



***Languages and Peoples of the Eastern Himalayan Region (LPEHR) comprises an annual special issue of *Himalayan Linguistics* together with occasional special publications. Peer-reviewed and open-access, it focuses on linguistic and ethnographic documentation and description in the Eastern Himalaya.***

## **Languages and Peoples of the Eastern Himalayan Region (LPEHR)**

---

*The stem alternation in Rengmitca*

**David A. Peterson**  
Dartmouth College

### ABSTRACT

It is well-known that South Central Tibeto-Burman (=Kuki-Chin) languages may exhibit a morphosyntactically-conditioned verbal stem alternation. This paper provides an exhaustive account of the stem alternation in Rengmitca, a highly endangered SC language of Bangladesh, based on a naturalistic text corpus. Compared to systems present in other languages, Rengmitca's stem alternation is formally quite limited. The distribution of stem alternants involves similar parameters to those seen for other SC languages, but there are some deviations from more commonly attested patterns, as well. The finding that the stem alternation is present in Rengmitca is noteworthy because evidence for it in the Southwestern SC subgroup up to this point has only been minimal. The paper also considers additional issues in the diachrony of the stem alternation in SC.

### KEYWORDS

South Central Tibeto-Burman, Kuki-Chin, Rengmitca, Khumi, Mru, stem alternation, nominalization

This is a contribution from *Himalayan Linguistics* Vol 19(2) – *Languages and Peoples of the Eastern Himalayan Region*: 80–94.

ISSN 1544-7502

© 2020. 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

# *The stem alternation in Rengmitca\**

**David A. Peterson**  
Dartmouth College

## 1 Introduction

Rengmitca is a highly endangered South Central Tibeto-Burman (a.k.a. Kuki-Chin) language spoken in the Southern Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh near Alikadam town. Rengmitca’s speakers have been shifting to Mru over the last several decades (Löffler 1960; Peterson 2013). Currently there are fewer than twenty competent speakers, ranging from perhaps five fully fluent individuals, mostly over the age of sixty, to those with only passive understanding and minimal speaking competence. Mru is itself a *non*-South Central Tibeto-Burman language, forming a small family with Hkongso, and possibly Anu, both spoken across the border in Myanmar (Peterson and Wright 2009). While most indigenous languages in the region are under threat, Mru is relatively healthy, by comparison. (1) shows the position of Rengmitca in the South Central (SC) group.

(1) South Central Tibeto-Burman (=Kuki-Chin) subgrouping (Peterson 2017):

- A. Northwestern (=Old Kuki: Monsang, Lamkang, Chiru, etc.)
- B. Central
  - i. Core Central (Hakha Lai, Mizo, etc.)
  - ii. Maraic (Maraa, Senthang, etc.)
- C. Peripheral
  - i. Northeastern (Tedim, Sizang, etc.)
  - ii. Southeastern (Hyow, Ashö, Daai, etc.)
  - iii. Southwestern (Khumi, Mro-Khimi, Lemi, Rengmitca, etc.)

This paper provides a treatment of the South Central (henceforth SC) stem alternation (see, among others, Bedell et al. 2013; King 2009) in Rengmitca, which is clearly

---

\* My work with Rengmitca has been supported by NSF #BCS-1360770. Work with Khumi and Mru was supported by NSF #BCS-0349021. Thank you especially to Lelung Khumi, Kaingwai Mro, Yangngan Mro, Inchong Mro, Ngujpöng, Cipri, Mangpün, Thwäjnglök, Kunraw, Rengpün, Menraw, Renglök, Thingwöj, Pajja, Hämpå, Rengpün, and Muhammad Zakaria. Thank you also for logistical support to the International Mother Language Institute and its Director General, Jinnat Imtiaz Ali, and Naira Khan and Sikder Monoare Murshed, University of Dhaka Department of Linguistics. This work was first presented at NEILS 9 in Silchar. My thanks to the audience at the conference for useful comments and questions. In addition, I would like to express my gratitude to an anonymous reviewer, Stephen Morey, and Linda Konnerth for suggestions and queries that have improved the final product.

evident in the language. Consider (2a), (2c), and (2d) vs. (2b). In these examples, the verb ‘go’ has two forms: *ke*<sup>1</sup> and *kek*<sup>2</sup>.<sup>1</sup>

- (2) a. *hi*<sup>3</sup> *ngset*’*röng*=*peng*<sup>2</sup> *ke*<sup>1</sup>  
 DEM gaur=ANIM.LOC g<sub>O<sub>B</sub></sub>  
 ‘“Go to this gaur’s place!”’ (306.27)<sup>2</sup>
- b. *ngset*’*röng*=*peng*<sup>2</sup> *kek*<sup>2</sup>  
 gaur=ANIM.LOC g<sub>O<sub>D</sub></sub>  
 ‘They went to gaur’s place.’ (306.28)
- c. ...*t*’*wöm*<sup>2</sup>=*peng*<sup>2</sup>=*ngö* *ke*<sup>1</sup>=*bät*<sup>2</sup> *t*’*wöm*<sup>2</sup>=*peng*<sup>2</sup>=*ngö*  
 bear=ANIM.LOC=LOC g<sub>O<sub>B</sub></sub>=IMPER bear= ANIM.LOC=LOC  
 ‘“...Go to bear’s place, to bear’s.”’ (306.33)
- d. *t*’*wöm*<sup>2</sup>=*peng*<sup>2</sup>=*ngö*=*wet*<sup>4</sup>=*dök*<sup>4</sup>=*ti*<sup>3</sup> *t*’-*ke*<sup>1</sup>  
 bear=ANIM.LOC=LOC=PFV=REAL=EVID NR-g<sub>O<sub>B</sub></sub>  
 ‘They went to bear’s.’ (306.34)

As we will see, there are morphosyntactic conditions (e.g., imperative vs. indicative, as here, but not only this distinction,) which dictate the use of one versus the other of these forms in Rengmitca. The conditions in question closely resemble the conditions that are relevant for stem choice in other SC languages.

