

Pluralization In Bodo: A Morphosyntactic Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Pluralization is a fundamental grammatical process that marks the distinction between singular and multiple entities. In Bodo, a Tibeto-Burman language spoken predominantly in Assam, India, pluralization is realized through multiple morphological and syntactic strategies. This paper provides a descriptive and analytical account of plural formation in Bodo, with special reference to suffixation, reduplication, and the use of multitude-denoting words. Suffixation is the primary method for human and animate nouns, inanimate nouns often rely on numeral-classifier constructions or context, reflecting optional plural marking, a characteristic common in Tibeto-Burman languages. Reduplication, though less frequent, conveys collective or distributive meanings. Data were collected from native Bodo speakers and published textual sources. This study contributes to the documentation of Bodo grammar.

Keywords: Bodo, number, pluralization, suffixation, multitude, reduplication

Introduction

Pluralization is an important feature of grammar that reflects how languages encode number distinctions in nouns, pronouns, and other nominal categories. Languages across the world mark plurality in different ways. For example, in English, plurals are usually formed by adding *-s* or *-es* (e.g., *boy* → *boys*, *class* → *classes*). However, not all languages follow this pattern. Some use suffixes, others use separate words, particles, or even reduplication. The study of pluralization is therefore very important, as it helps us understand both the structure of individual languages and their place within larger language families.

The Bodo language, which belongs to the Tibeto-Burman branch of the Sino-Tibetan family, is spoken mainly in Assam and neighbouring areas of Northeast India. It is one of the scheduled languages of India and holds great cultural and social importance for the Bodo community. Although Bodo has received attention in terms of literature and education, detailed studies on its grammar are still relatively limited compared to major Indian languages like Assamese, Hindi and Bengali. Among its grammatical features, pluralization in Bodo stands out as an area that deserves deeper study.

Pluralization in Bodo does not follow a single, fixed method. Instead, the language presents a variety of morphological and syntactic strategies depending on the type of noun and the context such as suffixes, multitude and reduplication to denote plurality. Some common plural markers in Bodo are *-{sur}*, *-{p'ur}* and *-{mun}* which are added to nouns to indicate plurality. In addition, numeral classifiers, multitude word and even reduplication are used in certain situations. In some contexts, plural marking may be omitted if the plurality is already clear from the use of numbers or quantifiers (e.g., *three boys*, *many houses*). This flexibility makes Bodo pluralization different.

Studying pluralization in Bodo helps us understand the internal structure of the language while also contributing to the study of number systems across the Tibeto-Burman family. Moreover, documenting such features is crucial for language preservation.

This paper therefore aims to explore pluralization in Bodo through a morphosyntactic perspective. It will describe the various strategies of plural formation, examine the conditions that govern their use, and highlight how they interact with other elements of grammar.

Aims and Objectives

To document and describe the strategies of plural formation in Bodo, including suffixation, reduplication, and numeral-classifier constructions.

Existing Works on pluralization in Bodo

The processes of pluralisation in the Bodo language have been examined by several scholars since the earliest grammatical descriptions. Scholars from the nineteenth century to the present have paid considerable attention to how plurality is expressed in Bodo, providing valuable insights into its morphological structure.

Hodgson (1847) identified the plural suffix as $\{-p^h\text{ur}\}$, as *got^ho* 'a child', *got^ho-p^hur* 'children'. His work marked one of the first grammatical accounts of the Bodo language, providing a foundation for later linguists to investigate its morphological characteristics.

Endle (1884) provided a more systematic description of number marking in Bodo. He recognized two grammatical numbers Singular and Plural. According to him, the singular form of a noun is represented simply by the noun itself, or sometimes by adding a numeral meaning 'one,' as in *mansi sase* 'one man'. The plural, however, is indicated by the addition of the suffix *-fur*, as shown below-

(a) *mansi* 'a man' *mansi-fur* 'men'

(b) *nɔ* 'a house' *nɔ-fur* 'houses'

Grierson (1903) in his *Linguistic Survey of India*, presented several examples of Bodo lexical data in which forms such as *bisor* and *bisir* occur, which are variants of *bisur* and are glossed as 'they' and 'them.' His analysis helped confirm that pluralisation in Bodo is primarily suffix based, although phonological variations occur depending on dialectal and contextual factors.

Bhattacharya (1977) provided a comprehensive discussion of Bodo morphology. He enumerates four plural suffixes namely $\{-\emptyset\}$, $\{-p^h\text{ur}\}$, $\{-sur\}$ and $\{-mun\}$. He writes about the use of *-p^hur* and *-mun* with the honorific personal pronoun like *nuŋt^haŋ* and *bit^haŋ*. He identified that the suffix $\{-p^h\text{ur}\}$ not only indicates plurality but also conveys an additional semantic nuance of *honour* or *respect*. He further pointed out that the suffixes $\{-p^h\text{ur}\}$ and $\{-mun\}$ are both used with honorific personal pronouns such as *nuŋt^haŋ*, though their distribution varies across different dialects of Bodo. He also says plurality may also be expressed by other qualifying words like *gubaŋ*, *burza*, etc.

