



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

The Majang Language

Joswig, A.

Citation

Joswig, A. (2019, June 4). *The Majang Language*. LOT dissertation series. LOT, Amsterdam.
Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/73814>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/73814>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

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

Part I: The Cultural, Ecological and Sociolinguistic Context

I.1 The Name of the Language

The Majang language, a Nilo-Saharan language spoken in southwest Ethiopia, has been given many names; see Dimmendaal (1998b, p. 26ff) for a list of names of all Surmic languages. The following are the names listed there for the Majang language: Ajo, Ato Majangeronk (self-name, means ‘*mouth of Majang people*’), Mageno, Majangir, Majanjiro, Mezhenger, Masongo, Mesengo, Ojang and Tama. As seen in section I.3.1, the variety of names has led to some confusion regarding the 2007 Ethiopian census.

The only names applied to the Majang people nowadays are based on the (closely related) variants Majang, Mesengo and Mezhenger. Since these are different orthographic representations of the self-name, they do not cause any offense to the Majang people. I am not aware of any derogatory names currently applied to the Majang people.

In this study, I use the name Majang language, or, in short, Majang.

The ISO 639-3 code for Majang is *mpe*. WALS (Dryer & Haspelmath, 2013) uses the code *maj*, and Glottolog¹ the glottocode *maja1242*.

I.2 Previous Research

A number of linguists have previously undertaken the study and description of the Majang language. The first of these was Cerulli (1948), followed by Bender (1983), who provided a morphological sketch of Majang. This sketch also deals with segmental phonology. Bender was leaning heavily on know-

¹ <http://glottolog.org/resource/languoid/id/maja1242>

ledge shared by Harvey Hoekstra, a missionary reported to have a very good command of the language. He never shared any of his linguistic knowledge publicly, so it can only be accessed through Bender's work. Bender provided some scanty Majang language data already in his self-published *The Ethiopian Nilo-Saharans* (1975), but most of it dealt with ethnographic issues.

Following Bender, Unseth studied the language in-depth and wrote a number of papers on individual aspects of the phonology and grammar (Unseth, 1984, 1986a, 1986b, 1988a, 1988b, 1989b, 1991, 1992b, 1994, 2007; Unseth & Tefera, 1985). He published some of these before he had to abandon his work on Majang. His work and data are of the highest quality and already provide good inroads into the language. Pete Unseth generously provided me with all his writings, published and unpublished, and even with some typed-up field notes of the early stage of his research, for which I am extremely grateful. He also let me use many texts that he collected during the years of his research, and an unpublished 80-page Majang-English dictionary (Unseth, 1992a), which proved extremely helpful for working with the texts.

James and Whashu Kim studied the language from 1998 to 2008 and produced an unpublished phonology sketch. Other recent works on phonetic and phonological topics were published by Moges (2002, 2006, 2008).

In 2009, Tyler Schnoebelen collected some data on Majang in the course of his research on the Shabo language, and very generously allowed me to use his data, including the audio files, before he published it elsewhere (Schnoebelen, 2009).

The most recent comprehensive treatment of the language is Getachew (2014), and it provides a wealth of Majang texts and some language analysis. In many points it differs significantly from the conclusions reached in this study.

Over the past few years I also published some shorter articles on the Majang language (Joswig, 2012, 2015, 2016). These articles use somewhat different terminology from what is chosen here, particularly the two articles relating to grammar, and my analysis of the reported phenomena has changed since then.

The Majang culture was studied and described by Stauder (1970, 1971). Hoekstra (2003), although his book was not written for an academic audience, provides much useful ethnographic information gained by someone

who has spent much time with the Majang people during the period in which they were being exposed to the Ethiopian highland culture.

