suffixing the morpheme *-nei* to the singular form of the demonstrative pronoun such as *hima-nei* 'these' and *soma-nei* 'those' in Khelma as shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Pluralization of Demonstrative Pronoun

Khelma	Gloss
<i>hi-ma</i>	'this'
<i>so-ma</i>	'that'
<i>hi-ma-nei</i>	'these'
<i>so-ma-nei</i>	'those'

In Table 4, it is shown that the demonstrative pronoun is pluralized by means of affixation. The morpheme *-nei* is attached to the singular form only to pluralize demonstrative pronoun in Khelma. Some more examples are given below to show the pluralisation of demonstrative pronoun.

(19) *hi-ma* *ui*
 PROX-DEM dog
 'this dog'

(20) *so-ma* *ui*
 DIST-DEM dog
 'that dog'

(21) *hi-ma-hi* *ui* *ink^hət* *a-ni*
 PROX-DEM-DET dog one 1SG-COP
 'This is a dog.'

(22) *so-ma-so* *ui* *ink^hət* *a-ni*
 DIST-DEM-DET dog one 1SG-COP
 'That is a dog.'

(23) *hi-ma-nei-hi* *lekhabu an-ni*
 PROX-DEM-PL-DET book 3PL-COP
 'These are books.'

(24) *so-ma-nei-so* *lekhabu an-ni*
 DIST-DEM-PL-DET book 3PL-COP
 'Those are books.'

From the above examples it can be seen that in Khelma the *hima* 'this' and *soma* 'that' is pluralized by suffixing *-nei* to it as *hima-nei-hi* 'these' and *soma-nei-so* 'those.' The demonstrative morpheme *hi* indicates proximal and the demonstrative morpheme *so* indicates distal in the language. The person agreement can be seen as far as number is concerned.



3.0 CONCLUSION

From the above analyzation the following conclusions can be drawn. Like other Kuki-Chin languages number is grammaticalized in Khelma language as there is subject-verb-agreement for number distinction. Non-singular in the language is formed by postposing morpheme *-nei* to the singular form of nouns which are morphologically unmarked, irrespective of human, non-human, animate and inanimate distinction. Personal pronouns are made non-singular by the morpheme *-ni*. Numerals and quantifiers follow the head noun in the language. The pluralization of Khelma nouns are also made by using numerals. It is observed that when the nouns co-occur with the numerals expressing more than one do not take plural marker. Demonstrative pronoun of Khelma is pluralized by suffixing the general plural marker in between the demonstrative pronouns. Further, in terms of negation, interrogation, transitive and intransitive clause, complement clause etc., more works needs to be look forward to get into the depth of number in Khelma.

Abbreviations

1	first person
2	second person
3	third person
COP	copula
DEM	demonstrative
DET	determiner
DIST	distal
EXCL	exclusive
EXIST	existential

INCL	inclusive
NEG	negative
PL	plural
PROG	progressive
PROX	proximate
SG	singular
QP	question particle

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