A Grammar of Mongsen Ao

By Alec R. Coupe
(Mouton Grammar Library 39)
Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter 2007
ISBN 978-3-11-019088-5
xxiii + 526 pages

Review by Shobhana L. Chelliah

A Grammar of Mongsen Ao is a revised and updated version of Alec R. Coupe's doctoral dissertation submitted to La Trobe University in 2003. Taking into consideration intra village variation, Coupe focuses in this grammar on Mongsen Ao spoken by approximately 2000 speakers from 441 households in one village in the Mokokchung district of Nagaland. He provides notes throughout the grammar on other Mongsen varieties.

Ao is one of the approximately 20 indigenous languages of Nagaland spoken in around fifty villages in northwestern area of the state. Comprised of the prestige dialect Chungli (50% of speakers), Mongsen (40% of speakers) and other smaller dialects (10% percent), Ao is clearly Tibeto-Burman. Coupe avoids further sub group classification, drawing back from a previous labeling of Ao as Naga (Coupe 1998), on the grounds that the Naga classification has only truly been established for languages of the Bodo-Konyak-Jinghpaw branch. With 170,000 speakers, the Ao belong to the dominant tribe of Nagaland and perhaps because of this do not feel that their language is threatened. There are some signs of concern, however, because while in rural village areas Ao has not been affected by the ubiquitous Nagamese, and even young children are monolingual in Ao, speakers in rural and urban areas have difficulty understanding and translating archaic poetry and song.

Coupe's excellent grammar of *Mongen Ao* is based on extensive onsite participant observer fieldwork and a large varied corpus which includes forty naturally occurring texts and elicitation based on those texts from a variety of consultants that Coupe worked with in Australia, Nagaland and Shillong (Meghalya State, India). Most useful is the data from personal interactions between the author and speakers: spontaneous conversations, corrections of the speaker's attempts at speaking Ao, and overheard conversations.

Examples used this grammar never feel contrived or strangely similar to English or Assamese! Coupe meticulously notes his data sources for each example, a practice which should be required for all linguistic writing.

Organization and presentation

A Grammar of Mongsen Ao has eleven chapters: 1.Introduction, 2. Phonology and phonological processes, 3. Prosody, 4. Word classes, 5. Clause structure and grammatical functions, 6. The noun phrase, relative clauses and nominalizations, 7. Nominal Morphology, 8. Verbs and verbal morphology, 9. Verbless, copula and existential clauses, 10. Imperatives, and 11. Clause combining. Also included are four texts with interlinear analysis, the first of which includes a word for word equivalency in the Chungli dialect. This is followed by an English-Mongsen Ao glossary comprised of the words used in the grammar with related Proto Tibeto-Burman forms where possible. The organization of the glossary by semantic field frustrates cursory word formation analysis since related words are separated (e.g.' bamboo' and 'bamboo sap' are listed under plants; 'bamboo wall' and 'bamboo cup' under cultural artifacts). The front matter includes a list of standard abbreviations, maps of Northeast India as well as a sketch map of the Ao country indicating Mongsen and Changli villages.

Coupe's grammatical explanations are supported mini typological lessons before many discussions, presented in straightforward prose, making this grammar accessible to readers of all levels. Other features that make Coupe's grammar a pleasant reading experience are the thirty-one Tables, twenty-five Figures and carefully selected morphologically analyzed examples.

Content and analysis

We now turn to the treatment of particular topics in this grammar where all the expected major structures are covered but the description is more extensive for some constructions than others (e.g. twenty-one pages on imperatives versus about six pages on interrogatives). A useful summary of each chapter is given in section 1.3.

Phonology and Prosody

Chapter 2 is a description of Ao phonology based primarily on the Mangmetong Mongsen dialect which has a simple five vowel system: high front, mid central, high back,

and a low central vowel which contrasts in a limited number of environments with a low central creaky vowel. Waromung and Khar Mongsen have an additional high central rounded vowel /ʉ/ which often corresponds with Mangmetong /i/: all the grammatical morphemes in Mongsen with /i/, occur with /ʉ/ in Waromung and Khar. This correspondence can be seen with some lexical items as well which Coupe hypothesizes may indicate a sound change in progress.