I.3 Demography

I.3.1 Number of speakers, location and other languages in the area

The 2007 Ethiopian census (Samia, 2007a, p. 91) lists 10,871 individuals for the “*Messengo*” ethnic group and 21,951 for the “*Mejenger*” ethnic group. Why the two groups were separated for the census is not known, as both names refer to the Majang people. So the total ethnic population in 2007 was just above 30,000 individuals. The 2007 census is less helpful when it comes to the number of speakers of the “*Messengogna*” and “*Mejengerigna*” languages: Only 6,443 speakers were counted for the former, and none whatsoever for the latter. Clearly, many of the speakers of Majang must have been confused by the two language names presented in the interview. An interesting illustration of the limited value of these speaker numbers is the fact that in “*Mezhenger Zone*” 9,985 ethnic Mejenger were counted, plus 18 Messengo. At the same time, only 11 Messengogna speakers came forth in that Zone, and no Mejengerigna speakers (Samia, 2007b, pp. 44, 54). There is no basis to assume that only 0.1% of ethnic Majang still speak this apparently vibrant language in one of the largest Majang population centers². Therefore the speaker numbers from the 2007 census need to be discarded and instead I assume that the number of speakers must still be in the same range as the number of the ethnic population: at around 30,000 in total for all of Ethiopia.

The Majang people were located by Stauder (1971, p. 3) and Unseth (1984, p. 2) in four isolated pockets. The northernmost pocket is situated between Gambella town and Dembidolo. The biggest area stretches from the town of Bure in the North to an area west of Teppi in the South, and includes the small town Godare. Two more pockets are found north of Teppi (this is

² In the same way, Samia (2007b) lists 3,454 ethnic “Mejenger” and another 50 ethnic “Messengo” for Sheka Zone, but only a total of 37 “Messengogna” language speakers. Sheka Zone contains Teppi, where I conducted most of my fieldwork and where it is not difficult to find numerous speakers of Majang in the nearby village of Goji.

shown as connected to the main area on the map below) and southwest of Guraferda. The town of Teppi itself was not included in Stauder's and Unseth's maps of the language area, but in fact numerous speakers can be found in the village Goji, only 10 minutes' walk from Teppi.

The following languages are spoken by other ethnic groups in the neighborhood of the Majang people: Anfillo (ISO 639-3 *myo*, Omotic, practically extinct), Anuak (*anu*, Nilo-Saharan), Me'en (*mym*, Nilo-Saharan), Oromo (*gaz*, Cushitic), Shabo (*shf*, unclassified), Shekkacho (*moy*, Omotic) and Sheko (*she*, Omotic). The closest contacts seem to exist with the Anuak people, with whom there is also considerable intermarriage. In areas of close contact, both Anuak and Majang people seem to be bilingual in each others' language, and the Majang people borrowed a number of words from Anuak (Stauder, 1970, p. 112).

Moges (2015) recently reported on a further linguistic group, Ngalaam, which resides in the area between the Guraferda-Majang community and the Kacipo-Baalesi (*koe*) habitat in the far Southwest of Ethiopia. Linguistically this group seems to belong to the southwest-Surmic subfamily.

I.3.2 Map

Colin Davis kindly created the following map (Figure 1) for this study. It contains information about the location of the different language areas of Majang in relation to the areas of neighboring languages, the main roads in the area, the largest rivers, major towns, and the regional boundaries of Oromia Region, Gambella Region and the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region of Ethiopia. The Majang language area straddles all three regions, which makes its political situation somewhat complicated. But the language is recognized as an official language of Gambella region, and developed there for use as a medium of instruction in school.

The map further shows the location of the Boma plateau in South Sudan, from where the Majang people reportedly migrated some generations ago (see section I.3.3 below).



Stauder (1970) attempted to reconstruct the history of the Majang people, based on oral traditions and knowledge available among them in the 1960s.

³ © 2016 SIL International. Used by permission, redistribution not permitted.

It appears that the Majang originated from places further south, probably near the Boma plateau in South Sudan (Stauder, 1970, p. 108). Since the Majang do not own cattle and live in otherwise unpopulated forests, they have moved gradually northwards, establishing settlements in the previously ample forest areas of western Ethiopia. In the course of this, they probably did not displace other populations, except possibly the Shabo, who are the only other forest dwellers in the area. During Stauder's time, all but the northern (near Dembidolo) Majang settlements were inhabited for a longer time than collective memory could establish (Stauder, 1970, p. 110).

