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Kinship terminologies in Western Rengma

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Abstract

This paper explores the linguistic aspects of kinship, reference, and address terms in the Western Rengma language. Kinship terminology is examined not just as a means of identifying familial relationships but also as a reflection of social structure, respect, and cultural values within the community. The study provides a detailed overview of how kinship ties are expressed and categorized in the language. Additionally, it looks at how address terms are used in various social situations, highlighting the depth and nuance of Western Rengma's vocabulary in expressing formality, familiarity, and social roles. Additionally, the discussion in this paper highlights how Western Rengma serves not only as a means of communication but also as a source that encodes and reflects deep cultural values and social structures. By examining these elements in detail, the study contributes to a broader understanding of the language's role in preserving identity and transmitting cultural heritage.

Keywords: Kinship terms, address terms, reference, relationships.

1. Introduction

The Rengma language, part of the Tibeto-Burman family and specifically within the Angami-Pochuri group, is spoken by a population of 65,328 as per the 2011 census. It is not a uniform language but rather comprises several regional varieties, each associated with different geographic areas across Nagaland and Assam. These include Northern Rengma, found in Wokha and Kohima districts; Central Rengma, primarily spoken in the Tsemnyu district; Southern Rengma, used in areas near the Nagaland-Manipur border; and Western Rengma, which is spoken in parts of Karbi Anglong (East) in Assam and also in Dimapur, Nagaland. Each of these varieties reflects the linguistic and cultural diversity within the broader Rengma-speaking community.

2. Methodology

The research relied on standard field linguistics methods to collect primary data, including the use of questionnaires, structured interviews, and direct observation. The data collection took place in Nkhenlari village, located in the eastern part of Karbi Anglong. Participants, both men and women aged between 30 and 65, contributed most of the linguistic material, such as vocabulary and example sentences. Interviews with native speakers formed a core part of the data-gathering process. For the analysis, the study followed the Leipzig Glossing Rules, a widely accepted framework for interlinear glossing. Alongside the primary data, a range of secondary sources, including academic books, journal articles, magazines, and doctoral dissertations, were also consulted to support and contextualize the findings.

3. Objectives of the present study

The study focuses on the three key objectives:

- First, it aims to examine the kinship terms used within the community, shedding light on how familial relationships are linguistically categorized.
- Second, it explores how forms of address are used across various social settings, providing insight into the cultural norms and interpersonal dynamics of the speakers.
- Lastly, the research investigates the use of referencing terms, which play a role in identifying and pointing to people or objects within communication.

4. Kinship terms in Western Rengma

Kinship terms are words used to describe family relationships and social connections between individuals, often reflecting the structure and values of a community. These terms go beyond just identifying biological ties like 'mother,' 'father,' or 'sibling.' Kinship terminologies can also convey social roles, generations, gender distinctions, and even marital alliances. In many cultures, kinship terms are deeply embedded in language and are essential for understanding social hierarchy, respect, and obligations.

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Within kinship systems, a distinction is often made between address terms and reference terms. Address terms are used when speaking directly to a person, for example, calling someone 'Auntie' or 'Grandfather', and they often reflect respect, affection, or social hierarchy. Reference terms, on the other hand, are used when talking *about* someone in the third person, such as 'my cousin' or 'her uncle.' In many languages and cultures, these two sets of terms may differ depending on the formality of the situation, the speaker's age or status, and the relationship to the person being referred to or addressed.

In Western Rengma, kinship terms can be especially nuanced. They may reflect clan systems, age grading, and lineage distinguishing, for instance, between maternal and paternal relatives or elder and younger siblings. Understanding both the address and reference forms of kinship terms can provide deeper insight into how relationships and respect are communicated within a culture. The kinship system in Western Rengma follows a primarily patrilineal structure. It is also generationally defined, which means that specific terms are used to distinguish individuals across different generations, such as grandparents, parents, and children, rather than grouping them broadly. This kind of system helps clearly identify a person's position within the extended family and reflects the cultural emphasis on age, hierarchy, and lineage.

The available data offers an initial overview or preliminary mapping of how kinship terms are organized in Western Rengma. The goal is to better understand not only the vocabulary itself but also how it reflects the social relationships and family roles within the community. This is an early step toward a more comprehensive understanding of the Western Rengma kinship system.

