

# The Syntax of

Biate, Hrangkhoh, Khelma, Onaeme, Purum, Liangmai and Yimchunger



*Editors*

**Madhumita Barbora**

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**The Syntax of Biate, Hrangkhoh, Khelma, Onaeme, Purum, Liangmai and Yimchunger:** Produced by the Centre for Endangered Languages, Tezpur University, Assam, India.

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First Published: March 2021

Published by:  
Registrar  
Tezpur University  
Tezpur, Assam

Price: ₹ 300

ISBN: 978-93-91902-14-8

Printed in India at: S S Graphics, Guwahati-781021

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## Acknowledgements

The current volume on Syntax of seven lesser known and lesser studied languages of Northeast India would not have been possible without the generous help and support of a good number of people.

First of all, we would like to express our profound thankfulness to Prof. Vinod Kumar Jain, Vice Chancellor, Tezpur University for his wholehearted support to our endeavours all through. At the same time, our most sincere thanks go to Prof. Dilip Kumar Saikia, Pro-Vice Chancellor, and Dr. Biren Das, Registrar of the University for their much-needed help at every stage of making of the volume. We are equally grateful also to Tezpur University Publication Committee for their active help and cooperation in publishing the volume.

We are privileged to have a Foreword to the volume from Prof. Scott DeLancey at the University of Oregon, USA. We will ever remain grateful to him for his time and interest.

We express here our profound thankfulness and gratitude to each and every member of these seven lesser-known language communities for their wholehearted cooperation and support during our fieldtrips. Needless to say, the current volume would not have been possible without their active involvement and encouragement all thorough.

We take this opportunity also to thank our colleagues in the Department of English and the Centre for Endangered Languages of the University: Dr. Arup Kumar Nath, Ms. Bipasha Patgiri, Dr. Amalesh Gope, Dr. Bobita Sarangthem, Dr. Monali Longmailai, and Dr. Dhanapati Shougrakpam for their valuable suggestions, direct help and support at various stages of the making of the book. We would also like to thank our fellow staff: Dr. Pushpa Renu Bhattacharyya, Dr. Charengna Widinibou, Dr. I. D. Raguibou, Dr. Elangbam Manimohon Meitei, Mr. Raju Ram Boro, Ms. Rima Saikia, Dr. Huiningshumbam Surchandra Singh, Mr. Dinkur Borah, Ms. Radhika Boruah, Mr. Gunjan Pegu for the insights we received from them during our group discussions. We are also grateful to our office staff: Mr. Trilok Narzari, Ms. Dipali Sona Nayak, and Late Eknath Upadhyay for their active help all through. Our thanks also go to SS Graphics, Guwahati for designing and printing the volume with great care and interest.

Finally, we would like to gratefully acknowledge the financial support provided by the UGC, New Delhi without which the present volume would have been hardly possible.

### Coordinator's Note

One of the mandates proposed by the University Grants Commission (UGC) for the Centre of Endangered Languages set up in nine Central Universities in India is to produce and publish reading materials, dictionaries and books. Keeping in line with the UGC mandate, the Centre for Endangered Languages (CFEL), Tezpur University is ready to publish three volumes on the phonology, morphology and syntax of the seven endangered, lesser known and lesser researched languages of Assam, Manipur and Nagaland. These languages are: Biate, Hrangkhoh and Khelma from Dima Hasao district of Assam; Onaeme from Senapati and Purum from Kangpokpi districts of Manipur and Liangmai from Tening Peren and Yimchunger from Tuensang districts of Nagaland. Out of the seven languages, four languages namely Biate, Hrangkhoh, Khelma and Purum belong to the Kuki-Chin group and the other three languages namely Onaeme, Liangmai and Yimchunger belong to the Naga group of languages. Yimchunger belongs to the Central Naga group, Liangmai to the Zemeic group and Onaeme to the Naga group of languages.

The idea to bring out the three volumes focusing on one grammatical aspect of the languages was primarily to highlight the typological features of the two language families namely the Kuki-Chin and Naga group of languages that we have documented. Six field trips, three data verification workshops and a number of workshops and seminars on various grammatical aspects and features of these two language families have finally helped in shaping of these three volumes.