In section 2 I briefly discuss the formal characteristics and overall frequency of the alternation. Following this, section 3 outlines the morphosyntactic distribution of the alternation in detail and highlights similarities and differences from what is found elsewhere in SC. By way of conclusion, section 4 discusses the alternation as manifested in

<sup>1</sup> In the interlinear glosses, following the terminology suggested by Bedell et al. (2013), I adopt the distinction between base (subscript B) and derived (subscript D) forms for distinguishing the two forms where a given item exhibits alternation. *Base* corresponds to the form which otherwise has been typically (though not always) referred to as “form 1” or “stem 1” and *derived* corresponds the form which otherwise has been typically referred to as “form 2” or “stem 2”. In what follows, the relevant portion of each example is underlined for clarity.

<sup>2</sup> Examples are coded according to page number in the author’s fieldnotes (first number) and line within the relevant text (second number). I represent Rengmitca here with a fairly transparent practical orthography. *h* following a consonant generally indicates aspiration and ‘ separates the minor syllable of a sesquisyllabic structure from its following major syllable. *ü* approximates IPA *ɿ*, *ö* approximates IPA *ɘ*, and *å* represents IPA *ɔ*. Tone has not been verified for the entire corpus, but where possible, underlying tones are represented with superscript numerals following their associated syllable (1: high level, 2: checked high level, 3: falling, 4: checked falling); this representation does attempt to capture the effects of tone sandhi, which are quite extensive but not yet fully understood. For certain grammatical markers, tone is left unspecified because it is not yet clear what their underlying tones are. So far, grammatical tone does not appear to play as far-reaching a role in this language as it does in, for instance, Khumi; however, see my remarks about bare imperative forms below.

Rengmitca from a diachronic perspective. The data for the study is primarily a naturalistic corpus consisting of about twenty-five texts of different lengths and genres, mostly narrative (approximately five hours total).

## 2 Formal aspects of the alternation

Let us begin with a consideration of the formal characteristics of the stem alternation in Rengmitca. The phenomenon in this language is lexically restricted, although there may be so far undetected tonal manifestations.<sup>3</sup> The detected alternation otherwise involves only cases of  $(C')CV$  (base form) vs.  $(C')CVk$  (derived form). (3) gives a list of the verbs seen to exhibit an alternation; it should be evident that these constitute only an insignificant percentage of the language's total verbal lexicon, making this probably one of the most marginal attestations of the stem alternation in SC. However, note that these are probably some of the highest-frequency verbal stems occurring in naturalistic discourse, so the actual occurrence of alternations in running discourse is much more frequent than this small list might suggest. (4) provides instances of verbs which appear to never alternate, including both verbs with final vowels and verbs with non-alternating final *k*.

(3) verbs exhibiting the alternation<sup>4</sup>:

*pö(k)<sup>4/2</sup>* 'give', *la(k)<sup>1/2</sup>* 'take', *ke(k)<sup>1/2</sup>* 'go', *wö(k)<sup>1/4</sup>* 'come', *na(k)<sup>1/2</sup>* 'say', *på(k)<sup>1/2</sup>* 'go up', *ne(k)<sup>1/2</sup>* 'drink', *ca(k)<sup>1/2</sup>* 'eat', *sa(k)<sup>4/2</sup>* 'do, make', *khü(k)* 'pick up', *hu(k)* 'throw', *i(k)<sup>1/2</sup>* 'sleep', *t'ma(k)* 'disappear'

(4) verbs not exhibiting a clear alternation:

a. non-alternating *V*-final: *nu<sup>4</sup>* 'see', *dü<sup>4</sup>* 'die', *cå* 'attack, catch', *kha* 'cry', etc.

b. non-alternating *k*-final: *khek* 'overnight', *klök<sup>4</sup>* 'hoe, cut', *thåk<sup>2</sup>* 'go out', etc.

c. others: *dang<sup>4</sup>* 'get', *khön<sup>4</sup>* 'look', *khum<sup>1</sup>* 'descend', *jap<sup>4</sup>* 'look for', *kat* 'shoot', etc.

---

<sup>3</sup> As mentioned, Rengmitca has at least four lexical tone distinctions. For a given stem, bare imperatives, (as in 2a as opposed to 2c or other related categories, such as hortatives – see 7 below,) appear to sometimes involve a shift in tone compared to the tone that stem would have in indicatives, nominalizations, etc.; at this point, the change in tone appears to be an orthogonal issue to the overall base/derived stem distributions discussed in this paper. That is, this tonal shift detected with imperatives is probably best analyzed as an independent feature of this type of imperative rather than as an aspect of the overall system of stem alternation.

<sup>4</sup> Tone is indicated where it has been verified. The base form tone is given on the left and the derived form tone on the right. For the class of verbs exhibiting alternation, while not without exception, there appears to be a tendency for the base form to have tone 1 (high level) and the derived form to have tone 2 (high level checked). In addition to the forms listed here, the form *m'nö(k)* 'know' appears to be treated by some speakers as alternating.

### 3 Distribution of alternants

We turn now to the distribution of alternants. The overall distribution of stem alternants in Rengmitca involves parameters comparable to those seen for other SC languages (Bedell et al. 2013; King 2009). However, the distribution is not identical. In section 3.1. and its subsections, I will explore ways in which the stem alternation is similar to what has been described for other SC languages. Section 3.2 and its subsections explores ways in which the stem alternation deviates from what other languages lead us to expect.

