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*Review*

**A Grammar of Malimasa with Annotated Texts and Glossary (玛丽玛萨话语法研究及标注文本)**

By Zihe Li (李子鹤)

Beijing: Peking University Press (北京大学出版社) 2024

Peking University Chinese Linguistics Research Series (“北大中国语言学研究丛书”)

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xvii + 419 pages

Reviewed by Alexis Michaud

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## **1 Introduction: the crucial importance of documenting endangered Naish varieties**

Li Zihe, who has conducted in-depth research on Naish languages (a sub-branch of Sino-Tibetan languages that encompasses Naxi dialects in the broad sense, including Naxi, Na, and Laze) since the late 2000s, published in 2024 a monograph devoted to the Malimasa dialect (玛丽玛萨). This Naish variety is spoken in Weixi (维西塔城), on the north-eastern fringe of the Naxi area, some 175 km from Lijiang. It is not a study of the Naxi dialect of Weixi, which was described by Fu Maoji (Fù 1940; Fù 1941), but of a distinctly different variety.

The choice of language is judicious. Although the Naxi language of the Lijiang plain, selected as the standard variety of Naxi – the only officially recognized Naish language – still lacks an all-encompassing reference grammar, it benefits from a long tradition of scholarship. Since Liu Fu, founder of the ‘Laboratory of Phonetics and Musics’ (语音乐律实验室, the forerunner of the Laboratory of Language Sciences at Peking University 北京大学语言学实验室, where the author of the book under review is based), encouraged Fang Guoyu to return to his native Lijiang to study the Naxi scripts (Fang Guoyu & He Zhiwu 1995), research on Naxi has been continuous. He Zhiwu produced a grammatical outline (1987); Jiang Zhuyi contributed a series of studies (2015); and He Xueguang’s bilingual Naxi-Chinese grammatical introduction (2016) is rich in original insights. Two dictionaries are also available (He Jiren, Zhao Qinglian & He Jiezhen 2011; Pinson 2012). This is not the place to review the current research landscape in detail, but it is worth emphasizing that Naxi continues to attract scholarly attention, and that the existing documentation of the Lijiang Plain variety already provides a strong empirical basis for future morphosyntactic work. In addition to extensive collections of ritual texts – a corpus that remains difficult to interpret and therefore to use for linguistic research – there are excellent collections of oral literature in romanized Naxi orthography, published from the 1980s onwards. The pioneering accomplishments of Li Jishan 李即善 and He Xuecai 和学才 were carried forward with great dedication by He Jiezhen 和洁珍 and her colleagues, whose irreplaceable collections (He Jiezhen 2016; He Jiezhen et al. 2016a, b) will, one hopes, be fully recognized for their value in time.

In comparison, all other Naish languages remain under-documented. The appearance of monographs on a growing number of Naish dialects is therefore of inestimable value for future research. Like all Naish languages, Malimasa is gradually

disappearing, as the traditional chain of transmission has been broken. The author highlights (p. 4) the consequences of the 2004 closure of local primary schools that had provided village-based education. With the introduction of boarding schools located far from the villages, children have become monolingual in Chinese. Moreover, the Malimasa are a minority among minorities: in intergroup exchanges (particularly with Han, Tibetan, and Naxi fellow citizens), it is always the interlocutor's language, as the more prestigious one, that is chosen. As a result, Malimasa is confined to intra-group communication.

