

## Three Questions of Describing and Analyzing an Under-described Language in Transition

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**Abstract:** As the process of modernization and globalization accelerates and deepens, communication between an ethnic group (usually a small one) and outside people becomes more frequent and reinforced, which causes their language experiencing a rapid transition from an original and pure state to a hybrid state, even towards language shift. Such a transition poses at least three questions for describing and analyzing an under-described language according to my fieldwork with a branch of Bulang ethnic group (autonym: /ʔa<sup>H</sup>vaʔ<sup>L</sup>/) in Mangjing village of Yunnan province in Southwest China.

Question I: How many newly borrowed words can be included in the vocabulary inventory?

After nine-month fieldwork working on Mangjing Awa (a variety of Bulang language belonging to the Palaungic group of Northern Mon-Khmer branch of Austro-Asiatic language family), I find that it takes on a hybrid state which is closely related to the fundamental transition from a slash-and-burn production way and isolated lifestyle to a commercialized production way (e.g. tea trade and tourism) and modern lifestyle in the past 50 years. Such a transition directly leads to an endangerment of a large number of old words which describe old farming ways, tools, etc. For example, in the past they arranged their spring farming activities through carefully listening to the sound made by specific animals only in specific time (see Example 1). But now they don't rely on this knowledge to farm, so this life-crucial knowledge in olden days is useless and dying out. At the same time, new words (mostly borrowed from Chinese) are streaming into their language playing an increasingly important role in their life. For an under-described language in transition, newly borrowed words shouldn't be excluded from the language, but the question is how many are appropriate.

Question II: How to combine two key features into one system?

In terms of phonology, compared to other Palaungic languages, Mangjing Awa shows a basically stable lexical-tone system with a high/low opposition accompanied by an eroded phonation type (i.e. modal vs. breathy). Unlike other varieties of Bulang language in Northern Thailand (Giaphong 2004, Pijitra 1986) that voice quality is the phonological contrast with accompanying different pitches, the tone contrast in Mangjing Awa has gained the dominance. However, the breathy voice is still a key phonetical feature which is probably closely related to the tone split among Palaungic branch. Furthermore, the third tone begins to split from the high tone conditioned by the aspiration loss of consonantal initials in two of five hamlets in Mangjing village but not stable yet (see Example 2). Both tone and phonation type are key features in Mangjing Awa, so the question is which way is the best way to describe such a hybrid phonological system.

Question III: How to penetrate into the nature of a grammar in transition?

Grammar generally changes very slowly and its variation is difficult to be perceived by native speakers and researchers. For example, from my preliminary observation, there are two kinds of word order in the classifier construction in Mangjing Awa: (1) N+Num+CL, and (2) Num+CL+N with no difference in syntax and semantics. If we hypothesize that the second construction perhaps borrowed from Chinese as a free variant, we may give the following supporting facts: (1) all the nouns can be used in the first construction but not all in the second,

(2) the second construction has an ‘every one N’ meaning in its sister language Parauk Wa, which seems to mean the first construction is more original and basic. So the question is if the variation of a grammar in transition happens what is the best way to describe and analyze it.

Example 1

<b>Mangjing Awa</b>	<b>meaning</b>	<b>description</b>
v <sup>h</sup> ɛk <sup>H</sup> v <sup>h</sup> ɛɪ <sup>H</sup>	a kind of bird twittering at night in early spring	reminding people to prepare seeds to sow paddy
si <sup>H</sup> si <sup>H</sup> sɔɪ <sup>L</sup>	a kind of insect with sharp legs	reminding people to discard the withered tree branches, vines , etc. in the field for farming
p <sup>h</sup> ak <sup>H</sup> klɯŋ <sup>H</sup> p <sup>h</sup> ak <sup>H</sup> tɔk <sup>L</sup>	a kind of bird twittering from April to May	calling businessmen back to farm
ŋɔŋ <sup>L</sup> tɛar <sup>L</sup>	a kind of cicada with an empty belly	reminding people to sow paddy
mɛŋ <sup>H</sup> wɔŋ <sup>L</sup>	a kind of insect	warning people to catch the time to farm, or there won't be the second chance
pur <sup>h</sup> puk <sup>H</sup>	muntjac, barking deer	If it rains, it will be sunny the next day; if it is sunny, it will be rainy the next day
rok <sup>H</sup> kɻŋ <sup>H</sup>	field frog	If field frogs are croaking around the hamlet, it means farming time has gone.

Example 2

Hamlet name word	Mangjing Shangzhai, Mangjing Xiazhai, Mang Hong	Wengji, Wengwa
tooth	r <sup>h</sup> ɻŋ <sup>H</sup>	ɻŋ <sup>H</sup>
rock	ɻŋ <sup>H</sup>	ɻŋ <sup>M</sup>
light, bright	ɻŋ <sup>L</sup>	ɻŋ <sup>L</sup>

Abbreviation

H	high tone	M	mid tone	Num	numeral
L	low tone	N	noun	CL	classifier

References

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