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*Verb agreement in Phong*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper describes the verb agreement marking patterns in Phong, a language variety spoken by a community who are also called Phong. The Phong community is one of the more than thirty two sub-groups of the larger Tangsa community, who live on both sides of the Indo-Myanmar border. Phong belong to Bodo-Konyak-Jingpho sub-group of the Tibeto-Burman family. It is spoken by around 3000 people spread across ten villages in the Changlang and Tirap district of Arunachal Pradesh and in the Tinsukia district of Assam.

The verbs in Phong agree with one of the arguments of the clause for number and person. There are three person and three number distinctions. The agreement markers are independent words consisting of the tense marker and the agreement morpheme. These words generally follow the main verb. Phong has a hierarchical agreement pattern in which the verb agrees with the argument higher in 'person hierarchy'.

## KEYWORDS

Phong, verb agreement, hierarchical agreement

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# *Verb Agreement in Phong*

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## 1 Introduction

Phong is a variety of Tangsa or Tangsang, which is a dialect continuum spoken by communities who identify themselves as ethnically Tangsa or Tangsang. There are more than eighty Tangsa subtribes across the Indo-Myanmar boarder on the Patkai mountains, which speak speech varieties that range from mutually intelligible to mutually unintelligible (Morey 2017). The Tangsa varieties form a subgroup along with Konyak, Wancho, Nocte, and few others, called Northern Naga or Konyak (Burling 2003). The earliest known work on Tangsa is Das Gupta (1980), which provides brief discussions on some of the Tangsa varieties in the Changlang district of Arunachal Pradesh. It contains brief descriptions on the verb agreement markers, numerals and case markers, among others. More extensive work in recent years has been done by Dr. Stephen Morey. His work mainly focuses on comparative phonology, though he has done brief grammatical descriptions on several Tangsa varieties. His work relevant to this paper include Morey (2015) and Morey (2011). Morey (2011) focusses on the form and functions of the agreement and tense/aspect markers of seventeen different varieties of the Tangsa group. Morey also discusses historical changes in the agreement systems. Morey (2014) discusses the tone systems of the Tangsa varieties.

This paper provides a description of the verb agreement marking patterns in Phong. This study is based on the data collected from the districts of Changlang and Tirap. Data were collected from a total of nine different villages from these two districts. §2 provides background information on the language. §3 gives a description of the pronominal forms. §4 describes the agreement marker and the agreement marking system.

## 2 Language Background

The linguistic situation on the India-Myanmar border is described by Burling (2003: 170) as one of “massive heterogeneity and uncertainty”. One thing that we can be reasonably certain of is that the two ‘languages’ called Tangsa (ISO 639-3:nst under the name ‘Naga, Tase’) and Nocte (ISO 639-3:njb ‘Naga, Nocte’) are internally diverse and closely related to each other (Morey, 2011). The term Tangsa was coined by Indian administrators in the 1950s to group together communities speaking otherwise uncategorized Tibeto-Burman languages in Changlang District of Arunachal Pradesh and neighbouring Tinsukia district in Assam; whereas Nocte is used to group together similar communities in Tirap District (Morey, 2011). Phong or the Ponthais call themselves “Tangsa” if they live in the Changlang district and “Nocte” if they live in the Tirap district of Arunachal Pradesh. Phong is spoken by around 3,000 people spread across six villages in Changlang and four villages in the Tirap district of Arunachal Pradesh. The map below shows the area of field work from where the data has been collected for this research.



Figure 1. Google map showing the area of study.

### 3 The pronominals

The Phong pronominal system consists of nine separate pronouns, combining the three persons and three numbers viz. singular, dual and plural. Unlike some languages of the family such as Jingphaw where the plural forms are derived from their respective singular forms, Phong appears to have distinct plural pronominal forms as well as dual forms. Table 1 presents the personal pronouns in Phong, and examples (1) and (2) illustrate the use of first person singular and first person dual forms.

