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*Introduction to 'Verb agreement in languages of the Eastern Himalayan region'*

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### ABSTRACT

The papers in this issue document argument indexation or verb agreement systems in a set of relatively unknown Tibeto-Burman languages spoken in the hills along the eastern border of India. This introduction lays out the goals and scope of the contributions. In addition, an overview of a few topics of particular interest is given: the types of person marker sets found in these languages; number marking; clusivity; transitive and ditransitive indexation patterns; innovative speech-act participant object marking and portmanteau forms for particular person scenarios; inverse marking; and variation in indexation forms.

### KEYWORDS

Verb agreement; person indexation; clusivity; inverse; hierarchical indexation; speech-act participants; diachronic morphosyntax

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# *Introduction to Verb agreement in languages of the Eastern Himalayan region*<sup>1</sup>

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## **1 Introduction**

The papers in this issue document argument indexation or verb agreement systems in a set of relatively unknown Tibeto-Burman languages spoken in the hills along the eastern border of India. These papers show – but only sample – the great contributions that these languages can make both to comparative Trans-Himalayan morphology and to the typology and diachrony of argument indexation systems. Verb agreement, or verbal person indexation, has been a topic of particular interest within the study of Tibeto-Burman (Trans-Himalayan) languages. For a long time, the primary interest in the topic has been the reconstruction of verb agreement to Proto-Tibeto-Burman. The earlier discussion has centered on questions of where in the family we find verb agreement, which apparent cognate forms can be identified, and which forms can be reconstructed (Bauman 1974, 1975; DeLancey 1989; Driem 1993).<sup>2</sup>

The narrow focus of much of the TB literature on verb agreement is in part due to the scarcity of data available. Previous descriptive work that documented person marking as part of the overall morphology of a language has typically offered a limited amount of data. Grammar sketches rarely present data beyond intransitive paradigms and transitive paradigms with third person objects.

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we can, and should, be more ambitious. Recent research has shown the tremendous proliferation of forms and constructions that can be unearthed in Tibeto-Burman transitive paradigms once we tap into person scenarios with speech-act participant objects. Also, rarely used and (accordingly) rarely documented verb forms such as negative future constructions sometimes preserve particularly archaic forms that can provide missing links in reconstructions that involve considerable time depth.

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<sup>2</sup> For a view opposing the reconstructability of verb agreement to Proto-Tibeto-Burman in the same earlier literature, see LaPolla (1994). There has since been a lot more discussion on this topic.

As more data are becoming available, more detailed questions can be examined. For example, DeLancey (2017, 2018) has looked more in depth at the occurrence of hierarchical and accusative alignment as well as the patterns of innovation in the local scenarios (where speech act participants act on speech act participants). There is no doubt that Tibeto-Burman languages are of particular interest also to a broader typological audience for different types of questions regarding verb agreement systems: different alignment types and the relationships between them; the particular characteristics of individual person scenarios; the role of clusivity in shaping parts of verb agreement paradigms and person marker sets; the different natures of subject (S/A arguments) and object (O/R/T arguments) indexation; among others. The remarkable degree of variation we encounter among closely-related languages in particular within the South-Central (or ‘Kuki-Chin’) group also provides a unique opportunity to study diachronic aspects of how systemic changes occur. Our hope is that with this special issue, the availability of more data on verb agreement systems will enable further advances in this exciting research agenda.

Some of the languages in the contributions to this special issue have received some degree of prior documentation while others are virtually undocumented. In all cases, full paradigms especially of transitive verb forms have never been presented before. This is particularly true of forms with speech-act participant objects.

## **2 Scope of this special issue**

The mountains which straddle the borders between Northeast India and Myanmar to the east, and China to the north, have until very recently been subject to very little linguistic documentation, and the languages of this area are among the least well-documented in the entire Trans-Himalayan family. We are only very recently getting substantial information about these languages, in particular Northern Naga and the conservative Northwest (formerly “Old Kuki”) and Northeast (“Northern Chin”) subbranches of the South Central group. Documentation over the last 15 years or so has shown them to be a repository of unusual verbal morphology, of great intrinsic, comparative, and typological interest.

Contributions in this special issue aim to present all distinct paradigms of intransitive and transitive verbs. In order to provide the relevant context, the contributions generally also show the sets of other person markers, in particular independent pronouns, and personal possessive markers. Most contributions also provide paradigms of the equational copula, which often but not always matches those of intransitive verbs. Ditransitive constructions may show a range of variation and are not fully covered although many contributions provide some preliminary information.

## **3 Contributions to this special issue**

This special issue presents comprehensive paradigms of verb agreement or verbal person indexation in languages from two branches of Tibeto-Burman: South-Central, also known as ‘Kuki-Chin’, and Northern Naga.

South-Central is represented by two of its subgroups. Among the Northwestern (“Old Kuki”) subgroup, the articles focus on the languages Lamkang (contributed by Chelliah et al.), Anal (Ozerov), Monsang (Konnerth & Wanglar), and Chiru (Awan). The first three of these are spoken

in the southeastern Chandel district of Manipur (Northeast India), near the border with Myanmar, while Chiru is a language of central (-western) Manipur, and is also spoken in the Cachar district of Assam in Northeast India. In addition to these Northwestern languages, this special issue also includes two contributions on Northeastern (“Northern Chin”) languages: Thadou, spoken primarily in a large area across Manipur and Assam (Haokip), and Tedim as spoken in Tedim town in Chin State, Myanmar (Mroueh).

