

NUMBER, VERB AND CASE CATEGORIES IN POCHURY

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ABSTRACT

Pochury is a language from the Sino-Tibetan family spoken in Nagaland. This study analyzes its key grammatical features using qualitative research based on native-speaker input. The language has a three-part number system: singular, dual, and plural. The plural marker /ri/ is used consistently for both nouns and pronouns. Duality is split: marker /sə/ is used for dual pronouns, while /kəŋi/ ('two') is used as a numerical specifier. Pochury verbs are stable and do not change form for singular or plural subjects, meaning they lack mandatory subject-verb agreement. Time and aspect (like past or future) are marked by attaching specific suffixes to the constant verb root. The language also relies on six case markers built on an Ergative-Absolutive pattern. The function in the case marking system exhibits polysemy. Single markers perform dual, related functions: the marker /nə/ marks both the ergative and the instrument case, while /və/ marks the dative and locative case. Overall, the findings show the complex structure of the Pochury language, in which the nominal system relies on noun classes to clearly identify the agent performing the action, a feature typical of Tibeto-Burman languages.

Keywords: Pochury, Number System, Verb-Agreement, Case Marking, Polysemy, Split Duality

1. INTRODUCTION

'Pochury' is a language of the Sino-Tibetan family, and is grouped under the Angami-Pochuri subgroup (Burling, 2003). It is natively spoken by the Pochury tribe of Nagaland, primarily residing in Meluri district. 'Pochury' derives its nomenclature from three native constituent villages: Sapo, Kechury and Khury. The Pochurys are also known by exonyms such as Sozomi, Shantary, and Nyushury used by neighboring Naga groups (Bareh, 2001). Historically, the British administration categorized the Pochury community as subgroups of other Naga ethnic groups, describing them as 'Eastern Sangtam' or 'Eastern Rengma' (Mann, 1996).

Pochury's placement within the Angami-Pochuri group (along with languages such as Angami, Sumi, and Mao) suggests shared typological characteristics. Linguistics research postulates that the Angami-Pochuri group, in the context of the larger Trans-Himalayan family, is best described outside the traditional Kuki-Chin subgroup, aligning with the 'Fallen Leaves' model (Burling, 2003; van Driem, 2011). While linguistics research on Naga languages is steadily proliferating, the current status on the Pochury language documentation is limited, marked by a scarcity of extensive written literature and formally published works. However, efforts by the Pochury Literature Board (PLB) played a significant role in promoting the language through translation, including the publication of the English-to-Pochury dictionary *Zhüthozhü* in 2017, and a monthly journal called *Aguo Zhü*, which was first published in August 1991 and continued until 1993. Non-linguist writers have also made notable literary contributions to the tribe (Mepingthvü, 2016; Thovitho & Poji, 2021). Additionally, recent studies have started to provide insights into the language (Ezung & Walling, 2021; Mepfhuo & Singh, 2025). Therefore, this study seeks to align with previous studies and further elucidate the nature of the Pochury language.

2. METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this study relies primarily on qualitative research, utilizing in-depth interviews, discussions and interactive sessions. The informants were native and proficient speakers of the Pochury language, and residing in the Meluri district. Reliance on local informants was necessary for this study's translation and transcription. The informants consisted of a Language Officer, elderly residents with extensive knowledge of the language and history, educators and students. Additionally, secondary data were sourced from academic theses, journals, articles, books, online sources, and scholarly databases.

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3. STUDY FINDINGS

3.1 Number System and Split Duality

Pochury has a tripartite number system: singular, dual, and plural. The singular is typically unmarked in nouns and pronouns. Duality, however, is expressed and realized by attaching the suffix /sə/ and numeral value /kəŋi/ (two) to the single lexical item.

- a. **Pronominal dual marker:** The suffix /sə/ is strictly an inflectional marker. This marker is grammaticalised and restricted to human/pronominal reference.
- b. **Nominal Dual Marker:** The numeral value /kəŋi/ functions as an analytical numerical specifier. It follows the noun to indicate count in general nominal contexts.

Notably, the dual marker /sə/ distinguishes dual forms from explicit numeral specifications. The distinction suggests that only the most salient referents (pronominal) have grammaticalized duality, while other nouns rely on a lexical counting strategy.