Credit for the shaping of these three volumes go to the seven language communities and the informants who associated themselves with our Field Assistants (FAs), Research Associates (RAs) and the faculties of CFEL, TU. The FAs, RAs, and faculties of CFEL and the linguistic faculties of the department need a special mention. Their diligent work has given the final shape of the three volumes. A very special thanks to the Tezpur University authority and administration who has supported us in our endeavour since the inception of CFEL in 2014.

The three books: Phonetics and Phonology Volume 1, Morphology Volume 2 and Syntax Volume 3 is the contribution of CFEL, TU to the seven communities, researchers and scholars working on Tibeto-Burman languages of Northeast and to the readership at large who has a keen interest on documentation of lesser known, lesser researched, endangered languages.

Madhumita Barbora  
Coordinator  
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## Foreword

### New insights into the languages of the Indo-Myanmar borderlands

Northeast India is a treasure trove for linguists, with at least 100, and very possibly twice that many, languages spoken here. With the exception of a few large languages with official status, almost all the languages must be considered potentially endangered; although most are still spoken by children in the communities, the rapid encroachment of modern life poses an existential threat to any small minority language. Very few of these languages have anything close to adequate documentation and description, and the majority are virtually, or completely, undocumented. (The fact that we cannot give a convincing estimate of the number of languages is a clear reflection of this situation). Except for a few Indo-Aryan, Austroasiatic, and Tai languages, almost all of the indigenous languages of the Northeast belong to the great Trans-Himalayan or Tibeto-Burman family, which stretches from western China and Myanmar across the Himalayas into northwest India. It has been evident for years that the resolution of many fundamental problems in comparative Trans-Himalayan linguistics requires data from Northeast India, which until quite recently was all but nonexistent. Still today our knowledge of these languages is thin and fragmentary.

These three volumes outline the basic phonetics and phonological, morphological and syntactic facts of seven previously under- or undescribed languages of Assam, Nagaland and Manipur. Four of these – Biate, Khelma, Purum and Hrangkhoh – belong to the little-known “Old Kuki” or Northwestern South Central subgroup of the Kuki-Chin branch of Tibeto-Burman, a historically important group recognized long ago in the *Linguistic Survey of India*, but for which we are only now beginning to have serious documentation. (The label “Old Kuki”, inherited from the *LSI*, is offensive to many communities and should be abandoned). The other three – Liangmai, Onaime, and Yumchinger – represent three of the language groups which have been called “Naga” since the *LSI*, although the current consensus is that this is not a genealogical unit or branch within Tibeto-Burman. Once again, this uncertainty about the classification of the “Naga” languages is symptomatic of our ignorance about them; we do not know how to classify them because we do not know enough about them. Thus these volumes represent a substantial contribution to our knowledge of the woefully neglected indigenous languages of the Northeast.

To take one important example, the scant earlier work on languages of this region is sorely lacking in reliable phonological description. This Phonology volume gives us descriptions which can be taken as exemplary by future researchers, with full attention to vowel systems, phonotactics, and, especially, tone. Tone is often ignored entirely in basic descriptive work on languages of Northeast India. Here we now have clear phonetic descriptions, with minimal pairs, of the tone phonemes of each of these languages, giving us unprecedented insight into the distribution of tone systems in this region.

Beyond their immediate value in contributing to the documentation of the languages of the Northeast, these volumes present data which is of great potential value to comparative Trans-Himalayan linguistics and to the broader field of linguistic typology. To begin with, the data here clearly support the classification of Biate, Khelma, Hrangkhoh, and Purum as belonging to the same NW Kuki-Chin (“Old Kuki”) group, and just as clearly fail to support the idea of a higher-order Naga group including the other three. Consider, for example, the morphology of adjectives. In most Tibeto-Burman languages the adjective stem is used in predicate function, where it is inflected as a verb, but its use as a nominal modifier requires a nominalizing affix. Two such nominalizers, \*gV- and \*a-, are widespread across the family, but many individual languages have innovated a new construction. In the languages here we see the \*a- prefix used in all four NWKC languages (although it appears to be being lost in Hrangkhoh). We see it also in Yimchunger, but Liangmai uses \*gV- (*kə-*) combined with the nominalizing suffix *-bu* (in a construction very similar to that of Meitei, while Onaeme has an innovative suffix *-do*).