#### 3.1 Familiar distributional patterns

##### 3.1.1 Imperative base form vs. indicative derived form

First, as in many SC languages, the base form occurs in imperatives while the derived form occurs in indicatives/declaratives. We already saw this in examples (2a) and (2c) vs. (2b). Some additional examples are given in (5), where the base form *ne<sup>1</sup>* ‘drink’ occurs in an imperative/request, but the derived form (*nek<sup>2</sup>*) occurs in (6), where ‘drink’ is indicative.

- (5) ...*urammö*      *ju<sup>2</sup>*      *neng-*      *ne<sup>1</sup>*      *klen<sup>3</sup>-t'='eja*  
 ...step-mother      rice.beer      (mistake)      drink<sub>B</sub>      once-QUANT=REQ

*nak<sup>2</sup>-p'='ti<sup>3</sup>*

say<sub>D</sub>-BEN=EVID

‘... “Step-mother, drink beer (once) please,” they said’ (135.140)

- (6) *bu<sup>2</sup>*    *cak<sup>2</sup>*    *an<sup>3</sup>*    *cak<sup>2</sup>*    *örak<sup>4</sup>*      *nek<sup>2</sup>*      *m'se<sup>2</sup>röra<sup>2</sup>...*  
 rice    eat<sub>B</sub>    curry    eat<sub>B</sub>    rice.liquor      drink<sub>D</sub>      etc.  
 ‘They ate and drank and so on...’ (113.97)

Example (7) shows that the base form is also used with other imperative-like categories, such as the hortative:

- (7) ...*ajnit<sup>2</sup>*      *ke<sup>1</sup>-hö<sup>2</sup>-t'kut<sup>4</sup>=st<sup>2</sup>*      *tukö<sup>2</sup>=ti<sup>3</sup>*      *thuj<sup>4</sup>-pö*  
 1DINCL      go<sub>B</sub>-ANDAT-back=HORT      thus=EVID      say-BEN  
 ‘“Let’s go back,” he said to him.’ (268.68)

##### 3.1.2 Irrealis base form vs. realis derived form

Next, as seen in (8), base forms (here, the form *ca<sup>1</sup>* ‘eat’) are used when there is overt irrealis marking. Compare example (6), where *cak<sup>2</sup>* occurs in a realis context. Note that although the irrealis is not formally marked in (9), (or, alternatively, here the sense of

irrealis is conveyed by the perseverative marker *-rân<sup>2</sup>* in the first instance of ‘go up’, the base form *pâ<sup>1</sup>* is used since it is notionally an as yet unrealized event. The derived form, *pâk<sup>2</sup>*, occurs later in the example because in this case it refers to a realized event.

- (8) *öm<sup>4</sup>=le<sup>3</sup>*                      *öm<sup>4</sup>*                      *ca<sup>1</sup>-kôm<sup>3</sup>*                      *tukö<sup>2</sup>=ti<sup>3</sup>*                      *thuj<sup>4</sup>-pö...*  
 believe=EMOT                      believe                      eat<sub>B</sub>-IRR                      thus=EVID                      say-BEN  
 ‘ “We believe! We believe. We’ll eat,” they said to him.’ (264.29)

- (9) *t’ma*                      *kaj<sup>3</sup>*                      *pâ<sup>1</sup>-cam<sup>2</sup>=rân<sup>2</sup>=ti<sup>3</sup>*                      *pâk<sup>2</sup>*  
 jungle.cat                      1S                      go.up<sub>B</sub>-ANDAT=PERS=EVID                      go.up<sub>D</sub>  
 ‘Jungle cat (said), “I’m going to (still) go up,” and he went up.’ (158.13)

### 3.1.3 Negative base form vs. affirmative derived form

As in many other SC languages, the base form also occurs in negative contexts, while the derived form occurs in affirmative contexts. Thus, in (10), the base form of ‘drink’ (*ne<sup>1</sup>*) is used and in (11) the base form of ‘take’ (*la<sup>1</sup>*) is used because these events are negated.

- (10) *thangbâ*                      *ng’-deng<sup>4</sup>*                      *m’lung<sup>2</sup>*                      *be<sup>4</sup>=wet<sup>4</sup>=ti<sup>3</sup>*                      *ne<sup>1</sup>-’ö*  
 yeast (=additives)                      VEN-pound                      heart                      hot=PFV=EVID drink<sub>B</sub>-NEG  
 ‘They pounded the mixture, it was spicy, (and so they) didn’t drink it.’ (295.4)

- (11) *ö*                      *la<sup>1</sup>-’ö*                      *kaj<sup>3</sup>*                      *nu<sup>4</sup>=l’=hi<sup>3</sup>*                      *tukö<sup>2</sup>=ti<sup>3</sup>*                      *thuj<sup>4</sup>-pö*  
 INTERJ                      take<sub>B</sub>-NEG                      1S                      see=TOP=DEIC                      thus=EVID                      say-BEN  
 ‘ “Oh, they didn’t take it. I saw,” ’ he said to them.’ (282.176)

(10) may be contrasted with example (6), where we saw an affirmative (indicative, realis) use of the same verb, ‘drink’, requiring the derived form (*nek<sup>2</sup>*).

## 3.2 Less familiar distributional patterns

There are also ways in which the distribution of the base vs. the derived forms differs from what the phenomenon in other languages might lead us to expect. This is not to say that there are no languages which pattern as Rengmitca does; however, these distributional features are less robustly attested.

### 3.2.1 Base form with *t’*- nominalizer

Based on current evidence, there appears to be a marked tendency for the derived stem to occur in nominalization and related contexts. For instance, the derived stem sometimes simply provides a nominal in Hakha Lai, Mizo (Chhangte 1993:161), and Hyow (Zakaria 2017:262-3). For some languages (e.g., Lai) there is a tendency for dependent clauses to make use of the derived stem, which is then marked by otherwise nominal case

morphology in expressing specific temporal or notional relationships between the dependent and main clause events.

