

Adapting the Multilingual Assessment Instrument for Narratives (MAIN) to Mizo

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This paper describes the adaptation of the Multilingual Assessment Instrument for Narratives (MAIN) to the Mizo language. Mizo is a vulnerable minority language spoken by a tribal population in Mizoram, which is situated in the northeastern part of India. A brief context about the region of Mizoram and an overview of the Mizo language are given in the paper, focusing on the language's distinct grammar and the interplay between the tonal and syntactic elements in shaping meanings in Mizo. Furthermore, it describes the adaptation process, the challenges faced with typological differences between Mizo and English, and the steps taken to fit the particular context. The MAIN Mizo adaptation offers an important tool to assess Mizo children in terms of their language development and narrative abilities.

1 Introduction and background

Narratives are an important part of many childhood speech acts, which makes them one of the most ecologically valid ways to assess communicative competence (Botting, 2002). The Multilingual Assessment Instrument for Narratives (MAIN; Gagarina et al., 2019) was created as part of the Language Impairment Testing in Multilingual Settings (LITMUS) battery developed by a working group that focused on Narrative and Discourse within the pan-European research network COST Action IS0804 (Armon-Lotem et al., 2015). MAIN is a reliable tool that was developed after examining and evaluating a variety of tasks used for eliciting narratives and identifying bilingual features in narrative discourse. The main feature of MAIN is its standardized procedure and use of four parallel picture sets (*Baby Birds*, *Baby Goats*, *Cat*, and *Dog*) that allow for the assessment of narrative skills and comparison across languages. MAIN has been adapted into a broad range of languages worldwide, including 11 Indian languages.

Although there have been numerous studies done on narrative development in children, the investigations are heavily biased toward English and the so-called WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) population (Von Suchodoletz & McNaboe,

2023). This leaves several linguistic communities unexplored. The Mizo language, spoken in the North Eastern part of India, is one of these unexplored linguistic communities.

India is the seventh-largest country by area, with a population of more than one billion, per the latest 2011 census (Bhattacharya, 2018). With its diverse population, India is home to a multi-ethnic and multilingual society. The Indo-Aryan languages dominate the North, West, and East of India, the Dravidian family of languages dominates the South of India, and the Tibeto-Burman language family dominates the Northeastern part of India (Mallikarjun, 2022). One of the states in the Northeastern part of India is Mizoram, a mountainous region home to the Mizo tribe. The region was formerly called Assam's Lushai Hills district until it became a Union Territory and later a state in 1987. Mizos are a minority group, recognized as Scheduled Tribe (ST) under the 6th Schedule of the Constitution of India. The term 'ST' refers to specific groups who are often geographically isolated from mainstream India and are recognized by the state of India as a Scheduled Tribe because of historical marginalization, limited access to social and economic opportunities. Tribal communities in India come from different ethnic backgrounds and speak languages from different families (Ambagudia, 2011).

The pre-colonial history of Mizoram is based on oral tradition and legends, which are passed on from one generation to another due to a lack of written records. Hence, there is not enough information to explain the origin and migration of the people (Lalchungnunga, 1994). Due to this, oral traditions and storytelling are deeply ingrained in the Mizo culture. It serves as a medium for sharing knowledge and values across generations. Mizo history became part of the Indian national narrative only after the military expansion into their territory. Research on this history is sparse, and existing accounts often suffer from colonial biases or a lack of reliability due to cultural and linguistic gaps.

The origins of the Mizos thus remain concealed in myths and oral narratives. One popular fable describes the Mizos as emerging from a massive rock called Chhinlung, while another suggests descent from the Chin Dynasty in China, with some Mizos believed to have been rebels who fled during a historical uprising. With no recorded history, these stories serve as cultural symbols for the community. Such myths are indicative of the challenges in reconstructing the history of a community that, until recent centuries, lived in relative isolation. Before British colonization, Mizos lived in small villages ruled by local chiefs. At the time, the region was called the "Lushai Hills" by colonial administrators. The arrival of English missionaries, known locally as Sap Upa and Pu Buanga, marked a shift in the history of the Mizos. These missionaries were instrumental in spreading Christianity and introducing formal education and literacy to the region (School Education Department, Government of Mizoram, 2024). According to some accounts, the Mizo language once had its script written on parchment. However, it was lost in a mythic tale involving a dog who ate the parchment. Subsequently, the missionaries devised a Mizo script using the Roman alphabet, making slight adaptations to fit the language's phonetic system. Their contributions to education and societal development are celebrated to this day in Mizoram.

Despite significant progress in education, Mizoram remains relatively unexplored in linguistic research. This has led to a growing need for tools that assess language skills in this context. As such, developing such tools will provide valuable resources for linguistic and

educational development and contribute to broader cross-linguistic studies. For instance, adapting a language assessment tool like MAIN to the Mizo language could make it more accessible and relevant while adding to the language versions of MAIN. This would also help linguists and educators take significant steps toward preserving the Mizo linguistic heritage and enriching the academic understanding of this understudied language.

