

# himalayan linguistics

A free refereed web journal and archive devoted to the study of the  
languages of the Himalayas

## Himalayan Linguistics

---

*Introduction: The grammatical encoding of space in Tibeto-Burman languages*

**Carol Genetti**

University of California, Santa Barbara

**Kristine A. Hildebrandt**

Southern Illinois University Edwardsville

### KEYWORDS

spatial encoding, Tibeto-Burman, Introduction, space, direction, grammar, morphosyntax, semantics, culture, Himalayas, typology, frame of reference

This is a contribution from *Himalayan Linguistics*, Vol. 16(1), *Special Issue on the Grammatical Encoding of Space*, Carol Genetti and Kristine Hildebrandt (eds.): 1–5.

ISSN 1544-7502

© 2017. All rights reserved.

This Portable Document Format (PDF) file may not be altered in any way.

Tables of contents, abstracts, and submission guidelines are available at  
[escholarship.org/uc/himalayanlinguistics](http://escholarship.org/uc/himalayanlinguistics)



# *Introduction: The grammatical encoding of space in Tibeto-Burman languages*

**Carol Genetti**

University of California, Santa Barbara

**Kristine A. Hildebrandt**

Southern Illinois University Edwardsville

## **1 About This Volume**

The current volume arose from a one-day pre-meeting workshop entitled “How Grammar Encodes Space in Tibeto-Burman” at the 48<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Sino-Tibetan Languages and Linguistics, which was held at the University of California, Santa Barbara in August of 2015.<sup>1</sup> The workshop, organized by Carol Genetti and Kristine Hildebrandt (co-editors of the present volume), was the first time that a group of Tibeto-Burmanists had come together to explicitly discuss spatial language in the family. This topic has been the focus of extensive cross-linguistic study (Talmy 1983, 1985, Slobin and Hoiting 1994, Svorou 1993, Wilkins and Hill 1995, Slobin 1996, Diessel 1999, Dixon 2003, Levinson and Meira 2003, Levinson and Wilkins 2006) and the Tibeto-Burman literature contains discussions of some quite complex systems of spatial encoding in grammars (e.g., Watters 2002, Coupe 2007, King 2009, Willis 2007, Prinns 2016), as well as articles (e.g., Bickel 1994, 1997, Lin 2002, Post 20011, Caplow 2007, Huang 2015). Concepts of direction have also been shown to form the basis of some TB systems of referential person agreement (DeLancey 1980). In addition, there is ample evidence that spatial categories and relationships are central to key cultural constructs and conceptualizations (Bickel and Gaenszle eds. 1999), and that these cultural styles, practices and histories are encoded in the grammars, lexicons and figurative speech constructions of TB languages. This seemed a promising topic for fruitful discussion and collaboration.

Seven papers were presented over the course of the day (Table 1), which culminated in a summary and general discussion led by Genetti, who presented a summary of the findings in a general session of the ICSTLL. Presenters were asked to focus on a single language or cluster of tightly related languages and present on: the lexical and grammatical systems that encoded spatial concepts; the encoding of figure-ground relations, coordinate systems, and frames of reference; the semantic distinctions and any indications that these were reflected in the cultural realm; idioms,

---

<sup>1</sup> We gratefully acknowledge and thank the Department of Linguistics, Division of Humanities and Fine Arts, and College of Letters and Science at UC Santa Barbara for financial and logistical support of this workshop.

metaphors, or constructions based in spatial categories; metaphorical extension and grammaticalization; and whether there are systematic ways that spatial morphemes are incorporated into connected discourse. The papers in the workshop were complemented by two studies presented in the ICSTLL general sessions, one by VanBik and Tluangneh, on directional verb particles in Lai, and the other by Lalnunthangi Chhangte, on locations in time and space in Mizo.

---

Balthasar Bickel	Kiranti Space
Kristine Hildebrandt	Spatial Relations in Manange (Tamangic) (with comparative reference to Nar-Phu and Chantyal)
Steven Watters	Spatial Topology in Dzongkha
Shobhana L. Chelliah and Tyler P. Utt	Schematizing Figure and Ground in Lamkang: Directional Pre-verbs, postpositions, and semantic role markers
David Bradley	Space in Lisu
James A. Matisoff	The Expression of Spatial Concepts in Lahu
You-Jing Lin	How Grammar Encodes Space in Rgyalrong

---

Table 1. Papers presented in the 2015 ICSTLL pre-meeting workshop  
“How Grammar Encodes Space in Tibeto-Burman”

All presenters were invited to submit papers to the current volume and most chose to do so; the volume also incorporates one additional paper by Sims and Genetti on Yonghe Qiang. Each study provides a comprehensive description of how spatial categories are realized within the language of interest.

