

## PERSON MARKING IN TIWA

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**Abstract:** Person marking in Tiwa has been described as obligatory verbal inflection with values for all person categories. This is not the case; the only true verbal person marker indexes 1SG subjects, as is clearly demonstrated in this paper. The misconstrual of Tiwa person marking raises interesting and important methodological issues in both data collection and in analysis.

**Keywords:** agreement, person marking, pronominal, Tiwa, Bodo-Garo, analysis, Tibeto-Burman

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Tiwa is a Bodo-Garo language spoken primarily in the far west of Karbi Anglong, Assam, with several hundred speakers on the other side of the Assam-Meghalaya border. These speakers are almost entirely Hills Tiwas, residing in villages interspersed among other tribes in the Karbi hills.<sup>1</sup> The language is relatively undescribed in the published literature. Apart from appearing in surveys of the area (e.g. Van Driem 2001; Wood 2008; Burling 2003), the only works dealing with the structure of the language are Balawan 1975, Jacquesson 2001 and Burling & Joseph 2001. Jacquesson (2001) makes certain claims about the verbal agreement system, claims which disagree with Balawan 1975 and are also at odds with the Tiwa data I have collected (in the villages of Umswai). This paper presents a detailed explication of verbal person marking in Tiwa, with reference to certain methodological arguments that are important in investigating such a phenomenon. I will show that person marking in Tiwa is best described following Balawan 1975, and not Jacquesson 2001.

### 2. BACKGROUND: TIWA MORPHOSYNTAX

Tiwa is a more or less typical Bodo-Garo language – heavily dependent marking, with agglutinative suffixing morphology, accusative alignment patterns and a basic SOV word order (Wood 2008: 6–7). Sentences illustrating many of these

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<sup>1</sup> The ethnic group Tiwa is not equivalent to the set of dominant speakers of the Tiwa language. The Plains Tiwa have adopted Assamese as their dominant language to the point that they have even adopted Assamese patronymics. The Hills Tiwa, meanwhile, have retained their traditional clan system and speak Tiwa to the extent that pre-school aged children are monolingual in this language. During my time in the area, I met several ethnic Tiwa from plains areas who were, while aware of their heritage, completely unable to speak Tiwa.

features are shown in (1) and (2).<sup>2</sup> Both examples show SOV word order, with accusative and instrumental case marking in (1) and dative in (2). Tense-aspect is suffixed on the verb. The case markers are typical of Bodo-Garo, with the accusative *-go* cognate with other Bodo-Garo accusatives, such as Garo /-ko/, and the dative *-(n)a* cognate with other Bodo-Garo datives (Wood 2008: 50). Sentence (2) also shows how readily overt arguments are omitted, if they can be inferred from context, a feature common to Tibeto-Burman languages, and indeed many other languages around the world (e.g. Dryer 2011).

- (1) Pe khorla tap-re libíng-go marê-ga.  
 3SG young.woman knife-INSTR person-ACC kill-PST  
 ‘That girl killed/has killed the man with the knife.’<sup>3</sup>
- (2) Khonána, hat-a lí-w.  
 tomorrow market-DAT go-NPST  
 ‘Tomorrow, (I) will go to market.’

Tiwa also has a wide range of suffixes which serve various pragmatic functions, for both nouns and verbs. Sentence (3) illustrates the contrastive identity focus marker *-do*, and sentence (4) the certainty marker *-bo*. These suffixes follow case marking or verbal inflection.

- (3) Pe-do mai chá-ga.<sup>4</sup>  
 3SG-IDENT.FOCUS rice eat-PST  
 ‘He ate rice (and no one else).’
- (4) Sa núng-o-bo!  
 tea drink-NPST-CERTAIN  
 ‘(I) will definitely drink tea!’

The pronouns of Tiwa are given in Table 1. The pronouns can be used as subjects without further marking, and for other functions must take the case marking normally found with other nominals (e.g. *-go* ‘accusative’, *-na* ‘dative’).<sup>5</sup> The form of the pronouns is particularly relevant in light of Jacquesson's claims

<sup>2</sup> Examples here are given using the orthography developed primarily by Balawan (1975, 1982) and later Joseph (dictionary forthcoming). The spelling is basically phonetic (not phonemic), with the following deviations from IPA norms: <ng> for [ŋ], <sh> for [ʃ] and <ch> for [tʃ]. Aspirated stops are shown with a following <h>. Tone is marked with ´ for H on the syllable to which it is assigned, and ^ for HL; tone spreads left to right. Monosyllabic words and roots with HL tone are unmarked.