Person	SG	DL	PL
1	ŋa	tʃik	ŋi
2	an	tʃit	tʃin
3	i	ni	niŋ

Table 1. Personal pronouns

- (1) *ŋa vik-e kat ta*  
 1SG field-LOC go FUT  
 ‘I will go to the field.’
- (2) *tʰaŋtʰun tʃik van aŋ-tʃi-r-i*  
 now 1DL talk AUX-PROG-PRES-1DL  
 ‘We(two) are talking now.’

The dual forms may be accompanied by the numeral two, as shown in (3) and (4).

(3) *tfik ini-e i-me hin t-e*  
 2DL two-ERG 3SG-ACC hit PST-1DL  
 ‘We(two) hit him.’

(4) *i-e ni va-ni-me hin ta*  
 3SG-ERG 3DL man-two-ACC hit PST  
 ‘He hit two of them.’

Phong does not have a distinct set of possessive pro-forms, except for the first person singular, which is *ʒaŋ* ‘my’. Examples (5) and (6) illustrate the possessive construction. The first person singular possessive pronoun *ʒaŋ* modifies the noun *tfem* ‘house’ in (5), and the first person plural *ŋi*, which is also used as a personal pronoun, modifies the noun *sumtiŋ* ‘village’ in (6).

(5) *haka ʒaŋ tfem evaŋ*  
 this my house from  
 ‘S/he belongs to my house/ is from my house.’

(6) *haka ŋi sumtiŋ*  
 this 1PL village  
 ‘This is our village.’

#### 4 Argument indexation

The verb complex of Phong contains a set of portmanteau morphemes following the main verb and/or the auxiliary, which mark tense-aspect-polarity as well as indexes person and number of one of the core arguments in the sentence. These morphemes are phonologically independent words and there are instances where discourse particles come in between the verb and the agreement word. An example of such a word is *taŋ* in (7), which follows the verb *vaŋ* ‘go’. The onset of this one syllable word marks past tense and the rhyme indexes the first person singular subject argument. Another example is the morpheme *a* in (8), where the lack of an onset indicates future tense, and the rhyme indexes a third person subject argument. In example (9), the onset *mu* codes negation and the coda *ŋ* indexes the first person singular subject.

(7) *ŋa i-dame bondit-e vaŋ t-aŋ*  
 1SG 3SG-ASS school-LOC go PST-1SG  
 ‘I went to school with him.’

(8) *i bondit-e kat a*  
 3SG school go 3SG  
 ‘He will go to school.’

(9) *ŋe nok deŋ hoi mu-ŋ*  
 1SG.ERG like ???<sup>1</sup> carry NEG-1SG  
 ‘I do not want to carry.’

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<sup>1</sup> It seems to be a part of the verb complex but it is not relevant to the verb agreement of the language.

The onsets of these words mark tense/aspect and polarity. The agreement words may be attached to what I call an auxiliary verb *aŋ*, as shown in (10). The first person singular index *aŋ* is attached to the auxiliary *aŋ*.

- (10) *ŋa bondit-e kat aŋ-aŋ*  
 1SG school-LOC go AUX-1SG  
 ‘I will go to school.’

The argument indexes are presented in Table 2. As we can see, three persons are distinguished, and three numbers are distinguished in first and second person. There is no number distinction in the third person. The sub-sections describe the indexation patterns in intransitive and transitive clauses.

Person	SG	DL	PL
1	aŋ	i	e
2	u	in	an
3	a		

Table 2. Argument indices

#### 4.1 Indexation in intransitive clauses

This sub-section presents the various paradigms of the argument indexes in intransitive clauses. The present tense paradigm is tabulated in Table 3. Present tense in Phong is marked with the onset *r-* in the agreement word. Examples (11) and (12) illustrate the present tense paradigm. In (11), we have an intransitive clause with the verb *kat* ‘go’. The agreement word *ra*, which consist of the present tense marker *r-* and the third person index *-a*, occurs with the auxiliary *aŋ*. In (12), the main verb is *tʃap* ‘stand’ which is followed the agreement word consisting of the present tense marker *r-* and the first person index *-aŋ* along with the auxiliary *aŋ*.