2 A brief overview of the Mizo language

Mizo is the language spoken in the state of Mizoram in India. It belongs to the Tibeto-Burman group of the Sino-Tibetan language family. Although the language is classified as a Tibeto-Burman language, the exact sub-category within which Mizo belongs in the group varies from one analysis to another (Chhangte, 1986).

Before Mizo became the official language of Mizoram, each tribe spoke its own distinct language. These tribal languages were eventually replaced by the Lusei or Mizo language, which now serves as the lingua franca of the state. While various Kuki-Chin languages like Hmar, Lakher, Pawi, and Ralte are still present, many speakers have either forgotten or abandoned them in favor of Mizo, which unites its speakers (Lalsangpuui, 2015).

The Mizo language script was introduced in 1894 by the pioneer Christian missionaries Rev. J.H. Lorrain, known as ‘Pu Buanga,’ and Rev. F.W. Savidge, known as ‘Sap Upa’ amongst the Mizos. It was developed based on the Roman alphabet using the Latin script based on the Hunterian system of transliteration. It consists of 25 letters, which makes it slightly different from the standard English alphabet, which has 26 letters.

Mizo is a tonal language that includes four contrastive tones. These tones have been identified as High, Low, Rising, and Falling (Chhangte, 1986; Fanai, 2015). In Mizo, the meaning of words can be altered according to distinct tones. For example, the English word ‘earth’ translates to *lei* in Mizo. However, depending on the tone, the word *lei* can refer to a ‘tongue’, ‘to buy something, or a ‘bridge’. Similarly, the Mizo word *man* can mean ‘catch’, or ‘price’, depending on the tone.

Mizo has distinct typological features when compared to English, such as its SOV word order, as shown in (1), and the absence of definite and indefinite articles like (a/an/the). In Mizo, definiteness is inferred from context or marked by demonstratives such as *he* ‘this’, *chu* ‘that’, and the plural suffix *-te*, as shown in (2). In addition to this, tense and aspect in Mizo are indicated using particles, with *ta* marking the perfective aspect, as seen in (3), and *tum* expressing purpose or intention, as shown in (4). Negation usually occurs post-verbally, as seen with *lo*, as in (5) (Central Institute of Indian Languages, n.d.). Direct speech is conveyed with the quotative *a ti*, meaning ‘said,’ illustrated in (7). The Mizo language depends on clear and direct communication. It has simple word forms and a strict order where verbs are placed at the end of sentences.

- (1) *Zawhte chuan phengphehlep a hmu*
 Cat TOP butterfly 3SG see
 ‘The cat saw a butterfly.’

(2) *sava note-te*
bird baby-DEF
'The baby birds.'

(3) *A tla ta*
3SG fall PST
'He fell.'

(4) *Man tum in a va zuang chhuak a*
Catch want/intend PURP 3SG DIR jump out PST
'He jumped out to catch it.'

(5) *A hmu hman ta lo*
3SG see PST PFV not
'He did not see it.'

(6) *Ui ka ball ka hlauh phah ta! a ti a*
Oh.no 1SG.POSS ball 1SG drop PFV PST 3SG say PST
'He cried: Oh no, I dropped my ball!'

Overall, the features of the Mizo language illustrated through the example sentences above show the syntactic patterns, such as the placement of descriptive elements, the verb-final SOV word order, and the use of particles and lexical verbs to express aspect, negation, and intention. These features depict the language's distinct grammar and shed light on the linguistic richness and the interplay between the tonal, morphological, and syntactic elements in shaping meanings in Mizo.

3 The adaptation of MAIN to Mizo

The adaptation of the MAIN Mizo version started in 2020, based on the revised MAIN English version (Gagarina, Klop, et al., 2019), and strictly followed the guidelines for adaptation (Bohnacker & Gagarina, 2019). It is important to note that adapting a linguistic tool to an understudied language presents a few challenges, particularly when there are insufficient resources and research. The present adaptation exemplifies such a case.

The first step taken before starting with the adaptation was eliciting the stories in the target language from 8 children, using the MAIN picture sequences. This step was crucial to help identify whether the characters and items in the original pictures were familiar to the children. Since some items in the original pictures did not fit the food habits and culture, some of the picture sequences were replaced with the modified versions.¹ For the *Dog* story, the picture sequence with the chicken legs instead of sausages was chosen to fit the context. Similarly, in the *Baby Goat* story, the picture with the brown fox was used. To serve the same purpose, for the *Cat* story, the author suggests that replacing the fishing rod with a fishing net would be more appropriate, considering the cultural familiarity of the learners in this context.

¹ The modified versions can be downloaded from the MAIN website: <https://main.leibniz-zas.de/en/main-materials/main-materials/> (available after registration).

The adaptation involved numerous rounds of discussions and cross-checking to ensure the accuracy of the adapted Mizo version. After the author of this paper did the first draft of the adaptation from English to Mizo, the draft was sent to three native speakers for checking and proofreading. These individuals were Mizo language teachers, one with a Master's degree who was teaching in a school at the time, and the other two with Ph.D.'s, who were both teaching in colleges. One of these college lecturers also has expertise in English and Mizo language translations.