Importantly, Malimasa, though undoubtedly belonging to the same lower-level grouping as Naxi, Na and Laze, is not merely a dialect of any previously documented variety. Admittedly, certain Malimasa words match across-the-board forms found in another variety: for instance, Malimasa, like Laze, has /dze-|/ for "to eat" and "food" (a word whose history the author has analyzed elsewhere: Li 2019), and Malimasa /ʂa-|wa-|/ is reminiscent of Laze /ʂa-|væ-|/ (with the same meaning: 'to speak' / 'speech'). Also, some Malimasa forms appear intermediate between those attested in other languages. Thus, for 'snow', the labial-dental fricative found in Laze /vie/, corresponding to a stop consonant in Naxi /mbe/ and Na /bi/, suggests an intermediate stage in which the stop was spirantized before stabilizing as a fricative (Jacques & Michaud 2011). The Malimasa form for 'snow', [ʃe], analyzed as /wje/ (p. 9), fits precisely with this hypothesized intermediate stage: a labialized spirant, it has the potential to harden into a fricative, and may be viewed as an evolutionary link between the Naxi (and Na) and Laze stages. However, not all Malimasa forms can be inferred from documented varieties through phonological triangulation based on regular sound correspondences. Thus, the words 'star' and 'gallbladder', respectively /ku-|/ and /tɕi-|/ in Malimasa, are segmentally homophonous in Laze (/tsi/) and likewise in Na and Naxi (/ku-|/). The Malimasa data therefore substantially enriches the empirical basis for proto-Naish reconstruction: the reconstruction \*kri proposed for both items ('star' and 'gallbladder') on the basis of Na, Naxi and Laze (Jacques & Michaud 2011) needs to be improved in light of this new evidence. Although all Naish languages documented to date are highly eroded phonologically, the gradual accumulation of correspondences now allows for reconstructing a relatively high number of syllables.

Another instructive case concerns prenasalized stops. Malimasa has a series of prenasalized stops, but the correspondences with Naxi (which likewise has /ŋg nd mb/ homorganic stops, though some dialects, particularly downstream from Lijiang, have lost them) is not straightforward. For instance, 'mountain' is /dzy-|/ in Malimasa, whereas in Naxi it is /ŋgy-|/ [ɲy-|]. As a final example, the correspondences between certain nasalized vowels in Malimasa and syllables with a nasal initial in other dialects (Malimasa /ṽ-|/ corresponding to Na /m̃-|/ for 'under, underneath'; /wã-|/ corresponding to /ŋwɤ-|/ for 'five') do not match any of the patterns analyzed to date (Michaud, Jacques & Rankin 2012). Thus, the Malimasa data offer a promising basis for a fresh comparative study based on the tried-and-tested method of historical linguistics (Jacques & List 2019).

Progress in such fine-grained comparative work, in turn, has broader implications for panchronic analysis – that is, for formulating generalizations about sound changes that are independent of any particular language or language group (see in particular Lai 2023). Li Zihe's monograph on Malimasa is therefore an especially rewarding read for linguists interested in this area of Sino-Tibetan studies.

This review is organized into two sections: the first presents the book's contributions to documentation and analysis; the second offers critical remarks.

## 2 The monograph's empirical and analytical contributions

### 2.1 *A solid empirical basis*

The volume rests on first-hand field research begun in 2011 and pursued steadily since. It is rich in annotated texts, in keeping with the tradition of reference grammars: texts and glossaries together take up about half of the book. This emphasis on primary data reflects the author's care in establishing a solid empirical foundation and gives hope that the Malimasa speech dataset preserved in the national archive will eventually become available to scholars worldwide. The preservation and publication of field recordings constitutes a central mission for contemporary linguists, with major implications for research in phonetics (Garellek et al. 2020) and for linguistic inquiry more broadly (Thieberger 2016; Berez-Kroeker et al. 2018).

The author describes the unfolding of his work with commendable precision, specifying the cumulative duration of fieldwork (ten months between 2011 and 2023) and explaining how variation among speakers was handled. Methodological clarity extends to the consistent distinction between synchronic description (the main focus of the study) and the diachronic hypotheses introduced at a few points in the book.

### 2.2 *Some useful innovations*

Although the author does not make ambitious claims of methodological novelty, he quietly introduces several innovations of genuine value. In phonological notation, he transcribes medial glides as /w/ and /j/, e.g. writing /wɑ/ and /ja/ rather than /ua/ and /ia/. The latter notations might misleadingly suggest diphthongized vowels rather than glide+vowel sequences. He also makes judicious use of less common combinations of International Phonetic Alphabet symbols, such as /ɬw/ for the word '长圆木'. Such narrow transcriptions are especially helpful for approaching the phonetics of varieties with tightly coarticulated initials and rhymes.