Person	SG	DL	PL
1	<i>V r-aŋ</i>	<i>V r-i</i>	<i>V r-e</i>
2	<i>V r-u</i>	<i>V r-in</i>	<i>V r-an</i>
3	<i>V r-a</i>		

Table 3. Present affirmative intransitive paradigm

- (11) *i vek-e kat aŋ-r-a*  
 3SG field-LOC go AUX-PRES-3SG  
 ‘He is going.’

- (12) *ŋa ton tʃap aŋ-r-aŋ*  
 I sit stand AUX-PRES-1SG  
 ‘I have stood up.’

Table 5 presents the past tense paradigm of argument indices in intransitive clauses. Past tense is indicated with the onset *t-* and the rhymes index the argument. Note that the dual forms of the agreement word in the past are somewhat peculiar. First, the dual indices, *-i* and *-in*, are not directly attached to the tense marker *t-*, instead it is attached to an additional material, the fricative *-s*. Secondly, we find the third person form of the agreement word in all persons in the dual. Examples (13) and (14) illustrate the past tense paradigm. In (13), we have an intransitive clause with the verb *ka* ‘go’, which is followed by the third person form of the agreement word *taʔ*. In (14) we have another intransitive clause with the verb *vaŋ* ‘come’ and it is followed by the first person form of the agreement word.

Person	SG	DL	PL
1	<i>V t-aŋ</i>	<i>V taʔ-s-i</i>	<i>V t-e</i>
2	<i>V t-uʔ</i>	<i>V taʔ-s-in</i>	<i>V t-an</i>
3	<i>V taʔ</i>		

Table 4. Past affirmative intransitive paradigm

- (13) *sa-ŋət i-nok dam-tʃu ʒon-e ʒaʔ*  
 day-one 3SG-friend ASS-that water-LOC fish

*hui so ka taʔ*  
 carry DP go PST  
 ‘One day, he went fishing with his friend.’

- (14) *ŋa i-dame bondit-e vaŋ t-aŋ*  
 1SG 3SG-ASS school-LOC come PST-1SG  
 ‘I went to school with him.’

The future paradigm is presented in Table 6. The future tense is unmarked, and therefore, the agreement word in the future tense consist of the argument indices. The formation of the dual agreement words in the future follows the same pattern as that of the past tense. The third person form of the agreement word is used in all persons along with the fricative *-s* followed by the dual indices. Examples (15) and (16) illustrate the future paradigm. In (15), the agreement word *aŋ* is attached to the auxiliary *aŋ*, which follows the intransitive verb *kat* ‘go’. In (16), the agreement word *a* follows the intransitive verb *kat* ‘go’.

Person	SG	DL	PL
1	<i>V aŋ</i>	<i>V a-s-i</i>	<i>V e</i>
2	<i>V u</i>	<i>V a-s-in</i>	<i>V an</i>
3	<i>V a</i>		

Table 5. Future affirmative intransitive paradigm

- (15) *ŋa bondit-e kat aŋ-aŋ*  
 1SG school-LOC go AUX-1SG  
 ‘I will go to school.’
- (16) *i bondit-e kat a*  
 3SG school go 3SG  
 ‘He will go to school.’

There are two more constructions which express future events, but they do not involve argument indexation. One construction involves use of the auxiliary *aŋ*. This construction lacks the agreement word, as shown in (17). Note that the final clause with the verb *phat* ‘eat’ contains the auxiliary *aŋ*, but not an agreement word.

- (17) *li zaʔdak le hui-van niʔ tʰoŋ-e so*  
 DEF a kind of fish DEF carry here SEQ basket-LOC DP
- sak sen taʔ tih ŋani pʰak aŋ*  
 inside keep PST REP tomorrow eat AUX  
 ‘He brought the fish, kept it in a basket and will eat tomorrow.’

The other construction that expresses a future event takes an invariant form *ta*, which may occur following the main verb or the auxiliary *aŋ*, if there is one. In (18) the verb *kat* ‘go’ is followed by the auxiliary *aŋ* and the form *ta* is attached to the auxiliary. In (19) the invariant form follows the lexical verb *ka* ‘go’.

