

BOOK REVIEW
A GRAMMAR OF MONGSEN AO
BY A.R. COUPE

Berlin/New York, Mouton de Gruyter, Mouton Grammar Library 39, 2007
[Hardcover, 526 pages, ISBN 978-3-11-019088-5]

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This splendid grammar describes the variety of Ao Naga spoken in Mangmetong ('Upright Corpse'), a village of about 2000 people in Mokokchung District of Nagaland. The Ao are the dominant tribe of Nagaland, with a population of over 170,000, divided into two major dialect groups. Chungli, spoken by about 50% of the Ao, has greater prestige, and is always used in church services; Mongsen, to which the Mangmetong subdialect belongs, is spoken by 40%, while 10% speak other dialects.¹ As with many other Tibeto-Burman (TB) groups like Nungish or Tangkhulic, Ao shows great dialectal variation from village to village, so that the safest way to identify a dialect is by a loconym, or village name. Ao is not really endangered at present, although it is facing increasing competition from Nagamese, the Indo-Aryan based pidgin widely used for inter-group communication in Nagaland.

Coupe (henceforth ARC) approaches grammatical description in a way that I find highly congenial, operating within a "broadly functionalist typological framework" (21), with an emphasis on semantic and pragmatic factors in grammar,² and a keen awareness of the processes of grammaticalization that constantly create new categories and structures in the course of a language's evolution. He recognizes the fuzziness of our terminological arsenal, that linguistic categories shade into one another, and that acknowledging such gradience is often more realistic than an all-or-nothing analysis. Discussing the nature of the morphemes involved in case-marking morphology, he observes, "They are ... best viewed as being located on a cline extending from independent words at one extreme, to clitics at the other, given that they share the features of both prototypes (170)." He decries a "rigid division" between inflectional and

¹ The sociolinguistic relationship between Chungli and Mongsen might seem paradoxical, since Mongsen, which retains, e.g. aspirated initial consonants, is phonologically more conservative than Chungli, which does not; but it is not necessarily the case that a more conservative dialect has greater prestige. While the Hanoi dialect of Vietnamese, which retains 6 tones, is indeed more prestigious than the 5-toned Saigon dialect, Lhasa Tibetan has more prestige than conservative atonal dialects like Balti and Purik; and conservative Cantonese has less prestige than eroded Mandarin.

² See especially Ch. V, *Clause structure and grammatical functions* (145-200).

derivational morphology, which does not do justice to “the many shades of grey waxing and waning between the extremes of black and white that represent the traditional poles of inflection and derivation (297).” ARC realizes that the semantic transparency of nominal compounds largely depends upon “a lexicalization continuum that extends from nominal juxtaposition at one extreme, with a meaning predictable from composite parts, to fully lexicalized compound at the other extreme, often expressing a meaning that may not necessarily be retrievable from its immediate constituents (242).” The presence or absence of the “relational prefix” *tə-* on the rightmost element of a possessive compound depends on the degree of its lexicalization, with the prefix optionally deleted if the compound is not fully lexicalized, e.g. *a-miʔ-puk* or *a-miʔ tə-puk* ‘a person’s stomach’ (85).^{3/4} When ARC does invoke the constraints of a particular theory, it is in a non-dogmatic and eclectic way. Although he does use a bit of autosegmental terminology in describing sandhi processes (62-64), he refuses to use the autosegmental notion of a “floating high tone” in order to account for the realization of a HIGH tone before the general nominalizer *-pàʔ*, simply because such an analysis has no historical basis (58-9). He thus demonstrates that he will not allow anyone else’s theoretical apparatus to obscure the diachronic facts of his language.

As mentioned above (n. 1), and clearly shown in spectrograms (34-44), Mongsen has a thoroughgoing contrast between aspirated and non-aspirated initials, extending to sonorants as well as stops, while Chungli lacks aspirated consonants entirely. This is but one more demonstration of the non-criteriality of manner contrasts in establishing genetic relationships among TB languages.

Like all TB languages of Nagaland, Mongsen is tonal. Its three level lexical tones participate in complex sandhi alternations, which have not yet been exhaustively analyzed (68),⁵ and which have only marginal grammatical functions (60-65). The most important of the latter involves the agentive case marker *nə*, which can be marked solely by tone when the head of its NP is the 1st person singular personal pronoun *nì* ‘I’ (64). In such NPs the segmental material of the case marker may be elided, leaving only its mid-tone; this stranded tone then associates leftward with the tone of the pronoun, leading to a low rising output, the only known instance of the creation of a contour tone in Mongsen.