The Northern Naga contributions document verb agreement in languages of the Tangsa group, as introduced in a short piece by Morey. In addition to a detailed overview of the Pangwa Tangsa group (also contributed by Morey, harvesting the fruit of many years of fieldwork), the articles specifically focus on Hakhun (Boro), Phong (Dutta), and Muklom (Mulder).

In the remainder of the present introduction, we will offer a brief overview of some topics of interest in the verb agreement systems of these languages.

### **3.1 Person marker sets**

The languages in this special issue generally feature either three or four basic sets of person markers. We find (a) independent pronouns and (b) possessive pronominals, which are bound forms that precede the root. The possessive person markers are typically diachronically related to the independent pronouns, although with sometimes interesting individual histories.

Verb agreement markers are postverbal, either bound or free, although in South-Central we find an additional innovation of preverbal agreement markers (DeLancey 2013). This means that verb agreement markers may either represent only (c) postverbal forms or also (d) preverbal forms in the case of South-Central. Of course, any particular language may have innovated further variations of the basic postverbal set (as, for example, in Monsang) or the preverbal set (as, for example, in Anal). In Monsang, there are three variants of the basic postverbal set, which are argued to represent different diachronic layers. In Anal, the preverbal set has variants that distinguish between A indexation and O indexation: on the one hand, default markers for SAP’s and *va-* marking for 3<sup>rd</sup> person; on the other hand, lengthened SAP person markers and zero marking for 3<sup>rd</sup> person. Anal also has further sets of portmanteau person and tense/aspect markers, even including instances of verb agreement being marked by particular tone patterns (Ozerov 2018).

In addition to these four sets or paradigms of person markers, a number of languages have innovative markers for object indexation. In addition some languages have special portmanteau forms for particular person scenarios (i.e., particular person configurations of the A and O arguments).

### **3.2 Number marking**

The majority of the languages have grammaticalized dual marking in independent pronouns, that is, in those languages, the use of a plural form in reference to two people is not acceptable. In agreement marking, dedicated dual forms are very rare but they exist both in Northern Naga (Phong and, though not obligatorily, Muklom) and South-Central (Thadou).

While the Northern Naga languages tend to have suppletive plural forms, South-Central languages more commonly have analytical plural markers. As a result of the separation of person and number marking in South-Central, plurality is typically only marked once and remains ambiguous in whether it refers to the A or the O argument. But despite the separation of person and number

marking in the South-Central languages, we still find separate plural markers for speech act participants as opposed to third persons in Lamkang and Anal.

### **3.3 Clusivity**

A relevant distinction in person marker sets in these languages is between non-singular first person exclusive and inclusive, that is between (a) excluding the addressee (typically the set of the speaker and one or more third person participants) and (b) including the addressee (typically the set of the speaker, the addressee(s), and possibly one or more third person participants).

The only language that does not make a distinction of clusivity in any domain is the Tangsa language Phong. All other languages distinguish between inclusive and exclusive, although they do not all do so in the same sets of person markers. Generally, all languages do distinguish clusivity in the bound pronominal possessive markers. Independent pronouns also mostly feature the distinction although this is curiously not the case in Lamkang where clusivity in general is not a stable feature, as reported by Chelliah et al.

In agreement or verbal person markers, the Tangsa languages generally lack clusivity in their postverbal agreement markers. Interestingly, however, Morey reports an exception in the Pangwa varieties Chamchang, Shecyü and Mungre. In these languages, inclusive forms have apparently been innovated in the future affirmative paradigms. Morey suggests that these forms have their origins in hortative forms, based on cognate morphology across Tangsa. The link between hortatives and first person inclusive future forms is also salient in South-Central languages such as Anal or Monsang, where the future paradigm similarly lacks a regular inclusive form and instead the hortative is used.

In contrast to Tangsa, the South-Central languages do distinguish between inclusive and exclusive in agreement markers. This is true for both the postverbal and the preverbal sets. Only Thadou does not have a clusivity distinction postverbally but that is because the language has lost the postverbal set with the exception of the single form *-ŋ*, which, as a remnant, marks unified first person just in particular contexts.

We should also take note of the exceptional case of Anal, where we only find the so-called “minimal” (dual) inclusive, which only refers to exactly the speaker and a single addressee.

### **3.4 Transitive and ditransitive indexation patterns**

Transitive verb agreement exhibits a remarkable range of different indexation patterns in these languages.

For example, partial double indexation of the A and O arguments exists in South-Central languages such as Anal, Lamkang, and Monsang. However, the same languages have also individually innovated speech-act participant object marking via vowel length (Anal); innovative first person exclusive and inclusive object marking (Lamkang); and inverse marking in 3→SAP and 2→1 scenarios (Monsang).