The southern origin of the Majang people is supported by considerations of syntactic typology. Dimmendaal (1998a, p. 66) assumes a verb-second basic word order for Proto-Surmic, which changed to a strict *VAP* pattern for the Didinga-Murle languages through language contact with neighboring Nilotic languages. The Majang language also follows a *VAP* pattern, but without having any *VAP* languages in its immediate neighborhood. Dimmendaal (1998a, p. 77) therefore states that “*the verb-initial structure of Majang remains somewhat enigmatic historically, given its current geographical position [...] i.e. given the absence of strict verb-initial languages in the immediate vicinity of this language.*” An origin from near the Boma plateau would place the Majang ancestors in the immediate vicinity of some Nilotic *VAP* languages, and this would explain Dimmendaal's enigma.

I.4 Ecology

The traditional Majang lifestyle varies considerably from that of other Surmic ethnic groups, whose whole culture centers around cattle herding. Animal husbandry never played any significant role in the Majang society. Until exposed to mainstream-Ethiopian culture during the 1960s, the Majang people were a group of forest-dwelling slash-and-burn horticulturalists (Hoekstra, 2003, p. 357; Stauder, 1970, p. 104ff). They used to clear out a small forest area, plant maize, sorghum and root crops among the felled trees, then move on after three to four years to clear a new patch of forest elsewhere. Their diet was supplemented by hunting forest animals and by collecting honey. Honey was (and still is) a major source of cash income. This dependence on the forest habitat explains the wide scattering of the Majang population today (Stauder, 1970, p. 108): they could move to any place that pro-

vided these forests and was not contested by other people in the same area. This, over time, brought them all across the densely forested and sparsely populated areas of the western Ethiopian plateau.

Over the past decades much of the forest was cleared in those parts of Ethiopia to make way for plantations of coffee and other crops. This has significantly reduced the land available to the Majang for settlement and their tradition of shifting cultivation (Horne, 2011, p. 39), so that nowadays they are only able to continue their traditional lifestyle in the area of the headwaters of the five rivers running through Gambella Region. This area is currently envisioned to receive protection as a “reserve forest” under the Ethiopian government (Horne, 2011, p. 39).

Many Majang have chosen to give up their traditional lifestyle, and they now settle in permanent villages, often near the coffee plantations, where they find employment. Honey collection continues to play a significant role in the Majang economy. My language consultants informed me that all of them still take care of several bee hives each.

The high mobility of the Majang people until the 1970s and their tendency to settle in changing configurations with other Majang people from different areas may also explain why in spite of the widely scattered population only very little dialectal variation was observed to date. Now that the Majang are more sedentary, it can be expected that regionally-based speech varieties will develop within a few generations.

1.5 Ethnography

The traditional culture of the Majang people was described extensively by Stauder (1971), so the readers can refer to that book for detailed information. This section only provides a short summary of the main defining features of the Majang society. Both material culture and social structure are closely linked to the ecologic and economic realities described above. Being forest dwellers and constantly on the move, the Majang never settled together in big groups, but in small units which were as easily dissolved as they were formed (Stauder, 1970, p. 105f). Although the people are grouped into a number of clans through patrilineal descent, there is practically no social

stratification, with the authority for any decisions resting with the family head. Conflicts are resolved in ad-hoc discussions.

Due to the temporary nature of any settlement, Majang forest houses were not elaborately constructed, but made of materials readily available in the forest (Hoekstra, 2003, p. 357). Lack of resources and specialization, again both due to small-group forest dwelling, also stood in the way of developing anything beyond a very simple material culture.

I.6 Genetic Affiliation

Bender (1975, p. 3, 1977) classified Majang as part of the Surmic sub-family of the Eastern-Sudanic Branch of the Nilo-Saharan languages. Since then, all scholars addressing the genetic classification of Majang agree that it forms a separate branch of the Surmic languages. Fleming (1983, p. 554) provided a first classification of Surmic languages, which puts Majang as the sole member of the northern branch, opposed to all other Surmic languages, which are classified as Southern Surmic. Figure 2 is a similar classification provided by Dimmendaal (1998b), with the addition of the Ngalaam language as reported by Moges (2015).