³ This looks superficially like the opposite of the situation in Lahu, where the absence of a prefix on the second element of a compound indicates a *higher* degree of lexicalization, e.g. *vàʔ ð-šā* ‘the flesh of a pig’ vs. *vàʔ-šā* ‘pork’. But highly lexicalized compounds in Mongsen formed with non-relational nouns like *á-sá* ‘meat’ are much less likely to have a prefixed 2nd element; cf. Mongsen *áwk-sàʔ*, cognate to the Lahu form (87).

⁴ There will be constant references to Lahu (a Central Loloish language) in this review, since comparisons with that delightful language tend to leap first into my mind.

⁵ ARC suspects that he will ultimately have to set up a number of different stem classes for both nouns and verbs, in order to properly characterize apparently idiosyncratic tonal behavior. Such idiosyncrasies are apparent, e.g. in nominal compounds consisting of animal names plus *sàʔ* ‘meat’. I found something very similar with respect to compounds consisting of animal names plus ‘excrement’ in Pumi (Qiangic). See Matisoff 1997.

The intricacy of its tonal behaviour leads ARC to surmise (67-68) that Mongsen has a polysyllabic pattern of tone assignment, like that described by Mazaudon (1977) for TB languages of Nepal like Tamang.

As always, glottalization poses special problems for tonal analysis. An intriguing but marginal contrast exists between the modal low central vowel /a/ and the same vowel with creaky voice /a̰/ (46-47), provided the previous consonant is /w/. Independent of this is a syllable-final glottal stop that looks superficially as if it contrasts with both final *-k* and zero-coda. ARC convincingly denies phonemic status to this [-ʔ], since it only occurs in final position and is deleted before a syllable boundary formed by a concatenated morpheme (25).^{6/7}

Mongsen nouns are described as either *unbound* or *bound* (81 ff.). Unbound common nouns are a disparate group belonging to different semantic classes. Bound nouns are either *relational*, bearing the *tə-* prefix⁸ (including bodyparts, kinship terms, parts of wholes); or *non-relational*, with the *a-* prefix (including cultural artifacts, animals, natural objects). A crucial example: *tə-maŋ* ‘body’ vs. *a-maŋ* ‘corpse’, with the latter showing severance of the connection between the body and the possessor (87). This relational/non-relational dichotomy looks very much like an inalienable/alienable distinction, as Coupe mentions (84), although there are problems with this view.

As always, semantically exocentric (or eccentric!) compounds are of great interest. Some choice examples:⁹

- ‘upper (upslope) part of village’ (241) *jim-paŋ* (village-mouth) (cf. Lh. *qhâʔ-ú* (village-head))
- ‘lower (downslope) part of village’ (241) *jim-laŋ* (village-buttocks) (cf. Lh. *qhâʔ-mē* (village-tail))
- ‘house gecko’ (489) *kì-tsəŋ-ti* (house-interior-older sibling) (cf. Lh. *yè-šē-ma* (lady of the house))
- ‘leopard cat’ (489) *hən-səlaŋ* (chicken-take stealthily)
- ‘womb’ (493) *a-nu mən-tʃən* (child-sit-place)
- ‘mole (on skin)’ (493) *ləph.u-tsəʔ* (cockroach-shit)¹⁰
- ‘watch (timepiece)’ (496) *tsəhŋi-[tə]ji* (sun-mother)

⁶ This problem has previously been discussed at length in Coupe 2003. Cf. my own analysis of Lahu *-ʔ* as a prosodic, suprasegmental feature, even though it obviously arose from syllables with final oral stops */-p -t -k/.

⁷ The problem of the status of *-ʔ* in Thai is equally complex. Thai words with *-ʔ* have the same tonal possibilities as words with short vowels ending in /-p -t -k/, but all short vowels in open syllables are automatically pronounced with glottal stop. There are thus three ways of phonemicizing long vs. short vowels: V vs. VV (adding *-ʔ* by rule to yield Vʔ to the short member); or Vʔ vs. V (adding vowel length by rule to yield VV for the long member); or, redundantly but mnemonically (as in the Haas transcription), Vʔ vs. VV.

⁸ The difference between an affix and a clitic is one of scope, with an affix operating only on a lexical stem, while the scope of a clitic may range over a word, phrase, or whole clause (51).

⁹ Most of these are from the *English-Mongsen Glossary* (487-504).

¹⁰ This concept is expressed by compounds meaning “fly-shit” in many Southeast Asian languages, including Khmer, Mon, Thai, and Malay. See Matisoff 1978: 70.

As universally in Sino-Tibetan, the criterion for Mongsen verbhood is negatability, especially in the past negative construction *mə̀ + V + la*. Again like all Sino-Tibetan languages, Mongsen has no primary form-class of “adjective”, adjectival notions being expressed by nominalized stative verbs (280).