5. Discussions and Results

5.1 Kin related by blood

A. Own generation

1. **Brother: Sage**

Elder brother	>	<i>sage</i>
Younger brother	>	<i>sedzenge</i>
2. **Sister: sage**

Elder sister	>	<i>sagi</i>
Younger Sister	>	<i>sedzenge</i>

B. First ascending generation

3. Father > *pu*
Mother > *dzu*
Parents > *pupinju*
4. Father's elder brother > *dah*
Father's younger brother > *njo*
Father's elder sister > *nji*
Father's younger sister > *nint/egi*
5. Mother's elder brother > *mju*
Mother's younger brother > *mju*
Mother's elder sister > *dzu*
Mother's younger sister > *dzu*

The data listed above highlights an important cultural insight from the Western Rengma kinship system. It explains that the same term *dzu*, which means mother, is also used to refer to maternal aunts, regardless of whether they are older or younger than the mother. This suggests that, in the minds of native speakers, a mother's sisters are viewed as closely equivalent to the mother herself in terms

of familial bond and respect.

The reason for this linguistic overlap is rooted in cultural beliefs. According to the local understanding, the mother's lineage is considered especially strong and unbreakable, even more so than the father's. Because maternal aunts share the same bloodline as the mother, they are given the same title, reinforcing the idea that their connection is just as vital and sacred as that of the biological mother. This also reflects how kinship terms are not just about describing relationships, but about expressing values, emotional closeness, and social ties within the community.

C. Second ascending generation

6. Grandfather (Father's Father, Mother's Father) > *ban*
Grandmother (father's mother, mother's mother) > *t^{hi}*
Ancestor > *puban*

D. Third ascending generation

7. Great-grandfather (father's father's father) > *banhren*
Great-grandmother (mother's mother's mother) > *t^{hi}hren*

Western Rengma uses the same kinship term for great-grandfather and great-grandmother from both paternal and maternal sides.

E. First descending generation

8. Son > *njuge*
Daughter > *njugi*
Baby > *njuhan*
Child (M) > *nt/enju*
Child (F) > *nt/enju tanju*

F. Second descending generation

9. Son's son > *njukanju patfe*
Daughter's son > *njukanju patfe*
Son's daughter > *Njukanju tanju*
Daughter's daughter > *njukanju tanju*
Grandchild > *njukanju tanju/patfe*

G. Third descending generation

10. Great-grandchild > *njukanju (M)/ ninju (F)*

H. Some other kinterms in descending generation

11. Brother's son > *atfuge*
Brother's daughter > *atfugi*
Sister's son > *atfuge*
Sister's daughter > *atfugi*

5.2 Kin related by marriage

12. Husband > *njetpu*
Wife > *nu*
Co-wife > *t^hanu*
Son-in-law > *muge*
Daughter-in-law > *mugi*
Mother-in-law > *ni*
Father-in-law > *mu*
Husband's grandfather > *ban*
Husband's grandmother > *t^{hi}*
Husband's younger sister > *nigi*
Wife's younger sister > *dzugi*
Husband's elder sister > *nigi*
Wife's elder sister > *dzugi*
Husband's younger brother > *njoge*

Wife's younger brother > *muge*
 Husband's elder brother > *dahge*
 Wife's elder brother > *muge*
 Elder brother's wife > *asa*
 Younger brother's wife > *amo*
 Elder sister's husband > *amu*
 Younger sister's husband > *amu*

5.3 Kin by adoption

13. Stepfather > *dah* (if Older than one's own father)
 Stepfather > *njo* (if younger than one's own father)
 Stepmother > *dzu*
 Stepson > *njuge*
 Stepdaughter > *njugi*

The data sets indicate that generational relationships hold greater importance than specific kinship terms in determining how individuals are addressed within the community. It is also observed that the kin terms adopted before marriage are often retained afterward, reflecting a degree of continuity in social relationships. However, this practice varies depending on the social settings. Among the Western Rengma, for instance, there are clear gender-based differences in kinship terminology following marriage. Although they follow a consanguineous marriage system, marriage within the same clan is strictly prohibited, as clan exogamy is a key cultural norm.

In such marriages, especially where the bride marries someone from a related but different clan, she is expected to change the terms of address for her in-laws. For example, suppose her husband's relatives were previously referred to as 'uncle' or 'aunt' due to extended clan relations. In that case, she adopts new, more formal or respectful terms after marriage, reflecting her changed social position. Interestingly, this rule does not typically apply to men. A groom may continue using the same kinship terms for his in-laws as he did before marriage, indicating a notable asymmetry in kinship practices between genders. This distinction reflects deeper cultural norms about respect, social hierarchy, and the integration of women into their husband's kin group post-marriage.