<sup>3</sup> Sentences (1) and (18–30) were elicited. All other sentences given here occurred in either natural conversation or in recorded texts. Those from the texts should be obvious – just look for mention of tigers and kings.

<sup>4</sup> The absence of accusative case marking on *mai* is consistent with P-marking within Tiwa – non-human, indefinite nouns do not take accusative case.

<sup>5</sup> Some of the forms of the other case marked pronouns vary slightly. For example, 2SG-DAT is *nága*, not \**nána*.

that verbal agreement affixes have developed from these forms (we return to this in Section 4).

<i>Person</i>	<i>Singular</i>	<i>Plural</i>
1	ang	ching
2	ná	nabúr
3	pe	pibúr

Table 1. Free pronouns in Tiwa

Like other Bodo-Garo languages, the canonical word order in Tiwa is SOV. During elicitation sessions this word order is invariable, unless an alternative is specifically sought. Similarly, in what little written material exists in the language, SOV is the only attested word order. Nevertheless, during conversation and spoken narrative, the word order patterns are highly variable. One of the most notable deviations from SOV is the postposing of the subject, yielding an (overtly) OVS clause. Such variations are used for varying pragmatic effects (see, e.g. Herring & Paolillo 1995, the papers in Rebuschi & Tuller 1999, and many others for discussion of the pragmatics of word order). We should note in particular that where a pronoun is postposed a sarcastic meaning is often implied.<sup>6</sup>

- (5) Ang lí-w.  
1SG go-NPST  
'I'll go.'
- (6) Lí-w ang.  
go-NPST 1SG  
'Sure, I'll go.' (speaker does not intend to go)
- (7) Tingri-go-se shos lán-ga-bo pe mishá.  
cage-ACC-only pull take-PST-CERTAIN DEM tiger  
'The tiger pulled only **the cage** (without me in it) away.'

One innovation which sets Tiwa apart from other Bodo-Garo languages is the indexing of 1SG subjects on verbal predicates. The data which I present is based on fieldwork conducted in and around five villages in Umswai and the surrounding regions in Karbi Anglong, close to the Meghalaya border. These villages are all purely Tiwa speaking, and all the informants acquired this language monolingually.<sup>7</sup>

Before giving an account of verbal person marking in Tiwa, I will first summarise what Jacquesson claims. Jacquesson's main argument is that "personal pronouns are used as agreement suffixes" (2001: 117). He provides two tables of

<sup>6</sup> This does not extend to other sorts of noun phrases.

<sup>7</sup> This is not to claim that the people of Umswai are monolingual. Tiwa has been in contact for several centuries with surrounding Tibeto-Burman and Austroasiatic languages as well as with Assamese. The effects of these contact situations can be seen through extensive loans, not all of which are purely content lexemes. The numeral system, for example, was borrowed from Assamese, as well as the postposition /phána/ 'from'.

the paradigm based on data collected in two villages near Sonapur. The agreement suffixes given in the table are variable, as he notes, between the speakers, but they are also variable between different verbs.

<i>Person</i>	<i>Speaker 1</i>	<i>Speaker 2</i>
1	-ang	-ng
2	-na	-nga ~ -na
3		(-me)

Table 2. Agreement suffixes (Jacquesson 2001)

Jacquesson also states that the agreement “looks compulsory” (2001: 118).

### 3. VERBAL PERSON MARKING

The verbal person marking system in Tiwa consists entirely of the optional indexing of 1SG subjects on verbs with the suffix *-ng*. As with other Tibeto-Burman languages, it is a rare sentence in spoken Tiwa that sees the expression of all the arguments of a verb with full noun phrases, even in the absence of any person marking (see example 2 above). With this in mind, it is perhaps not surprising that the converse is also true – Tiwa speakers rarely index 1SG on the verb when there is an overt 1SG pronoun. Nevertheless, this sort of double marking of the 1SG subject is attested – usually in a longer clause, shown in sentence (8).

- (8) Ang raja-ne krai-jing sai-sai phal-a lán-ga-ng.  
 1SG king-GEN village-ALL little-REDUP sell-INF take-PST-1SG  
 ‘I sold a little to the king’s village.’

Sentence (9) shows the most basic form of the clause ‘I ate rice’, where all arguments are overtly expressed and the verb shows no verbal agreement. Sentence (10) shows 1SG subject marking, and the omission of the overt pronoun.<sup>8</sup>

- (9) Ang mai chá-ga.  
 1SG rice eat-PST  
 ‘I ate/have eaten (rice).’