The typical indexation pattern of transitive verbs in the Tangsa languages is hierarchical in nature, where the SAP arguments are indexed preferentially. This commonly combines with inverse marking when the SAP's are the O argument in the clause. However, there are also notable exceptions in that different variants of indexes can be used in particular person scenarios (cf. §3.7).

Although ditransitive indexation is only discussed in a preliminary way in this special issue, it is worth pointing out that ditransitive verbs apparently always make use of the same agreement forms as transitive verbs. A recurrent pattern is one of hierarchical object indexing. What we find is that it is an SAP rather than a 3<sup>rd</sup> person object that is preferentially indexed on the verb independent of whether it is the R or the T argument. This ditransitive indexation pattern is observed in both South-Central languages, such as Monsang, Anal, Chiru, Tedim, and Thadou, as well as in the Tangsa language Hakhun. At the same time, other ditransitive indexation patterns can be observed even in some of the same languages, such as Monsang and Hakhun.

### **3.5 Innovative SAP object marking and portmanteau forms for particular person scenarios**

In person scenarios where speech act participants are the object, Tibeto-Burman languages display a breathtaking diversity of verb forms that may feature innovative person indexes or avoid any type of person indexation. Some of this diversity is also reflected in the contributions here. In a number of cases, the forms are transparent enough that their diachronic developments can be traced convincingly.

One indexing pattern that keeps being innovated from different types of source material is a single marker that is used whenever any speech-act participant category (single or plural, inclusive or exclusive, first or second person) is the object. Such a marker has been innovated from a cislocative or venitive, i.e., a marker of motion towards a reference point, repeated in languages around the world (Konnerth 2015), and this is also the case in Tedim *oŋ*-. In Chiru, such a speech-act participant object marker also exists but has its origin in an apparent second person form, arguably via a stage of indexing the inclusive (Konnerth 2018). This object indexation pattern is also found in the Tangsa group. Specifically, Muklom uses the prefix *p<sup>h</sup>-* in scenarios with speech-act participant objects, a marker that is found widely in the Tangsa group with interesting variation in its exact distribution across inverse scenarios. The Muklom case differs from the others, however, since this marking is optional in 3→SAP scenarios.

Another phenomenon also found elsewhere in Tibeto-Burman are portmanteau forms that are used in particular person scenarios. An example is Thadou where *nei*= is not synchronically analyzable and occurs as the unique person index in 2→1. The occurrence of such portmanteau forms in one of the local scenarios, i.e., where an SAP acts on an SAP, is typical, although Thadou also has a unique portmanteau marker *i*= occurring in 3→1.

### **3.6 Inverse marking**

Several different types of inverse marking are found in the languages in this special issue. The most common pattern is for inverse marking to occur in the 3→SAP plus 2→1 scenarios. This is found in the Tangsa languages Hakhun and Phong, as well as in the South-Central languages Lamkang and Monsang.

Inverse marking in 1:O and the other local scenario 1→2 is found in Muishaung, as discussed in Morey's contribution on Pangwa Tangsa languages, although the distribution of the inverse marker has been found to vary while the factors that underlie this variation are not yet known.



The cognate of the Muishaung inverse prefix in Muklom occurs in all speech-act participant object scenarios, although only optionally in 3→SAP.

### **3.7 Variation**

A topic of particular interest is the documentation of variation in the person marking of particular person scenarios. Since diachronic change is always preceded by synchronic variation, the documentation of this variation may provide crucial links to help understand the evolution of the agreement systems. Some of this variation is easier to document and may come up in simple elicitation, while other variants require large text corpora to be discovered. Many contributions in this special issue were able to at least document some of the variation that may be holding precious information for future research.

For example, as mentioned above, in Muklom 3→SAP scenarios, either the O may be indexed along with inverse marking, or the 3<sup>rd</sup> person A may be indexed, with or without additional inverse marking.

While hierarchical alignment is generally default in Hakhun, accusative alignment is commonly used when the A is second person plural, and it is obligatory in non-final clauses.

In Muishaung, Morey reports that one language consultant used the inverse prefix *p<sup>h</sup>-* only in first person O forms and in 1→2, while another language consultant also used this prefix in 3→2 although with the addition of a prefix *kə-*, which has the same form as the reflexive marker of the language.

In Lamkang, the 2→1 scenarios may either index the second person A argument, or they may index the first person O argument, in which latter case the same form can be used for 2→1 and 3→1, i.e., this is a general first person O form.

## **4 Conclusion**

Once the documentation of verb agreement reaches a critical level of detail, a whole host of new questions can be asked, which are of interest not only to the Tibeto-Burman scholarly community but also to typologists and historical linguists more broadly. We can go beyond the study of apparently cognate forms and compare at a larger scale the systems of verb agreement: hierarchical indexation with or without inverse marking; subject-only indexation; double indexation of the A and the O argument; object marking only for first person objects or unified marking for speech-act participants objects. And we can go person-scenario-by-person-scenario and compare the marking patterns that emerge that way. While this type of more detailed research has been done already for particular languages and/or particular smaller groups, the detailed documentation of verb agreement paradigms in every new language offers more testing ground for already described synchronic and diachronic marking patterns and may very well offer entirely new patterns that have not been found before.

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