In the analysis of morphosyntax, the well-developed sections on evidentiality and egophoricity (chapter 9) demonstrate the author's effort to assimilate the relevant knowledge from Tibetan linguistics to elucidate this Naish variety, which is in sustained contact with a Tibetan dialect. Malimasa appears to be the first Naish variety in which an egophoric system has been reported. Addressing this topic in detail significantly enriches the description, and will interest specialists of other languages of the region that display comparable phenomena.

### 2.3 *Fine-grained analysis of phonetics and phonology*

Another strength of the study lies in the fine-grained phonetic and phonological analysis that it sets out. Relevant instrumental data is provided: spectrograms,  $f_0$  measurements, formant frequency estimates, and averaged curves. On p. 16, the figure showing the non-overlapping time courses of the four tones compellingly demonstrates both the internal consistency of the categories identified and their clear phonetic

differentiation. The use of experimental-phonetic methods when they can shed light on a specific issue further contributes to the empirical solidity of the work.

Tone plays an important role in Malimasa phonology, as illustrated by tonal contrasts that support morphological distinctions such as the one between aɬmɛɬ ‘mother’ and the feminine suffix aɬmɛɬ, which makes it possible to differentiate unambiguously between ‘the female cat’ and ‘the mother cat’ (p. 50). In his analysis of tone, the author distinguishes carefully between tonal coarticulation and tonal sandhi. The phonological combination of two Mid tones (ɬ + ɬ) does not trigger tonal sandhi, whether in the combination of object and verb or in the combination of two nouns into a compound noun, as shown in Tables 2-3 and 2-4. On the other hand, tonal coarticulation rules lead to notably different avatars of this same phonological M(id) tone depending on its position within a disyllable: the second M tone in an M.M sequence (ɬ ɬ) is realized as [31]. In this context, it remains distinct from a Low tone, which is realized as [21] (as well as from a High tone, realized as [53]): there is no tonal neutralization, even though the tonal space within which M contrasts with L is significantly reduced.

This analysis requires some effort on the part of readers, because the narrow phonetic notation [31] is used for two distinct phonological tones, L and M, depending on context: the former in isolation, the latter in second position within a disyllable. Yet this system has the major advantage of underscoring the distance that exists, in the tonal domain, between the level of phonology (including ‘surface’ phonology, i.e. the phonological transcription of the observed sequences) and that of phonetic realization. The author records sandhi phenomena with exemplary precision, enabling a clear distinction between disyllabic compounds governed by the synchronically active sandhi rules and older disyllables whose tonal patterns do not conform to these synchronic rules (p. 19 in particular).

Last but not least, the author pays close attention to topics of language contact (with Tibetan, Chinese, and other neighbouring languages), while remaining cautious in his hypotheses on this topic, which, though not central to the work, enriches its broader perspective.

### **3 Some critical observations**

The following remarks are offered in the same constructive spirit as the preceding discussion. The monograph stands as a major step forward in the study of Malimasa and of the Naish branch more broadly; the comments below aim less at pointing out shortcomings than at situating some of the author’s choices within a wider context. Several of these points pertain to questions of historical affiliation and methodological orientation, which have a bearing on how descriptive data is organized and interpreted.

#### ***3.1 Classification and descriptive perspective: Loloish versus Na-Rgyalrongic approaches***

From the standpoint of phylogenetic classification, the author notes the position held by “a few foreign scholars” who regard Naxi as more closely related to the Rgyalrongic languages than to Burmese-Yi, yet he aligns with the view predominant in Chinese scholarship that situates Naxi (and, by implication, the Naish languages) nearer to

the Yi (a.k.a. Loloish, Ngwi) branch of Sino-Tibetan: “Our study suggests that Naxi is more oriented towards the Yi branch” (p. 4; original text: 我们的研究认为纳西语更偏向于彝语支). The precise diachronic import of the phrase “oriented towards” (偏向于) is, however, left unspecified.

Classificatory stance may seem to be entirely peripheral to the book, with no actual relationship to its contents, since the volume has a clear synchronic focus. The choice to favour a Loloish (Yi) perspective rather than a “Na-Rgyalrongic” (or “Na-Qiangic”) one is not without consequences for language description, however. It arguably draws the author’s attention away from pieces of comparative evidence that could be leveraged for contextualizing and interpreting his own empirical observations more fully. Although the monograph is synchronic in orientation, historical insights are not without value to shed light on synchronic patterns – provided that the two perspectives are kept analytically distinct, of course.

