Some Aspects of Chin Verb Morphology

Edward J. Hillard
University of California, Berkeley

0.0 The verb morphology of several Chin languages displays alternations which are not directly attributable to phonological conditioning. The most significant of these alternations deals with the distribution of verbs according to the phenomena labeled Forms I and II in Tiddim Chin (Henderson, 1965), conditions 'A' and 'C' in Lushai (Lorrain, 1940), and Stems I and II in Sizang (Stern, 1963). Bright (1957) has summarized the phonetic shapes of these alternations. Briefly, these involve changes in vowel quality and quantity, change in tones, and change in syllable closing features, such as change of oral stop to glottal stop, change of velar nasal to dental nasal, change of nasal to homorganic stop, as well as change of open to closed syllable. Since the geographic and linguistic spread of these languages is considerable within the Kukish sub-family of Tibeto-Burman (Tiddim and Lushai, at least, are Northern and Central Chin languages in Saafer's (1955) classification), it may be worthwhile to consider the comparative syntax of these languages as this is reflected in alternations in verbal morphology. This paper presents a preliminary effort at such an investigation. In what follows I have attempted to illustrate comparisons in the syntax of Lushai and Tiddim Chin with particular attention to sentence mood, passivity or reflexivity in nominal constructions, and transitivity in verbs, as these comparisons are exemplified by changes in verb morphology.

1.0 Lorrain (1940; xiii) has the following to say regarding the distribution of verbs and their alternations in Lushai:

When a root verb has only one modification, that root form is used under all 'A' and 'B' conditions...and the modification is used under all 'C' conditions. When, however, a root verb has two modifications, that root form is used under 'A' conditions only, the first modification is used under 'B' conditions, and the second modification under 'C' conditions.

Lorrain's conditions generally group indicative and imperative mood under 'A' and 'B' conditions and infinitive mood, subjunctive mood, passive voice, 'cause', 'purpose', benefactive, and similar situations, under the list of 'C' conditions. Lorrain indicates these conditions in terms of the co-occurrence with the verb of various words and particles which imply or denote the notions above. As such, the major bifurcation involved, that between Lorrain's 'A' and 'B' versus 'C' conditions, is remarkably paralleled by Henderson's (1965; 72)
description of the distribution of verbs in Tiddim Chin in terms of Forms I and II:

Verbs are distinguished from all other classes of words by their formal scatter. All verbs have two alternating forms, dependent upon grammatical context... In the great majority of the verbs recorded one of these forms, hereafter referred to as Form II, can always be predicted from the other, hereafter referred to as Form I. Such verbs may be termed regular. All other verbs are irregular.

The formal scatter of regular verbs is correlated with the phonological structure of the last syllable of Form I.

1.1 In Henderson's description of Tiddim, mood characterizes sentences, phrases, and smaller constructions larger than the word, in the narrative style, the style specifically described in her book. Sentences are characterized as 'conclusive' or 'inconclusive' according to whether they occur with the sentence-final particles, hi or leh, respectively. In the narrative (as opposed to colloquial) style, the 'conclusive'/ 'inconclusive' dichotomy is paralleled by the distinction of indicative versus subjunctive mood. The final predicate phrase of all conclusive (i.e., indicative) sentences contains a verb or verbs in Form I. The final predicate phrase of all inconclusive (subjunctive) sentences contains a verb or verbs in Form II. Phrases may be either subjective, predicative, or adjunctive. Subjective phrases are not characterized by mood. Predicative phrases in all occurrences except as the last phrase of an inconclusive sentence have verbs in Form I. All adjunctive phrases which contain verbs are subjunctive in mood. Verbs in adjunctive phrases, therefore, are always in Form II.

2.0 The first obvious parallel of Lorrain's modifications with Henderson's "formal scatter" is the major split of indicative versus subjunctive, those moods characterizing Henderson's Forms I and II respectively. Thus, in Lushai,

1) ?á hř∫αt\textsuperscript{II} cūn
   he know if
   if he knows

2) ?á hř∫αt\textsuperscript{I}
   he know
   he knows,

reflect characteristic morphological changes involved between the subjunctive and the indicative moods. The verb undergoes a change of open to closed syllable with a concomitant tonal change of low-rising ("') to high-falling (''). (Superscribed roman numerals indicate verb
form throughout the paper.)

2.1 In Tiddim, the following colloquial style sentences illustrate indicative versus subjunctive moods where the subjunctive construction expresses the notion of benefaction:

Indicative,
3) sá a goI hi animal kill sp ppf
   he killed an animal, e.g., for a feast

Subjunctive,
4) sá a gawII hi
   he killed an animal for me.

3.0 The second parallel of verb alternation behavior between Tiddim and Lushai concerns verbal notions in nominal phrases, in particular subject noun phrases in passive and reflexive sentences. Lorrain and Savidge (1898; 26) note:

...care must be taken in the pronunciation of the verb in the passive voice, as a slight difference in pronunciation may change the meaning from passive to active.

They provide the following examples:

5) saap velII ka ni sahib hit ppf sp I am hit by the sahib;
6) mizo huatII ka ni Lush. hate ppf sp I am hated by the Lushais;
7) tual, tha?II a ni (?) kill ppf sp He was murdered;

versus

8) saap veelI ka ni I hit the sahib;
9) mizo hua?I ka ni I hate the Lushais;
10) tual thatI a ni He was a murderer (had murdered).

Bright (1957; 102) observes that his informant rejected these examples, preferring, instead:

11) saap in mi veel The sahib hit me;
12) saap ka veel I hit the sahib;
in which a seemingly agentive particle, -in, adds a definitely ergative coloring to the construction, contrasting to the use of passive versus active verb forms in Lorrain's and Savidge's examples. It is worth noting at this point that Tiddim utilizes a particle, -in, which strongly marks the agent. We can say that it is possible both languages are drifting (as I understand this concept in Sapir (1921, Chapter VII)) toward ergative constructions from stative-active type constructions. It is intriguing to consider in the light of evidence from Stern (1963) and Höffler (1973) that this may be a trend to be found in the Chin languages as a group.

3.1 A further illustration of the grammatical distribution of Form I and II verbs is evident in constructions with the verbal prefix, ki-, in Tiddim Chin. Ki- calls for a reflexive or passive translation in English when it occurs preceding an indicative (Form I) verb:

13) ki ɪtʰi ni vpf love sp let us love one another

14) a ki cì pó hi vpf say sp it is called

15) ka ki sāi kha vpf hit (?) I hit myself by mistake

16) amau gel a ki ɪtʰi they... one vpf vpf love another

uh hi
psf sp

When ki- occurs with a following subjunctive (Form II) verb, the sense is benefactive:

17) sial ki goʰi pen mithan vpf kill sp the mithan that was killed

18) hausapa sial a headman ppf ki gawʰi hi vpf kill sp the mithan that was killed for the headman.

3.2 In nominal construction with verbal forms, when the verbal forms refer to some recent change of state in the noun referent, the verbal forms are in Form II:

19) lo pʰ khawʰi khìatʰi grass weeded-out
sa te already sp grass