Coupe recognizes eleven structural positions for suffixes in a “lexical suffix zone” in the Mongsen VP, with the caveats that the order of the 17 possible fillers of the slots is not absolutely fixed, and there are mutual exclusivities based on semantic selectional restrictions (289). Coupe considers all the verbal functorial morphemes that come after the verb-root to be part of the same *word* as the verb, rather than treating them as particles or post-head auxiliary (“versatile”) verbs. This is quite similar to Burling’s (2004) treatment of the VP in Modhupur Mandi (Garo),¹¹ and seems to reflect the fact that these morphemes (mostly presumably grammaticalized from verbs) have gone further along the grammaticalization path than, e.g. the Lahu post-head versatile verbs. These latter are closely similar semantically to the Mongsen suffixes, but still able to occur as the only verb in their clause.¹² The structure of the Mongsen VP is thus to be considered a morphological rather than a syntactic question.

Four suffixes with aspectual meanings (continuative *-ja*, repetitive *-si*, completive *-maʔ*, habitual past *-jaʔ*) occur in paradigmatic opposition in the 6th slot of the verb stem (325). Five similarly abstract suffixes expressing modality occur in slot #7 (abilitive *-tʃhət*, frustrative *-phət*, conative¹³ *-tsə*, chance modality *-tʃhaʔ*, desiderative *-mì*), but these are not mutually exclusive, and a string of at least three is possible in the same VP, as in:

- (329) wa -tʃhət -tsə -mì -ə̀ɪ
 go ABIL CON DESID PRES
 ‘wants to try to be able to go’

ARC sums up his chapter on verb morphology by observing that Mongsen “reveals a surprising level of complexity in the verb stem that was previously not fully appreciated for ... any of the TB languages of Nagaland ... Verb stems [in the languages of NE India] tend to be complex and highly agglutinative ... In particular, the presence of lexical suffixes that have grammaticalized from compounded verb roots stands out as one of the most salient areal characteristics of TB languages of the north-east. It now appears that this feature, arguably more than any other, serves to distinguish the TB languages of north-east India from

¹¹ See Matisoff 2008: 147.

¹² This distinguishes them from Lahu verb particles, which cannot occur without a preceding verb. See Matisoff 1973: 315.

¹³ The conative modality expresses a meaning of ‘try to VERB’. Verbs meaning ‘see’ or ‘look’ are frequently grammaticalized in this direction, e.g. Lahu *ni* ‘look at’, *qay ni* ‘try going’; Japanese *miru* ‘look at’, *itte miru* ‘try going’.

those of the greater TB family, and irrespectively of their particular branch affiliations” (355).

In ARC’s closely reasoned discussion of “Core grammatical marking” (154-165), we learn that Mongsen shows a typologically unusual alignment pattern, where semantic and pragmatic factors play a key role in determining the presence or absence of case marking. “Pragmatically and/or semantically motivated marking of core arguments appears to be a shared characteristic of other TB languages of the region”¹⁴ (286).

Agents are overtly marked rather sparingly, in cases where personal choice or volitionality (not necessarily “control”) is involved.¹⁵ As in other TB languages and Chinese, grammatical relations like **subject** and **object** are not well-defined, as demonstrated by the lack of a grammaticalized “syntactic pivot” that “consistently selects a particular argument of the clause for cross-clausal coreference of deleted NPs” (169). It is contextual pragmatics that determines this. Neither are the categories of **passive** (168-9) or **transitive** (81, 285) of much use, although the latter may be invoked informally to characterize verbs with high agentivity.

Mongsen marks agentive, instrumental, and allative arguments in the same way, via the particle *nə*. ARC discusses the “unusual” use of agentive case marking on A arguments to encode **habitual** activity (165), as in these contrastive examples (156):

(156) *nì* *a-səŋ* *sə-əɪ*
 1sg wood chop
 ‘I’m chopping wood.’

nì *nə* *a-səŋ* *sə-əɪ*
 AGT
 ‘I chop wood (habitually, as an occupation).’

In this connection I have a suggestion, for what it is worth. Perhaps this agentive morpheme *nə* (which is cognate to Meithei *nə* ‘controlling agent’ and possibly also to the Lai Chin ergative marker *ni?*) has actually developed from a TB copular morpheme with a velar nasal initial and a central vowel that appears in many Qiangic and Loloish languages (e.g. Qiang Mawo and Ergong *ŋuə*, Muya *ŋv*, Yi Xide and Hani *ŋur*⁵⁵, Jino *ŋur*³³), as well as in Jingpho *ŋà*. Thus a sentence like *nì nə a-səŋ sə-əɪ* might have once semantically approximated an English cleft sentence like “It is I who chop wood”, i.e. “I am a prototypical or habitual wood-chopping one”.

