The Majang Language

Joswig, A.

Cover Page

Universiteit Leiden

The handle http://hdl.handle.net/1887/73814 holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

Author: Joswig, A.
Title: The Majang Language
Issue Date: 2019-06-04

Introduction

> *"Grammar and discourse interact with and influence each other in profound ways at all levels, so that in real life neither can even be accessed, not to mention explained, without reference to the other."*

This statement by John Du Bois (2003, p. 49) may serve as a fitting tag-line for this language description, which provides much justification to his idea. The past few years of my attempts to first understand and then describe the structure of the Majang language were deeply impacted by this interaction between grammar and discourse. The project began with a tone workshop under the guidance of Keith Snider and Constance Kutsch Lojenga in Addis Ababa in 2008; there I became convinced that another description of the Majang language would add value to the efforts of previous and contemporary linguists, simply because my newly gained understanding of the tone system would give me a considerable advantage that was not available to them. With this confidence about tonal differences, I felt that I could open doors into the inner systems of the grammar by identifying all the categories that so far were not described by my colleagues.

I started by analyzing a substantial word list, and then worked on simple narrative texts. They revealed that Majang had very little to offer in the way of case marking, as most central constituents appeared to be unmarked for case. After some time I started branching out from the texts by eliciting further data, and this was the first time that it dawned on me that things might become more complicated. The consultant at that time returned completely unexpected tone patterns to me, both on verbs and nouns, so that after a few days of this I falsely concluded that I could not trust his data and decided not to work with him again. What is worse, I went through the data I collected from him and corrected it to the way I thought it had to be, because it just did not fit my assumptions.

Next then came another workshop, this time about grammar, which was based entirely on elicited material gleaned from a number of motivated language consultants. After a short time with these men it became very clear that the Majang language had a surprise in store for me that I did not expect to find in an African language – a full-blown ergative-absolutive alignment system, probably the most robust specimen encountered so far in any language on the continent. I went through my text corpus again to change all the

glosses according to this new discovery, correcting all the data where I must have misheard things initially. Unfortunately, I ran into more and more difficulties with this, as rather a lot of the early transcriptions did not quite fit the new revelation.

Some elicited data finally made me aware that there must be some split system regarding intransitive subjects. Often they came out with different cases than the absolute I expected, and I presented this as some kind of split-*S* or fluid-*S* system at the 2015 Nilo-Saharan colloquium in Nairobi. Later, I checked my data again and discovered what seemed closer to the truth, a split-ergativity system based on the pragmatic parameter of topicality, which fits very well into the framework provided by typologists (section III.2.1.2). Then going through the tedious job of checking all the paradigms of nouns encountered in my texts, I made the startling discovery that, with very few exceptions, ergativity did not appear in any of the texts. I was looking at a language with two faces – one with a vibrant ergative-absolutive nature jumping at me from all my elicited grammar data, and another one stubbornly aligned along nominative-accusative characteristics in my texts.

There are explanations for these two natures, grounded in the aforementioned interaction between discourse and grammar. In the discussions that follow I hope that I do this language justice. One thing I have learned in the process of preparing this grammar: whatever the linguist finds out depends to a great extent on the nature of the available data. Had I followed the advice of only looking at data from natural texts, I would probably not have encountered the ergative-absolutive nature of this language. Had I only restricted myself to elicited data, I would not have realized how marginal the structures are in the language, at least in the kinds of text that are usually analyzed by linguists. I am grateful that somehow I stumbled across the most felicitous mix.

This Majang grammar was written for linguists. This means that it is not particularly useful or even readable for those who want to learn the language, or for linguistically untrained members of the Majang language community. Other resources need to be (and hopefully will be) written for them. At least it is my hope that this language description can serve as a resource for those who will be creating such works of a less technical and more practical nature. Reading this grammar requires a minimum of linguistic training, which encompasses familiarity with the terms provided by what is called *Basic Linguistic Theory*. This concept is now readily accessible in the three volumes of the same name by Dixon (2010a, 2010b, 2012). Following the con-

cept of Basic Linguistic Theory entails the commitment to disregard any particular contemporary grammatical theory or model in its current special-ized terminology or formal representation, or to at least reduce it to a mini-mum. The idea is that even in generations to come, linguists and typologists will be able to make use of this description without having to first go through a course on the intricacies of linguistics in the early 21st century. I hope to accomplish this goal by providing sufficient definitions for all ter-minology that is not part of Basic Linguistic Theory, and by refraining from any kind of formal representation that is not self-explanatory. Contemporary readers who hope to find explanations and representations according to the latest models will therefore be predictably disappointed. All in all, the focus is mostly on description, and much less so on explanation.

For the most part, I also refrain from historical statements, and I take no part in any discussion regarding the placement of Majang or any other higher-level language family unit in any kind of genetic classification. Where the presented data supports or contradicts any existing classification, I say so, but without drawing any further conclusions.

This language description comes in several parts. The division into parts is inspired by the ideas of both T. Payne (2006) and Noonan (2006), who en-visioned the development of user-friendly grammars as coming from two perspectives: one a form-to-function approach, and the other a function-to-form approach. Although this division could not be upheld entirely, these two approaches are reflected in *Part IV: Morphology* and *Part V: Other Syntactic and Pragmatic Topics* of this language description. But I found it necessary to add a third part preceding these two perspectives which deals with the basic facts behind information packaging in the clause (*Part III: Basic Syntax*). This is the shortest of the parts in this work, but it introduces many of the concepts in both form and function that accompany the reader in all the following sections. It also discusses my choices regarding analysis and terminology, and explains why some alternative approaches were not pursued in the interpretation of certain language structures. In a sense Part III can be seen as the central chapter of the whole description.

Further elements necessary for a helpful language description are found in the other parts. *Part I: The Cultural, Ecological and Sociolinguistic Context* not only provides demographic, ethnographic and sociolinguistic informa-tion on the Majang language and the people who speak it; it also gives de-tails on sources and history of this study, and the people involved in it. It fur-

ther contains a short typological summary (section I.11) of the language. *Part II: Phonological Inventory and Orthography* presents the findings of the phonological analysis, which is an integral part of this study, together with much of the data that underpins these findings. It also explains the particulars of the practical orthography used in this language description.

After the main grammar parts III-V, *Part VI: Texts and Lexicon* provides two word lists, one from Majang to English and one from English to Majang, to give an impression of the Majang lexicon. This is preceded by two sample narrative texts, which show the language in natural use.

It is my sincere hope that the index provided at the end enhances the usefulness of the grammar to those who do not have the time to read this work from beginning to end, since this usually describes the largest group of grammar users.