Mongsen exhibits a contrast between aspirated and unaspirated stops and affricates: in particular, contrasts exist between voiceless aspirated and unaspirated labial, dental, and velar stops; and voiceless unaspirated and aspirated dental and palatal/paleto-alveolar affricates. Mangmetong also has a voiceless and voiced dental fricative and the voiceless glottal fricative [h]. While not true for all dialects, Coupe instrumentally establishes that Mangmetong Mongsen and four other village varieties exhibit both voiced and voiceless sonorants: these are the bilabial, dental and velar nasals; dental lateral; and bilabial, post-alveolar, and palatal approximants. Coupe's careful methodology, seen also in Coupe (2003), allow him to revisit Marrison's 1967 classification of the so called Naga languages which uses the presence of voiceless liquids and nasals as a diagnostic for subgrouping. This chapter illustrates that fieldwork, careful transcription, a good ear, observation of dialect variation, and instrumental study are needed for accurate language reconstruction.

In Chapter 3, Coupe describes the tone and intonational patterns of Mongsen. He finds three contrastive pitch levels, high, mid, and low which mainly mark lexical tone, although there are some grammatical morphemes with underlying tone as well (e.g. the nominalizer *–pà*). In general, the tone of the stem is spread to an affix but the resulting tones from morpheme concatenation of suffixes is less predictable than for prefixes and maybe based on stem class variation. Similarly, more work needs to be done on sandhi across words or in compounds. This chapter also provides typical intonational contours, with waveform and Fo traces, associated, for example, with major speech acts (e.g. self-introductions) or common constituents (e.g. clause with converb).

Word classes

Chapter 4 includes open and closed word classes which are differentiated on the basis of formal criteria: verbs; nouns; pronouns; nominal modifiers; time words; adverbs; discourse connectives; phrasal conjunction; interjections; and particles and clitics. Like

other TB languages Mongsen does not have a separate adjective class but rather derives adjectives from stative verbs.

Section 4.2. systematically describes pronouns (personal, possessive, demonstrative, interrogative, indefinite, and generic). Mongsen personal pronouns include a dual inclusive (1st) and exclusive (1st ,2nd ,3rd) and plural inclusive (1st) and exclusive (1st ,2nd ,3rd). As in other Tibeto-Burman languages, there is a syncretism between the personal and possessive pronouns. Relational nouns (kinship terms, body parts) and non relational nouns (cultural artefacts) have citation forms with different prefixes (e.g. *tə-puk* 'stomach' (RL -stomach); *á-hlú-* 'field' (NRL -field). In possessive forms, the prefix may be deleted in first and second person with no difference in meaning: *a-mi?-puk* (NRL -person-stomach)~ *a-mi? tə-puk* (NRL -person RL stomach) 'a person's stomach) and *nì á-hlú* (1SG NRL-field)~*kə-á-hlú* (1SG. POSS NRL-field) ~*kə-hlú* (1SG. POSS-field) 'my field'. As in many parts of this grammar, Coupe points out age graded variation: while older speakers can indicate the possessive of 'my field' or 'my stomach' with without the personal pronoun, speakers forty or younger do not use the form with the 1st person singular *nì*. Another example of age related variation is the acceptance of the third person singular pronoun for nonhuman entities by older speakers, a usage which is rejected by younger speakers. Coupe's sizable consultant base allows him to make such observations and allows for accurate grammatical generalizations.

Section 4.2. includes a discussion of nominal deictics (emphatic, proximate, distal, anaphoric). Interestingly, as in Meithei, the proximate nominal demonstrative is used to introduce new referents; subsequent mentions of the referent are marked by the distal which functions like the English definite article 'the'. Such information packaging strategies are notoriously difficult to unravel and can only be accomplished through examination of a rich database and a strong knowledge of pragmatics.

In the numeral system, we find that the non-realational prefix *a-* occurs with numerals one, two, and three and *ph-* for four and five (113-114). The numeral formation in the teens and higher compound number is decimal: thus 11 is 10 +1 and 72 is 70 +8 (115). Data from previous descriptions allows Coupe to discover that while the Ao system was originally an overcounting or subtractive system (16 = 20 not brought 6), as documented in (Clark 1893), the system is replaced by a decimal system in the 1920s under the influence of American Baptist missionaries who felt that the overcounting system would be confusing for students learning addition. (118-119).

The chapter concludes with examples of closed word classes such as adverbs; interjections, exclamations and onomatopoeia expressions; and particles used for direct speech, reported speech, phrasal conjunction, case marking, topic marking, and discourse focus (with meanings such as 'just', 'only', also, yet again.'); and illocutionary force (for assertions, interrogatives, statements of obligation, and the like). While Coupe consistently shows analytic sophistication in naming and describing particles involved in pragmatic and discourse organization, there is non-committal glossing of discourse particles, with at least nine of them glossed PTCL although their meanings range from *wa* 'as I remember it' to *àw?* 'contrary to expectation' (138-140).