¹⁴ Here ARC cites Lahu and Meithei as sharing this characteristic.

¹⁵ Volitionality is also of great importance in the clause structure of Himalayan languages like Tibetan, where it plays a key role in the way ergativity operates. See DeLancey 1986; Tournadre 1996: 191-199.

Causatives (190-198) are formed both morphologically (with the suffix *-iʔ*, either coercive or permissive), and analytically with the versatile verb *khiʔ* ‘give’, with the latter construction interpretable only as a permissive causative. With causative verbs of high transitivity, the causer receives A marking, while the original A argument becomes the causee, and the object is unmarked. The causee optionally receives dative marking in cases where s/he retains a considerable degree of control, even when the action is usually involuntary, as when a doctor has a patient cough on purpose, or an actress is made to scream deliberately.

The closely interrelated syntactic phenomena of nominalization and relativization receive expert treatment in Ch. VI (201-239). Mongsen relative clauses (RC’s) may be either pre- or post-head, with roughly equal frequency, and with little difference in meaning, except that the pre-head ones tend to be restrictive, and the post-head ones non-restrictive.¹⁶ ARC feels that the RC construction arose out of the nominalizing one, but admits that this is hard to prove, since both structures share a common “grammatizational pathway” (218). Headless RC’s (about 30% of the total) look especially similar to nominalizations, but are distinguishable from the latter by the restorability of the head. Most RC’s in Mongsen are externally headed, unlike, e.g. in Angami Naga. Internally headed RC’s are only possible when the head noun is a core argument of the RC, and both A and O arguments are explicitly mentioned, requiring the relativized verb stem to be transitive (225).

Special praise is due for ARC’s insightful discussion of “converbs” and clause linkage (343-344, 409-447). A converb is a “non-finite verb form whose main function is to mark adverbial subordination”. The Mongsen converb suffixes, as listed in a chart (343, 422), perform functions similar to those of the Lahu “non-final unrestricted particles”, expressing such subordinate relationships as conditional, temporal, concessive, and causal. Equally important is the pervasive Tibeto-Burman narrative practice of “clause-chaining” (422 ff.), whereby non-final clauses receive a marking indicating only that more is to come in the sentence, typically a sequence of temporally ordered verbal events. These loosely conjoined clauses serve to structure narratives in a way similar to non-finite Indo-European verb forms like participles. The sequential converb *-əɪ* is the most commonly used converb in Mongsen,¹⁷ as in:

atsə-ja-əɪ	ahɪə-əɪ	pa	hmila	tʃu	ku	punʃshəŋ
look-CONT-SEQ	roar-SEQ	he	reflection	DEM	LOC	pounce.PST

‘Looking and roaring, [Tiger] pounced on her reflection [in the water].’ (425)

¹⁶ As ARC notes (220-221), Lahu also permits the shifting of a relative clause from pre- to post-head position, but the details are quite different. Only Lahu RC’s of quite simple structure (usually with an adjectival verb) can make the shift to post-head position. I have noted that post-head RC’s tend to convey *old information*, a notion rather like ARC’s non-restrictivity (Matisoff 1973: 490-496, esp. n. 100, p. 607).

¹⁷ It seems to function very similarly to the Lahu “suspensive” non-final unrestricted particle *le*.

“Ascriptive clauses” (362-370) consist of a topic and a complement, neither one of which is a verb; the complement is formed from certain stative verbs that are nominalized by the *tə-* prefix (and optionally also by a mysterious *-a* suffix):

ípá? a-ki tʃu tə-pə̀ti-a -ù?
 EMPH house DEM Pfx-big-Sfx DEC
 “That house [is] a big one.”

In Lahu terms these are “minor sentences”, a concept which I needed to establish the unrestrictedness of certain particles, i.e. their ability to occur after either nouns or verbs. Thus the unrestrictedness of the yes/no interrogative particle *lâ* is demonstrated by its post-nominal as well as post-verbal occurrences, e.g. *nə qay lâ* ‘Are you going?’ vs. *nə Lâhū-yâ lâ* ‘Are you a Lahu?’