Baro (1990) described four plural allomorphs in Bodo like, $\{-\emptyset\}$, $\{-p^h\text{ur}\}$, $\{-sur\}$, and $\{-mun\}$. According to him, the zero morpheme $\{-\emptyset\}$ is typically used with nouns that are already pluralised through quantifying words or with mass nouns that inherently express plurality or uncountability.

Basumatary (2006), examined plural formation across three major dialects of Bodo Western, Eastern, and Southern. He pointed out that in many cases, a *zero suffix* is used when the noun is qualified by another word that already indicates plurality, such as in *gubaŋ mansi- \emptyset* ('many men'). He also identified a number of plural suffixes including $\{-bɔza\}$, $\{-daŋgrɪ\}$, $\{-t^hɔp^h a\}$, $\{-muzum\}$, $\{-at^h um\}$, and $\{-mut^h a\}$. For instance, in *zigab-bɔza*, the suffix *-bɔza* denotes collective plurality. However, Basumatary clarified that many of these forms are independent lexical items that function as *nouns of quantity* rather than true inflectional plural markers. His study highlights the dynamic nature of pluralisation in Bodo, where lexical and grammatical elements interact to express number.

Brahma (2020) identifies two processes of pluralization i.e., morphological and syntactic. In the first section, he discusses pluralization through suffixes *-sur*, *mun* and *p^hur*. In syntactic process he discusses pluralization by reduplication, using multitude *gubaŋ* and using numerals. Again, he discusses about the extended feature of the plural suffix *-p^hur*. According to him the plural suffix *-p^hur* has a very unique feature, it is used in addressing in-laws.

Methodology

The present study on *Pluralization in Bodo* adopts a descriptive and analytical approach. The research focuses on naturally occurring linguistic data obtained from both written and spoken sources. The study is done based on both primary and secondary data. Primary data have been collected directly from native speakers of Bodo through interviews, conversations, and elicitation sessions. Informants were selected from different age groups, genders, and educational backgrounds to ensure linguistic diversity. Most of the informants are fluent native speakers from Kokrajhar, Chirang, and Baksa districts of B.T.R (Assam), where the language is predominantly spoken. Secondary data have been gathered from existing grammars, linguistic descriptions, and academic works on Bodo, such as those by Hodgson (1847), Endle (1884), Bhattacharya (1977), and other contemporary scholars.

All the collected data were transcribed phonetically using the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) to facilitate accurate morphological analysis. To ensure reliability, data were cross-checked with multiple informants, and the elicited forms were verified with standard Bodo grammar texts. Triangulation was applied by comparing

spoken data with written sources. All informants participated voluntarily in the study. Their consent was obtained prior to data collection.

Discussion

Number is a grammatical category that expresses quantity or count in relation to nouns, pronouns, and sometimes verbs or adjectives. It indicates whether a word refers to one, more than one. Bodo has two types of number distinction, these are- singular and plural. Of them, singular is unmarked and plural is marked. The pluralization in Bodo can be formed through two processes i.e., morphological and syntactic process.

Morphological Process

The most productive process of pluralization is suffixation. There are three plural suffixes in Bodo, these are- {-sur}, {-p^hur} and {-mun}.

{-sur}

Personal pronoun: This plural suffix is added to second and third person non-honorific personal pronoun. For example:

- (1) *nunŋ-sur* > *nunŋsur*
you-PL 'You (PL)'
- (2) *bi-sur* > *bisur*
he/she-PL 'They'

Reflexive pronoun: The suffix {-sur} is also used to form the plural of the reflexive pronoun *gaw*. For example:

- (3) *gaw-sur* > *gawsur*
self-PL 'selves'

{-p^hur}

Material, Common, and Collective Nouns: The suffix is added to material, common, and collective nouns to form plural. For example –

- (4) *bizab--p^hur* > *bizabp^hur*
book-PL 'books'
- (5) *p^hɔraisa- p^hur* > *p^hɔraisap^hur*
student-PL 'students'

Third person non-human pronoun: This suffix is also used to form plural form of third person non-human pronoun. For example:

- (6) *be-p^hur* > *bep^hur*
It-PL 'they'

Reference kinship term: It is further employed to mark plurality in reference kinship terms, particularly when denoting a specific category of kin, such as sisters or brothers. For example:

- (7) *bida-p^hur* > *bidap^hur*
his/her elder brother-PL 'his/her elder brothers'

