

Supervisor report on the PhD thesis of
Štěpán Pavlík
“The description of Namuzi language”
(Popis jazyka Namuzi)

Institute of South and Central Asia, Faculty of Arts, Charles University 2017
Subject: Languages of Asia and Africa

The submitted dissertation is a description of grammar of Namuzi, a very little studied and severely endangered Tibeto-Burman language. It is the first scholarly work about Namuzi in a Western language.

During the several years of the candidate's PhD study I witnessed the whole process in which the present work came to being. Even before starting his work on Namuzi Štěpán proved his talent for fieldwork and language description in his B.A. thesis, which focused on the Chinese Hunan dialect. His M.A. thesis brought a thorough evaluation of the to-date research done on the Namuyi language and a well founded discussion about the current classification of the Tibeto-Burman languages of Yunnan and Sichuan. In the course of preparation for his PhD research he acquired basic grasp of Tibetan, which, in addition to his profound knowledge of Chinese, facilitated his understanding of the little documented Namuzi language. During his PhD study Štěpán performed an exemplary fieldwork, when he, during the relatively short period of time available, gathered an impressive amount of valuable material. He combined the methods of questionnaire and collecting authentic material of folk narratives which enabled him not only to determine morphological and syntactic paradigms, but also to evaluate the frequency and importance of the grammatical structures in the present-day live speech. In the course of the study he participated in a series of conferences, where he presented results of his preliminary analysis of Namuzi grammar and other fieldwork material.

In the *Introduction*, the author provides useful general information about the sociolinguistic situation of Namuzi and a critical overview of the previous study of Namuzi and closely related languages. In the section *Genetic relationship* the author discusses the current classification of the Tibeto-Burman languages and comes to a conclusion that supports the need of revision of the classification in the light of new language material.

The main body of the dissertation (chapters 2-8) starts with an impressive description of Namuyi phonology. The *Morphology* section opens, in Chapter 3, with an extensive discussion about word classes classification and identification. On p. 39 he states that “on the one hand, verbs, nouns and some other word classes have rather distinct morphology, and on the other hand, most of the formants may be and systematically are omitted. In fact the morphological marking is used only in cases of ambiguity in order to avoid confusion.” This peculiarity of Namuzi (reminiscent of other non-Chinese languages within China) obviously was the main challenge to grammar analysis and interpretation, and to the choice of linguistic approach in general. The author uses a rather innovative combination of traditional Western grammar analysis (Comrie and Smith) and the latest approaches to description of Chinese grammar. In this chapter the author gives his criteria for classification of morphologically unmarked words in a sentence.

The description begins with verbal morphology, which is obviously the most complicated part of Namuzi grammar. The author interprets some features of the behaviour of verbs in the context of Chinese, while others he finds in Tibetan and other agglutinative languages. The nominal morphology comes in the right moment to relieve the reader exhausted by the immense complexity of verbs. The description of syntax in Chapter 7, introduces main sentence types, thus completing the basic grammatical structure with a clear picture of its functioning in speech. The appended Namuzi texts with thorough glossing and translation greatly increase the value of the thesis for general linguistics.

Each grammatical feature mentioned in the Morphology section is illustrated by several examples transcribed twice – in the author's own system and IPA – and furnished with a two-line annotation for meaning and word class of each morpheme, and a translation into English. Throughout the grammar description the author discusses the interpretations of the authors of the previous works on Namuzi and related languages.

The grammatical description is well balanced, properly and clearly structured. The grammatical features are treated with great sensitivity in a constant effort to avoid false projection of the established Western or Chinese linguistic categories. The author's excellent knowledge of general linguistic categories, together with the meticulous treatment of language samples, make the intriguing grammatical structure of Namuzi easily readable even without a background in Sino-Tibetan linguistics. The author makes extensive use of secondary literature concerning the language under description, Tibeto-Burman and Sino-Tibetan languages in general and relevant general linguistic publications.

The dissertation will certainly be valued by linguists for its plentitude of reliable language data with precise analysis. It brings to the Western scholarly public invaluable and entirely new material of a language whose grammatical peculiarities and fascinating typological and lexical links to not only its neighbours, but also to geographically distant languages, will certainly prove interesting for socio- and contact linguistics and historical linguistics, not speaking of the self-understood value for Tibeto-Burman studies. The work is an important contribution to the discussion about classification of the Tibeto-Burman languages. There is, of course, no need to emphasize the crucial importance of documentation of endangered and dying languages, to which Namuzi certainly belongs.

The approach to description used in the present work may be inspiring for the analysis of some other agglutinative languages within China, which in the course of language contact gradually acquired grammatical properties of Chinese, incorporating them into their structure and becoming typologically mixed languages.

In sum, the present work in many aspects goes far beyond the requirements for a PhD thesis. It is a pioneering work which deserves, after a thorough native-speaker check of English, quick publication in a renowned academic publishing house.

I recommend the submitted thesis for defence.

Prague, 9th June 2017

Veronika Zikmundová
Institute of South and Central Asia