ARC is highly attuned to the fact that grammars are not immutable entities, and that one diachronic state melts imperceptibly into the next. At many points he comments on ongoing grammatical developments, or speculates about past ones. To some extent, Coupe’s sensitivity to these phenomena has been heightened by the fact that in general the sources of Mongsen grammatical morphemes are remarkably transparent (22), e.g. dual pronouns contain the element *-nət* ‘two’, e.g. *inət* ‘we two (incl.)’, *kənət* ‘we two (excl.)’ (89). A few other examples:

- “The heavy polysyllabic structure of the benefactive *atəməkə* suggests a relatively recent grammaticalization.” ARC speculates that it might be from a verb *atem* ‘reiterate a name/eulogize’ recorded in Clark’s dictionary of the Chungli dialect (1911: 163) (172).
- Eleven functors used to show spatial location or deictic orientation are called “nascent postpositions”, since they clearly derive from relational body-part terms or locative nouns (184-189). Cf. the morpheme *taŋi* ‘side’ in the following sentence (186):¹⁸

kə taŋi siaŋ
 1sg.POSS side turn
 ‘Turn towards me.’ [“Turn [to] my side.”]

- The nascent postposition *thak*, as in N + *thak* ‘in the direction of N; on N’ derives from a noun *tak* ~ *dak* ‘place, location’, cited in Clark’s Chungli dictionary (186). Mongsen lacks an accusative particle, but this morpheme certainly seems cognate to the Lahu accusative noun-particle *thà?*, which has been grammaticalized from a spatial noun meaning ‘upper surface’.¹⁹

¹⁸ For the spatial/locative use of Hebrew bodypart terms, see Petruck 1986.

¹⁹ See Matisoff 1991a: 388-389. In Mongsen ditransitive sentences it is the indirect object which takes the dative marker *li*, just as in Lahu it is the IO which takes *thà?*. In causative sentences, *li* is recruited to mark the causee, again just like Lahu *thà?*

- There is a nice chart showing the ramified grammatical pathways of the prefix *tə-*, which now functions (among other duties) as an adverbial subordinator, the marker of heads of purposive complements, an instrumental nominalizer, and a deverbalizer of adjectives. (259).
- The diminutive suffix *-za* has obviously been grammaticalized from the noun *tə-za* ‘child’ (< PTB **za*), just as a morpheme meaning ‘mother’ has acquired the augmentative metaphorical sense of ‘principal/major’ (272).²⁰
- The terminative suffix *-lak*, which “specifies the terminal part of the referent when it occurs on a noun stem”, as in *tə-mi lak* ‘tip of a tail’ is “almost certainly” derived from the general TB root **lak* ‘hand’ (273).
- ARC plausibly suggests that the negative suffix *-la* has developed from the general TB yes/no interrogative marker **la* (341-342).
- The transitive verb *tʃhà* ‘do/make’ has become polyfunctional, and is now also a copular intransitive verb expressing existence, a marker of past tense in existential clauses, a mood marker in dependent clauses, an inchoative verb meaning ‘become/happen’ (371-383).

Many other Mongsen grammatical phenomena have close analogies in other TB languages, and a number of Mongsen functors seem to have actual cognates elsewhere in the family:

(1) *Functional equivalents.*

- The “immediate future” marker *-lu*, was originally the “segmentally identical purposive nominalizer *-lu*” (345). This makes it exactly parallel to the Lahu irrealis verb particle and purposive nominalizer *tù*. (Matisoff 1973: 335-336).
- The Mongsen spatial nouns *tə-sin* ‘back’ and *mənaŋ* ‘front’ appear to be evolving temporal functions, morphing into postpositions meaning ‘after’ and ‘before’, respectively (449-50). Such space-to-time grammaticalizations are common cross-linguistically, and Lahu has close analogues: *(ð-)qhðʔ-nó* ‘back; after’, *(ð-)ğû-š̄f̄* ‘front; before’.
- Mongsen has six semantically differentiated nominalizers (219):
 - (1) ‘general’ *-pàʔ*
 - (2) ‘MAN nominalizer’ *-tʃhaŋ*
 - (3) ‘agentive’ *-əɪ*
 - (4) ‘locative’ *-tʃən*
 - (5) ‘purposive’ *-lu*
 - (6) ‘temporal’ *tə...i ku*

²⁰ These metaphorical developments are common in East and SE Asia and beyond, as demonstrated in Matisoff 1991b.

These correspond categorially (but not phonologically) with uncanny exactitude to the five nominalizers to be found in Lahu:²¹

- (1) ‘general’ *ve*
- (2) ‘agentive’ *pā*
- (3) ‘locative’ *k̄*
- (4) ‘purposive’ *tù*
- (5) ‘temporal’ *thâ*

As with Lahu *ve*, the Mongsen agentive nominalizer/relativizer *-əɪ* also functions as a genitive marker (252-255). For the ‘MAN nominalizer’, see below.