This tendency is far from absolute, however. In many languages there is variability in dependent clauses' requirement for the base or derived stem depending on the particular construction involved. For instance, in Sizang, conditional clauses require the base stem while other adverbial and complement clauses make use of the derived stem; there is also differential behavior in relative clause formation depending on the role of the relative clause head (Davis 2017:78). Zakaria (2017:279) makes similar observations regarding constructional variability in terms of the distribution of base/derived stems in Hyow's subordination contexts.

The most frequent nominalizer in Rengmitca is a prefix *t'*-, which invariably requires use of the base form rather than the derived form. As seen in (12) and (13), if a verb is nominalized using this prefix, the base form occurs (*na*<sup>1</sup> in (12) and *ca*<sup>1</sup> in (13); cf. the occurrence of the derived forms for these verbs (*nak*<sup>2</sup> and *cak*<sup>2</sup>) in non-nominalized contexts at the end of each sentence).

- (12) *dök*<sup>4</sup>*la*<sup>3</sup>                      *bâjca*<sup>2</sup>=*kli*<sup>3</sup>                      *tik*<sup>2</sup>=*wet*<sup>4</sup>=*be*<sup>3</sup>                      *t'-na*<sup>1</sup>=*n'i*<sup>2</sup>  
 then                                  child=COLL                                  what=PFV=INTERR                      NR-say<sub>B</sub>=SEQ

*cingcöj*=*le*<sup>3</sup>    *kaj*<sup>3</sup>    *nak*<sup>2</sup>-*pö*  
 spirit=EMOT    1S    say<sub>D</sub>-BEN

'Then, the children said, "What's that?" and I said, "It's a spirit!" ' (317.3)

- (13) ...*plitcö*<sup>2</sup>=*ti*<sup>3</sup>                      *sângkhiw*                      *t'-ca*<sup>1</sup>-*pö*                      *samrethaj*                      *cak*<sup>2</sup>-*pö-phjang*<sup>2</sup>  
 completely=EVID                      treeshrew                      N-eat<sub>B</sub>-MAL                      galangal                      eat<sub>B</sub>-MAL-EXHAUST  
 '...treeshrew ate them all on him, he ate all the galangal (roots) on him.' (217.33)

### 3.2.2 Base form in relativization

As just alluded to for Sizang, in some SC languages, the role of the relative clause head may require use of one or another stem form (e.g., Hakha Lai uses the base form for relativization on S/A participants vs. the derived form for relativization on P participants). The corpus does not contain many instances of relativization. However, it would appear that in Rengmitca, where relativization makes use of the nominalizing prefix described in the previous section, only the base form occurs, regardless of the role of the head internal to the relative clause. For instance, in (14), where the 'old woman' head of the bracketed relative clause is an A participant internal to the relative clause, the nominalizing prefix *t'* requires the base form.

(14) Relativization on A:

$p'i^4=haj^3=ti^3$	$p'i^4$	$[thing^3$	$t'-la^1]=haj^3$
old.woman=COM=EVID	old.woman	firewood	NR- <u>take</u> <sub>B</sub> =COM

$ta-ngkrum^4$

NR-meet

'He met with an old woman, an old woman who was collecting firewood.' (233.17)

We may contrast this with (15), in which the item taken by the grandmother and child is the P participant in the (bracketed) headless relative clause 'what we, grandmother and child, have taken'; here again, the  $t'$ -nominalizing prefix dictates use of the base stem form rather than the derived stem form.

(15) Relativization on P:

$\dots[kajnit^4$	$pi-ca^2$	$t'-la^1]=lö^3$
1DEXCL	grandmother-child	NR- <u>take</u> <sub>B</sub> =TOP

$ökre-ca$

stick-DIM

$m'se^2-ca-t'=rân^2$

etc.-DIM-QUANT=PERS

$t'-la^1$

NR-take<sub>B</sub>

' "...what we, grandmother and child, have taken, we've only taken a little stick." ' (266.43)

### 3.2.3 Base form vs. derived form with valence-affecting suffixes

Another pattern which is widespread in SC languages (e.g., in Hakha Lai, Mizo (Chhange 1993:100-102), Daai (So-Hartmann 2009:102-3)) is use of the derived stem form in conjunction with valence-affecting constructions, such as causatives and applicatives. In such languages, this preference holds regardless of what other factors might call for the use of the base form (e.g., negation, irrealis, etc.) Rengmitca shows greater flexibility: the other factors seen so far take precedence over the use of a particular stem alternant in a valence-affecting construction. For instance, (16) shows that the derived form of 'make' ( $sak^2$ ) occurs in conjunction with the here malefactive applicative marker  $-pö$ .<sup>5</sup> However, it is likely that the reason for this is simply that the form is indicative, affirmative, and realis; hence the derived form is expected anyway, given what previous sections have shown.

---

<sup>5</sup> Like many benefactive applicatives, this one may also exhibit malefactive semantics if appropriate in context. Also like virtually all benefactive applicatives (and all of the known ones in SC), this marker stems from the verb 'give', which as we have seen, exhibits the stem alternation in Rengmitca. In its role as an applicative marker,  $-pö$  appears to vary in terms of its tone depending on the preceding tone, so it is left underspecified here. It is noteworthy that this marker reduces to a minor syllable  $p'$ - whenever it is followed by a clitic.

- (16) *-pö* benefactive/malefactive:  
*...m'sü*      *sak<sup>2</sup>-pö*  
 snare      make<sub>B</sub>-MAL  
 '...He made a snare (trap) for him.' (218.41)

If, however, another factor is present, such as the *t'*-nominalizer, as seen in (17), or that the verb is imperative, as in (18), or that the event is irrealis, as in (19a) and (19b), or that the event is negative, as in (20), the base form of the verb occurs.

- (17) *t'*-nominalizer with *-pö*:  
*...tapkung<sup>3</sup>*    *nak<sup>2</sup>=nö=ti<sup>3</sup>*      *maj<sup>3</sup>*      *t'-sa<sup>1</sup>-pö*  
 hearth      beside=LOC=EVID    fire      NR-make<sub>B</sub>-BEN  
 '...she made a fire for him next to the hearth.' (71.8)

- (18) imperative with *-pö*:  
*mangkri<sup>3</sup>*    *thuj<sup>4</sup>-pö=mi<sup>2</sup>* *bu<sup>2</sup>*    *pö<sup>2</sup>-pö*      *an<sup>3</sup>*    *pö<sup>2</sup>-p'= 'e*  
 king      say-BEN=NR    rice    give<sub>B</sub>-BEN    curry    give<sub>B</sub>-BEN=IMPER  
 'The king said to them, "Give them food." ' (266.47)

- (19) irrealis with *-pö*:  
 a.    *imka<sup>2</sup>*    *ngaj<sup>4</sup>=rän<sup>2</sup>*    *imka<sup>2</sup>*    *sa<sup>1</sup>-p'=köm<sup>3</sup>...*  
       deck    want=PERS    deck    make<sub>B</sub>-BEN=IRR  
       'A deck is still needed, we make a deck (for it)...' (52.22)  
 b.    *himi<sup>3</sup>*      *m'sü*      *sa<sup>1</sup>-p'=rän<sup>2</sup>...*  
       DEM      snare      make<sub>B</sub>-BEN=PERS  
       'I'll make a snare for him.' (218.40)

- (20) negative with *-pö*:  
*angreng<sup>3</sup>*      *c'pa<sup>3</sup>=nö=lö<sup>3</sup>*      *n'aj<sup>4</sup>-p'aj<sup>4</sup>*      *maj<sup>3</sup>=pö<sup>3</sup>*  
 rich      son=LOC=TOP      mother-father      fire=FOC

*sa<sup>1</sup>-p'- 'ö=ti<sup>3</sup>*  
make<sub>B</sub>-BEN-NEG-EVID  
 'The rich son, his parents didn't make a fire for him.' (72.9)

Turning to a second applicative in Rengmitca, the generalized *-haj<sup>2</sup>* applicative<sup>6</sup>, (21) shows that the derived form (*lak<sup>2</sup>*) occurs in indicative (non-irrealis, non-negative, non-imperative, non-nominalized) contexts.

<sup>6</sup> There are also rare instances where *-haj<sup>2</sup>* has causative semantics in Rengmitca, as seen for cognate morphology in Khumi and Lemi (So-Hartmann 2014).

- (21) *-haj<sup>2</sup>* generalized applicative:  
*kh'lö<sup>3</sup> p'thun*      *tāngpuj=lö<sup>3</sup>*      *an<sup>3</sup>*      *t'-hāj<sup>4</sup>*      *bu<sup>2</sup>*  
 then (name)      wife=TOP      curry      NR-good      rice
- t'-hāj<sup>4</sup>*      *lak<sup>2</sup>-p'-haj<sup>2</sup>...*  
 NR-good      take<sub>D</sub>-BEN-APP  
 'Then P'thun's (bear's) wife took along good food for him...' (226.85)

However, as with *-pö*, if any other factor is operative, such as nominalization (22), imperative (23), or negation (24), the base form of the verb (*la<sup>1</sup>*) occurs.<sup>7</sup>

- (22) *t'*-nominalizer with *-haj<sup>2</sup>*:  
*p'thun=lö<sup>3</sup>*      *mün<sup>2</sup>=ti<sup>3</sup>*      *t'-la<sup>1</sup>-haj<sup>2</sup>*  
 bear (name)=TOP      large.basket=EVID      NR-take<sub>B</sub>-APP  
 'P'thun (bear) took along a large basket.' (215.8)
- (23) imperative with *-haj<sup>2</sup>*:  
 ...*m'khā<sup>3</sup>-kāng<sup>3</sup>*      *kaj<sup>3</sup>*      *nu<sup>4</sup>=wet<sup>4</sup>=dök<sup>4</sup>*      *pa<sup>3</sup>=ö<sup>3</sup>*      *hajkek<sup>2</sup>*  
 bead-tree      1S      see=PFV=REAL father=voc      dao
- ng-la<sup>1</sup>-haj<sup>2</sup>*      *m'rek<sup>2</sup>*      *ng-la<sup>1</sup>-haj<sup>2</sup>*      *nak<sup>2</sup>-p'=ti<sup>3</sup>*  
 VEN-take<sub>B</sub>-APPaxe      VEN-take<sub>B</sub>-APPSay<sub>D</sub>-BEN=EVID  
 ' "...I saw a bead tree. Father, bring a dao, bring an axe!" he said to him.' (99.106)
- (24) negative with *-haj<sup>2</sup>*:  
*tukö<sup>2</sup>=h'=lö<sup>3</sup>*      *t'se*      *la<sup>1</sup>-haj<sup>2</sup>-'ö=ti<sup>3</sup>*  
 thus=TEMP.LOC=TOP      rain.basket      take<sub>B</sub>-APP-NEG=EVID  
 'At that time she didn't take along a rain basket (=rain shield).' (182.32)

### 3.3 Base form vs. derived form in non-main clauses

One other respect in which Rengmitca's stem alternant distribution differs from the usual pattern seen in SC is in terms of the stem choice for non-main clauses. As already noted, in many other languages there is a tendency for the derived form to occur in non-main clauses, regardless of other factors (e.g., see King 2009 for various Central and Northeastern languages). In Rengmitca, as we saw for the stem used in valence-affecting constructions, there is also variation in terms of the stem form based on other relevant factors. Thus, in (25b), which immediately follows (25a) in a narrative text, the (bracketed) dependent sequential clause marked by *=dök<sup>4</sup>la<sup>3</sup>* contains the derived form of 'go up' (*pāk<sup>2</sup>*).

<sup>7</sup>Irrealis forms with *-haj<sup>2</sup>* are also attested, but so far not without an accompanying *t'*-nominalizer, so it is unclear whether the nominalizer or the irrealis status of the clause is responsible for the occurrence of the base form in these examples.

- (25) a.  $dök^4la^3$        $nawnit^2$        $ica^2=ngö (=nö)$        $t'bang^4=ba^3$   
then                      3D                      siblings=LOC                      hold.on=REQ
- $nak^2-p'=ti^3$                        $t'maj^1=ngö (=nö)$        $s'uj^3$                        $pāk^2-haj^2$   
say<sub>D</sub>-BEN=EVID                      tail=LOC                      civet.cat                      go.up<sub>D</sub>-APP  
‘Then, she said to the siblings, “Hold on, ok?” and civet cat went up with them on her tail.’ (308.48)
- b. [ $pāk^2-haj^2=dök^4la^3$ ]                       $hi^3=ngö (=nö)$                        $ting^4=wet^4=dök^4$   
go.up<sub>D</sub>-APP=SEQ                      DEM=LOC                      reach=PFV=REAL  
‘Having gone up with them, they reached here.’ (308.49)

However, in (26), where the irrealis marker is present in a postposed but still dependent sequential clause (again bracketed), a similar situation requires use of the base form of ‘eat’ ( $ca^1$ ).

- (26) ... $nang^3$        $thuj^4-plākplāk^2=tu^3$                       [ $bu^2$        $an^3$        $ca^1=köm^3=dök^4la^3$ ]  
2S                      speak-carelessly=DEIC                      rice      curry      eat<sub>E</sub>=IRR=SEQ
- $nak^2-p'=ti^3$   
say<sub>D</sub>-BEN=EVID  
‘ “...You’ll talk badly about me when you’re eating food,” she said.’ (93.38)

Similarly, the  $=k'hö^1$  temporal locative-marked dependent adverbial clause bracketed in (27) contains the derived form of ‘come’ ( $wök^4$ ) because the event is affirmative and realis. In (28), though, a similar adverbial clause type uses the base form of the verb ( $wö^1$ ) because the event is negated (and additionally is notionally irrealis due to the combination of negative and perseverative marking.)

- (27) [ $ng-wök^4=wet^4=dök^4=k'h'=lö^3$ ]                       $ng-nök$   
VEN-come<sub>D</sub>=PFV=REAL=TEMP.LOC=TOP                      VEN-bring  
‘When they came, they brought them.’ (105.18)
- (28)  $nak^2dök^4la^3$       [ $nawnit^2$        $ng-wö^1-’ö=rän^2=k'hö^1$ ]...  
then                      3D                      VEN-come<sub>E</sub>-NEG=PERS=TEMP.LOC  
‘Then, when they had not yet arrived...’ (104.7)

### 3.4 Questions?

A final area which might be considered is the occurrence of stem forms in questions. For some SC languages (e.g., Hakha Lai) polar questions require use of the base rather than the derived form. Unfortunately the Rengmitca corpus does not contain any relevant data on this issue at present.

### 3.5 Summary

The following table summarizes what we have seen about the distribution of base and derived stem forms in Rengmitca:

**Table 1: distribution of base and derived stems**

	BASE STEM	DERIVED STEM
<i>t'</i> -NOMINALIZATION	*	-
IMPERATIVE	*	-
IRREALIS	*	-
NEGATIVE	*	-
VALENCE-AFFECTING CONSTRUCTION	*	*
DEPENDENT CLAUSE	*	*
AFFIRMATIVE REALIS INDICATIVE	-	*

## 4 Some diachronic considerations

In closing, I will make some observations of a diachronic nature. First, I will talk about the nominalization pattern in Rengmitca relative to what we see elsewhere in SC. Then I will offer some speculative observations regarding the SC stem alternation.

### 4.1 Nominalization patterns

The occurrence of the base form with the *t'*- nominalizing prefix is of note, particularly in light of the occurrence of the same stem form with the presumably cognate prefix in Daai. So-Hartmann 2009 (174) cites forms such as those in (29):

(29) *k*- nominalization in Daai:

- a.     *kshum*         *k-shu*  
           paddy         NR-pound<sub>B</sub>  
           ‘paddy pounder, one who pounds paddy’<sup>8</sup>
- b.     *tui:*           *k-la*  
           water         NR-fetch<sub>B</sub>  
           ‘one who fetches water’

---

<sup>8</sup>So-Hartmann’s stem B corresponds in most respects to the base form described by Bedell et al. (2013); her stem A corresponds in most respects to the derived form. This nominalizer may also occur with So-Hartmann’s stem A in the case of state or activity predicates, so its distribution is not entirely identical to the element seen in Rengmitca. Stephen Morey points out that there seems to be a relation between the ‘pound’ verb and the word for paddy; however, the other stem form for *shu* is *shuk*, according to the grammar (So-Hartmann 2009:104). While it may be related, it is more likely that the ‘paddy’ word is related to the word for ‘mortar’, PSC *\*shum*, according to VanBik (2009).

The  $t'$ - nominalizing prefix in Rengmitca is cognate with Daai's  $k'$ - nominalizer since the corresponding nominalizing prefix in Khumi is  $k(ang)$ -. This  $t\sim k$  correspondence is a regular one between Rengmitca and Khumi for lexical prefixes (cf. Rengmitca  $t'na^2$  'ear' and Khumi  $k'no^4$  'ear'.) These nominalizers in Khumi and Rengmitca presumably reflect Konnerth's (2016) Tibeto-Burman  $*gV$ - nominalizing prefix in SC.