Table 3.1: Duality in Pochury

Duality using the Marker /sə/		Duality using the Numeral 'two' /kəŋi/	
nə-sə	k ^h ərə	z ^h e	-kəŋi
you-DU	both	house.SG	two
'Both of you' (dual)		'two house'	
hi-sə	k ^h ərə	Aru	-kəŋi
I-SG-DU	both	ship.SG	two
'Both of us' (dual)		'two ship'	
nə-sə	m.pa saluo	rəku	-kəŋi
you-SG-DU-SELF	do-VERB	tomb.SG	two
'do it yourselves' (dual)		'two tomb'	
Tuma kə.pri.və	hi-sə-ʒi	məre	-kəŋi
That car	I-SG-DU-POSS	snake.SG	two
'That car is ours' (dual)		'two snake'	
hi-sə.m.pa	nə sa-na	aməz ^h ə	-kəŋi
I-SG-DU-SELF	do-FUT (dual)	Mouse.SG	two
'We will do it ourselves' (dual)		'two mouse'	

3.2 Plural Marker /ri/

Plurality is typically indicated by the suffixation of the marker /ri/ at the end of independent words. This pattern is notable because it applies to two major parts of speech – nouns and pronouns – indicating a unified grammatical strategy for marking number in the nominal system. The primary and most straightforward function of the marker /ri/ is to convert a singular noun into its plural form through suffixation, which establishes /ri/ as the regular, productive plural morpheme for nominal entities. The marker /ri/ is also consistently used to form plural pronouns from their singular counterparts, demonstrating that plurality is marked similarly across the nominal and pronominal systems.

Table 3.2(a): Singular and Plural in Pochury

Singular (Noun)	Meaning	Plural Marker	Plural (Noun)	Meaning
/tʃuk ^h u/	'bag'	ri	/tʃuk ^h uri/	'bags'
/nimpa/	'man'	ri	/nimpari /	'men'
/nimza/	'woman'	ri	/nimzari /	'women'
/saməwa/	'animal'	ri	/saməwari /	'animals'

Table 3.2(b): Personal, Reflexive and Possessive Pronouns in Pochury

Pronoun	1 st Person		2 nd Person		3 rd Person	
<i>Personal</i>	hi-ri	'we'	nə-ri	'you'	ma-ri	'them'
<i>Reflexive</i>	Hirimpa	'ourselves'	nərimpa	'yourselves'	Marimpa	'themselves'
<i>Possessive</i>	i-ʒi-ri	'ours'	nə-ʒi-ri	'yours'	ma-ʒi-ri	'theirs'

3.3 Verb Agreement

The Pochury verbal system is characterized by a high degree of stability in the verb root itself, relying entirely on affixation to convey temporal and aspectual meaning. Unlike the English language, Pochury verbs exhibit invariance, meaning the base verb form remains constant for both singular and

plural subjects. For instance, the verb /ʒə/ ('run') is used whether the subject is singular or plural. The absence of mandatory subject-verb agreement is a typological feature frequently found among TB languages, which typically use nominal case marking and fixed word order to track arguments rather than relying on complex verbal conjugation.

3.3.1 Tense and Aspect (TAM) Suffixation

Tense and aspect are marked explicitly through suffixes attached directly to the base verb, allowing for precise expression of time and action status. The verbs use specific suffixes, such as /ve/ for present, /be/ for progressive, /tʰuo/ for past, and /na/ for future. The identified suffixes are fixed to the verb stem, keeping the root intact, as demonstrated in the examples below:

Table 3.3.1(a): Verb Agreement in Past Tense

English		Pochury	
The boy	ran	Vizaŋu wa	ʒə -tʰuo
DETSUBJ-SG	VERB-PST	Boy DET	run-PST
		'The boy ran'	
The boys	ran	vizaŋu-ri	ʒə -tʰuo
DETSUBJ-PLU	VERB-PST	boys-PLU	run-PST
		'The boys ran'	

Table 3.3.1(b): Verb-Agreement in Present Tense

English		Pochury	
He	runs	Ma	-ʒə -ve
SUBJ-SG	VERB	SUBJ-SG	VERB
'He' takes the singular verb form 'runs' (ending with an -s)		'He run'	
They	run	Mari	-ʒə -ve
SUBJ-PLU	VERB	SUBJ-PLU	VERB
'They' takes the plural form verb 'run' (ending without an -s)		'They run'	

Verbs in English change their form to agree with the subject (e.g., 'run' & 'runs'). In contrast, Pochury's verb /ʒə/ ('run') remains the same in its form regardless of the number of subjects. Table 3.3.1(c) illustrates how the verb /ʒə/ combines with different markers to form various tenses, demonstrating how suffixes can change the tense of a verb while keeping the base form intact.

Table 3.3.1(c): Tense and Aspect Markers in Pochury

Function	Marker	Example (Base: /ʒə/ 'run')
Past Tense	/tʰuo/	ʒə -tʰuo (ran)
Present Tense	/ve/	ʒə -ve (run/runs)
Future Tense	/na/	ʒə -na (will run)
Present Progressive	/be/	ʒə -be (is running now)

The above findings reveal that Pochury uses a system of suffixes attached to the verb to indicate tense and aspect, rather than modifying the verb form to agree with the number of subjects. This reflects a grammatical pattern in Pochury where tense and aspect are marked explicitly through suffixes, while subject-verb agreement is not a prominent feature.