In other ways as well the languages described here neatly illustrate the basic morphological distinction between the Kuki-Chin and Naga languages. The former have complex paradigmatic morphology, while the latter lack paradigmatic patterns, while, like other languages of Northeast India, showing considerable syntagmatic complexity. In the NW Kuki-Chin languages in these volumes we see remnants of the older postverbal agreement paradigm retained in the negative conjugation, while the rest of the paradigm is built on the characteristic Kuki-Chin proclitic series. This supports the classification of the Kuki-Chin languages of Dima Hasao with their close cousins in Manipur, including Purum, and also Aimol, Anal, Lamkang, Monsang, Moyon, Tarao, and others.

Most or all of the languages described in these volumes illustrate morphosyntactic phenomena which are common in languages of the Northeast, but less so in languages of the world in general, and thus of great interest to linguistic typology and theory. One typical Tibeto-Burman feature which we see abundantly illustrated in these volumes is the use of the productive clausal nominalization construction for nominal modification. Tibeto-Burman languages in general do not have “relative clauses” in the classical Indo-European sense, but many descriptions try to squeeze these languages into an Indo-European model (whether based on English or on Sanskrit), and treat the use of nominalizations as nominal modifiers as distinct from other functions of nominalization. It is past time that we return to the older practice of describing these languages in their own terms.

To give one example of a very current “hot topic” in linguistics which emerges from this work, we see many instances of “optional” ergative marking, where a transitive subject may or may not be marked with ergative case. (This is distinct from split ergative marking, where the presence or absence of ergative case is obligatorily determined by aspect or by the person of the transitive subject). This is a phenomenon which has only been noted in the



linguistic literature for the last 15 years of so, and is the subject of much current research. We see from these descriptions that the languages of the Northeast have much to offer for the study of this topic. (It is worth noting that, based on these descriptions, optional ergative marking in the Northeast is occurs in all genealogical units, a fact which has previously not been clear).

Documentation of the 100 or 200 or whatever languages of Northeast India is a huge task, and will require the efforts of a great many linguists over many years. It is an inescapable fact that, if these 100 or 200 are all to ever be properly documented, the bulk of the work will have to be done by scholars working in the Northeast. Important contributions have been and will continue to be made by scholars from elsewhere in India and abroad, but these are only a small part of the work which needs to be done. There will never be sufficient participation from outside the Northeast to complete, or even make a serious dent in, the task before us. It is heartening to see local scholars stepping up shouldering the load.

Scott DeLancey  
University of Oregon  
19/02/2020

## Editors' Note

It gives us immense pleasure to have finally completed and bring out this volume on the syntax of Biate, Hrangkhoh, Khelma, Purum, Onaeme, Liangmai, and Yimchunger, seven lesser-studied languages of Northeast India. The Centre for Endangered Languages, Tezpur University (CFEL), undertook the task of documenting these seven languages of Assam, Manipur, and Nagaland soon after it had been established by the University Grants Commission, India way back in 2014. Along with this volume, we are also bringing out two independent volumes on the Phonetics and Phonology and Morphology of these languages. The faculty, the research associates and the field assistants of the Centre made six field trips to the Dima Hasao District of Assam, the Senapati and Kangpokpi Districts of Manipur, the TenningPeren and Tuensang Districts of Nagaland for collection of data for these volumes. The collected data was then transcribed for descriptive analysis. Subsequently, the native speakers of the three States were invited to the CFEL for data verification and they verified the collected data in three data verification workshops that were serially held at the Centre. During this period, the faculty and the staff had the opportunity of attending a number of talks, seminar and workshops held at the Centre, which were conducted by several acclaimed linguists, notably, Scott Delancey, George van Driem, Klaus Uwe Panther, Linda Thronburg, Anvita Abbi, K.V. Subbarao, Pramod Pandey, and Conchur O Giollagain.

The seven lesser-known languages selected for documentation by the CFEL are all Tibeto-Burman languages and they belong to the two sub-groups of the family: the Kuki-Chin and the Naga Group of languages. While Biate, Hrangkhoh, Khelma, spoken in the Dima Hasao District of Assam, and Purum, spoken in the Kangpokpi District of Manipur, belong to the Kuki-Chin group, Onaeme, spoken in the Senapati District of Manipur, belongs to the Naga Group of languages. An unclassified language, Onaeme shows linguistic affinity with languages such as Poumai, Maram, Liangmai of the Southern Naga Group. On the other hand, Liangmai, spoken in the TenningPeren District of Nagaland, and Yimchunger, spoken in the Tuensang District of the same State, belong, respectively, to the Zeliang sub-group and the Central Naga group of languages.