• One of several “discourse connectives” (124-127) which serve to establish temporal sequentiality is actually a mini-clause meaning “thus doing”:

tə-	tʃhà-	əɪ
thus	do	SEQ

This is exactly parallel to the Lahu expression

qhe-	te-	lɛ
thus	do	SUSP

that frequently begins clauses in connected narratives (Matisoff 1973: 136-137).

• The “affective suffix” *-sət*, derived from PTB *g-sat ‘kill’ is used after verb roots expressing manners of killing that result in death (316-319), but has now been fully grammaticalized as a general intensifier, as in English *tickled to death*. ARC points to a similar development of the cognate Meithei verb-suffix *-hət*. One could also mention the Thai intensitive *cə taaj* (lit. “will die”), as in *?ðək-cətaaj* ‘extremely/exceedingly’, as well as Lahu *š̄i e (la) yò* (lit. “almost die”) as in *yàʔ-ni lè ñâ ġa š̄i e (la) yò* ‘Today we caught so many fish you could die!’

• The temporal concept *before* has no Mongsen lexical exponent, so it must be expressed circuitously by constructions like a dependent clause formed with a negative prefix before the verb and a nascent postposition and locative converb suffix after the verb:

mə	khəp	tsənta	-ku
NEG	depart	between	LOC

‘before [he] departs’; literally “while [he] has not departed” (447-448)

This is nearly identical to a Lahu construction expressed in a similarly negative way:

²¹ See Matisoff 1972 and Matisoff 1973: 440-459.

mâ qay šē thâ
 NEG depart yet TEMP
 ‘before [he] departs’; literally “while [he] has not yet gone” (Matisoff 1973: 337-338)

- Mongsen has an elaborate class of directional motion verbs, where the relative up-or-down path of the motion is built into their meanings (280-282). This deictic preoccupation with relative height is characteristic of mountain dwellers, and is common to other TB languages. See, e.g., the Lahu “spatial demonstratives” (Matisoff 1973: 51-52).
- Speaking of the present tense marker $-əɿ$, the origin of which ARC believes to be the nearly homophonous agentive nominalizer $-əɿ$, he observes that “Non-embedded nominalizations that function as independent clauses appear to be a common feature of TB languages, and have been reported in Lahu (Matisoff 1972), Athpare (Ebert 1997), Yamphu (Rutgers 1998), and Kham (Watters 2002)” (345).

(2) *Putative cognates*

- 97-8 The nominal distal demonstrative *tʃu* seems to be directly cognate with the Lai Chin demonstrative/deictic *tsuu*. (See, e.g. Barnes 1998.)
- 122-3 The prefix-like element *tha* that appears in seven time words encoding temporal proximity (e.g. *thaku* ‘now’, *thani* ‘today’, *thaka?* ‘tonight’) looks like the Lahu temporal particle and temporal nominalizer *thâ* (Matisoff 1973: 170, 407-408).
- 124/138 The shortened form *kà?* of the concessive converb *anukà?* ‘again, also, even, yet’ is identical in sound and meaning to the Lahu non-final unrestricted particle *kà?* (written the same way in my transcription!) (Matisoff 1973: 164-165, 176, 424-427).
- 131/139 The Mongsen quotative particle *tə* ‘thus’ also means ‘certainly/indeed’, asserting the truth of a proposition. ARC suggests a relationship between the quotative and ‘indeed’ functions (139). The phonologically similar Lahu quotative particle *tè* has also been grammaticalized from the verb *tè* ‘be true’ (cf. also the derived noun $\dot{\text{ə}}\text{-tè}$ ‘truth’) (Matisoff 1973: 171, 365, 410-411, 464, 467-470).
- 144 The declarative mood clitic $-ù?$ has a diachronic source that “is not determinable at present.” Perhaps it can be related to the PTB copular morpheme *way that is also the ancestor of Lahu *ve*, the hardworking particle that is a nominalizer, genitivizer, and relativizer.²²
- 268 The “MAN nominalizer” mentioned above is a suffix $-tʃhaŋ$ that can be used as a relativizer in clauses whose head noun is human. As ARC remarks (268), it

²² See Matisoff 1972, 1985.

is obviously cognate to the Proto-Lolo-Burmese form *tsaŋ ‘person, man, human being’ (> e.g. Lahu *chə*).