- (10) Mai chá-ga-ng.  
 rice eat-PST-1SG  
 ‘I ate/have eaten (rice).’

<sup>8</sup> Despite his claim to the contrary, Jacquesson’s data shows the optionality of the agreement suffixing. In giving examples of patient pronouns taking the accusative marker *-go*, he provides examples such as (1), which clearly lack agreement suffixing on the verb.

(1) aŋ pe-go nuj-dō  
 1SG 3SG-ACC see-IMPV (glossing mine - VD)  
 ‘I see him.’

Sentence (11) is grammatical but uncommon, with the subject expressed both overtly and through verbal person marking. Sentence (12) shows the complete omission of an overt subject. Instead, the identity of the subject is inferred from context. All four of these possibilities are grammatical, and all four are attested in spontaneous speech (though not with equal frequency, as I have noted).

(11) Ang    mai    chá-ga-ng.  
       1SG    rice    eat-PST-1SG  
       ‘I ate/have eaten (rice).’

(12) Mai    chá-ga.  
       rice    eat-PST  
       ‘(I) ate/have eaten (rice).’

Sentence (13) shows that the grammaticality or occurrence of the person marking is not dependent on an agentive semantic role for the subject.

(13) Ko-ga-ng.  
       fall-PST-1SG  
       ‘I fell/have fallen.’

When the verb ends in a consonant other than *w*, which is relatively infrequent, the person suffix acquires an epenthetic vowel, *a*, and so surfaces as *-ang*. The reader will note, comparing with Table 1, that this is identical to the free form of the first person singular pronoun.

(14) Phi-do-m-ang.                    (< /phi-do-m-ng/)  
       come-IMPFV-PST-1SG  
       ‘I came (yesterday, last week, etc.).’

With different intonation, the same string of phonemes that we find in (14) could be interpreted as a post-posed free pronoun, shown in (15), following the principles of word order variation that we have already discussed (see example [6] above).

(15) Phi-do-m,                    ang.  
       come-IMPFV-PST    1SG  
       ‘*Sure*, I came (yesterday, last week, etc.).’

When the verb form ends in the consonant *w*, the glide is omitted so that the structure of the word fits the phonotactic possibilities of Tiwa (the maximal syllable is CCVC, with *w* treated as a C in codas), as in (16). This last variation especially provides evidence for this 1SG indexing as part of the verb, as such consonant clusters are allowed across word boundaries. That is, the deletion of the *w* in (16) demonstrates that the string of phonemes is one phonological word, especially since *ng* cannot exist as a word on its own in Tiwa.

- (16) Lí-ng.                    (< /lí-w-ng/)  
       go-1SG                    go-NPST-1SG  
       ‘I will go.’

Further evidence showing that *-ng* is suffixed is that it can be followed by the verbal pragmatic suffixes, such as the definite marker *-bo*, as in (17).

- (17) Lí-ga-ng-bo!  
       go-PST-1SG-CERTAIN  
       ‘I definitely went!’

Speakers have neither been attested producing a version of (17) with the person suffix following the definite marker, nor would they accept a reordering to the effect of *\*lí-ga-bo-ng* when I proposed it. Clearly the 1SG *-ng* is suffixed to the verb, and is the final suffix that can occur before the definite suffix *-bo* is attached. Additionally, the suffix *-bo* only applies after all verbal affixation.

This summarises the synchronic situation of person marking in Tiwa. Given the form of the suffix, it seems likely that it was historically derived from the 1SG pronoun *ang*, as Jacquesson proposes (2001: 117). This suffix has been around as long as any of my informants can remember, and is documented by the French missionary priest Father Balawan, writing in 1975 but relating his experience of the previous four decades:

[I]t is the first person singular which is sometimes different from the others, and this occurs, not only in the Present Tense, but in all the Tenses... The personal pronoun *ang* is repeated after the verb, and united to it by contraction... (1975: 33)

Although the evidence presented above supports Jacquesson’s view that the suffix has developed from the free pronoun, I would like to note here that I am in no way weighing into the debate concerning the origins of Tibeto-Burman agreement suffixes. While this process in Tiwa may appear to support LaPolla’s (1992) view that all agreement in Tibeto-Burman languages evolved independently, I am not convinced this is the case. It could be that the agreement markers reconstructed for Proto-Tibeto-Burman (Bauman 1974; DeLancey 1989; van Driem 1993) were lost in an earlier stage of the language’s history, and are only now redeveloping. The two are not mutually exclusive.