The current volume has seven chapters, each chapter devoted to one particular language of the seven languages. Arranged in the alphabetical order, Chapters 1, 2, and 3 are thus on Biate, Hrangkhoh and Khelma of Assam; Chapters 4 and 5 are on Purum and Onaeme of Manipur; Chapter 6 and 7 are on Liangmai and Yimchunger of Nagaland. The chapters have focused on the following of the seven languages: the word order of the noun phrase, the adjective phrase, the adverb phrase and the verb phrase; sentence types; finite versus non-finite clauses, nominalization and nominalized clauses, relative clauses; causative and passive constructions; non-verbal predicates and possessive predicates. The objective of working on

the same set of grammatical aspects was to understand the typological features of these languages.

The similarities and differences between these languages in terms of their typological features as is clear from the descriptions presented in the volume are: Biata, Hrangkhoh, Khelma (Assam) and Purum (Manipur), all Kuki-Chin languages, exhibit a rich subject-verb agreement system that gives them the status of a pro-drop language. By contrast, Onaeme (Manipur), Liangmai and Yimchunger (Nagaland), all belonging to the Naga group of languages, lack such an agreement. On the other hand, Biata, Hrangkhoh and Khelma have object clitic pronouns, which is, however, not seen in Purum, although it belongs to the same Kuki-Chin group. Yet another important difference is that while Biata, Hrangkhoh and Khelma have a grammatical number system, Purum lacks such a system. One similarity between these four Kuki-Chin languages (i.e. Biata, Hrangkhoh, Khelma and Purum) is that the use of the numeral classifier in them is restricted to the numeral ‘one’ alone, and combined they form the indefinite marker. Amongst the Naga Group of languages Yimchunger is patterned like the Kuki-Chin languages discussed above in its use of a numeral classifier to indicate indefiniteness. Liangmai, on the other hand, has a rich numeral classifier system. In sharp contrast, Onaeme employs no classifiers.

The seven languages under study are all syntactically nominative-accusative languages. However, except for Liangmai, Biata, Hrangkhoh, Khelma, Purum, Onaeme and Yimchunger show Split-Ergativity.

The four Kuki-Chin languages (i.e., Biata, Hrangkhoh, Khelma and Purum) use two separate verbs in non-verbal predicate constructions. Thus, they all share *om* ‘exist’ as the existential verb. On the other hand, *ni* ‘be’ is the copular verb in Biata, Hrangkhoh and Khelma, while *i* ‘be’ is its counterpart in Purum.

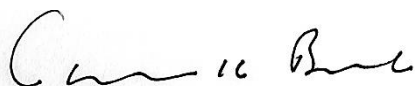
Onaeme and Liangmai, which belong to the Naga group of languages, do not use a copular verb; in them the nominal and adjectival predicates are true non-verbal predicates. For locative predicates, Onaeme uses the existential verb *ba* ‘exist’, while *bam* ‘exist’ is its counterpart in Liangmai. On the other hand, Yimchunger, which also belongs to the Naga group of languages, has only one verb *la* ‘be’ to be used in nominal, adjectival, locative and possessive predicates.

The two editors of this volume worked on the seven languages at tandem. As for the editing, MadumitaBarbora edited the descriptions of Biata, Hrangkhoh, Khelma and Yimchunger, while the descriptions of Onaeme, Purum and Liangmai were edited by Gautam K. Borah. We as editors would like to extend our warmest and grateful thanks to all the members of the concerned communities, especially, those who acted as language consultants for us, for their active and complete cooperation with the Staff of CFEL. Without their

cooperation this volume would have never happened. Our special thanks go also to the Faculty, the Research associates, the Field Assistants at the CFEL for their sincere and dedicated efforts, resulting in the seven chapters that this volume is made of. We would like to thank also to the rest of the CFEL Staff, the Office Staff included, for assisting the contributors of the volume in various ways during the preparation of the descriptions. We are also profoundly grateful to the University authorities and the Administration for their generous support and sound advice throughout. Finally, as editors we take full responsibility for any possible shortcomings in the analysis or the descriptions presented in the volume.

A handwritten signature in purple ink, appearing to read 'Barbora' with a large, stylized initial 'B'.

Madhumita Barbora

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Gautam K. Borah' with a stylized 'G' and 'B'.

Gautam K. Borah

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