- (18) *ŋa bondit-e kat aŋ-ta*  
 1SG school-LOC go AUX-FUT  
 ‘I will go to school.’
- (19) *ŋa thanthun ka ta*  
 1SG now go FUT  
 ‘I will go now.’

The negative paradigm is presented in Table 7. Note no tense distinction has been found in the negative, and therefore we have a single paradigm. The negative form is *mu* and the argument indices are attached to it. Note that the plural indices change their form. The first person plural form is *-i* (not *-e*), and the second person plural form is *-n* (not *-an*). Moreover, since the nucleus of the

negative form and the second person singular index are the same vowel, i.e. *u*, the two vowels merge into a single vowel and the agreement word is realized as *mu*. Examples (20) through (22) illustrate the negative paradigm. In (20) the agreement word, which follows the verb *hoi* ‘carry’, consists of the negative form *mu-* and the first person index *-ŋ* follows the verb *hoi* ‘carry’. Example (21) contains three instances of the negative agreement word with first person index *-i*, following the verbs *vanj* ‘come’, *ʒət* ‘know’, and *taŋ vanj* ‘go and cook’. Example (22) contains the third person form of the negative agreement word, *muʔ*, which occurs following the verb *ʒət* ‘know’.

Person	SG	DL	PL
1	<i>V mu-ŋ</i>	<i>V mu-s-i</i>	<i>V mu-i</i>
2	<i>V mu</i>	<i>V mu-s-in</i>	<i>V mu-n</i>
3	<i>V muʔ</i>		

Table 6. Negative intransitive paradigm

- (20) *ŋe nok deŋ hoi mu-ŋ*  
 1SG.ERG like ???<sup>2</sup> carry NEG-1SG  
 ‘I do not want to carry.’
- (21) *ŋi vanj mu-i ʒət mu-i taŋ vanj*  
 1PL come NEG-1PL know NEG-1PL cook come  
*mu-i*  
 NEG-1PL  
 ‘We did not go, we didn’t know, we didn’t go and cook.’
- (22) *le rajva le ŋo-ena ʒət muʔ*  
 DEF God DEF none know NEG  
*lam-e tfoŋʒa tu aruŋ taʔ tih*  
 everyone-ERG hate only PL PST REP  
 ‘No one knew God, everyone just hated him.’

#### 4.2 Indexation in transitive clauses

The verbs in the transitive clauses index the argument which is higher in person hierarchy irrespective of its grammatical relation. Thus, a first person argument outranks a second person argument, and a second person argument outranks a third person argument. There are a few exceptions to this which we will see below. Examples (23) and (24) illustrate hierarchical indexation. In (23) the verb complex indexes the first person singular subject argument since it is higher than the third person singular object argument.

In (24) the verb complex indexes the first person singular object argument since it is higher than the second person singular subject argument. The agreement word takes an inverse marker *-h*

<sup>2</sup> Same as footnote <sup>1</sup>.

to indicate that the clause involves an inverse configuration. Inverse marking is also an indication that the verb complex is indexing the object argument.

(23) *ŋe*                    *i-me*                    *hen*                    *taʔ-aŋ*  
 1SG.ERG                3SG-ACC                hit                    PST-1SG  
 ‘I hit him.’

(24) *an-e*                    *ŋa-me*                    *hen*                    *taʔ-h-aŋ*  
 2SG-ERG                1SG-ACC                hit                    PST-INV-1SG  
 ‘You hit me.’

Table 7, 8, and 9 present the present, past, and future paradigms in the direct configurations of transitive clauses. The vertical axis denotes agent argument and horizontal axis denotes patient argument. These are the configurations where the subject is higher than the object in person hierarchy, as illustrated in examples (25) through (27). Example (25) illustrates a present tense agreement word in direct configuration, where the verb indexes the first person singular subject. Example (26) illustrates a past tense agreement word in direct configuration, where the verb complex indexes the second person singular subject argument as it is higher than the third person object argument. Example (27) illustrates a future tense agreement word in direct configuration, where the verb complex indexes the first person dual subject over the third person plural object.