#### 4. POSTVERBAL SUBJECTS AND THE ILLUSION OF AGREEMENT

Sentences with an OVS order are perhaps the root of the mistaken assumption that Tiwa possesses agreement suffixes for *all* the person-number categories. As discussed above, the most convincing evidence of why there are no agreement suffixes (other than for 1SG subjects) is the ordering of the pragmatic suffixes. Under no circumstances can any of the other pronouns (or larger NPs) precede pragmatic verbal suffixes. This clearly illustrates that these are not agreement suffixes. This is true of every pronoun, as demonstrated by the sentences (18–30).

Sentence (19) shows the true 1SG agreement suffix preceding the certainty suffix *-bo*, in contrast to a free pronoun in (20), which is ungrammatical in this position.

(18) Lí-ga-bo            ang.  
go-PST-CERTAIN 1SG  
'I went.'

(19) Lí-ga-ng-bo.  
go-PST-1SG-CERTAIN

(20) \*Lí-ga-ang-bo

Sentences (21–29) show that the non-1SG pronominals must all follow the pattern seen in (18) and (20): they follow the certainty suffix, and cannot precede it.

(21) Lí-ga-bo            ná.  
go-PST-CERTAIN 2SG  
'You went.'

(22) \*Lí-ga-ná-bo

(23) Lí-ga-bo            pe.  
go-PST-CERTAIN 3SG  
'(S)he went.'

(24) \*Lí-ga-pe-bo

(25) Lí-ga-bo            ching.  
go-PST-CERTAIN 1PL  
'We went.'

(26) \*Lí-ga-ching-bo

(27) Lí-ga-bo            nabúr.  
go-PST-CERTAIN 2PL  
'You (PL) went.'

(28) \*Lí-ga-nabúr-bo

(29) Lí-ga-bo            pibúr.  
go-PST-CERTAIN 3PL  
'They went.'

(30) \*Lí-ga-pibúr-bo

The phonological similarity between 1SG *-ng* and the free pronoun *ang* could give the impression that the pronoun is suffixed, with the eliding of the vowel. This is not true of all the pronouns, however, as examples (21–30) clearly demonstrate; they remain free pronouns. Even aside from these convincing ordering restrictions, describing the data Jacquesson collected as “agreement” without further qualification was perhaps never the best analysis. The whole notion of agreement vs. pronominal affix has long been a point of tension among different authors (see, e.g. Bresnan & Mchombo 1987, Siewierska 2004, Corbett 2006: 100, and many others before and since). When, in cases such as Tiwa, the markers have clearly developed from, or even are in the process of developing from, free pronouns, it is important to consider alternate possibilities.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Several methodological points can be drawn from the investigation of verbal agreement suffixation and subject postposing in Tiwa, and the confusion of one for the other. The first is that it is imperative that data be elicited from dominant speakers of the language. Where no such speakers exist, it is arguable that second

language speaker data is better than no data, but pronouncements about a language as a whole based on the speech of these non-native speakers is not representative of the speech of fluent Tiwa community members. Any study done on their language should be specified as such. We all know that different varieties of large languages such as English (American, Australian, British, Canadian, etc.) have different phonologies and different grammars, while sharing similarities. How much greater the variation is when we consider non-native varieties of English. In the case of the Tiwa provided by those living on the plains, it is clear that it is a contact variety between Tiwa and Assamese.

Secondly, when investigating such phenomena, it is essential that context also be elicited. Languages are not spoken in verbal paradigms, and should not be treated as such in elicitation. Furthermore, interaction between speakers, where obtainable, is an invaluable source of information regarding the variation and pragmatics of the language.

Finally, on a more formal note, it is important that all morphemes and lexemes be tested in several environments before deciding on a final analysis. In the case of Tiwa, a simple test with the ordering of suffixes shows that the only person marking on verbs is for 1SG subjects, and that other postverbal pronouns are, in fact, postverbal pronouns. Just because a pronominal form referring to a subject follows a verb (in an SOV language) does not mean that it is (pronominal) agreement.

### ABBREVIATIONS

ACC	accusative	IMPFV	imperfective
ALL	allative	INSTR	instrumental
CERTAIN	certainty	GEN	genitive
IDENT.FOCUS	contrastive identity focus	NPST	nonpast
DAT	dative	PL	plural
DEM	demonstrative	PST	past
INF	infinitive	REDUP	reduplication
		SG	singular

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