{-mun}

Personal pronoun: This plural suffix is added to second and third person honorific personal pronoun. For example:

- (8) *nunŋ^haŋ- mun* > *nunŋ^haŋmun*
you.HON-PL 'you (PL,HON)'
- (9) *bi^haŋ-mun* > *bi^haŋmun*
he/she.HON.-PL 'they (HON)'

Personal proper name: This suffix is used to pluralise personal proper names, as given below:

- (10) *razu-mun* > *razumun*
Raju-PL 'Raju and others'

Kinship term: The suffix {-mun} is also used to pluralise address and reference kinship terms. For example:

- (11) *abuu-mun* > *abuumun*
My grandfather-PL 'My grandfather and others'
- (12) *bibɔ-mun* > *bibɔmun*
his/her elder sister-PL 'his/her elder sisters'

Syntactic Process

There are a few syntactic processes of pluralization in Bodo, such as reduplication, use of multitude word and use of quantifying numerals.

Reduplication

Reduplication in Bodo serves not only as a word formation process but also plays a crucial grammatical role. It functions as a syntactic mechanism for pluralization, particularly in nouns, pronouns, and even adjectives.

Reduplication of noun: Reduplication of noun is one of the most productive process to express plurality of the respective noun. For example:

- (13) *bisur gami gami berai-duŋ*
 They village RED roam-PCT
 'They are roaming from village to village.'

Reduplication of pronoun: Interrogative, indefinite and reflexive pronouns are also repeated to express plurality. For example:

- (14) *gabun p^hɔraisali-aw sur sur t^hangun* (Interrogative)
 tomorrow school-LOC who RED go-FUT
 'Who are going to the school tomorrow?'

Reduplication of Adjective: It is observed that while expressing plurality of a noun, the respective qualifying nouns are repeated as given below:

- (15) *mu^kra-a gumun gumun t^halir-k^huu za-duŋ*
 monkey-NOM ripe RED banana-ACC eat-PCT
 'The monkey is eating ripe bananas.'

Using nouns of multitude:

There are some noun words those convey the meaning of multitude. These are- *hanza* 'group', *p^halu* 'herd', *damuul* 'heap', *zak^hri* 'group', etc. Such words are themselves independent words and they are collective nouns. When such nouns occur with other noun that has a singular meaning they may precede or follow the other noun and expresses plurality. For example:

- (16) *musuu p^halu-a p^hut^har-aw gaŋsu za-duŋ*
 cow herd-NOM field-LOC grass eat-PCT
 'The herd of cows are eating grass in the field.'

From the given examples it is observed that the nouns are not marked for plural number if they are used along with multitude noun words. But it is worthy to mention that sometimes a plural suffix is added to head noun redundantly. For example:

- (17) *gubaŋ ɡɔt^hɔ-p^hura gele-duŋ*
 many child-PL play-PCT
 'Many children are playing.'

Using numeral

In Bodo, there is a process of pluralization by using quantifying numerals to the nouns. In such process numeral precedes noun and the numeral should be other than one i.e., - two, three, four, etc. For example:

- (18) *mui-ja zuŋ-naw sa-brui alasi p^hui-duŋ-mun*
 yesterday-NOM we-LOC Clf.-four guest come-RPT
 'Four guests came to our home yesterday.'

Pluralization of action noun

Action noun is a kind of derivational noun; it derives from action verb. In Bodo, pluralization of action noun is often seen or found. Action noun is pluralized by addition of the plural suffix {- *p^hur*}. It is observed the pluralized action nouns also takes case suffixes. For example:

- (19) *bisur-ni mawnai-p^hur-k^huu nu-nanui aŋ guzun-duŋ-mun*
 they-GEN doing-PL-ACC. See-nFt I please- RPT
 'On seeing their doing(s) I pleased.'

Conclusion

The present study, *Pluralization in Bodo: A Morphosyntactic Analysis*, has examined how the Bodo language marks plurality through various morphological and syntactic strategies.

Morphologically, suffixation is the most productive means of forming plurals. The plural markers {-sur}, {-p^hur}, and {-mun} occur with different classes of nouns and pronouns, showing distinctions of animacy, honorific usage, and social respect.

Syntactically, plurality is expressed through reduplication, using nouns of multitude and using numeral. These allow speakers to convey plural meaning without always marking the noun morphologically. Such flexibility, where plural markers may be omitted when plurality is understood through context, aligns Bodo with other Tibeto-Burman languages that feature optional plural marking.

Abbreviation

ACC	Accusative Case	Clf	Classifier
FUT	Future Tense	GEN	Genitive Case
HON	Honorific	LOC	Locative Case
nFt	non-Finite	NOM	Nominative Case
PCT	Present Continuous Tense	PL	Plural
RED	Reduplication	RPT	Remote Past Tense

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