

The Grammatical Structure of Zhuang

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1 Introduction

This book is a descriptive grammar of the Zhuang language spoken mainly in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region in southwestern China. In this introductory chapter we introduce this region, describe the language situation and fieldwork that led to the collection of data for this research, outline the major linguistic features of the language, and finally present a synopsis of the various chapters.

Guangxi has one of the biggest number of minority languages in China, and indeed the largest minority language, Zhuang, which is the focus of this book. It is thus one of the most multilingual regions of the country. In Guangxi, a child growing up in a Zhuang-speaking village would pick up Zhuang as a mother-tongue. If the village is adjacent to other villages where the other 10 minority languages of the region, including Yao, Miao, Mulao, Dong, Maonan, Hui, Yi, Jing, Shui, and Gelao are spoken, the child may pick up one or more of these. When the child moves to the district capital or nearest town, she may pick up Guiliu if she is of northern Zhuang stock; or a variety of Cantonese (*baakwa*) if she is of southern Zhuang origins. If the child attends school she would have started learning how to speak, read, and write Mandarin (*Putonghua*), the national language. By the time the child leaves her village, her district capital or the nearest town for Nanning, the capital city of Guangxi, or any of the other Chinese cities like Guilin, Guangzhou, Shanghai or the national capital, Beijing, she would speak anywhere from three to four or more language varieties, including her dialect of Zhuang, one or two other minority languages, a *lingua franca*, such as Guiliu or Cantonese, and, of course, the national language, Mandarin (*Putonghua*). Foreign languages, such as English and Japanese, may complete the picture.

Not only does the average rural-turned-urban Zhuang child have the possibility of speaking different languages, proficiency in these languages are also at different levels and, more importantly, there is a lot of code-mixing and code-switching phenomena in actual conversational situations, such that borrowing of words and expressions from one variety of speech to the other is not uncommon. The Guangxi Zhuang linguistic area thus presents a scenario of multilingualism, polyglottism, and, consequently, language contact phenomena such as code-mixing and –switching, leading to a veritable medley of language influence.

This kind of scenario presents challenges for linguistic field work, especially, that aimed at collecting authentic materials and systematically studying the structure of a particular language variety and how it is used in context. The challenges include how to identify and locate ideal and fluent speakers, how to identify and locate the right environments in which the language is used, and how to negotiate through the range of language contact phenomena in order to tease out the right linguistic structures one is investigating without influences from other linguistic systems.

This introduction describes how these challenges were addressed during a series of field trips to the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region between 2003 and 2006. We do this by first describing the fieldwork and language situation in section two, detailing the choices we made in selecting where to go and what techniques to use once we were there.

2.0. Language Situation and Fieldwork

In this section, we first describe the language situation of Zhuang including its genetic classification and geographical spread before turning to a description of the fieldtrip activities.

2.1. The Language Situation

Zhuang is a branch of the Kam Tai language group (along with languages such as Thai, Lao, and Dai), which in turn, belongs to the larger Tai-Kadai language family (Edmondson and Solnit 1990). In 2002 the number of speakers were estimated to be about 16 million (more precisely 16, 178, 811(PCO 2002)). Qin (2004) estimates Zhuang speakers to be about 20 million. We have mentioned in several parts that Zhuang is spoken in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. Besides here, it is also spoken in the Zhuang-Miao Autonomous Prefecture of Yunnan Province, in the Lianshan Zhuang-Yao Autonomous County of Guangdong Province, in Congjiang County of Guizhou Province, and in Yao Autonomous County of Hunan Province, and, outside China, in northern Vietnam by the Tay and Nung Ethnic groups.

These varieties are hardly ever mutually intelligible, and indeed the divide between Northern Zhuang and Southern Zhuang is more of an interlingual than an intralingual divide. In terms of literacy, there are two writing systems, a Zhuang character writing system based mainly on Chinese characters and a romanization system, which is supposed to be the official writing system but which is not much used. On the whole Zhuang writing is not very much an everyday practice, eventhough there are some Zhuang magazines like Sam Nyied Sam in Nanning that disseminate information in written Zhuang.