Clause Structure and grammatical relations

Ao clause structure is verb final with the possibility of arguments occurring after the predicate only as afterthoughts. In transitive constructions AOV is basic but OAV is possible if O is pragmatically salient; OAV is usually translated as a passive. As in other Tibeto-Burman languages, variable word ordering and free ellipsis of arguments makes it hard to know who did what to whom without context.

Declaratives must be specified for absolute tense and most often occur with a declarative mood clitic *-ù*. There are four question particles that are used to make disjunctive questions, polar questions, and content questions. As far as Coupe can determine the difference between the question particles is subtle enough that consultants 'allow them to be interchanged' (149) without any apparent change in meaning. There probably is a difference in meaning, but here and elsewhere Coupe correctly resists the temptation to solve all such puzzles within this reference grammar, striking an appropriate balance between breadth and depth of coverage.

Imperatives, discussed in detail in Chapter 10, are indicated by three imperative mood affixes: */-aŋ/* 'positive imperative'; */tə̀-/* 'prohibitive'; and */asá?-/* 'admonitive'. Since Coupe has lived with speakers, he is able to give us information of socially acceptable ways to issue commands and which particles indicate urgency, impatience, imploration, or soften a command (403). Register differences are indicated with additional particles that occur with the positive imperative.

This grammar presents one of the most useful treatments of case marking on core arguments in a Tibeto-Burman language published to date. Coupe resists fitting Ao into a recognized alignment system (ergative, accusative, Split-S, or Fluid-S), and treats the

presence or absence of agentive marking as being motivated by semantic and pragmatic factors as seen in other Tibeto-Burman languages such as Burmese (Wheatly 1982), Meithei (Chelliah 2009); Na (Lidz 2008); and Lhasa Tibetan (Tournardre (1991). In Mongsen Ao, the actor of an intransitive verb may be marked by agentive *-nə* to show willfulness or intentionality of action by the actor (160-161). With transitive predicates as well, the agentive only occurs to indicate "willful or socially marked behavior" (159). Coupe's presentation illustrates how textual data on its own cannot reveal the motivation for agentive marking; rather, it was through discussion of personal involvement in a speech situation that the pragmatic factors required in using agentive marking were made clear to him. This shows once again that varied data sources are crucial for adequate description.

Nouns and nominal morphology

Coupe provides a template of noun phrase constituents: a simple, compound or complex head noun can optionally be preceded by a determiner or attribute and can optionally be followed by attribute, quantifier, determiner, and/or case marker. Also possible are discourse particles that mark topic or focus which can occur in three parts of the NP. There is a certain looseness in the discussion that allows for observed tendencies and possibilities in the distribution of these markers (212). The remainder of this section provides a detailed description of nominalizations, especially the relative clause, the majority of which are externally headed or headless. Ao employs six morphemes for nominalization, four of which can occur when the nominal functions as a relative clause.

Parts of chapter 7 repeat and expand on the information on possession from Chapter 4. The word for child has been reanalyzed as a diminutive and occurs productively on animate and inaimate referents (e.g. 272). Numeral morphology is also revisted to describe the morphology of ordinals (suffix the cardinal numeral with *–pu`pa`ʔ*); distributive numerals (reduplicate the final syllable of the numeral); and numeral adverbs. It is always a challenge to organize material in a grammar so that the reader can get a feel for a language's major structures first with details filled in later. Undoubtedly, this can make the exposition repetitive but Coupe handles this well through cross referencing earlier discussions.

Verbs and verbal morphology

Chapter 8 on verbal morphology, the longest chapter in the book (279-355), focuses on the characteristics of verb classes (intransitive and transitive) and morphology. An interesting class of intransitive verbs indicate the path of movement (up, down, across on the same plane) with respect to a central point. Contrast *kəɹa* (ascend + come.PST) 'came up'; *ləɹa* (descend + come.PST) 'came down'; and hi*ɹa* (level + come.PST) 'came across'. Coupe resists analyzing these verbs into their possible morphological basics because speakers don't recognize these forms as morphologically complex even though, as Coupe points, it is likely that they are (*-ɹa* is probably derived from the motion verb ɹà 'come').

Coupe does an excellent job of explaining Ao's complex agglutinative verb morphology which he presents in template form: a prefix slot (taking the prohibitive, admonitive, negative, or nominalizing) is followed by the verb root and nine suffix positions which don't all have to be filled (lexical; reciprocal/collective; directional; aspectual; modality; resultant state; perfective aspect; causative; and negative). There is a striking similarity between the historical derivation of lexical suffixes (e.g. *-thən* 'to V together' derived from *athənsi* 'gather') from verb stems in Mongsen and other Tibeto-Burman languages of Northeast India such as Meithei (Bhat and Nigomba 1997; Chelliah 1997) and, as Coupe points out, this feature sets these languages apart from other Tibeto-Burman languages.

