

THE GRAMMAR OF SIMPLE CLAUSES IN MIZO

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1. INTRODUCTION¹

Mizo, formerly known as Lushai, is the language of the Indian State of Mizoram in North-East India. It is also spoken in adjacent states such as Manipur and Tripura, and by smaller numbers in Burma and Bangladesh. It is a Tibeto-Burman language, in the Central subgroup of the Kukish or Kuki-Chin branch.

While the phonology of Lushai has been extensively studied, the morphology and syntax are less well described. Studies by Henderson (1948), Burling (1957), Bright (1957), Weidert (1975) and Chhangte (1985, 1986) have dealt with some aspects of phonology, but more work, especially on the current sociolinguistic situation, remains to be done.

The transcription used here and the analysis that it is based on are described in detail in Chhangte (1986). Basically it follows the traditional Mizo orthography but adds final glottal stop and tones. There are four tones: mid/low (unmarked), high (1), rising (2) and falling (3). There are phonetic differences in the realisations of these tones depending on syllable type and vowel length.

The dialect described is my own, the standard Southern Duhlian dialect of the Lunglei area.

2. PHRASE STRUCTURE AND MORPHOLOGY

2.1 Introduction

Mizo grammar has received much less attention than phonology. For one, the area is basically inaccessible to foreigners so that fieldwork is virtually impossible. Also, very few, if any, Mizos are trained sufficiently in theoretical linguistics so that non-Mizos attempting to study the language

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have very scant resources. Moreover, since most of the literature about Mizos has been written by foreigners, the available information is not completely reliable either. I will comment on some of these errors and explain why they are unacceptable. I will also clarify some issues in instances where they have not been explained adequately.

In this grammar I will clarify some of the issues relating to Mizo syntax. I will spend a considerable amount of time explaining the mixed ergative system. Before I do that, however, I will briefly survey what has been written about Mizo syntax and comment on its relevance to this paper.

2.1.1 Overview of the literature

The work of the missionaries, Lorrain and Savidge (1898), provides the most thorough and accurate representation of Mizo grammar. All other attempts at describing the language have borrowed heavily from Lorrain and Savidge. The volume is fairly exhaustive and gives several useful examples. In spite of its scholastic excellence, the work suffers from a strong Indo-European bias and other technical shortcomings of that era. For instance, they list several examples of ‘tense’, even though the Mizo examples they give are identical! The other problems are absence of tone markings and inaccurate phonological data. The latter was corrected in a later revision of the dictionary by Lorrain (1940). However, in spite of such flaws, the work of Lorrain and Savidge is a masterpiece of linguistic fieldwork. The technical flaws reflect the shortcomings of the linguistics of that era and not of the linguists themselves.

In addition to Lorrain and Savidge, there were several word lists prepared by British officers such as Lewin (1874) and Shakespear (1921). Most of these are not very accurate as the writers had idiosyncratic ways of transcribing data.

A detailed and extensive volume was written by a Bengali surgeon, Brojo Nath Shaha (1884). This work is well-organised and adequately illustrated. Unfortunately, most of the examples are either grammatically unacceptable or their glosses are wrong and for that reason I do not recommend it as a data source. The writer either did not get native speakers as informants or his interpreter was linguistically incompetent. It is also likely that the writer was influenced by his own language as the examples he gives are what a Mizo would consider ‘Vai Mizo’, that is, a version of Mizo used by Bengalis or Assamese.

Grierson (1904) used most of the above sources in his survey. The section on Tibeto-Burman (TB) languages not only compares the related languages but also gives data. Many of the languages mentioned in the survey, such as Ralte, are now extinct. The texts, though inadequately glossed, were useful in comparing certain grammatical features. For instance, I was interested in the ergative marker and the oblique marker, both of which are present in Mizo. It turns out that the grammatical structure of Hmar is the most similar to that of Mizo, even though it is a more distant relative than some of the other languages. Perhaps this has to do with the close contact these two groups have had.