The papers represent languages from a wide swath of the Tibeto-Burman area, including Nepal (Manange and Nar-Phu, discussed by Hildebrandt), Manipur in Northeast India (Lamkang, discussed by Chelliah and Utt), Chin State in Myanmar (Hakha Lai, discussed by VanBik and Tluangneh), and Sichuan (Rgyalrong, discussed by Lin, and Yonghe Qiang, discussed by Sims and Genetti). Two languages are geographically widespread: Lisu (discussed by Bradley), which ranges from Northeast India through northern Myanmar, northern Thailand, Yunnan and Sichuan; and Lahu (discussed by Matisoff), which extends from Burma into Thailand, Yunnan, and northwestern Laos. The languages are also typologically diverse, including some languages of the analytic type (Lahu, Lisu, and Manange), other languages with extensive bound morphology (Lamkang, Rgyalrong), and some in between (Yonghe, Hakha Lai). Finally, the languages represent five distinct sub-branches of the Tibeto-Burman family, including Tamangic (Manange, Nar-Phu), Kukish (Lamkang, Hakha Lai), Lolo-Burmese (Lahu, Lisu), Qiangic (Yonghe Qiang) and Rgyalrongic (Cogtse Rgyalrong).<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Genetti (2016) provides a good map of the family and introduction to the debates about historical relationships in Tibeto-Burman; see also Thurgood and LaPolla (2017).

In most Tibeto-Burman languages,<sup>3</sup> spatial concepts are grammatically expressed in both the noun phrase and the verb phrase. With the exception of the paper on Hakha Lai (which focuses exclusively on verb particles), all the papers in this volume discuss some ways of grammatically coding spatial concepts in the noun phrase. This is most commonly done through systems of casemarkers (postpositions or affixes) and locational relator nouns, but Lisu has an extensive system of deictics as well as a spatial nominal classifier, Lahu has nominal particles, and Rgyalrong indexes an orientation system in both nominals and pronominals (in addition to verbs and adverbials). Within the verb phrase, we find spatial concepts expressed by particles in Hakha Lai and Lahu, prefixes in Rgyalrong, Yonghe Qiang, and Lamkang, serial verb constructions in Manange, Lahu, and Lisu, existential verbs in Lisu and Yonghe Qiang, as well as in rich verbal lexicons.

Semantically, meanings range from very general senses of location or direction to quite detailed notions. Of particular note are systems of structured oppositions realizing paradigms (e.g., Rgyalrong, Hakha Lai, Yonghe Qiang). Topological categories incorporate verticality, contact, attachment, inclusion, support, containment, and adjacency. Forms encoding distance are found in Hakha Lai, Lisu, and Yonghe Qiang. Verticality is particularly prominent and some systems make explicit reference to local geography with markers for uphill/downhill (Lamkang) and upstream/downstream (Rgyalrong). Within cardinal directions, east/west is a core dimension of the extensive Rgyalrong orientation system; north/south may be marked lexically (e.g. Lisu), but is not reflected in the grammars of any of the languages described here.

There is strong evidence of grammaticalization pathways from lexical nouns or verbs that encode spatial meanings to affixes, particles, serial verbs, or other elements that encode an abstract, frequently bleached, locational or directional concept. A number of authors indicate the historical provenience of specific forms, when known. Sources include body parts, in addition to rich sets of nouns with topological meanings, as well as motion verbs that denote a variety of trajectories. In addition, all authors discuss the metaphorical extension of spatial to temporal or aspectual meanings. Spatial morphemes are also described as extending metaphorically to modality (Hakha Lai), and social and psychological space (Lamkang). We also see strong integration of spatial and cultural expressions (Rgyalrong, Yonghe Qiang, Manange, Lamkang) that suggest that spatial concepts are central to the cultural conceptions of their speakers.

As a set, the assembled papers illustrate the richness of spatial encodings in Tibeto-Burman languages and we encourage others to explicitly describe, analyze, and theorize lexical and grammatical systems of space and direction throughout the family so that our knowledge of this complex area can continue to expand. Questions to consider include the following: In what parts of the grammar are spatial relations (including path of motion) marked? How are figure-ground relations encoded? What types of topographic categories are marked grammatically or lexically, and what type of coordinate systems are found in the language? What can be said about the different frames of reference, or different types of spatial fields, for example, that are realized in one part of the language's grammar as opposed to another? Turning to broader semantic inquiries, how are the semantic distinctions revealed by spatial language reflected more broadly in the culture? For example, are there idioms, metaphors, or constructions that make use of spatial information? What evidence is there that grammaticalized spatial categories are reflected in societal or cultural systems? And finally, thinking about the function of these encodings in communication, are there systematic ways

---

<sup>3</sup> Interesting counter-examples are Kham (Watters 2002), which has remarkably extensive systems of encoding spatial distinctions in the noun phrase, but not in the verb, and Lepcha (Plaisier 2007).

that spatial morphemes are incorporated into connected discourse? We hope that this special issue provides fertile ground for new explorations and discussions of the grammar of space in these languages.