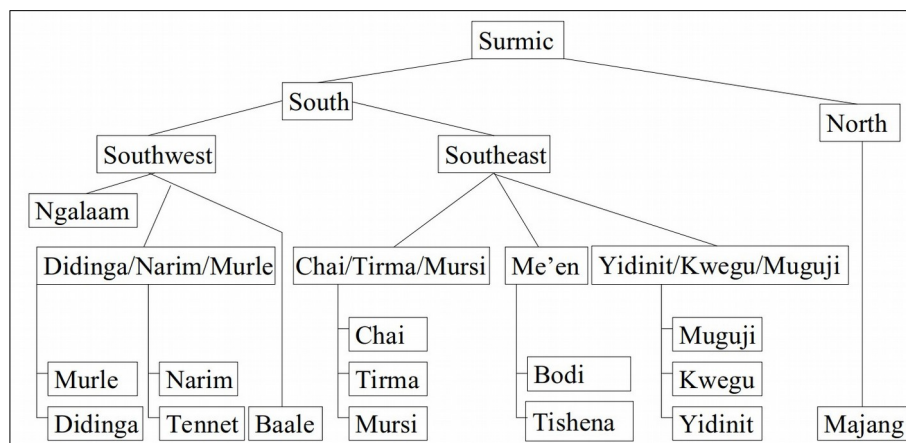


Figure 2: Majang family relations according to Dimmendaal (1998b, p. 13)

I.7 Literary Tradition

Until very recently, no literature was published in the Majang language. The Gambella Regional Government has begun implementing formal elementary education in the language, but this is still in its early stages, and the Latin-based orthography is still being pilot-tested. The Majang New Testament, using this orthography, was published in December 2017 (BSE, 2017).

I.8 Dialects

Stauder (1971, p. 5) stated that “*variations in dialect [...] are very few between northern and southern Majangir*”. Bender at first regarded the Majang language as “*fairly uniform*” (1975, p. 25), but later (1983) in various statements assumed considerable dialectal variation between the dispersed Majang locations. Unseth (1984) conducted different tests to check on these conflicting reports. A text-based intelligibility test and the comparison of vocabulary led him to the conclusion that indeed there is very little apparent variation disturbing “*the smooth sea of mutual intelligibility within Majang*” (Unseth, 1984, p. 6). No research was undertaken regarding the difference of grammatical structures between different language areas. This present language description is entirely based on the performance of speakers from the southern half of the Majang habitat.

As stated in section I.3.3, the high mobility of the Majang until recent times may serve as an explanation why regional dialects did not develop to date – there was sufficient interaction between Majang speakers of all areas to prevent significant diversification.

Whenever dialectal differences were noted in the course of this study, they are presented in the relevant places of the language description.

I.9 Sociolinguistic Situation

Regarding the sociolinguistic situation of the Majang people, the best information to date can be found in the thesis of Getachew (2014).

Majang people are often bilingual, the second language depending on individual circumstances. In areas where there is close interaction with the Anuak people, Majang speakers tend to be proficient in the Anuak language. Otherwise, the most important languages for Majang speakers seem to be either Oromo (Cushitic) or the Omotic languages of the Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples Region: Sheko, Bench, Diizin, Shekkacho (Getachew, 2014, pp. 4, 39). The available schooling options in the places where Majang is not used as medium of instruction seem to render Amharic and Oromo more and more important for the young generation of speakers (Getachew, 2014, p. 43f).

On the other hand, Majang is also used as a second language by at least one smaller group in the general area, the Shabo (Schnoebelen, 2009, p. 275).

