

Classifiers, Gender, Plural Nouns, and Diachrony in Khasian

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The Khasian language family is striking in exhibiting both gender and classifier systems, as well as the additional feature of plural marking within classifier phrases (Rabel 1961; Nagaraja 1985; Ring 2015). Located in the Northeast Indian state of Meghalaya in an area frequently observed to be a contact zone for cultures and language groups (Chelliah and Lester 2014), this group of languages belongs to the Austroasiatic (AA) phylum, but are separated from their closest relatives by Indo-Aryan and Tibeto-Burman languages. As gender in particular is unusual for AA languages, it is currently an open question how this system has arisen. The literature on grammaticalization and gender suggests that gender markers can easily grammaticalize from pronouns (Corbett 1991; Kilarski 2013; Heine and Kuteva 2002), yet case studies illustrating this are few.

This talk first describes the Khasian system, with reference to an annotated database of transcribed Pnar speech, and then suggests a pathway by which languages which do not have gender can develop gender systems. Contrary to Greenberg (1978)'s claim regarding Khasi, I claim that in these languages gender markers are more likely to have developed from pronouns than from demonstratives. The discussion posits a language contact situation in which 'pivot-matching' processes (Matras and Sakel 2007; Matras 2009) and nominalization strategies (Ring 2014) interact to enable contact-induced grammatical change (Heine and Kuteva 2003).

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