6. Address terms

As previously mentioned, women are generally expected to modify their address terms for their husband's family after marriage, often adopting more respectful or formal expressions. For instance, if a woman marries a man whose uncle's son from a different clan is someone she previously addressed with a familiar term like '*mu*' (meaning maternal uncle), and *nji* (maternal aunt), she would now use a more formal or honorific term like '*me*' (father-in-law) and '*ni*' (mother-in-law). This change reflects her shift in social status and marks her integration into her husband's family. On the other hand, men typically do not make such adjustments in their address terms for their in-laws after marriage. A husband may continue to refer to his wife's relatives in the same manner as he did before, with no significant change in the language used. A few of the addressing terminologies used by a man and woman before and after marriage are listed below:

6 Father's elder sister (before marriage for woman) > *dzu*
 Father's elder sister (turned mother-in-law) > *ni*

7 mother's elder sister (before marriage for man) > *dzu*
 mother's elder sister (turned mother-in-law) > *dzu*
 8 Mother-in-law (not related by blood) for both man/woman > *ni*
 Father-in-law (not related by kin) > *me*
 9 Mother's elder sister (married/unmarried) > *dzugi*
 Mother's younger sister (married/unmarried) > *dzugi*

6.1 Formal addressing terms in Western Rengma

10 *seŋgar^{he}ge* > 'sir'
seŋgar^{he}gi > 'madam'
tasen > 'guest'
kallokassi tasen > 'invited guest'
kadda > 'chief'
tasen kadda > 'chief guest'
kampuege > 'head'
rohuloke > 'respected' (male/female)
kantan > 'honorable'
kantan > 'distinguished'
le > 'salutation for unmarried woman'
po > 'salutation for unmarried man'
palle (Pl) > 'salutation for married man'
negi (Ng) > 'salutation for married woman'

6.2 Informal addressing terms in Western Rengma

11 *pɔŋju* > 'bachelor'
lenju > 'spinster'
magi > 'widow'
mage > 'widower'
tʃankakɔge > 'divorcee' (male)
tʃankakɔgi > 'divorcee' (female)
dʒaŋk^hiŋpɔ > 'fiancé'
dʒaŋk^hiŋle > 'fiancée'

7. Terms of Reference

Referencing terms used in Western Rengma are based on the 'person' (1st, 2nd, and 3rd) that could be discussed, as mentioned in the section below:

First person

12 *a-dzu* > 'my mother'
a-pu > 'my father'
a-sage > 'my elder brother'
a-sagi > 'my elder sister'
a-njugi > 'my daughter'
a-njuge > 'my son'

Second person

13 *n-dzu* > 'your mother'
n-pu > 'your father'
n-sage > 'your elder brother'
n-sagi > 'your elder sister'
n-njugi > 'your daughter'
n-njuge > 'your son'

Third person

14 *lidan-dzu* > 'their mother'
lidan-pu > 'their father'
lidan-sage > 'their elder brother'
lidan-sagi > 'their elder sister'
lidan-njugi > 'their daughter'
lidan-njuge > 'their son'

8. Conclusion

This research paper holds a very important aspect of Western Rengma, *kinship terms*, that not only focuses on genealogical relations but also highlights social relations and settings. Kinship in Western Rengma extends beyond mere biological ties it embodies a complex web of interpersonal responsibilities, social expectations, and culturally embedded roles that shape the community's structure and values.

The use of kinship terms serves as a key linguistic and cultural marker, reinforcing identity, hierarchy, and communal belonging. These terms guide interactions across generations, define appropriate behavior in formal and informal contexts, and preserve traditional norms in both private and public life. Whether used in everyday speech or ceremonial events, kinship expressions reflect respect, intimacy, and the continuity of cultural heritage.

Moreover, the richness of the kinship system in Western Rengma highlights the interconnection between language and society. It demonstrates how language functions not only as a tool for communication but as a carrier of collective memory and social order. By understanding and documenting these terms, we contribute to the preservation of indigenous knowledge systems, support linguistic diversity, and offer valuable insights into the cultural fabric of the Rengma people. As modernization and external influences continue to shape indigenous communities, it becomes even more vital to study and safeguard such linguistic practices. This research, therefore, underscores the role of kinship terminology as a living tradition, one that anchors identity, promotes cohesion, and sustains the values of the Western Rengma across time.

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