- 371-4 The Mongsen verb *tʃhà* ‘do/make’, now becoming grammaticalized as a copula, looks like a possible cognate to Lahu *chê* ‘be in a place; progressive auxiliary’ < *kya or *tsya (since *-ya > Lh. *ɛ*); but it couldn’t be from *tsa, because the Lahu front vowel would be unexplained. The aspirated initial of *tʃhà* is a better phonological fit with *chê* than Ao *-ja* ‘continuative’, even though *-ja* fits better semantically. For the semantics, cf. Ao *li* ‘stay/be at’, which has copular functions as well.²³

ARC is careful to point out features of Mongsen grammar that have been influenced by contact with other languages (Nagamese pidgin, Bengali, Hindi, English):

- 134/234-235 The “relative-correlative” construction, i.e. paired clauses where a pronoun in the second clause refers back to an interrogative/indefinite pronoun in the first one, as in ‘Whoever wins, [he] will be more senior’, or in the analogous Hindi example upon which it is probably modeled, ‘Whoever will stay in this deserted mansion, [he] will get a reward’ (235).²⁴

- 112-120 The traditional Mongsen numeral system, like that of many other languages of Nagaland, featured “overcounting”, as in the numerals from 15 to 19, which were expressed as “twenty not-completed five”, “twenty not-completed four”, etc.²⁵ ARC considers overcounting in languages of Nagaland to be a “unique innovation that almost certainly has genetic significance.” Now, however, Ao counting has become thoroughly decimal, under Christian missionary influence.²⁶

The grammar is rounded out with four Mongsen texts with interlinear and connected translations (455-486). The first of these, “The Story of the Long-tailed Broadbill”, is also provided with Chungli equivalents on separate lines. The book concludes with an *English-Mongsen Glossary* (487-504) that includes all the vocabulary to be found in these texts, arranged by semantic category.²⁷

²³ My previous etymology of *chê* involved an allofamic relationship with *jê* ‘rest/stop’ (Matisoff 1988: 574).

²⁴ This same construction has been introduced into Garo from Bengali (Burling 2004: 333-338).

²⁵ I had called numeral systems like this “subtractive” (1997a: 33), though a better adjective is perhaps “anticipatory”. ARC points out that this type of overcounting was formerly pervasive in Nagaland, much more so than I had realized (118).

²⁶ Other interesting aspects of Mongsen numeral phrases include the absence of classifiers, and “prefix runs” in consecutive numerals (1, 2, and 3 have *a-*; 4 and 5 have *phə-*; 9 and 10 have *thV-*). See Matisoff 1997b: 100.

²⁷ In one case, however, the division into semantic classes might be etymologically misleading: the word *hli* ‘vine’ appears under Plants (490), and *[tə]-hli* ‘vein’ under Body Parts (493), but they probably represent the same etymon. One further quibble with the *Glossary*: the word *ajamaŋ* ‘dream’ is given a “literal” gloss “night + believe” (494), but *maŋ* is rather from the general PTB/PST root *s-maŋ ‘dream’ (STC #82).

An excellent feature is that many of the glossary items are accompanied with PTB reconstructions from Benedict 1972. We may add a few more:

	<i>Mongsen</i>	<i>Other TB</i>
‘brood eggs’	muk	PLB *s-mu (> e.g. Lh. mū) (Matisoff 2003: 499, Matisoff 2008a: 32)
‘corpse’	a-maŋ	PTB *s-maŋ (Matisoff 2003: 265)
‘cured’	nà	Lahu na (Matisoff 1988: 726-727)
‘eagle’	a-hmu	PTB *s-məw (STC #257)
‘hand’	tákhət	PTB *k(r)ut (Matisoff 2003: 365)
‘son-in-law’	tə-əmhnak	PTB *s-mak (STC #324)
‘weep’	tʃəp	PTB *krap (STC #116)

Table 1. Additional cognates

Several forms in the *Glossary* show interesting assimilatory phenomena:

	<i>PTB</i>	<i>STC</i>	<i>Mongsen</i>
‘eye’	*s-mik	#402	tənik
‘ripe’	*s-min	#432	hniŋ
‘leech’	*m-li:t	#396	mənət

Table 2. Assimilatory phenomena

Finally, one item in the *Glossary*, *a-kuŋ* ‘prawn’ (489) is a startling look-alike with a Tai form (cf. Siamese *kûŋ*). Is this completely fortuitous, or has there been some contact with Tai (Ahom? Khamti?) in Nagaland?²⁸

There is a great deal to admire in this book. ARC is thoroughly familiar with various theoretical frameworks, both phonological and grammatical, but maintains an independent and eclectic approach. As observed above, he invokes bits of theoretical terminology or concepts when he finds them useful, but never lets theory falsify the facts of the language. He does not shrink from using recent neologisms when they are called for, e.g., *reportative particle* (132-133), *abilitive modality* (329-330), *frustrative modality*²⁹ (330-332); *autobeneficiary imperative* (398, 408). It is a pleasure to follow his detailed arguments for and against alternative analyses.