3.4 Case Categories

Frede (1994) defines grammatical case as 'a category of nouns and noun modifiers that corresponds to potential grammatical functions for a nominal group in a wording', indicating the relationship of a noun or pronoun with the rest of the words in a sentence. The main cases in English are the subjective (or nominative), possessive (or genitive), objective (or accusative), and dative (or instrumental). Many Tibeto-Burman languages follow a mixed pattern of case marking system, in which it has been observed that Pochury differentiates six types of case marking: Ergative-Absolutive, Ablative, Dative, Instrumental, Possessive, and Locative

3.4.1 Ergative-Absolutive Case

Pochury exhibit an Ergative-Absolutive (E-A) alignment system for core arguments, wherein the subject (S) of a transitive verb is marked with the ergative marker /nə/ (Tom-ERG). The subject of an

intransitive verb and object of transitive verb are treated similarly, with S (John) and O (pig) being zero marked- Ø or unmarked (absolutive case).

- 1) Tom-nə awu fet^he -na
Tom-ERG pig kill -FUT
'Tom will kill a pig'
John tse
John Ø come PrCONT
'John is coming'
- 2) Tom-nə awu -p^he
Tom-ERG pig feed-PST
'Tom fed the pig'
John kuwa
John Ø go PrCONT
'John is going'

3.4.2 Ablative Case

This element functions to specify the agent in passive grammatical constructions, or to denote the instrument of manner, or location associated with the action described by the verb. It has one absolute marker corresponding to the preposition /və -nə/.

- 3) ma nju:pe və -nə tse -t^huo
he/she village from-ABL come PST
'He/she came from village'
- 4) akəwei rəni və -nə ru -ve
light sun from -ABL come PRST
'Light comes from the sun'
- 5) hi Meluri və -nə
i Meluri from ABL
'I am from Meluri'
- 6) k^hela -nə
where from-ABL
'From where'
- 7) kərəhuwa mərhə ku və -nə tʃo -t^huo
thief window from-ABL jump PST
'The thief jumped from the window'

3.4.3 Possessive Case

Possessive cases denote a structural relationship of possession or belongingness between two nouns or between a noun and a pronoun. It uses the marker /ʒi/ to indicate possession, which follows after the noun.

- 8) hama at^ho -ʒi kətʃiēp^ha
this-SG at^ho -POSS book
'This is Atho's book'
- 9) hamari tsiez^hi -ʒi ləʃe kəkatevə
this-PLU tsiez^hi -POSS hairpin
'These are Tsiezhi's hairpin'
- 10) tsurho -ʒi tʃuk^hu

tsurho POSS bag

'Tsurho's bag'

11) sam -zi aze

sam POSS room

'Sam's room'

Given below are few examples of possessive determiners in all first, second and third person under singular and plural without the marker;

Singular:

12) I kətʃiēp^ha

SG.POSS book

'My book'

13) nɔ -zi kətʃiēp^ha

SG POSS book

'Your book'

14) ma -zi kətʃiēp^ha

SG POSS book

'His/her book'

Plural:

15) I -zi-ri kətʃiēp^ha

POSS PLU book

'Our book'

16) ma -zi-ri kətʃiēp^ha

POSS PLU book

'Their book'

3.4.4 Dative Case

The dative case marks the noun or the pronoun that serves as the indirect object of a verb, showing its relationship to the action being performed. In Pochury, the dative case is marked by /və/. And interestingly, it allows the ergative marker /nə/ and the dative marker /və/ to co-occur in the same sentence without disrupting the syntactic structure, as illustrated in the examples below.

17) hi -nə ma -və kətʃiēp^ha tse -t^huo

i-ERG her -DAT book one-NUM give -PST

'I gave her a book'

18) hiri -nə aʃu -və arə tse -t^huo

we-ERG dog -DAT bone give -PST

'We gave our dog a bone'

3.4.5 Locative Case

The locative case serves the function of identifying or expressing the essential positionality or the location of objects relative to an action. The locative case is determined by the marker /və/.

19) nɔ k^he -və wa nti

you.SG where -LOC go -PrG

'Where are you going?'