The author’s comparative work, which has produced a cross-variety database of unprecedented scope for the Naish subgroup, could be leveraged for epoch-making progress, analyzing the facts in a broader comparative context. One case in point is the suppletion in the forms for ‘year’, where one root, /k<sup>h</sup>ɿ/ , appears in classifier contexts (in counting years) and another root in combinations such as /ts<sup>h</sup>iɿwje-/ ‘this year’, /suɿwje-/ ‘next year’, /aɿwje-/ ‘last year’, and so on. This alternation is dutifully recorded in the book (p. 306) but left uncommented upon.

Yet the form /wje/ [ɿɛ] is clearly cognate with Naxi /be/, Laze /vie/ (showing lenition of the initial consonant into a labial-dental fricative, as also in ‘snow’, discussed earlier), and Na /ji/. This connection is relevant to questions of subgrouping. The suppletion for ‘year’ in Naxi contrasts sharply with the patterns found in the Yi (Loloish) group, while aligning Naxi with Tangut, where the labial-initial root is reconstructed as \*C-pja (proto-Tangut), and the form associated with numerals as \*kjuk. Rgyalrong has generalized the labial form (‘next year’ being an innovation), while the velar root was lost. In Lolo-Burmese languages, only the root related to Tangut \*kjuk survives. This comparison, summarized in Table 19 of Jacques and Michaud (2011), reproduced here as Table 1, bears directly on the historical interpretation of the Malimasa forms.

Meaning	Tangut	Gyalrong	Shuiluo Pumi	Muya	proto-Naish
last year	.ji <sup>2</sup> .wji <sup>1</sup>	japa	zépə	jø <sup>33</sup> zɑ <sup>24</sup>	... *C-ba
this year	pji <sup>1</sup> .wji <sup>1</sup>	ɣwɿpa	pəpə	pə <sup>33</sup> βə <sup>53</sup>	... *C-ba
next year	sjij <sup>1</sup> .wji <sup>1</sup>	fsɿq <sup>h</sup> e < *psaŋ-q <sup>h</sup> o-j	zək <sup>h</sup> iú	sæ <sup>33</sup> βə <sup>53</sup>	... *C-ba
one year	.a-kjiw <sup>1</sup>	tuw-xpa	tʰ-kó	tɛ <sup>55</sup> -kui <sup>53</sup>	... *k <sup>h</sup> u
two years	nji <sup>1</sup> -	ɸnuw-xpa	ɲí-kó		... *k <sup>h</sup> u

Table 1. Suppletion for ‘year’: cognates in Rgyalrong, Pumi, and Muya, with initial reconstruction for proto-Naish. Reproduced from Jacques and Michaud (2011).

Suppletion for ‘to go’, with distinct PAST and NON-PAST roots, reported on p. 41, could likewise be adduced for diachronic purposes: since this alternation is shared with Namuyi and Shixing (Xumi), members of the next higher-level grouping above Naish (Naic languages), it is unlikely to be a recent innovation (or borrowing) in Malimasa, and instead provides another comparative clue for a more detailed examination of phylogenetic relationships.

Tonal morphology can, as Matisoff (1973: 28) observed, “furnish invaluable clues to earlier stages of the language”; conversely, insights from historical phonology can aid synchronic description by drawing attention to specific points. The realization of the morpheme ‘ten’ without aspiration in the Malimasa numerals from twenty to twenty-nine, as /tsi˥/ (p. 33), is described as an “irregularity” (不规则) within a system where ‘ten’ is aspirated (ts<sup>h</sup>i˥) in other contexts. Yet this feature is shared by all Naish languages and thus represents a shared innovation, which actually extends beyond the Naish group (Michaud 2011).