While these are not the only attestations of this prefix, elsewhere in SC, as mentioned in section 3.2.1, there is a tendency for the derived stem either to stand by itself as a nominalized form, or for it to occur in conjunction with other dedicated nominalizers (e.g., the  $-tuu$  agentive nominalizer and the  $-naak$  instrumental and locative nominalizer in Hakha Lai.) Although it runs counter to the pattern seen widely in SC, where the derived stem form occurs in contexts of nominalization based on what are presumably more recent nominalization strategies, what we see in Rengmitca and Daai perhaps reflects a more archaic SC pattern.

#### 4.2 The origins and development of the stem alternation

Although it only affects a handful of verbs, the occurrence of the stem alternation in Rengmitca is noteworthy, especially given its similarities to the phenomenon as seen elsewhere in SC. Up to this point, we have uncovered no conclusive evidence of the alternation in other Southwestern languages which we have information for (e.g., Khumi, Lemi, Mro-Khimi (So-Hartmann 2014, So-Hartman 2008)). There are alternations in Khumi (e.g.,  $la^1\sim lo^6$  'take',  $ca^1\sim co^6$  'eat',  $sa^1\sim so^6$  'do, make') which VanBik (2009) suggests derive from the earlier presence vs. absence of a final consonant in the derived form, expected to occur in the affirmative vs. negative and imperative contexts. This Khumi evidence is fairly meager, the behavior being restricted to around five verbs that we know of.<sup>9</sup> Rengmitca provides much clearer evidence for the stem alternation in Southwestern SC, leading to the conclusion that it clearly must have been a feature of Proto-Southwestern, as in the other branches of the subgroup.

Nevertheless, the single strategy for forming the derived form in Rengmitca is quite simple in comparison to what is typical for other languages exhibiting stem alternation. Although his reconstructions appear to be based primarily on evidence from the Central and Northeastern subgroups, which tend to exhibit multiple patterns, VanBik (2009) reconstructs the following patterns of alternation for Proto-SC, ordered in terms of frequency:  $-ŋ_B\sim -n_D$ ,  $-\emptyset_B\sim -\gamma_D$ ,  $-k_B\sim -\gamma_D$ ,  $-\emptyset_B\sim -k_D$ ,  $-t_B\sim -\gamma_D$ ,  $-\emptyset_B\sim -t_D$ ,  $-p_B\sim -\gamma_D$ , and  $-n_B\sim -t_D$ . Regardless of the language, in systems with multiple patterns, the relationship between the alternants is always unpredictable, even if subpatterns are generally identifiable for a given language.

The  $-\emptyset\sim k$  alternation would appear to be one of the most robustly attested patterns in SC. Indeed, while not all of the stem alternations found in Rengmitca are reconstructed, VanBik (2009) reconstructs virtually identical alternations for a number of the prominent

---

<sup>9</sup> Meager though it may be, it nevertheless seems highly probable that this Khumi alternation does reflect the stem alternation, as it shows a similar distribution of allomorphs to that of other languages, and it applies to some of the exact same forms which exhibit stem alternation in Rengmitca.

lexemes in the list: \**laa-laak* 'take', \**pee-peek* 'give', \**saa-sak* 'build', \**nee-neek* 'eat', strongly suggesting that this was a pattern present at the PSC stage.

Accounts for the SC stem alternation vary widely, generally invoking a handful of two or more nominalizations and transitivizing (causative) suffixal elements (Benedict 1972, Chhangte 1993, Matisoff 2003, King 2009). None of these explanations appears to provide a coherent account for the widespread  $\emptyset\sim k$  alternation, however.<sup>10</sup> An exception to this is Zakaria 2017, who dispenses with a causative source for Hyow's alternations, instead positing three distinct nominalizing elements ( $-ʔ$ ,  $-t$ , and  $-k$ ) which give rise to the patterns attested for that Southeastern language. The latter of these would account for the  $\emptyset\sim k$  class seen in Southwestern.

Thinking specifically about Rengmitca and Southwestern, on the one hand, we might view the sparse system of Rengmitca as reflecting loss of a more complex system like the ones we see in other SC languages. Note that this could not simply be an aspect of the language's current endangerment, however, because other Southwestern languages show a comparable lack of evidence for a complex system of alternation. In the absence of evidence for a more elaborated system of stem alternation, it is probable that Proto-Southwestern had just this single aspect of the SC stem alternation.

Alternatively, we might view the  $\emptyset\sim k$  alternation pattern seen in Rengmitca as one of the basic patterns of stem alternation in SC, and it may be that Southwestern only ever developed that aspect of the alternation. Additional formation patterns may have been layered over it, or have developed alongside it, for languages which exhibit more complex stem alternations. They simply did not develop in Southwestern, resulting in the minimal occurrence of stem alternation there.

In the absence of further in-depth, systematic study of the stem alternation across the family it is unclear what arguments might effectively support the latter scenario over a simplification scenario. However, I will offer one consideration: Rengmitca is relatively conservative in terms of its retention of final nasals and plosives, including the reflexes of  $*-k$  seen in its stem alternation. In order for Rengmitca to have inherited the conservative finals it has, they must have also have been present at the Proto-Southwestern stage, including finals (e.g.,  $-p$ ,  $-t$ ,  $-n$ ) that potentially would reflect additional stem alternation classes, if they were present at that stage. Now, if the progenitor to the Southwestern system of alternation had additional stem alternation patterns, it is unclear why Southwestern languages would have lost all evidence of stem alternations besides the  $*\emptyset\sim k$  alternation class. In other words, if Pre-Proto-Southwestern had a more complex system of stem alternations, why are there no remnants of the other classes when, by the evidence Rengmitca provides, Proto-Southwestern must have had a much more conservative retention of final consonants than what is seen in other Southwestern languages?

