The pragmatic word ordering in Bouyei

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1. Introduction

The Bouyei people are also known by the names pu⁴⁴jai⁴⁴, pu⁴⁴ji⁴⁴, or pu⁴⁴joi⁴⁴. Yay [jei] is the most frequently used antonym of the Bouyei (Synder 1995). In Thailand Bouyei are known by the name Tai Diao (Tai Yoi) which refers to the Bouyei people residing in Vietnam.

The Bouyei language belongs to the northern group of the Tai language family (Li 1960). It is spoken by a Tai ethnic group with a population of more than 2,500,000. In China the Bouyei people live in the south, the southwest, and the central parts of Guizhou Province; seventy percent of the total Bouyei population live in Qiannan and Qianxinan prefectures (Snyder 1995). A small number of Bouyei also live in Yunnan and Sichuan, China, and in the mountainous areas of northern Vietnam (Zhou et al. forthcoming).

The variety of Bouyei language used in this study is called Niuchang¹ Bouyei, which is spoken in a town of Zhenfeng county, Guizhou Province. The data were drawn from Bouyei-Thai-Chinese-English Dictionary (Zhou et al. forthcoming) and Kam-Tai Oral Literatures (Somsonge et al. 1998).

This paper presents the word order variation of Bouyei language in comparison with Thai, its genetically related language, and Chinese, the language which is used along with the Bouyei language. It supports the claim made by other cross-
linguistic studies that the semantic and pragmatic relations, i.e.,
the information structure, are primarily the main determinants
of word order variation rather than grammatical relations such
as subject, direct object, and indirect object.

2. Canonical word order of the clause

As pointed out by Hawkins (1983:19-20), Greenberg’s
seminal paper “Some Universals of Grammar with Particular
Reference to the Order of Meaningful Elements” (1966) has
had a considerable impact on all subsequent work on word
order universals. Greenberg proposed three universal word
order types viz., VSO, SVO, and SOV, and argued that these
different verb positions correlate in a principled way with other
properties, such as languages with dominant VSO order are
always prepositional. Along this main stream, Lehmann
(1978:6) distinguished between two types of languages, VO
and OV with VSO and SVO as the subtypes of the VO type.
This typological analysis is based on the syntactic constructions
in which the verb with regard to its object is most fundamental.

Based on the Theory of Word Order Universals posited
by Greenberg and statistical count of occurrences, Bouyei
seems to fit the subject-verb-object (SVO) type of language like
its cousin language, Thai. However, either decontextualized
isolated clauses as found in the Bouyei-Thai-Chinese
Dictionary or contextualized clauses in the Kam-Tai Oral
Literatures have other word order patterns, such as the
predominant variation SOV, as well. The word order in Bouyei
seems to be flexible and hence, according to Givón (1984:188),
the Bouyei language can be classified as a flexible word order
language in contrast to the rigid one.

Whether Bouyei is regarded as a SVO or SOV
language, it has the features associated with both types of order
according to Greenberg’s typological scheme. For example a
certain adverbial may follow a verb featuring the SVO and
frequently another adverbial precedes its head, which is an SOV
concomitant. The SOV features found in the Bouyei language are listed with examples as follows:

1. SOV clauses occur:

(1) \( \delta u m^2 \ pa^4 \ nau^2 \delta a:n^2 \ tu^2 \)
wind     PREP   roof     all
\( ku:at^2 \ pin^3 \theta ian^1 \ leu^4 \)
blow      upside down already
'The wind has turned the roof upside down.'

2. Certain adverbials precede the verbs:

(2) \( k e n^6 \ k u^2 \ su^2 \ tu^2 \ to^1 \ w u n^2 \)
corn cob   easy   light more firewood
'Corncobs are easier to burn than firewood.'

3. Aspect markers follow the verb:

(3) \( k u^1 \ k u^6 \gamma o y^1 \ \tau a i^1 \ k a:n^6 \)
I      work     in process
'I am working.'

(4) \( k u^1 \ \gamma a m^6 \gamma a:n^5 \ \gamma d a i^4 \ \gamma a n^1 \ k u a^5 \ t e^1 \)
I      night before last get see ever him
'I saw him the night before last night.'

4. Prepositional phrases precede the verbs:
   (except temporal and locational phrases as discussed below)

   The preverbal prepositional phrases are mostly the source or the point of departure of a path (5), beneficiary (6), and accompaniment (7).

(5) \( t e^1 \ l u y^3 \ t a i^5 \ m u i^4 k u e^2 \ t a:u^1 m a^1 \)
he      just  from America come back
'He has just come back from America.'
(6) ?au¹ pa³mai⁴ ma¹ ku¹ take the end of the thread come I
lay¹ mun⁷ ta:m⁵ for you tie
‘Let me tie the thread for you.’

(7) ñuan²so⁶ ku¹ ta:n¹tu² ñiaŋ²
tomorrow I alone with
mun⁷ ka:ŋ³
you talk
‘I will talk to you alone tomorrow.’

The locational and temporal positions of the clauses, whether expressed by prepositional phrases or not may be preverbal or postverbal depending on the pragmatic and semantic factors.

The locational and temporal expressions which serve as a setting of the following events in a discourse are in the initial clause position (preverbal) as in example (8).

(8) mai⁶sau⁴ ña:m²po¹ ni⁴ su⁴ before mountain pass this often
pan² pu⁴ ŋ dip⁷
has bandit
‘There were bandits in the mountain pass before.’

The locational expression which is the predicate argument indicating the location of action is preverbal (9-10) and is usually introduced by the preposition ?ju⁵ ‘in’ and the directional verbs pai¹ ‘to go’ and ma¹ ‘to come’ whereas the one which signals the location of the participant or object is postverbal (11).