No studies are known which deal with the language attitudes of the Majang people. Indirect evidence can be gleaned from the fact that the Majang people still choose to pass on their language to the next generation, in spite of the pressure of the surrounding dominant languages. At the moment, the Majang language is not in immediate danger of language death, although the situation is still precarious (Getachew, 2014, p. 3). The Ethnologue (www.ethnologue.com/cloud/mpe, retrieved on March 14, 2019) places Majang into category 4 of its EGIDS scale, which describes it as a language in “*vigorous use, with standardization and literature being sustained through a widespread system of institutionally supported education.*” This assessment may be a little too optimistic, considering that mother-tongue education in Majang is currently in its very early steps, and that the standardization has not been completed.

I.10 The Corpus

This section gives an overview of how this study came about, and how its presentation is envisioned.

1.10.1 The nature of the research

The research conducted for this study was impacted by two main factors: the requirements of the Leiden University Ph.D. program under which this dissertation was developed, and the expectations I had to meet as a result of my affiliation with SIL International, working in Ethiopia. Fortunately, both were not set against each other, and there was a lot of helpful overlap. Still, having to work in a full-time position resulted in the inevitable neglect this study received over time, which means that it took much longer than this kind of research is supposed to take. It also had the disadvantage that I was not able to spend extended periods of time in the language area, and I did not develop any active proficiency in the language.

In the *Introduction*, it was stated that this study is based on both elicited data and natural texts, against Dixon's advice (2010a, p. 321ff), who insists that a grammar should always be based on natural data only, possibly augmented by data from elicited paradigms to fill gaps. I believe that such a restriction would have led to a poorer description of this language. I will explain in section III.2.1.2 why there are good reasons not to expect a high number of ergative forms in narrative or conversational discourse, which is exactly what happened in the texts studied for this grammar. Not only was I forced to elicit ergative structures by using contrived examples, I also had to go through countless paradigms of both verbs and nouns in order to get a clear identification of the forms found in the texts. *Part IV: Morphology* makes it clear that it is not possible to just look at a verb or, particularly, a noun in Majang to determine its syntactic status. For practically each noun encountered in a text, I had to collect a full number-case paradigm to be sure of what particular form I was looking at, especially when it came to central-case forms, and often even beyond that. Any hope that I would accumulate sufficient knowledge of forms exclusively from natural texts would have been totally unrealistic.

My corpus of well-analyzed texts contains 2879 words, availing me with sufficient material to demonstrate the various structures of the language in the sections that follow. It is balanced by many pages of elicited sentences and paradigms. Occasionally I also draw on less well-analyzed texts for examples to illustrate a particular point.

The research began in 2008 with a phonetic transcription of the 1700-word Comparative African Word List (CAWL, Snider & Roberts, 2004), which was initially prepared for me in 2007 by two linguistics students, Sandra

Hufnagel and Stefanie Hauser. This word list, arranged by semantic domains, constituted the main source of information in the very early stages of this research. Using this resource, I collected the singular-plural paradigm for each noun, and the main-clause paradigms for all persons for each verb encountered. It also served as the basis for the tone analysis conducted in 2008 at a tone workshop in Addis Ababa.

This tone workshop introduced me to the methodologies propagated by both Constance Kutsch Lojenga and Keith Snider⁴ and gave me an excellent set of tools to formulate and test hypotheses. This was amplified by the qualities of my language consultant during that workshop, Joseph Kalakun, who is a good whistler and who compares the tone patterns of different utterances with a high and well-deserved confidence.

A substantial amount of textual material was given to me by both James Kim and Pete Unseth, who collected these texts years before. I picked some of these texts, re-recorded them and applied my own transcription. This was necessary, as no tonal information was present in the old transcriptions, and there was much uncertainty about vowel qualities and quantities. Two of these texts are presented in section VI.1. Most texts were traditional narratives, but I also analyzed a hortatory text written in the course of a discourse workshop in the early 2000s, and I recorded a new spontaneous conversation between the three main consultants, which provided me with structures not encountered elsewhere in my corpus. Many of these appear as examples in the following sections.

As I slowly discovered the various case forms of Majang, I devised diagnostic frames that I could apply to all nouns, and in this way I was able to glean the various nominal paradigms presented in sections IV.1 and IV.2.2.1. For verbs, I was easily able to collect paradigms about basic finite forms, nominalizations, infinitives, negative forms, and direction forms. It was more difficult to create appropriate frames for the subordinate-tense forms. More and better research can and should be conducted on this, including the other tense options, aspect and mode.