After receiving feedback, a revision was made with the suggested changes incorporated into the adaptation. Since the present adaptation would provide a valuable contribution to narrative assessment in the context, a decision was made to send the draft for final proofreading. A college professor with expertise in translation proofread and helped with the final revision. The adaptation of the Mizo MAIN reached its fruition due to the collaborative efforts of these individuals, who were open to helping and providing valuable feedback.

In the adapted version of MAIN Mizo, cultural and linguistic modifications were made to fit the context. For example, the word *thawnthu* 'story,' was added to the title of all four stories for the Mizo adaptation since this is how a story's title is conveyed in Mizo culture, and it appears more natural this way. For example, *Sava Note* 'Baby Birds' was renamed *Sava note te thawnthu* 'Baby Birds story'.

Furthermore, due to typological differences between Mizo and English, there are several instances where the lack of lexical and vocabulary equivalence, especially with regard to terminologies, poses a challenge. For example, some key terms like narratives, model stories, and internal state terms do not have direct lexical equivalents in Mizo. These were translated using close equivalents or by describing them. The term *sawi chi* 'narrative', which directly translates to 'to tell' was replaced with the word *thawnthu sawi* 'storytelling', which is more appropriate for the context since it is also deeply rooted in the culture. The 'model story' was translated as *thawnthu entawn*, meaning 'copying the story,' and internal state terms were described as *rilru a ngaihtuah sawina*, meaning 'to state what is being thought'.

English terms are retained in brackets to aid comprehension, especially for teachers or researchers who are most likely to use narrative assessment tools and are familiar with technical terminology. In the 'Protocol' section, the term 'counterbalancing' has been retained for methodological clarity. In this case, the Mizo equivalent term *inbuk rualna*, as per the English-Lushai dictionary,² does not fully convey the intended meaning. This prompted the authors to retain the English term. Apart from this, the terms 'scoring sheet' and 'assessment' have been preserved alongside their Mizo translation to clarify their usage. The word 'bilingual' was translated as *tawng chihnih thiam*, which means 'one who knows/speaks two languages' since there is no direct equivalent translation in Mizo.

Like many languages, Mizo vocabulary has been shaped by influences from other tongues. In the adaptation, some loan words from English, like *balloon* and *ball*, were used. Additionally, words related to merchandise and trade are often borrowed from Sanskrit-based

² The English-Lushai dictionary was written by J.F. Dailova and published in 1964. While there was other existing literature, this dictionary was his attempt to provide a more comprehensive resource, which was previously not available.

languages like Bengali or Hindi. Although the words ‘store’ and ‘shop’ both translate to *dawr* in Mizo, the original story used ‘shopping,’ which translates to the Hindi loan word *bazaar*. Hence, that word was used. These borrowed words have been retained in the translation of the story scripts. When possible, explanations rather than direct translations were provided, such as clarifying what ‘audio recorder’ means while keeping the English term. We included both the Mizo and the English word for ‘envelope’ since the English term is more commonly used today.

In some cases, more vocabulary options were added to make the context clearer. For example, in the ‘Protocol’ section, the options ‘nursery’ and ‘Anganwadi’ were added as alternatives to ‘kindergarten.’ This approach will help make the content easier to understand and relevant to the context while keeping the original material’s meaning.

In sum, the process of adapting MAIN to Mizo first involved eliciting stories from the children using the picture sequences, modifying the picture sequences to make them culturally appropriate, and several revisions to maintain accuracy. Due to typological and lexical differences between Mizo and English posing a challenge in translation, certain terms were attributed with either their close equivalents or descriptions, all while retaining the original terms in brackets for cross-reference.

4 Concluding Remarks

The current paper briefly describes the significance of adapting MAIN to Mizo, including an overview of the social and cultural context of Mizoram and the Mizo language, as well as some challenges during the adaptation process. The Mizo MAIN can provide rich linguistic samples from Mizo speakers, which would provide valuable data to research language acquisition and development in a Mizo context, which is currently lacking.

Furthermore, the Mizo MAIN has a practical implementation in the teaching of both Mizo and the English language. Since oral narratives provide a rich source of data about a child’s language in a relatively natural context, they can also be used as an oral part of a Mizo or English language proficiency assessment. Finally, as there is currently a growing scientific interest in studying minority languages worldwide, Mizo MAIN will provide a great opportunity to perform cross-linguistic comparisons with other languages. The author of this paper is currently piloting the Mizo MAIN in the telling elicitation mode as part of an ongoing Ph.D. project.

The Mizo MAIN should be cited in the following way:

- Gagarina, N., Klop, D., Kunnari, S., Tantele, K., Välimaa, T., Bohnacker, U. & Walters, J. (2019). MAIN: Multilingual Assessment Instrument for Narratives – Revised. Materials for use. *ZAS Papers in Linguistics*, 63. Mizo version. Translated and adapted by Hnialum, V., Raman, M. G. & Vanlalvenpuia.
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