In terms of methodology, Coupe states that he has used only naturally occurring texts in order to get at the meaning of the verbal suffixes. It is clear that he has also used extensive discussion with consultants about those examples and he reports those discussions in detail thereby making transparent the influence of native speaker feedback on his ultimate analysis. It is uncommon but refreshing to have the linguist wear their analytic motivations on their sleeve in this manner.

Verbless, copula, and existential clauses

In Chapter 9 we learn that clauses of the shape NP = NP are used to indicate the identity of a referent. They do not indicate tense; for tensed equational clauses, the copula is used. Also discussed are existential and possessive clauses. A useful chart summarizing the functions of verbless and other clause types indicating copulative meaning (Identity, Ascription, Existence, Happening, Location, Possession, Becoming) is provided at the end

of the section. It would have been more useful to place this chart at the outset of the section, rather than at the end.

Clause Combining

Coupe's chapter on clause combining provides enough typological and theoretical background to make it a standalone reading on converbs for a syntactic typology course. In Ao, it is possible to distinguish between simultaneous and sequential converbs. Simultaneous converbs qualify the proposition of the matrix verb by, for example, expressing the manner in which an action is performed; sequential converbs simply indicate that one action which occurs after another. Some converbs express propositional meaning (e.g. hypothetical or concessive). Coupe also shows that the origin of converb morphology in Ao is parallel to what we has been shown for other Tibeto-Burman languages, e.g., derived from nominalizers or case marker. (Genetti 1986, Chelliah 1997).

Conclusion

I find it hard to find fault with Coupe's grammar of Mongsen Ao. The few typos I've seen are innocent (e.g. *the* South Asia, p. 3), and a word or two is missing from the glossary ('ground' on page 58 but not in the glossary). It would have been helpful to have a list of all Ao affixes and particles. In many ways Ao looks a lot like Meithei -- a surprise because Meithei does not look like other Naga languages to this extent -- and comprehensive list could have aided in comparing the two languages. These points are obviously trivial. *A Grammar of Mongsen Ao* represents exactly the kind of comprehensive and trustable description one looks for in a grammar. It is a welcome addition to the Mouton Grammar Library and will certainly be used as a model for description of other Tibeto-Burman languages of North East India.

References:

Andrew, Avery. 1985. "The major functions of the noun phrase". *Language, typology and syntactic description,* vol. I: *clause structure*, ed. by Timothy Shopen, 62-154. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bhat, D.N. Shankara and M.S. Ningomba. 1997. *Manipuri grammar.* Munich: Lincom.

Chelliah, S. 2009. "Semantic Role to New Information in Meithei". *The role of semantics, pragmatics, and discourse in the development of case,* ed. by Jóhanna Barðdal and Shobhana Chelliah, 377-400 . Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Chelliah, S. 1997. *A Grammar of Meithei.* Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Clark, Mary Mead. 1893. *The Ao Naga grammar.* [Reprintj, Delhi: Gian Publications, 2002].

Coupe, Alexander Robertson. 1998. "The acoustic and perceptual features of tone in the Tibeto-Burman language Ao Naga". *Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on Spoken Language Processing,* vol. 2, ed. by Robert Mannell and Jordi Robert-Ribes, 57-60. Canderra: The Australian Speech Sciences and Technology Association.

Coupe, Alexander Robertson. 2003. *A phonetic and phonological description of Ao: a Tibeto-Burman language of Nagaland, north-east India.* Canberra: Pacific Linguistics

Genetti, Carol. 1986. "The development of subordinators from postpositions in Bodic languages". *Berkeley Linguistic Society* 12: 387-400.

Lapolla, Randy. 1995. *Ergative marking in Tibeto-Burman. Senri Ethnological Studies* 41: 189-228.

Lidz, Liberty. 2008. "Non-systemic ergativity, anti-ergativity, and grammaticalization in Yongning Na (Mosuo)". Paper presented at the 41st International Conference on Sino-Tibetan Languages and Linguistics, December 18-21 SOAS, London.

Marrison, Geoffrey Edward. 1967. *The classification of the Naga languages of north-east India,* vol. I-II. Ph.D. diss, University of London.

Tournadre, N. 1991. "The rhetorical use of the Tibetan ergative". *Linguistics of the Tibeto-Burman Area* 14(1): 93–107.

Wheatley, Julian. 1982. *Burmese: A grammatical Sketch.* Ph.D. diss, University of California, Berkeley.