Person	2SG	2DL	2PL	3
1SG	<i>r-aŋ</i>	<i>r-aŋ</i>	<i>r-aŋ</i>	<i>r-aŋ</i>
1DL	<i>r-i</i>	<i>r-i</i>	<i>r-i</i>	<i>r-i</i>
1PL	<i>r-e</i>	<i>r-e</i>	<i>r-e</i>	<i>r-e</i>
2SG				<i>r-u</i>
2DL				<i>r-in</i>
2PL				<i>r-an</i>

Table 7. Hierarchical agreement paradigm (Present)

Person	2SG	2DL	2PL	3
1SG	<i>t-aŋ</i>	<i>t-aŋ</i>	<i>t-aŋ</i>	<i>t-aŋ</i>
1DL	<i>taʔ-si</i>	<i>taʔ-si</i>	<i>taʔ-si</i>	<i>taʔ-si</i>
1PL	<i>t-e</i>	<i>t-e</i>	<i>t-e</i>	<i>t-e</i>
2SG				<i>taʔ-u</i>
2DL				<i>taʔ-sin</i>
2PL				<i>taʔ-an</i>

Table 8. Hierarchical agreement paradigm (Past)

Person	2SG	2DL	2PL	3
1SG	<i>aŋ</i>	<i>aŋ</i>	<i>aŋ</i>	<i>aŋ</i>
1DL	<i>si</i>	<i>si</i>	<i>si</i>	<i>si</i>
1PL	<i>e</i>	<i>e</i>	<i>e</i>	<i>e</i>
2SG				<i>u</i>
2DL				<i>sin</i>
2PL				<i>an</i>

Table 9. Hierarchical agreement paradigm (Future)

- (25) *ŋe*                    *ʈfam*    *saʔ*    *aŋ*  
 1SG.ERG            rice    eat    1SG  
 ‘I eat rice.’
- (26) *an-e*                    *ni-va*                    *ni-me*                    *hen*    *t-u*  
 2SG-ERG            two-man                    3DL-ACC                    hit    PST-2SG  
 ‘You (sg) hit the two of them.’
- (27) *ʈfik*    *ini-e*                    *niŋ-me*                    *hen*    *si*  
 1DL    two-ERG                    3PL-ACC                    hit    1DL  
 ‘Two of us will hit them.’

Alternative indexation patterns for some configurations, especially involving both first and second person arguments, are observed in the language. For instance, in (28) and (29) the arguments involved are first person singular subjects and second person singular objects, but the verb complexes take a third person index. Moreover, there is the inverse marker *-h* in both sentences.

- (28) *ŋe*                    *an-me*                    *tip*    *a-taʔ-h-a*  
 1SG.ERG                    2SG-ACC                    see    ???<sup>3</sup>-PST-INV-3SG  
 ‘I saw you.’
- (29) *ŋe*                    *an-me*                    *hen*    *taʔ-h-a*  
 1SG.ERG                    2SG-ACC                    hit    PST-INV-3SG  
 ‘I hit you.’

Table 10 and 11 present argument indexations in the inverse configurations. As aforementioned, the vertical axis denotes agent argument and horizontal axis denotes patient argument. In these configurations the subject is lower than the object in person hierarchy, and the verbs index the object argument. In such cases the verb complex carries an inverse marker. The

<sup>3</sup> I do not know yet whether these are different forms of the auxiliary or not. These particles however do not affect the verb agreement of the language.

inverse marker is the glottal fricative *-h*, which may be realized as a consonant or as an aspiration in different paradigms. In the present paradigm, the tense marker in the inverse configuration is *at<sup>h</sup>*, to which the argument index is attached, as shown in Table 11. In the past paradigm, the tense marker is *taʔ*, which is followed by the inverse *-h* and the index.