## REFERENCES

- Anderson, Stephen A. 1992. *A-morphous morphology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press [Cambridge Studies in Linguistics 62].
- Bickel, Balthasar. 1994. *Mapping operations in spatial deixis and the typology of reference frames*. Working Paper No. 31, Cognitive Anthropology Research Group, Nijmegen.
- Bickel, Balthasar. 1997. "Spatial operations in deixis, cognition, and culture: Where to orient oneself in Belhare". In: Pederson, Eric.; and Nuyts, Jan (eds.), *Language and conceptualization*, 46-83. Cambridge University Press.
- Bickle, Balthasar; and Gaenszle, Martin (eds.). 1999. *Himalayan space: Cultural horizons and practices*. Völkerkundemuseum Zürich.
- Caplow, Nancy J. 2007. "Directionals in Tokpe Gola Tibetan discourse." In: Bielmeier, Roland; and Haller, Felix (eds.), *Trends in linguistics: Linguistics of the Himalayas and beyond*, 23-46. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- DeLancey, Scott. 1980. *Deictic categories in the Tibeto-Burman verb*. Ph.D. diss, Indiana University.
- Diessel, Holger. 1999. *Demonstratives: Form, function, and grammaticalization*. Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Dixon, R.M.W. 2003. "Directionals: A cross-linguistic typology". *Studies in Language* 27.1: 61-112.
- Genetti, Carol. 2016. "The Tibeto-Burman languages of South Asia." In: Hock, Hans Henrick; and Bashir, Elena (eds.), *The languages and linguistics of South Asia: A comprehensive guide*, 130-154. Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter.
- Huang, Chenglong. 2015. "Qiangyu de kongjian fanchou" (Spatial relations in the Qiang language). *Language and Linguistics* 16.5: 663-689.
- King, John. 2009. *A grammar of Dhimal*. Leiden: Brill [Languages of the Greater Himalayan Region].
- Levinson, Stephen C.; and Meira, Sérgio. 2003. "Natural concepts' in the spatial topological domain-adpositional meanings in crosslinguistic perspective: An exercise in semantic typology". *Language* 79.3: 485-516.
- Levinson, Stephen C.; and Wilkins, David P. (eds.). 2006. *Grammars of space: Explorations in cognitive diversity*. Cambridge University Press.
- Lin, You-Jing. 2002. "A dimension missed: East and west in Situ rGyalrong orientation marking." *Language and Linguistics* 3.1: 27-42.
- Plaisier, Heleen. 2007. *A grammar of Lepcha*. Leiden: Brill [Languages of the Greater Himalayan Region].
- Post, Mark W. 2011. "Topographical deixis and the Tani languages of North East India". In: Hyslop, Gwendolyn; Morey, Stephen; and Post, Mark W. (eds.), *North East Indian linguistics*, 137-154. Cambridge University Press India, New Delhi, India.
- Slobin, Daniel I. 1996. "Two ways to travel". In: Shibatani, M.; and Thompson, S. (eds.), *Grammatical constructions: Their form and meaning*, 195-220. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

- Slobin, Daniel I.; and Hoiting, Nini. 1994. "Reference to movement in spoken and signed languages: Typological considerations". *Proceedings of the 20<sup>th</sup> annual meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society*, 487-505. Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Linguistics Society.
- Svorou, Soteria. 1993. *The grammar of space*. Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Talmy, Leonard. 1983. "How language structures space". In: Pick, Herbert (ed.), *Spatial orientation: Theory, research, and application*, 225-282. New York: Plenum Press.
- Talmy, Leonard. 1985. "Lexicalization patterns: Semantic structures in lexical forms". In: Shopen, Timothy (ed.), *Language typology and syntactic description* 57-149. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thurgood, Graham; and Randy LaPolla (eds.). 2017. *The Sino-Tibetan languages*. London: Routledge.
- Watters, David E. 2002. *A grammar of Kham*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wilkins, David P.; and Hill, Deborah. 1995. "When GO means COME: Questioning the basicness of basic motion verbs". *Cognitive Linguistics* 6.2/3: 209-59.
- Willis, Christina. 2007. *A descriptive grammar of Dharma: An endangered Tibeto-Burman language*. Ph.D. diss, University of Texas.

Carol Genetti  
cgenetti@linguistics.ucsb.edu

Kristine Hildebrandt  
khildeb@siue.edu