Adopting a ‘pan-Naish’ perspective on the data would, for instance, invite closer attention to the tonal difference reported between ‘16’ and ‘18’ (p. 33), respectively /ts<sup>h</sup>i˥k<sup>h</sup>o˥/ and /ts<sup>h</sup>i˥ɿɿ/. The numerals ‘6’ and ‘8’ form a pair exhibiting identical tonal behaviour in all Naish languages documented to date (as do ‘1’ and ‘2’, and ‘4’ and ‘5’): “three pairs of numerals stand out: ‘1’ and ‘2’ always have the same tonal behaviour; likewise, ‘4’ and ‘5’ share the same tone patterns, as do ‘6’ and ‘8’. (...) [T]hese sets also behave identically in numerals from ‘11’ to ‘99’ and above: thus, ‘14’ and ‘15’ share the same tone pattern, etc.” (Michaud 2011). The identical tones of ‘6’ and ‘8’ as isolated numerals in Malimasa (pp. 33 and 326), as well as in ‘60’ and ‘80’ (p. 363) and in ‘6th month’ and ‘8th month’ (p. 332), fit neatly within this general pattern. Seen in this light, the reported tonal divergence between ‘16’ and ‘18’ in Malimasa calls for further investigation.

Such divergence could potentially shed light on the segmental materials that originally triggered the near pan-Naish similarity of these numeral pairs. Their separate evolution in Malimasa may have to do with a special pattern of consonant-cluster reduction. Yet a simpler hypothesis, at least at the time of writing of this review, is that the monograph documents a speech variety that has undergone piecemeal introduction of innovations containing the numeral ‘8’: forms produced through additional processes that took place in the context of another language variety. The variation in the segmental composition for ‘eight’ – /ɿ/ in its base form and in ‘18’ and /ɿ/ in /ts<sup>h</sup>e˥du˥ɿni˥/ ‘8th day of the month’ and /ɿla˥mɿ/ ‘8th month’ – lends a (small) degree of plausibility to this hypothesis. This may reflect dialect mixture, involving the borrowing of forms from an innovative dialect, or – less plausibly – language-internal processes to which the numeral ‘eight’ was subject in certain combinations. In any case, the way forward clearly lies in further data collection.

In conjunction with updates to the higher-level classification of Naish within Sino-Tibetan, there would also be benefits in revising the internal classification of Naxi (Naish) varieties. The assertion that Malimasa belongs to the ‘Eastern Naxi’ dialect group (p. 4) is not particularly illuminating. The binary division into ‘Western’ and ‘Eastern’ dialects proposed by He Jiren and Jiang Zhuyi (1985) has been perpetuated in subsequent works as an established fact, whereas it was originally advanced only as a provisional hypothesis, grounded in empirical data that was far less extensive than that available today. The remarkable diversity of phonetic correspondences now documented could warrant placing

Naxi (Naish) dialectology on a new footing, rather than relying on a time-worn two-way classification to accommodate newly described varieties whose internal richness and diversity are increasingly apparent thanks to progress in documentation and research.

A cross-dialect perspective could also provide a useful frame for assessing etymological proposals advanced for Malimasa vocabulary. From a diachronic standpoint, the bold hypothesis concerning the etymology of ‘colt’ /lɔ.lkoʎ/ – interpreted as a compound derived from a borrowing from the Burmese *mrang* ‘horse’, yielding Malimasa lɔ, combined with a diminutive suffix cognate with Tibetan *-bu* (on page 52) – assumes a shift from \*b to k through progressive assimilation of the place of articulation of the final velar nasal of the nominal root. Regressive assimilations are more common; to my knowledge, no cases are attested in which /p/ turns to /k/ under the influence of a preceding velar nasal. But leaving aside the issue of novelty (since one needs to keep an open eye for surprising discoveries, which, once confirmed, add to the portfolio of attested phonetic changes), the deeper problem is chronological. The item being a cognate and not a borrowing, how long can one reasonably suppose that the final nasal consonant -ŋ was preserved in the history of Naish languages? The hypothesis that it was retained until the period of contact with Tibetan, during which the suffixed form is hypothesized to have been coined, is undeniably bold. It would entail that final nasals survived longer in Malimasa than in Burmese. In Burmese, whose phonological history is relatively well known, the transphonologization of final nasals appears to have begun around the 17th century (Okell 1969); traces of these nasal consonants persist today through vowel nasalization. In Naic languages, while reconstruction proposals assume nasal codas in earlier stages, the absolute chronology of their loss remains unknown. Final consonants are absent from all Naish dialects documented to date, and there is no synchronic trace of them in the guise of vowel nasalization: nasal vowels in words of Naish stock derive instead from *initial* consonant clusters containing a nasal (Michaud, Jacques & Rankin 2012). An early study based on Naxi, Na and Laze considered that “[e]xamples of Naish words corresponding to etyma with back vowels and nasal codas are too few in our data to be studied with any profit” (Jacques & Michaud 2011). The persistent difficulty of identifying cognate sets that preserve any trace of former final nasals suggests (albeit with limited certainty) that their loss must be relatively ancient. From a cross-dialectal perspective, therefore, the hypothesis advanced for Malimasa /lɔ.lkoʎ/ ‘colt’ appears highly speculative, with a somewhat *ad hoc* character. Then again, the formulation of hypotheses has value to advance research, gradually progressing towards an improved picture, both synchronic and diachronic.