²⁸ ARC, who has published on Thai (cf. Coupe 2001), actually makes several comparisons between it and Mongsen (242, 254, 341). In connection with the optional omission of the genitive marker from some Mongsen NPs, he remarks (254) that a similar possibility exists in Thai, so that *rót khǎŋ mǎw* ‘the doctor’s car’ may be simplified to *rót mǎw*. However, his literal gloss of the fuller construction as “car belong doctor” makes it sound too much like Tok Pisin! A more literal translation is “car *thing* doctor”, since *khǎŋ* is basically a noun meaning ‘thing’.

²⁹ The marker of this modality, *phət* ‘do incorrectly, do ineffectually’ is another possible contact word from Tai (cf. Siamese *phít* ‘make a mistake’). This Tai morpheme has also been borrowed into Lahu as *phí?* ‘err; do wrong’, where it has been well integrated into the class of “post-head versatile verbs” (e.g. *qay phí?* ‘go to the wrong place’).

A book like this could not have been written without the author's intimate cultural familiarity with the people under study. ARC is a fluent speaker of Nagamese, and has acquired a near-native command of Mongsen, to the point where any mistakes that he makes are subtle, and lead to grammatical insights (159-160, 220, 335-336). He is acutely aware of both generational and dialectal variation among Mongsen speakers, enabling him to speak, e.g. of "an evolving age-related shift in the functional reference of the third singular pronoun" (89), or an "incipient age-related difference in the use of pronouns with oblique arguments" involving suffixation of the dative marker onto the 1st person sg. pronoun in a causative sentence instead of the possessive 1st person form *kə-* (180). Every so often a nugget of cultural information is offered: "Lycanthropy³⁰ survives amongst the Ao in some villages, despite the influence of Christianity" (14); "A convention in Mongsen folklore stories is for all animals to be personified as having feminine gender" (135);³¹ the accursedness of untimely deaths, so that "May you accidentally die!" is the worst of curses (404).³²

No review would be complete without a cavil or two, though it is hard to find anything to complain about:

- The /r/ phoneme is written throughout as "r". Since there are no other varieties of *r*, why not just write it as "r"?
- It is claimed that declarative clauses may be specified for "absolute tense", a grammatical development ascribed to a development from "simple mood marking", where *realis* verbs were unmarked and *irrealis* verbs were marked (344). That explains why Ao has a typologically rare unmarked past tense. (ARC cites all verb-roots in this form.) This newer tense system has an unmarked past, a present marker derived from the agentive nominalizer, and an "immediate future" used with 1st person verbs where the speaker possesses "the epistemic authority to assert that an event is imminent". I would not call this an "absolute future", but rather an intentional or hortatory notion like 'intended action of the 1st person', as conveyed by the Lahu particle *šā* (Matisoff 1973: 352).³³

A Grammar of Mongsen Ao is beautiful in appearance, with expertly formatted interlinear glosses, and is virtually typo-free. It now takes its place as one of the best Tibeto-Burman grammars to date, ranking with Chelliah (1997) and Burling (2004) as a model for the description of the TB languages of northeast India.

³⁰ I.e., the metamorphosis of a human into animal form, like a *wer(e)wolf*.

³¹ One wonders how to translate a story like *The Three Bears*!

³² The Lahu have an identical attitude toward such deaths, referring to them as *šī mâ dâ?* 'dying badly'. Curses are of course of great interest cross-culturally. Among the Akha the deadliest insult used to be to call someone "Twin!", since multiple births were considered animalian, and grounds for punishing the unfortunate parents.

³³ As a final cavil, I will not mention that my Lahu dictionary is listed twice in the *References* (513), as having been published both in 1988 and 1998. The 1988 reference is correct, but it was #111 (not #11) in the UCPL series.

It seems to me that the time has come for somebody to develop a detailed *Lingua*-type questionnaire tailored to Tibeto-Burman, including dozens of items like the following:

- Does your language have deictic height distinctions in demonstratives?
- Does it exploit tonal distinctions in pronouns?
- Does it use the verb ‘die’ as an intensifier?
- Does it have verbs-with-tied-noun?
- Can relative clauses occur both before and after their heads?
- Does it use a nominalizer in the citation form for verbs?
- Does it permit sentential (non-embedded) nominalizations?

ABBREVIATIONS

PLB	Proto-Lolo-Burmese
PST	Proto-Sino-Tibetan
PTB	Proto-Tibeto-Burman
STC	from Benedict 1972 <i>Sino-Tibetan: a Conspectus</i>

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