More recently, Lehman has written several articles on Mizo grammar, many of them in relation to Burmese or Haka (Laai) Chin. Most of my analysis is based on his articles and comments

through personal correspondence. Various articles in the *Linguistics of the Tibeto-Burman Area* series dealing with morphologies of TB languages have also been extremely helpful.

Pedagogical grammars are not very helpful in terms of analysis. They are usually based on the grammar written by Lorrain and Savidge, which, as I have mentioned already, is based on Latin grammar. Nevertheless, they are useful as a source for data, and I have benefitted from the textbooks written by Kiangte (1964) and Remkunga (1977).

2.1.2 Overview of purpose and methodology

The major aim of this paper is to describe the basic syntactic structure of modern Mizo using current linguistic theories. My approach will be typological and I will refer to linguistic universals and not restrict myself to the TB language group. My main aim is to describe the language as the Mizos themselves see it. Some of my assumptions are based on comments people made to me in Mizoram. Furthermore, this being a synchronic study, comparative discussions will be kept to a minimum. I will, however, refer occasionally to Thadou, a member of the northern branch of the Kuki-Chin languages, as I have a fairly good description of its syntax and phonology. Unfortunately, Krishan's (1980) grammar of Thadou, though published recently, was actually written in the early 1970s and does not refer to any current linguistic theory.

This description of Mizo grammar will be comprehensive and it will also try to relate some of the grammatical features to the phonological system. This will be mainly in the area of defining word boundaries. For the moment, I have decided to mark only two grammatical boundaries: morpheme boundaries are indicated by - and word boundaries are marked with a space. My decisions are based on the guidelines given by Hyman (1978) and Zwicky (1985). These boundaries correspond to phonological boundaries as follows: the phonological word corresponds to the grammatical phrase; internal word boundaries in phonology correspond to grammatical word boundaries; morpheme boundaries are the same, though they are much more significant in the grammar than in the phonology. I have not marked the grammatical phrase boundary as it is marked morphologically by the final case markers.

The following sections are an attempt to bring together the works mentioned above, using more recent linguistic tools. I have used terms, such as N', in the manner of Radford (1981) and the categorisations are based roughly on Givón's (1984) typological approach to syntax. Even though this paper will not get into the theoretical details, I will make theoretical assumptions based on current linguistic theories. In particular, the notion of ergativity will be a major consideration of the following sections. In this area I am indebted to Lehman's (1985) and DeLancey's (1981a) discussions of ergativity in TB languages.

2.2 Noun phrase structure

The noun phrase structure of Mizo is fairly complex. The most characteristic feature of the NPs is that they can be demarcated on the left by a *demonstrative pronoun* and on the right by a *case marker* (CM). The obligatory case markers for the NP are preceded by the determiner: plurality markers and locational markers are suffixed on the demonstrative pronoun.

Since every NP must possess a case marker (although the absolutive case is encoded with zero) it is thus not subcategorised for the N'. Moreover, since no constituent may follow the case marker, I assume that a node N'' separates the determiner noun from its case marker.

There are several reasons for this NP structure. First of all, there is no subcategorisation between the case marker and the rest of the NP. Furthermore, the case marker (CM) is obligatory and always comes last, even when there is a full determiner (with case markings). There is also evidence from relative clauses that demonstrates that the CM is on the rest of the NP. Take for instance:

- (1) *nu-laa1 thing2 phur3 in*
 maiden wood carryII ERG
 The wood that the maiden carried ...

In the above example, the CM is over the relativised construction, which is an incorporated object. The above example in its main clause form is:

- (2) *nu-laa1 in thing2 ∅ a phur1*
 maiden ERG wood ABS 3NOM carry
 The maiden carried firewood.

Evidence from phonology also favours the analysis that the CM is a separate word. Take for instance the GLIDE HARDENING RULE² which operates over phonological word boundaries only. The case marker is affected by this rule so that we get:

- (3) //thou + in// → /thou vin/
 fly ERG

Thus, the basic unmodified NP would have a structure