2.2. Fieldwork in Guangxi: Choices, Methods and Techniques

Given that Zhuang-speaking communities are hardly found anywhere outside China, field trips to China and Guangxi, with the aim being to collect authentic and naturalistic data, and of course, to understand the cultural context, are crucial. I believe that one should always go to the field with an idea of what sort of questions to ask (of course, with an open mind for new questions and issues), so most of the hypotheses and issues were often formulated after preliminary data elicitation from two speakers in Hong Kong (who are my students) and from the few written documents of Zhuang available in libraries and on the internet. Fieldwork began on the Zhuang language with funding support from grant institutions in Hong Kong and so far the following fieldtrips have been undertaken:

- i. Hong Kong-Nanning City-Debao County-Jingxi County-Tiangyang County (April 2003)
- ii. Hong Kong-Nanning City-Mashan County-Jinchai Town-Dongping Village/Nanning City-Guilin City-Yangshuo County (December 2004)
- iii. Hong Kong-Nanning City-Mashan County-Jinchai Town-Dongping Village/Nanning City-Wuming County-Luoxu Town-Xianshan Village (October 2005)
- iv. Hong Kong-Nanning City-Beihai City-Qinzhou City-Changtan Town-Butou Village (August 2006)

A major conundrum in Guangxi is the apparent conflict between economic development and cultural preservation. In general, each time a Zhuang-speaking settlement develops into a modern centre of business and commerce it ceases to be a Zhuang-speaking settlement because more Han-speaking people come into the area and the new town turns into a Mandarin- or Cantonese-speaking town or city! Of course, this situation is not limited to the Zhuang minority group alone, but is of some concern for other minority groups in China as echoed by the Dalai Lama with regards to the Tibet minority group in connection with the start of a new railway from Beijing to Tibet: "He said that while the Chinese constitution promised regional autonomy to minority nationalities, the guarantee was not implemented fully. What happens on the ground is that large populations from the majority nationalities have spread into these minority regions...Consequently, there is a danger of the languages and rich traditions of the minority nationalities becoming gradually extinct, he said." (Dalai Lama, 2007). A careful look at the pattern of fieldtrip itinerary is one of city/town to village. We noticed that, as a result of this conundrum, hardly is Zhuang ever spoken as a public or common language of communication in any city. Indeed, Nanning, the capital city of the Guangxi

Zhuang Autonomous Region has ceased to be a Zhuang-speaking settlement, and is now mainly a Mandarin-speaking city. In fact, the trend is that children born in the city to Zhuang-speaking parents generally do not pick up Zhuang as their mother-tongue. This important language use phenomenon was the basis of one of our first field trip choices: to do most of the data collection in villages rather than in towns. As mentioned above, communication in these cities is often characterized by a mix of languages (code-switching and code-mixing) such that even when a fluent speaker was found, it was not possible to find actual situations in which only Zhuang would be used over a considerable stretch of time. As a result, most of the recordings we made were done in rural settings by traveling to the villages of our informants.

In terms of methodology and technique, a major choice we had to make was very much related to this issue of language survival. The concern of most Zhuang people, even in the village, is how to document and preserve their language. We noticed that once we were in the village, people mainly got interested in what we were doing when they had some understanding that the work we were doing might lead to the documentation and preservation of their language. As a result of this, in subsequent visits, we decided to develop a technique of dialogue repetition and dramatization in the village based on linguistic texts we had carefully constructed from a proficiency course book (Bodomo and Pan 2007). Very often the villagers would be very amused about the texts and actually dramatize them, say them aloud, discuss them, saying what is authentically Zhuang and what is not, and finally suggesting better ways of making the conversation, and once everybody was satisfied with the texts, we then proceeded to do photo-, audio-, and video- recording the dialogues. This way we got testimony from the language users themselves that what we were coming up with was indeed authentic linguistic data. Of course, other more spontaneous recordings took place in the form of participating in the everyday lives of the people, especially rites of passage like funerals and birth celebrations, routine farm work situations in which we followed the villagers to the fields and asked them to identify plant, insect and animal names for us, during which we photo-, audio-, and video-recorded them. These semi-controlled dialogue settings along with the spontaneous settings ensured that we collected pronunciation, lexical items and syntactic constructions of authentic Zhuang from fluent speakers and without the risk of influences from other linguistic systems through language mixing as we witnessed in the cities. Connecting one's linguistic field research explicitly to issues about language documentation, preservation and revitalization is an important field research technique and strategy in Guangxi, in particular, and other minority linguistic situations, in general.