All texts, all lexical information and much of the grammar was entered into a database running under the *SIL Fieldworks* software. For the phonological analysis I used *SIL Phonology Assistant*, supported by both *Praat* and *SIL Speech Analyzer*. Much of the paradigm analysis was facilitated by the helpful spreadsheet features of *OpenOffice* and *LibreOffice*.

⁴ See Snider (2018) for a recent exposition of his methodology.

Active research on the language stopped just a few weeks before the submission of the first draft for this thesis in December 2016.

1.10.2 Consultants and other sources

A number of language consultants have contributed to this research. Joseph Kalakun provided most of the data; he is a resident of Teppí, but was born in Godare in Gambella Region, northwest of Teppí. He was already present during a data-collection session undertaken in 2007. Joseph also participated in the SIL tone workshop in Summer 2008 in Addis Ababa. During later research sessions, he was often supported by the other members of the Majang Bible translation team: Hawariat Babure, Epheson Teramaj, and, until 2011, Abyot Girma. All three are residents of Teppí or nearby Goji (**gójì** in Majang), and were either born there or in Godare. Mr. Abyot now works as a teacher in Goji. A further resident of Goji involved in the early research is Yordanos Addisu, who also works as a teacher. All these gentlemen were in their 30s and 40s during the research period.

Three more consultants participated in the two-week “Discover-Your-Grammar” workshop for Nilo-Saharan languages, conducted in 2011 by SIL in Mizan Teferi⁵. One of them was Ashine Astin, who at that time was also the Speaker of the House of Gambella Region. He is a trained linguist and is highly motivated to contribute to language development for his mother tongue. During that workshop he was supported by Kadiree Nyamor and Nibeyat Dimesse, who also work for the Gambella Regional Government. Both Ashine and Kadiree were born in Godare, and Nibeyat in Mangeshi. All three are now residents of Gambella town. From all participants in the research, I obtained signed statements of informed consent, after the terms of this informed consent were explained to them in Amharic.

In 2009 Tyler Schnoebelen conducted research on the Shabo language, the results of which were published in Schnoebelen (2009). In order to compare Shabo data with the surrounding languages, he also elicited sentences from Majang and Shekkacho. His Majang consultant for these sessions was a man only known to me by his first name, Yaikob. Schnoebelen granted me permission to make use of his audio data and his transcriptions, but it became

⁵ For the Majang language, an immediate result of that workshop was the rough “Brief Grammar of Majang” (Joswig, 2011), which may serve as a grammar sketch for people without linguistic training.

clear that most of Yaikob's data rather followed the syntax of English, and therefore had to be discarded.

Another useful resource was the word list created by Pete Unseth (1992a). The words in there are mostly unmarked for tone, but they provided a welcome reference when studying Majang texts.

I.10.3 *Presentation of data*

The Majang language shows no grammatical difference between masculine and feminine. For simplicity, I have chosen to use masculine pronouns for the English glosses in all elicited examples involving the third person singular, except in cases where the semantic context makes a masculine referent rather unlikely. If the lexeme suggests a non-human referent, the neuter pronoun 'it' was chosen.

If the example is taken from a text, then the choice of pronouns in the English glosses follows the pragmatic context of the example. In the following sentence, the use of the impersonal form without object pronoun leaves the identity of the object ambiguous.

Example I.1: presentation of pragmatic context in textual examples

má^L té:nàn jé:mé^L ké^L róríjá:tiŋ.
 má^L té:nàn jé:mé^L k-é^L róríjá:ti = ŋ
but instead previously NEG-IMPS teach\NEG=SFT
But they were not previously taught.

The impersonal construction in Majang serves the purpose of what passive does in other languages (see p. 238ff) and is translated as such in the free translation. If no short pronoun follows the impersonal verb, the object could be either 3rd person singular or 3rd person plural. In the pragmatic context of this example, the referent is clearly plural, and this English free translation is chosen regardless of the fact that a context-free reading would allow a singular interpretation.