20) hi ma asükəsaz^heh -və ŋu-t^huo

SG.FEM market -LOC see -PST

'I saw her at the market'

- 21) ma nju:pe -və wa -t^huo
 SG.FEM village -LOC go -PST
 ‘She went to village’
- 22) hi meluri -və be -ve
 SG meluri -LOC stay -PRST
 ‘I stay in Meluri’

3.4.6 Instrument Case

It serves the function of identifying and marking the noun, to express the means by which it enables the subject to carry out or accomplish the action. It utilizes the marker /nə/.

- 23) hi ɑ:tsa -nə ʃ^holo rhe
 SG knife -INST apple cut
 ‘I cut an apple with a knife’
- 24) ma aməvə -nə ɑ:tso mə:k^hu -ve.
 SG.MAS axe -INST wood split -PrCONT
 ‘He is splitting wood with an axe’
- 25) ma ɑ:tsa -nə lose rhe
 SG.FEM knife -INST bread cut
 ‘She cut the bread with a knife’

4. DISCUSSION

The nominal system’s tripartite number categories – singular, dual, and plural – presents a typological point of interest. The most compelling feature is the non-uniform realization of duality, manifesting as a significant functional split. The suffix /sə/ as an inflectional marker, and the constraint limiting this specific inflection to high-animacy entities confirms that the animacy hierarchy plays a role in governing morphological complexity, prioritizing explicit dual marking for persons. This suggests that the language has grammatically prioritized the dual distinction for the most salient participants. The verb system has analytic tendencies because the verb root remains unchanged. The base verb form remains constant whether the subject is singular or plural. All TAM information is consistently shown using fixed suffixes. This reliance on suffixes, instead of changing the verb stem or requiring subject-verb matching, directly reflects the language’s lack of subject-verb agreement. The positioning of suffixes follows a fixed morphological template, with related Naga languages suggesting an Aspect-before-Tense ordering rule (Giridhar, 1980).

The core structure reveals an Ergative-Absolutive (E-A) pattern that is marked morphologically, a widely documented typological trait within the Tibeto-Burman family. The subject of a transitive verb (A) is marked by the ergative suffix /nə/. However, this ergativity is likely non-systemic and non-paradigmatic, and is pragmatic, which is common in Tibeto-Burman languages (LaPolla, 1992). The main reason for this system seems to be to clarify semantic roles, which directly results in extensive case syncretism. The functional overlaps observed in Pochury’s case-marking system provide clear examples of polysemy. The polysemy of case markers clearly demonstrates its linguistic type. The marker /nə/ functions as both Ergative and Instrumental. The language resolves this potentially ambiguous syncretism by applying the animacy hierarchy (LaPolla, 1995): /nə/ marks the high-animacy agent when the referent is human, and the low-animacy instrument when the referent is a tool. This is a semantically driven strategy widely used across the Tibeto-Burman language family (LaPolla, 2004). Similarly, the marker /və/ serves both dative and locative functions, a syncretism typical of relational markers on the spatial-relational spectrum (LaPolla, 1992). Disambiguation in this case is structural, as it relies on the marker’s pre-nominal position for dative functions versus its post-nominal position for locative functions. The observed structures of the Pochury language reveals that it relies on affixation and semantic factors rather than rigid verb conjugation or purely syntactic mechanisms to manage its core grammatical relations. The verbal system is analytic, featuring an invariant verb

stem where all temporal and aspectual meaning is conveyed through fixed suffixation. These findings classify Pochury as a classic Tibeto-Burman language that uses a non-systemic, pragmatically driven approach to case marking.

5. CONCLUSION

The study reveals a nominal system featuring a tripartite number distinction and a notable ‘split duality’: inflectional /sə/ is used for pronominal duals, while the numeral /kəŋi/ indicates nominal duality. The language employs a six-case system built on an Ergative-Absolutive alignment. This system exhibits polysemy, where a single marker, such as /nə/ (Ergative/Instrumental) and /və/ (Dative/Locative), has multiple grammatical functions. The nominal affixing system functionally compensates for the simplicity of the verbal structure, which is characterized by invariant verb roots and the absence of mandatory subject-verb agreement. Temporal and aspectual information is also indicated by verbal suffixes. Overall, the findings show the complex structure of the Pochury language, where the nominal system plays a primary role in ensuring the clear delineation of core arguments, a pattern similar to the typological characteristics observed across Tibeto-Burman languages.

6. ABBREVIATIONS

ABL	- Ablative	INST	- Instrument	PrCONT	- Present continuous
DAT	- Dative	LOC	- Locative	PrPROG	- Present Progressive
DET	- Determiner	MAS	- Masculine	PST	- Past
DU	- Dual	NUM	- Number	SG	- Singular
ERG	- Ergative	PLU	- Plural	SUBJ	- Subject
FEM	- Feminine	POSS	- Possessive		
FUT	- Future	PRST	- Present		

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