The second set of observations concerns tonal categories and tone-morphology interactions in Malimasa. In the tone system, again, what appears as irregularities can in fact provide windows into additional sets of regularities, once the data is interpreted in light of cross-dialectal comparison and diachronic layering.

### 3.2 *Questions for further research into the Malimasa tone system*

As is natural in an all-out description aiming to cover the full range of a language’s grammar, certain aspects still invite further investigation. Regarding tone, the volume under review leaves some questions open. Yongning Na has been the subject of a

monograph – Liberty Lidz’s doctoral thesis (Lidz 2010) – and its tonal system has been further analyzed in a subsequent study revealing numerous tonal categories and a complex morphotonology (Michaud 2025), a work with which Li Zihe is familiar, having provided a review of it (Li 2023). He states (p. 23 of the book) his conviction that the tone system of Malimasa does not exhibit such tonal complexity (“玛丽玛萨话中没有这种现象”), which is a fair point: tone in Malimasa appears much more stable than in Yongning Na.

The author also notes that Malimasa appears closer to the Na dialect of Lataddi, spoken in the Grass Sea area (Lugu Lake Marshes), as described by Dobbs and La (2016). If so, the study of Malimasa may, as research progresses, reveal additional layers of tonal complexity, similar to the developments observed for Lataddi. A recent doctoral dissertation on this dialect (Fily 2022), while confirming Dobbs and La’s observations, uncovers further subtleties through close observation of connected speech combined with targeted elicitation. It seems conceivable that future studies of Malimasa may follow the same path, gradually uncovering a diachronic layering of tone patterns (for various types of multi-word expressions, and for loanwords of different periods).

An instructive example of a subsystem where progress can be made is provided by the eight monosyllabic nouns associated with the feminine suffix *-mɛɫ* (p. 50). These examples cover only three of the four lexical tone categories of monosyllabic nouns, namely L (exemplified by */ts<sup>h</sup>uɫ/* ‘goat’, */waɫ/* ‘pig’, and */juɫ/* ‘sheep’), M (*/khuɫ/* ‘dog’, */ɣuɫ/* ‘cow’, */loɫ/* ‘horse’), and H (*/xwaɫ/* ‘rat’). The derived disyllables exhibit no full regularity: they fall into five different tonal patterns, namely L.L (‘goat’ and ‘sow’), M.H (‘rat’, ‘bitch’, and ‘hen’), L.R (‘cow’), H.M (‘ewe’), and L.H (‘mare’) [using standard abbreviations: H=High, M=Medium, L=Low, R=Rising].

Even within these limited data, correspondences between monosyllables and suffixed forms are far from straightforward. Among the L-tone roots, */ts<sup>h</sup>uɫ/* ‘goat’ and */waɫ/* ‘pig’ both yield L.L, yet */juɫ/* ‘sheep’ yields H.M. Similarly, the M.H pattern corresponds to two roots with different lexical tones: */xwaɫ/* ‘rat’ (H) and */k<sup>h</sup>uɫ/* ‘dog’ (M). The three M-tone nouns produce three different outcomes: */k<sup>h</sup>uɫ/* ‘dog’ yields M.H, */ɣuɫ/* ‘cow’ yields L.R, and */loɫ/* ‘horse’ yields L.H. (The monosyllabic form for ‘horse’ does not appear in the vocabulary list, which only offers entries for more specific terms such as ‘mare’ and ‘foal’, but it is found in the glosses, e.g. p. 39, with M tone.)