---

<sup>10</sup> Benedict (1972:100-101) opines that  $-k$  is the usual reflex of a Tibeto-Burman  $-t$  causative suffix in Kuki-Naga, but does not appear to provide an explanation for this otherwise anomalous rhyme development. It is also not clear whether the element Benedict is referring to is the same as the  $-k$  involved in the  $\emptyset\sim k$  alternation, as he claims it alternates with glottal stop. Besides this, at least one of the alternations reconstructed by VanBik (2009) appears to potentially involve a  $-t$  suffix rather than  $-k$ , so it is unclear why  $-t$  would occur in some cases and  $-k$  in others.

The simple pattern seen in Rengmitca (and reflected in Khumi) is curiously reminiscent of a pattern of nominalization found in Mru. (30) gives just a few examples of Mru's suffixal *-k* nominalizer, which is not fully productive, though widespread.

- (30) Mru's suffixal *-k* nominalizer:  
*ku* 'steal'      *kuk* 'theft, 'thief'  
*kha* 'bitter'    *khak* 'bitterness'  
*pe* 'give'        *pek* 'giving'  
*ca* 'eat'         *cak* 'food'  
 etc.

This phenomenon in Mru thus closely resembles what appears to be a fairly basic manifestation of the stem alternation in SC; Mru otherwise does not exhibit stem alternation. Assuming that Mru(-Hkongso) is in a fairly close relationship with SC at some higher level within Tibeto-Burman, as has long been surmised, it is feasible that this nominalization pattern is related to the  $\emptyset \sim k$  alternation that is so widespread within SC.

I would suggest that the origin of the single stem alternation pattern attested in Rengmitca also reflects what was originally a nominalization strategy, as attested in Mru. Clearly, as a fundamental component of the stem alternation system it has taken on a different, non-nominalizing function in SC generally. This paper has also certainly argued that the derived form is not synchronically linked to nominalization in Rengmitca as it is elsewhere in the family; this is presumably because what may have originally been a nominalization pattern simply has not supplanted what must be an even older and to this day highly productive nominalization strategy in Rengmitca's *t'*-nominalizing prefix.

The tendency for SC derived forms to occur in non-final clauses and to exhibit other noun-like properties nevertheless perhaps reflects an original nominalizing function for the suffixal *-k* element in question.

#### ABBREVIATIONS

1DEXCL	1 <sup>st</sup> dual exclusive	HORT	hortative
1DINCL	1 <sup>st</sup> dual inclusive	IMPER	imperative
1S	1 <sup>st</sup> singular	INTERJ	interjection
2S	2 <sup>nd</sup> singular	INTERR	interrogative
3D	3 <sup>rd</sup> dual	IRR	irrealis
ANDAT	andative	LOC	locative
ANIM	animate	MAL	malefactive
APP	applicative	NEG	negative
BEN	benefactive	NR	nominalizer
COLL	collective	PERS	person
COM	comitative	PFV	perfective
DEIC	deictic	QUANT	quantifier
DEM	demonstrative	REAL	realis
DIM	diminutive	REQ	request

EMOT	emotive	TEMP	temporal
EVID	evidential	TOP	topic
EXHAUST	exhaustive		
FOC	focus		

## REFERENCES

- Bedell, George, Kee Shein Mang, Roland Siang Nawl, and Khawlsongkim Suantak. 2013. "The morphosyntax of verb stem alternation". Paper presented at the The First Workshop on Issues in Kuki-Chin Linguistics, ICSTLL 46, Dartmouth College.
- Benedict, Paul K. 1972. *Sino-Tibetan: A conspectus*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Chhange, Lalnunthangi. 1993. *Mizo syntax*. University of Oregon Ph.D. dissertation.
- Davis, Tyler. 2017. "Verb stem alternation in Sizang Chin narrative discourse". Payap University M.A. thesis.
- King, Deborah. 2009. "Structural and pragmatic functions of Kuki-Chin verbal stem alternations". *JSEALS* 1:141-157.
- Konnerth, Linda. 2016. "The Proto-Tibeto-Burman \*gV- nominalizing prefix". *LTBA* 39.1:3-32. 10.1075/ltba.39.1.01kon
- Löffler, Lorenz. 1960. "Khami/Khumi Vokabulare: Vorstudie zu einer sprachwissenschaftlichen Untersuchung". *Anthropos* 55:505-557.
- Matisoff, James A. 2003. *Handbook of Proto-Tibeto-Burman: System and philosophy of Sino-Tibetan reconstruction*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Peterson, David A. 2013. "Rengmitca: the most endangered Kuki-Chin language of Bangladesh". In Nathan W. Hill and Thomas Owen-Smith. eds. *Trans-Himalayan linguistics: Historical and descriptive linguistics of the Himalayan Area*, 313-327. Berlin: Mouton.
- Peterson, David A. 2017. "On Kuki-Chin subgrouping". In Picus S. Ding and Jamin Pelkey, eds. *Sociohistorical linguistics in Southeast Asia: New horizons for Tibeto-Burman studies in honor of David Bradley*, 189-209. Brill. 10.1163/9789004350519\_012
- Peterson, David A. and Jonathan Wright. 2009. "Mru-Hkongso: A new Tibeto-Burman grouping". Paper presented at ICSTLL 42, Payap University.
- So-Hartmann, Helga. 2009. *A descriptive grammar of Daai Chin*. Berkeley: STEDT monograph 7.
- So-Hartmann, Helga. 2014. "Properties of the Lemi verb complex". Paper presented at SEALS 24, University of Yangon.
- VanBik, Kenneth. 2009. *Proto-Kuki-Chin: A reconstructed ancestor of the Kuki-Chin languages*. STEDT monograph 7.
- Zakaria, Muhammad. 2017. *A grammar of Hyow*. Nanyang Technological University Ph.D. dissertation. 10.32657/10356/73237.