Like in this previous example, most examples present the Majang data in two lines. The top-most line shows the surface-phonemic representation of the data after the application of all lexical phonological rules – see sections II.1.2 and II.2.2 about how the various phonemes are actually pronounced. Moreover, this representation includes all lexically identifiable material present in the utterance. This includes the writing of floating low tones that

are part of the lexical presentation, even if they don't have any phonetic effect (such as the floating low tone following **típír^L** in example I.2, where it precedes a low tone on the next word). The second line instead shows all morphemes in their underlying representation.

Example I.2: presentation of surface and underlying structures

ó:lùn **típír^L** à **ékê:r**.
ó:l-in **ti-pír^L** à **ék-èr^L**
can-2S.CJ *INF-fly* *CONJ* *truth-PL.ABS*
You can truly fly.

For example the *2S.CJ* morpheme is shown with the vowel /i/ before the application of the labial-harmony rule, and the *PL.ABS* morpheme is shown with its underlying tonal structure – carrying a low tone. For a detailed list of conventions for representing tone, downstep, toneless syllables, polar tone and tone replacement in the underlying form, see section II.9.

In a few instances the surface and the underlying representation are identical, without any morpheme breaks in the words. Then only one text line is shown, which represents both the surface and the underlying level.

As for the presentation of morphemes in the second line, this work follows the conventions of the Leipzig Glossing Rules (Comrie, Haspelmath, & Bickel, 2015). Glosses and morphemes separated by a hyphen (-) indicate that a discrete morpheme boundary is in evidence. Glosses separated by a dot (.) are given to portmanteau morphemes with several morphological functions. Glosses separated by a backslash (\) are placed below stem forms with implied grammatical information. If a form's morphology is ambiguous in the given context, this is indicated in a footnote.

I.11 Typological Overview

This section contains an overview of the basic typological facts about Majang for easy reference. The details of all these features should be read in their respective passages in this language description.

Compared with other Surmic languages, Majang has a very small consonant inventory with only 18 consonants, including two implosives /ɓ, ɗ/ (see sec-

tion II.2.1). The language provides no systematic opposition between stops, fricatives and affricates – all these sounds can be subsumed under the single label *obstruents*.

Majang has seven vowels (including two sets of mid vowels, see section II.1.1), without ATR vowel harmony (section II.1.4). There is contrast between short and long vowels (section II.1.3). Important phonological rules of Majang are labial harmony, which rounds the short vowel /i/ to /u/ in verbal suffixes following syllables containing round vowels or labial consonants, and the morphologically restricted vowel-height harmony, which changes the vowel /e/ into /ɛ/ following a high-vowel syllable (section II.5).

The tonal inventory consists of two tones plus downstep (section II.6). It can be shown that some morphemes in Majang are inherently toneless, and that another morpheme requires an analysis involving a polar tone. Many words demonstrably end in a floating low tone (section II.6.3), which is often attached to apparently toneless morphemes. Tone plays an extensive role, not only in distinguishing lexical items, but also in the grammar of Majang.

The Majang morphology is predominantly agglutinative, with segmental affixes containing individual bits of grammatical information (only suffixes are productive, with two unproductive prefixes). Some grammatical features, however, such as noun number and case, are indicated by stem changes or by tonal means. Like most Eastern-Sudanic languages, Majang does not display grammatical gender, but it provides a very diverse number- and case-marking system on nouns, with a large number of inflection classes (section IV.1.3). Case marking is complicated by the provision of special forms for modified nouns in some syntactic cases (section IV.1.3.2). Unlike other Surmic languages, Majang has no distinction between inclusive and exclusive forms of the first person plural of pronouns or verbs.

The language has a variety of personal pronouns for various functions. One set of pronouns serves for general anaphoric reference, another for reference inside the verb phrase, and a third for contrastive purposes (section IV.3.1.1). Demonstratives and relative pronouns code a three-level deictic system, with reference to either the speaker, the hearer, or a place away from them both (sections IV.3.1.2, IV.3.1.3). Possessive pronouns indicate the person of the possessor together with number reference to the possessed entity (section IV.3.1.4). Interrogative pronouns always appear at the end of the question.