A sixth tonal pattern, H.H, appears on p. 368 for */ts<sup>h</sup>aɫmɛɫ/* ‘doe’, corresponding to a monosyllable with H tone (p. 7). This adds another type of correspondence between root and suffixed form, distinct from that observed for the other H-tone root, */xwaɫ/* ‘rat’. These observations by no means entail that the monosyllables involved belong to different synchronic lexical tone categories. It is plausible that the observed correspondences belong to several diachronic strata: some disyllables may reflect older morphotonological rules in suffixation, while others were coined (or minted anew) more recently, following a different set of tonal rules.

The point, then, is that certain dimensions of tonal complexity (especially diachronic) observed in Yongning may not be absent in Malimasa, contrary to the author’s current interpretation. It would therefore be worthwhile, if opportunity permits, to apply to Malimasa the analytical tools deployed for Yongning Na, probing the system incrementally under the hypothesis that tone rules are morphotonological rather than purely phonological. Taking again the example of the feminine suffix *-mɛɫ* (also used as

augmentative), a promising avenue would be to establish an inventory covering all tonal categories (can examples be found for monosyllables with rising tone?), to list all correspondences between roots and suffixed forms, and to project these correspondences into a diachronic space, hypothesizing different time depths.

As a tentative analogy, this field may prove comparable to tone change in Naxi dialects around the Lijiang plain, where changed tones are attested only in a limited number of items, making the investigation both more challenging and, in a sense, less rewarding than in Na. Progress there depends on systematic hypothesis generation and testing, with the modest aim of illuminating individual patterns. A Malimasa example here would be the root for ‘year’, /k<sup>h</sup>ɿ/], discussed above: it has L tone in most contexts, but M tone in /k<sup>h</sup>ɿ+ɿ+/ ‘the beginning of the year’ (年初, p. 306).

### 3.3 Questions of argumentation and terminology

Overall, the volume is very well written, and the author is careful not to overstate claims. As modestly noted on p. 5, the book is a revised and expanded version of a report prepared within the framework of the national linguistic documentation programme (“中国语言资源保护工程”). With a view to further refinement of this important work, one possible improvement would be to flesh out some of the arguments, making the reasoning more explicit where space permits.

For instance, it is not stated what the reported “loss” of the voiceless lateral phoneme /ʎ/ among speakers under sixty (p. 4) actually means. On the basis of rule-of-thumb typological plausibility, one would expect a merger with the voiced lateral /l/, but the author explained (p.c. 2025) that the merger is actually with /x/, not /l/. Clarifying this point in a future re-edition (or another publication) would definitely assist readers. Also, the phonetic transcriptions would deserve another round of systematic proofreading, to prevent confusion arising from occasional inconsistencies: for example, on p. 7, /tsa+/ ‘happy’ and /ts<sup>h</sup>o+/ ‘to lend’, both with Mid tone, are transcribed in narrow phonetic notation with “31”, the realization of Low tone, instead of “43”, the expected contour for Mid tone. Given the genuine structural complexity of Malimasa phonology and morphosyntax, every effort to minimize typographical difficulties is worth undertaking.

The terminology is generally clear and judiciously chosen, yet a few terms would benefit from greater precision. Thus, the description of tonal phonology as “cyclic” (p. 22: “在三音节或更大的音系单位里，声调音系规则是循环性 (cyclic) 的，依照语法层级依次运用”) invites closer scrutiny. The notion of recursive rule application – where tone sandhi rules apply within one unit, and then again at a higher level – is highly appealing, but the examples do not appear to demonstrate cyclicity in the classical sense: no instance shows a first application feeding or blocking a subsequent one. What the data illustrates, rather, is a single application of the sandhi mechanism at hierarchically ordered morphosyntactic levels. Unless further evidence emerges, describing the process as *hierarchical* rather than *cyclic* would seem both accurate and sufficient. If the term “cyclic” is retained, a clarification or re-definition would be advisable.