3.0. Major Features of the Zhuang Language

In this section, we provide an outline sketch of the major linguistic features of Zhuang. Further information about the major linguistic features of the language can be found in our forthcoming grammar (Bodomo, in preparation).

3.1. Phonology

Each of the two dialects we have studied so far (Mashan in Northern Zhuang and Qinzhou in Southern Zhuang) has nine vowel phonemes and this is based on minimal pairs set up from our field notes (Bodomo, in preparation), including the close front vowels /iù/ and /I/, the close-mid front vowel /eù/ (Mashan) /Eù/ (Qinzhou), the open front vowels /aù/ and /a/, the open-mid back vowel /•ù/, and the close back vowels /U/, /μ/ and /uù/. There are a number of diphthongs and triphthongs in each of these dialects. Also based on minimal pairs from our field notes, we have 23 consonants for Mashan Zhuang and 19 for Qinzhou including bilabials, labio-dentals, dentals, alveolars, velars, glottals, palatals, labialized velars, palatalized bilabials, and palatalized velars, with the difference that the labialized and palatalized consonants occur in Mashan but not in Qinzhou.

Like other Chinese languages, Zhuang is a tone language, with six “stretchy” tones and two “checked” ones in both Mashan and Qinzhou. Tones in Mashan Zhuang are marked as Tone 1- 8: (Tone1= 53, Tone2=22, Tone3=242, Tone4=24, Tone5=33, Tone6=31; Tone 7 and 8 are marked respectively by letters p, t, k and b, d, g at the end of word/syllable boundaries).

According to Zhang (1998) the so-called Standard Zhuang (this is based on the Wuming dialect but is hardly intelligible with other dialects and is thus very little used by speakers of other dialects) has 22 initials, and 108 finals, including six vowels, 12 compound vowels, 30 nasal vowels, and 60 vowels ending with codas.

3.2. Morphosyntax

The basic word order of the language is SVO as attested in the following declarative sentences with a nominal object in (1a) and a pronominal object in (1b):

- (1) a. Gou aeu nohmou.
 Gou53 aeu53 no31mou53.
 1SG take pork
 ‘I am picking up pork.’

- b. Gou gyaez mwngz.
 Gou53 gyaez22 mwng22.
 1SG love 2SG
 'I love you.'

Interrogative structures are, at least, of two types, including in situ and A-not-A choice questions, as shown in (2):

- (2) a. Mwngz gwn gazmaz.
 Mwng22 gwn53 ga22ma22.
 2SG INGEST what
 'What are you eating?'
- b. Mwngz gwn ndi gwn?
 Mwng22 gwn53 ndi53 gwn53?
 2SG INGEST NEG INGEST
 'Are you going to eating something or not?'

The negative particle as can be seen in (2) usually occurs between the subject and the verb, as shown in (3):

- (3) Gou ndi gwn ngaiz.
 Gou53 ndi53 gwn53 ngai22.
 1SG NEG INGEST cooked rice
 'I am not eating cooked rice.'

As can be seen in the various sentences, the language has little inflectional morphology, as common morphosyntactic categories like gender, agreement, tense, and case are not marked on nouns and verbs. However, the language has aspectual markers attached to verbs as in (4) and quite an intricate system of nominal classifiers as shown in (5):

- (4) Gou gwn-gva
 Gou53 gwn53-gva33
 1SG eat-PERF
 'I have eaten.'
- (5) a. song boux vunz 'two CL person'
 b. song duz mou 'two CL pig'

- c. song ndaen lwggam 'two CL orange'
- d. song ndaen lwgmanh 'two CL pepper'

The major word classes of the language are listed in (6):

- (6) a. Noun ngai 'cooked rice'
- b. Verb gwn 'to eat'
- c. Adjective sang 'tall'
- d. Determiner bwnj saw naex CL-book-DET 'this book'
- e. Adverb nyaeng 'slowly'
- f. Preposition nywqgwanz daiz de on-table-the 'on the table'
- g. Conjunction cimh 'and'
- h. Ideophone hiz-liz-humh-lumh 'noisy actions', and
- i. Pronoun gou 'I', mwngz 'You'.

Summary of the various chapters.

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