Many Majang verbs come in pairs of perfective and imperfective, where the imperfective form is derived from the perfective form through partial reduplication (section IV.2.2.7). Furthermore, all verbs are inflected with subject suffixes. Most verbs also distinguish between a tonal *conjoint* (CJ) form and a *disjoint* (DJ) form; the conjoint form is only applied to verb phrases that are immediately followed by a non-topical NP in the absolutive case (section III.3). Another grammatical category frequently expressed on the verb is directionality, which comes in three values: *centripetal* (CP) forms, which indicate a movement towards the deictic center; *centrifugal* (CF) forms, which express a movement away from the deictic center; and *deictic TransFer* (TF) forms, which are used for a movement from one deictic center to another deictic center.

The basic order of constituents in Majang transitive clauses is *VAP*, where *A* stands for the transitive agent and *P* for the transitive patient-like constituent, usually the object. The order of constituents is fairly fixed in the language, except for the option to front certain constituents (mostly subjects) for syntactic and pragmatic reasons (section V.7.1).

Pragmatic factors indeed have a major influence on the syntax of Majang. The case marking of central participants of a clause depends on their topicality (section III.1). If they are not topical, *S* and *P* are marked by the same *absolutive* case (examples a and b):

Example I.3: non-topical case marking of central constituents

- a) **kàwé è:è: wár^L kékàr.**
 kàw-é è:è: wár^L kékàr
bite-3S.DJ cat\SG.ERG dog\SG.ABS again
A cat bites a dog again.
- b) **dégàr wár^L kékàr.**
 dégàr wár^L kékàr
sleep\3S.CJ dog\SG.ABS again
A dog sleeps again.
- c) **kàwé wâr ídít^L.**
 kàw-é wâr ídít^L
bite-3S.DJ dog\SG.ERG man\SG.ABS
A dog bites a man.

The non-topical *A*, however, is marked by a different case, the *ergative* (example I.3c). If topical, this *A* is marked by yet another case form, the *nominative*, which is also used for a topical *S*:

Example I.4: topical case marking of central constituents

- a) **dégár^L wár kékàr.**
 dégár^L wár kékàr
 sleep\3s.DJ dog\SG.NOM again
 The dog sleeps again.
- b) **kàwé wár ídít^L.**
 kàw-é wár ídít^L
 bite-3s.DJ dog\SG.NOM man\SG.ABS
 The dog bites a man.

The three different case forms of ‘dog’ – **wár^L** (*ABS*), **wâr** (*ERG*) and **wár** (*NOM*) – are only distinguished by tone, but different they are. Two more clause-level cases are used by the Majang language, the *dative* (*DAT*) and the *locative* (*LOC*), plus a further *possessive* (*POSS*) case to mark nouns as possessors of a noun phrase. A detailed discussion of the cases and their use is presented in sections IV.1.3.2 and III.2.1.2.

Though the constituent order *VAP* is normal, the verb is often found at the end of the sentence. In that situation, another morpheme is attached to the verb, the sentence-final topicality marker **=ŋ** (*SFT*). This marker indicates that the final constituent is either the verb phrase or a topical noun phrase (see section III.4 for its discussion).

The language makes use of some valence-changing devices. Most notable among those is the antipassive (*AP*) (section V.5.1). A genuine passive construction in the sense of Dixon (2010a, p. 166) is not encountered in the language – its function is partly covered by the impersonal form, an inflectional device described in section IV.2.3.1.

In spite of Unseth’s (1989b, p. 106) claim to the contrary, Majang does not have postpositions, and only a few questionable prepositions (section IV.3.6).

Relative clauses are very frequent in Majang, and can be both restrictive and descriptive (section V.8.5). Some temporal adverbial clauses have subordinate-tense verb forms (section V.8.3.1). Otherwise tense is only expressed through tense markers which appear to be working along the lines of a metrical tense system (section V.6.1.1).