Preliminary topics in Lutuv morphosyntax

This paper presents an overview of basic morphosyntactic categories in Lutuv, an undescribed Kuki-Chin language from the Tibeto-Burman language family (Van Bik 2009). Originally spoken in the Chin Hills of Western Burma/Myanmar, Lutuv—like many if not most other Chin languages—is increasingly spoken by large refugee communities around the world. The Ethnologue reports approximately 15,000 speakers worldwide (Eberhard, Simons, & Fennig 2019), several thousand in the United States, and at the time of this writing the community estimates that around 700 of the 19,000 Burmese refugees who call Indianapolis home are speakers of Lutuv.

The work presented today—which to the best of our knowledge represents the first linguistic work on Lutuv apart from a Swadesh list published this summer (Lotven et al. 2019)—represents one small part of a larger collaboration between IU speech scientists and the Indianapolis Chin community. Linguistic fieldwork with Lutuv began in September 2019. Herein, using data from one native speaker, we undertake preliminary analysis of several key elements of the morphosyntax of the dialect of Lutuv originating in Hnaring village (henceforth Hnaring Lutuv). Our goal in this project is to establish the basics of verbal morphology in Hnaring Lutuv, thereby providing identifying areas of theoretical interest and laying a foundation for future work.

A particular focus is placed on the system of subject and object marking and its correlation (or lack thereof) to the case marking system. Lutuv employs both preverbal and postverbal subject and object agreement markers. The order of these markers is governed by a person hierarchy, in which a preverbal 1st person marker will always precede a 2nd or 3rd person marker; a 2nd person marker will always precede a 3rd person marker, regardless of subject or object status. Examples are found in (1)-(3) below.

(1) íí m̥oŋ
1SG.SBJ sleep
“I slept”

(2) íí tsé̡k̡ m̥oŋ
1SG.SBJ 2SG.OBJ see
“I see you”

(3) íí nāā m̥oŋ
1SG.OBJ 2SG.SBJ sleep
“You saw me”

As illustrated in (4), 2nd and 3rd person plural object markers have an additional postverbal morpheme which often appears in tandem with the corresponding preverbal marker. In negative constructions, agreement marking instead appears at the right edge of the verbal complex with distinct subject agreement markers attaching to a negative-marking morpheme, as in Ex. (5).

(4) iimáá tsáá m̥oŋ y̡y̡
1PL.SBJ 2.OBJ see NON1PL.OBJ
“We saw y’all”

(5) pæk̡w̡ w̡-ŋ
NEG-1SG cough
“I didn’t cough”

All of the verbal agreement markers shown in Examples (1)-(5) follow a nominative/accusative system. It is of note, however, that the postnominal case particles do not—rather, they appear to have a tripartite bent, though this is a feature of the system that demands deeper investigation as tripartite systems are vanishingly rare and are not expected in a Tibeto-
Burman language (Chelliah & de Reuse 2010, Whaley 1997). That said, as seen below, the subject of the intransitive verb ‘sleep’ in (6) and the agent of the transitive verb ‘chase’ in (7) receive two different case particles, tŝə̃ and taa respectively. Meanwhile, the patient of the transitive verb ‘read’ in (8) receives the accusative marker naa.

(6) ʉʉ tŝə̃ ə ɲòŋ wá
   dog INTR 3SG.SBJ sleep FUT
   “The dog will sleep”

(7) ʉʉ taa ʒiekuo ə tsædeɛ aa
   dog ERG cat 3SG.SBJ chase FUT
   “The dog will chase the cat”

(8) tsaauu naa ii ɾii
   book ACC 1SG.SBJ read
   “I read a book”

We present an overview of subject and object markers in transitive and intransitive constructions, as well as the basic structure of the verbal complex, question formation, and the construction of negatives. Also noted is the lack of the verb stem alternation that is present in other Kuki-Chin languages. By beginning to establish some basic facts about the verbal morphology of Hnaring Lutuv, we aim to not only lay the foundation for future work but also identify areas of potential typological and theoretical interest.

References: