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## Book review

Shobhana L. Chelliah, *A Grammar of Meithei* (Mouton Grammar Library, 17).  
Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1997. XXV + 539 pp.

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A considerable amount of time and effort has gone into the writing of this book. Aside from a relatively comprehensive grammar, there is a Meithei-English glossary, discussions of Meithei literature and writing systems, and three long Meithei texts.

Meithei is a Tibeto-Burman language spoken in Manipur State of Northeast India (Tibeto-Burman is one of the two major branches of Sino-Tibetan). The description given in this book is of the standard (Imphal) dialect. Chapter 1 ('Introduction', pp. 1–15) discusses the position of Meithei within Tibeto-Burman, gives the geographic distribution of the dialects, reviews the linguistic literature on Meithei, plus has information on the culture, religion and political history of the Meithei speakers (including maps, photos, and drawings). There is also a detailed account of the fieldwork done and personal information on the speakers recorded. At the end of the chapter C gives something of a caveat that while a generative approach is used in the book, she is not arguing for any particular theoretical approach. While it is generally not advisable to use a theoretical framework that will be out of style (and possibly incomprehensible) in a few years in doing descriptive grammars, in this case the framework does not get in the way of the presentation, and so should be comprehensible even to those who are not at all familiar with the generative approach. The main influence of this approach is in terms of what is given emphasis in the discussion.

Chapter 2 ('Phonetics and phonology', pp. 17–70), covers the sound system of Meithei. Sections 2.1–2.4 introduce the phonemic inventory of initials, finals, and tones, with each phoneme justified by minimal or near-minimal pairs. The tones were also subjected to verification by instrumental means, and so aside from minimal pairs, fundamental frequency charts of the pronunciations of different syllable types are given as well. This extra care was taken with the tones because there has been some controversy as to whether there are two or three tones in Meithei. C argues on the basis of her data for two tones, with sandhi rules and tone spreading to prefixes and suffixes complicating the picture. The rest of the chapter is devoted to phonological rules. The presentation of the voicing assimilation rule is somewhat

confusing at first, as it is stated as a general rule (and it is considered as such by some native grammarians): “[s]yllable-initial voiceless unaspirated stops are voiced between voiced segments” (p. 48), yet C goes on to show that it only holds in a small number of syllable-type combinations, where the first syllable ends in a nasal (or in some cases a semivowel) and the second syllable ends in a nasal, semivowel or vowel. Aside from this it applies to grammatical suffixes and enclitics. In the following sub-section, on the deaspiration rule, which in some cases feeds the voicing rule, the voicing rule is shown applying to syllable-type combinations where the previous sub-section said the rule did not apply, such as CV-CVC and CV-CVN. The discussion of the velar deletion rule is also a bit confusing, as the rule is said to apply when a *kl-* cluster is formed from “the suffixation of a First (morphological) Level derivational verb suffix or the distal marker *-lak* to a verb stem ending in *-k*”, but none of the First Level suffixes begin with *l-*, and so the rule can only apply in the case of the distal marker. What at first seems to be a more general rule turns out to apply only to one grammatical suffix.

Chapter 3 (‘Grammatical preview’, pp. 71–92) presents an overview of phrase structure and lexical categories (form classes), and introduces the affixal categories discussed in more detail in the later chapters. Chapter 4 (‘Grammatical relations and information structure’, pp. 93–129) again picks up the discussion of phrase structure, arguing, on the basis of various types of syntactic behavior of arguments, that Meithei clauses have a flat structure, as there is no verb phrase. Because none of the syntactic constraints or morphological marking usually associated with the concepts of ‘subject’ and ‘object’ hold in Meithei, C concludes that all arguments have equal status in Meithei, and so ‘subject’ and ‘object’ are not useful concepts for the description of Meithei grammar. (This is true of a large number, possibly the majority, of Sino-Tibetan languages; see, for example, Matisoff, 1973; Hope, 1973, 1974; LaPolla, 1993; in press.) Case marking, which is also discussed in this chapter, is purely semantically based. Aside from the case marking, there is also a set of suffixes that mark some type of pragmatic status of the referent, such as contrastive, identifiable (definite marking), exclusive vs. inclusive, delimitive, and adversative. They can be used with, or replace, the semantic role markers. In some cases these forms are derived from semantic role markers, such as the adversative marker, which C argues is derived from the patient marker. This is an example of what has been talked about as ‘subjectification’ (e.g. Traugott, 1989, 1990; Traugott and König 1991), where marking shifts from marking more objective meaning to more subjective meaning. In the discussion of word order, which is said to be determined by pragmatic factors (though generally verb-final), it is argued that, due to the pragmatic marking and the possibility of different word orders and omission of arguments, many expressions are ambiguous out of context. The conclusion is that avoiding ambiguity is not the key factor behind the marking of arguments; instead discourse factors such as saliency, contrastiveness, new vs. continuing topic, etc., as well as semantic role, are the key factors in determining marking.

Chapter 5 (‘Root sentences’, pp. 131–154) discusses the coding of different types of illocutionary force in Meithei: declarative (non-hypothetical, assertive), imperative, prohibitive, interrogative, optative, supplicative, and permissive. The coding is

similar to the sentence final particles found in many other Sino-Tibetan languages, but takes the form of verb-complex-final enclitics rather than separate particles. An interesting divergence from the usual pattern is that the interrogative marker can only be suffixed to nouns and nominalized verbs. The discussion of the forming of interrogatives of all types is particularly thorough, and includes discussion of the etymology of the interrogative pronouns and their use as discourse markers.

Chapter 6 ('Subordination', pp. 155–200) deals with the many uses of nominalized clauses. Nominalization of non-stative verbs is accomplished by suffixes or lexical nominalizers (words like 'thing'), while stative verbs are nominalized by a prefix. One chief use of nominalizations is as modifier of a noun, either as a prehead externally headed relative clause or as a head-internal relative clause. Adjectives created from nominalized stative verbs can precede or follow the noun, with a slight difference in degree of restrictiveness. Another major use is as the complement of an auxiliary verb. These auxiliary verbs mark modality and aspect. Some adverbial constructions, such as 'run slowly', are of the form where the adverb is the main predicate and the action verb is nominalized as the complement. Adverbial clauses are also nominalized and often take different case markers as subordinators (a common phenomenon in TB; see Genetti, 1986, 1991): instrumental for cause or manner, associative for simultaneous action, genitive for purpose, locative for temporal sequence, ablative for result or comparison. Combinations of different subordinators and the different subordinators with the quotative complementizer are also possible. Development of a quotative complementizer from a verb meaning 'say' is a feature of the linguistic area where Meithei is spoken (see Saxena, 1988), and Meithei has also developed such a quotative complementizer, but there is an interesting difference in its use: it can be used as the final element of a relative clause (without any quotative sense), and in fact must be used in relative clauses which refer to future actions (e.g. 'the boy who is going to hold the pen'). This is because of the evidential use of the quotative for marking information that is hearsay, or not confirmed, or related to the desires or intentions of someone other than the speaker.

Meithei is a highly agglutinative language, and C has done an excellent job of analyzing the various affixes that can appear on a verb or noun. This analysis is presented in Chapter 7 ('Affixal morphology', pp. 201–259). There are 39 different affixes that can appear on the verb, which C analyzes as being of four levels: three derivational, and one inflectional, with a number of sub-groupings of markers as well. The reasons for these divisions are carefully argued. All of the forms and their uses are discussed and exemplified. The derivational affixes mark type and degree of affectedness, aspect, direction, deictic orientation, causation, benefaction, reflexive action, reciprocal action, evidential meaning, negation, desire, epistemic and deontic modality, and potentiality. The majority of these forms are transparently grammaticalized from verb stems. The inflectional forms, which form a paradigm, mark the illocutionary force (these are discussed in Ch. 5). Meithei does not have person or number marking on the verb, though it does have pronominal possessive prefixes on nouns. Aside from these possessive prefixes, the rest of the noun morphology is suffixal, and analyzed as having three levels: two derivational and one inflectional. The derivational morphology includes (natural) gender and number, while the inflec-

tional morphology is the semantic role marking and pragmatic status-marking enclitics. The last section of the chapter treats all enclitics in Meithei together, grouping them into five categories: determiners, semantic role markers, the copula, mood markers, pragmatic status markers, and speaker attitude markers. As most of these have been discussed elsewhere in the book, only two of the pragmatic status markers and the attitude markers are discussed with examples here.

Chapter 8 ('Compounding and duplication', pp. 261–284) discusses the different patterns of productive and non-productive compounding of noun with noun, verb with noun, or verb with verb. An interesting aspect of compounding in Meithei is that an inflected form can be included in some compounds, such as *in-nə-phi* [wrap-instrumental case marker-cloth] 'wrapper, shawl'. Most of the chapter is about duplication, which appears to be a major source of lexical forms in Meithei. There are several different patterns of partial or complete duplication and the kind of echo collocations common in Sino-Tibetan languages (usually four-syllable expressions with two of the syllables being the same). At the end of the chapter is a list (two and a half pages) of ideophones involving duplication and the verbs most often used with them.

The first part of Chapter 9 ('Functional and pragmatic aspects', pp. 285–312) discusses ways that the illocutionary force of imperatives can be softened using certain adverbs or polite expressions, or avoided altogether through the use of indirect speech acts (e.g. using an interrogative form to perform a command). Methods of requesting permission, warning, persuading, and cursing or blessing are also discussed. The second half of the chapter is on evidentiality. In Meithei, aside from morphological marking of evidential categories by the derivational verb suffixes (e.g. 'indirect evidence'), there is an evidential sense in the use of different nominalization (nominalized clause + copula) constructions. For example, a clause nominalized by a word meaning 'type' has the evidential sense of the speaker having only indirect evidence for the truth of the proposition. If the interrogative is added to this form, it has a sense like a mirative (surprise at finding this state of affairs). In another type, with simple morphological (*-pa*) nominalization, the sense is certainty of the truth of the proposition, as opposed to the finite form, which has no such sense of certainty. Nominalizations involving the nominalizer and a demonstrative have an even stronger sense of certainty. On the other hand, a nominalization construction involving a complementizer composed of the verb 'to say' and the instrumental marker can be used when the speaker is not sure of, or has no direct evidence of, the truth of the proposition. There are many different complementizers with different evidential nuances, which in some cases are influenced by tense and aspect differences. In some cases the aspect marking alone has a particular evidential sense; e.g., the use of the inceptive marker generally implies that the speaker saw the inception of the action.

Appendix I ('Meithei-English glossary', pp. 313–351) gives glosses for all of the words that appear in the volume plus some minimal pairs for contrasting tones. All words are given form-class categorizations, and loan-words are marked for their source. Compounds are also given under many of the main headings. A brief discussion of Meithei literature is given in Appendix II ('Meithei literature', pp. 353–354).

In Appendix III ('Meithei writing systems', pp. 355–376) the two writing systems used for Meithei are discussed. Both are Devanagari-based, one being a modified version of the Bengali script, the other (Meithei Mayek) deriving from the Gupta Brahmi script. Use of the latter is said to go back to the 11th–12th century. There is discussion of the symbols and their use for both scripts, as well as sample texts in the scripts. There is also discussion of problems in adapting the Bengali script to Meithei. Appendix IV ('Texts', pp. 377–493) gives two narratives and a one-act play. All are fully analyzed. The appendices are followed by the Notes (pp. 495–512), the References (pp. 513–534), and the Index (pp. 535–539). The references include all the items cited in the text, plus many other references related to Meithei. C has marked items that are hard to come by with symbols to show whether she has been able to acquire them (and whether she has had them translated into English) or has not yet been able to acquire them. While she doesn't state it explicitly, I assume from this that she would be willing to share those materials she has been able to acquire with other scholars.

Throughout the book, at least one example is given for every point mentioned, and there are also the 115 pages of analyzed text, so the book contains a large amount of language data. The examples and texts are in a five-line format, rather than the usual four-line format, as three levels of translation are given: morpheme-by-morpheme gloss, word gloss, and free translation. All examples of a particular section or sub-section in the grammar have the same number, and differ only in sub-letter, e.g. (17a–17m) are all related to the discussion of the quotative subordinator. While this is done to some extent commonly, it is rare to do it to this extent, but it is a way for the reader to be able to see in an instant which examples group together.

Recording a language and writing a grammar such as this one is the very foundation of linguistics, but it is a long and difficult (though fun!) process. C's approach throughout the volume is rigorous, principled, and thorough, making this a worthy addition to the Mouton Grammar Series.

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