

The Verbal Complex in the Languages of Northern Burma

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I am writing a cumulative dissertation on the topic “Language Contact in Northern Burma” in the project “*The Greater Burma Zone — a transitional zone of languages and people*”. In the colloquium talk I will focus on but one of my four papers, coauthored by Mathias Jenny. Thematically it is close to the work done in the project “*Linguistic Morphology in Space and Time*” (LiMiTS), especially their paper on morphological homogeneity in Sino-Tibetan (WIDMER et al forthcoming). The focus of this study is to determine and compare the different wordhoods of the verbal complex within and across the languages spoken in Northern Myanmar and adjacent regions.

The question of what constitutes a word in linguistics is by far not trivial (DI SCIULLO & WILLIAMS 1987, ZWICKY 1990, DIXON & AIKHENVALD 2002, HALL et al 2008). Numerous studies both from a typological perspective as well as for specific languages have long since shown that most – if not all – languages lack a uniform concept of a ‘word’ that could serve as a meaningful domain in morphology, syntax, phonology, semantics, and lexicology. There is the wide-spread assumption that in phonology and morphology, separate but uniform word domains exist in which certain rules apply. These are usually labelled *phonological words* (DIXON 1977) or *prosodic words* (SELKIRK 1981), or in short *p-words*, and *grammatical words* or *morphological words*, in short *g-words*, respectively.

P-words are defined by certain phonological rules that apply either word-internally or across word boundaries, e.g. stress placement, epenthetic vowel insertion, assimilation processes. G-words are usually defined according to grammatical criteria: a fixed order of morphemes within the word, or their ability of having other elements inserted, or their boundness. In addition, the concept of *semantic words* (*s-words*), which have a fixed meaning but are not necessarily phonological or morphosyntactic units, also seems to be crucial. Newer studies (e.g. VAN GIJN & ZÚÑIGA 2014, BICKEL & ZÚÑIGA 2017, WIDMER et al forthcoming) have shown that most languages appear to have multiple p- and g-word domains, each of them defined by a set of rules.

The present study will focus on the verbal complex, including the serial verb constructions ubiquitous to Southeast Asia, different types of negations, TAM markers, incorporated elements, and others. The goal of this paper will then be to determine what the different word domains for p-words, g-words, and s-words are in the verb complex among the languages of Northern Burma, and to answer the question of how these word domains differ between languages, and if these patterns are genetically stable (being largely the same in related languages) or if they spread through areal contact (thus being more similar in geographically adjacent but genetically unrelated languages).

Furthermore, it has been suggested (e.g. NICHOLS 1992) that the morphological complexity of languages differs according to whether it is a spoken in a *spread zone* (i.e.

the center or lowlands) or in a *residual zone* (i.e. the periphery or highlands), which on the one hand is due to smaller communities in the mountainous areas tending to retain more archaic features in their languages, and on the other hand due to a larger amount of L2 speakers shifting to lowland languages, which then tend to become more isolating. WIDMER et al (forthcoming) have demonstrated that languages from either type do not differ so much in their p- and g-word domains, although their sample did only include four Sino-Tibetan languages (Bunan, Burmese, Chintang, and Mandarin).

The Greater Burma Zone (GBZ) is an excellent region for this endeavor, as languages of multiple families (Sino-Tibetan, Tai-Kadai, Austroasiatic, Hmong-Mien) are spoken by peoples who have been in close contact with each other for a very long time, and with ample evidence of such contact in the lexicon and grammar of these languages. Some of them form a small linguistic area matching the Kachin sociocultural complex, as I have argued before (MÜLLER 2016, MÜLLER forthcoming); others have undergone major syntactic change due to language contact, like Khamti, a Tai-Kadai language whose basic word order is apparently changing from SVO to SOV.

Many of the languages in the area are underdescribed, so it is difficult to obtain sufficient data for some of them. Extensive fieldwork by the GBZ project has luckily produced a lot of data that is also being harvested for this study. The languages in focus are:

- Sino-Tibetan family:
 - Burmese (potential dialectal differences)
 - Jinghpaw
 - Lhaovo (aka Maru)
 - Lahu
 - Rawang
 - Pa-O
 - Kadu
 - Chin (probably the Teddim variety)
- Tai-Kadai family:
 - Shan
 - Khamti
- Austroasiatic family:
 - Palaung (esp. the Rumai variety)
 - Wa (esp. the Parauk variety)

My plan is to create a template of the verbal paradigm with all existing slots (but not necessarily all possible morphemes, of course) for each of these languages, and to identify the morphological and phonological processes relevant in these languages. When identifying the range of morpheme slots these processes apply to, we will be able to specify the exact morphological and phonological domains for these processes. The expectation is that several processes will have the same domain, while others will have

wider, narrower, overlapping or perhaps even completely disjunct domains, thus producing several different p-word and g-word domains per language.

The final analytic step is then to assess the similarity between the languages with regards to:

1. the relative ordering of similar slot types (e.g. negation, modality, TAM, agreement) in the verbal complex,
2. the boundness of certain morphemes,
3. the number of p- and g-word domains, and
4. the general structure of these domains (which and how many slots they encompass).

In addition, we hope to be able to say something about the proposed category of the s-words (semantic word domain), and their relation to the p- and g-word domains.

Open questions and problems:

- Are “s-words” the same as collocations with non-transparent semantics?
- Does creating a big paradigm with slots for the verbal complex actually work?
- Best way to compare the different word domains?
- Amount of work seems too large — where to make the cuts?

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