Person	1SG	1DL	1PL	2SG	2DL	2PL
2	<i>at<sup>h</sup>-aŋ</i>	<i>at<sup>h</sup>-i</i>	<i>at<sup>h</sup>-e</i>			
3	<i>at<sup>h</sup>-aŋ</i>	<i>at<sup>h</sup>-i</i>	<i>at<sup>h</sup>-e</i>	<i>at<sup>h</sup>-u</i>	<i>at<sup>h</sup>-in</i>	<i>at<sup>h</sup>-an</i>

Table 10. Inverse alignment paradigm (Present)

Person	1SG	1DL	1PL	2SG	2DL	2PL
2	<i>taʔ-h-aŋ</i>	<i>taʔ-h-i</i>	<i>taʔ-h-e</i>			
3	<i>taʔ-h-aŋ</i>	<i>taʔ-h-i</i>	<i>taʔ-h-e</i>	<i>taʔ-h-u</i>	<i>taʔ-h-in</i>	<i>taʔ-h-an</i>

Table 11. Inverse alignment paradigm (Past)

Examples (30) through (32) illustrate the present tense inverse paradigm. In (30), the subject argument is *an* ‘you’ and the object argument is *ŋa* ‘me’, and the verb *nokbo* ‘like’ indexes the first person object and it takes the inverse form of the present tense marker, *at<sup>h</sup>*. In (31), the subject argument is *i* ‘he’ and the object argument is *ŋa* ‘me’, and the verb *hen* ‘hit’ indexes the first person object and takes the tense marker *at<sup>h</sup>*. In (32), the subject argument is *i* ‘he’ and the object argument is *an* ‘you (sg)’, and the verb indexes the second person object and takes the tense marker *at<sup>h</sup>*.

- (30) *le va le latvok niʔ le zada-sa le so*  
 DEF man DEF jump.down SEQ DEF young.girl-lovely DEF DP

*banlu an-e ŋa-me nokbo aŋ-at<sup>h</sup>-aŋ*  
 catch you-ERG 1SG-ACC like AUX-PRES-INV-1SG  
 ‘The man jumped down and caught the young woman and asked her, “Do you like me?”’

- (31) *i-e ŋa-me hen a-tfe-at<sup>h</sup>-aŋ*  
 3SG-ERG 1SG-ACC hit ???<sup>4</sup>-PROG-INV-1SG  
 ‘He is hitting me.’

- (32) *i-e an-me hen a-tfe-at<sup>h</sup>-u*  
 3SG-ERG 2SG-ACC hit ???<sup>5</sup>-PROG-INV-2SG  
 ‘He is hitting you.’

<sup>4</sup> See footnote <sup>3</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See footnote <sup>3</sup>

Examples (33) through (35) illustrate the past inverse paradigms. In (33), the subject argument is *i* ‘he’ and the object argument is *ŋa* ‘I’, and the verb indexes the first person dual object. The tense marker is *taʔ*, and it is followed by the inverse marker *-h*. In (34) the subject argument is *i* ‘he’ and the object argument is *tfit* ‘you two’; the verb indexes the second person dual object in the verb complex.

(33) *i-e*                    *ŋa-me*                    *hen*                    *taʔ-h-aj*  
 3SG-ERG                1SG-ACC                beat                    PST-INV-1SG  
 ‘He hit me.’

(34) *i-e*                                    *tfit-me*                    *hen*                    *taʔ-h-in*  
 3SG-ERG                                2DL-ACC                    hit                    PST-INV-2DL  
 ‘He hit you two.’

## 5 Summary

The Phong pronominal system consists of nine separate pronouns, combining the three persons and three numbers viz. singular, dual and plural. The verb agreement in Phong is marked post-verbally. The agreement words combined with tense–aspect markers form a separate word. They may also consist of just the agreement markers without the tense/aspect marking onsets. Phong has a hierarchical agreement system where an argument higher in person hierarchy is indexed on the verb irrespective of its grammatical relation. Phong marks inverse configuration when the verb indexes the object argument. Exceptions to the hierarchical marking pattern is found in certain configurations where the arguments involved are first and second person. In such configurations, the verbs take a third person index.

### ABBREVIATIONS

ACC	Accusative
ASS	Associative
DEF	Definite
DP	Discourse word
DL	Dual
ERG	Ergative
FUT	Future
INV	Inverse
LOC	Locative
NEG	Negative
PL	Plural
PRES	Present
PST	Past
REP	Reportative
SEQ	Sequential marker
SG	Singular

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