A final *desideratum* concerns bibliographic references. The study would gain in transparency and cumulative value from more systematic citations, linking specific statements to identifiable sources. For example, when an estimate of the Malimasa-

speaking population is provided (p. 4), it would be helpful to specify the census date and method on which the figure is based. This is not to question the quality of the information provided, but rather to frame it in a way that supports verifiability.

#### 4 Possible future directions for morphosyntactic research

Beyond the significant advances it reports, one of the enduring values of a work of this scope lies in its capacity to inspire further research: its quality whets the appetite to explore more deeply. The final note in this review is therefore devoted to possible directions for future morphosyntactic investigation.

As the author observes with respect to aspect: Malimasa appears to have “a system in which several types of grammatical meanings related to aspect are grammaticalized separately, and in most cases to a limited extent, forming a relatively loose system that is not completely detached from the semantic and pragmatic levels” (p. 117). This formulation captures a pattern shared with other languages of the area: as Sebastian Fedden (p.c. 2019) notes, it is difficult to articulate hard-and-fast syntactic generalizations for Naish, Yi, Burmish, and other languages in which grammatical morphemes function less rigidly – and more ‘syntagmatically’ – than in, for example, Rgyalrongic (Lin 2003; Lai 2017; Gong 2018; Zhang 2020; Jacques 2025).

A case in point is the Malimasa nominalizer clitic =leɿ, which occurs more than three hundred times in the volume. Examples include prototypical cases of nominalization, e.g. example (3-38), but also combinations as in (3-7):

(3-7)	aɿp <sup>h</sup> ɿɿ	xuɿ	dzɿɿ	tsiɿ	=leɿ.
	outside	rain	to fall	PROG	NMLZ
	‘It is raining.’				

The co-occurrence of nominalization and progressive aspect is particularly striking. Nominalization typically signals a synthetic, closed perspective on an event, whereas the progressive aspect evokes an ongoing process – and therefore an open perspective. In (3-7), however, the nominalizer frames rather than cancels the progressive meaning, producing a construction of high morphosyntactic precision. Seen in this light, not only does each morpheme call for careful description (e.g. studying the distribution of uses between the =leɿ and -paɿ nominalizers: see p. 68): each combination of morphemes also invites analysis in its own right.

A question that naturally follows is methodological: how to achieve gradually increasing precision in the endeavour of exploring these nooks and crannies of morphosyntax in Malimasa (and in other Naish varieties)? One ideal path would be collaboration with a linguist who is a native speaker of Malimasa, emulating the successes achieved in Naxi studies. The analysis of subtle syllabic reduction phenomena in Naxi by a native speaker (He & Liu 2021) provides a remarkable model, but one that is hard to replicate in smaller communities where no speaker is also a trained linguist. In such settings, field researchers may work with consultants who, despite their knowledge,

insight and generosity, are not accustomed to technical linguistic reasoning, and whose priorities may understandably differ. Their choice deserves full respect.

In such a situation, quantitative tools may usefully complement traditional fieldwork. Statistical methods applied to well-curated corpora can reveal recurrent patterns of co-occurrence and subtle regularities even in systems characterized by interacting dimensions. This perspective has proved fruitful elsewhere – for instance, in a recent study of gender in German that combines typological theory and quantitative modelling (Fedden, Naranjo & Corbett 2025). Such methods remain largely untapped in Naish studies; yet they hold real promise, particularly if pursued in collaboration with computationally minded colleagues, to facilitate progress on questions that might otherwise remain beyond reach.

## 5 Concluding note

Taken as a whole, *A grammar of Malimasa* stands as a landmark in the study of Naish languages. Its meticulous documentation, lucid structure, and interpretive care make it a model for descriptive work in this field. The issues that remain open (whether in historical classification, tonal diachrony, or morphosyntactic analysis) delineate a horizon for cumulative inquiry in which Li Zihe’s contribution occupies an enduring place. One can only hope that the dialogue between fieldworkers exploring languages of Southwest China will thrive, fuelled by the same spirit of precision, openness, and respect for linguistic observations that animates this book.

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