

Issues in writing a grammatical sketch in Tiddim Chin

OTSUKA Kosei

(The University of Tokyo / JSPS Research fellow)

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1. About the Tiddim Chin language

Tiddim Chin (ISO693-3: tdm) is a Tibeto-Burman language (Kuki-Chin branch) spoken in northwest Myanmar (Chin state) and northeast India (Mizoram state and Manipur state). It is spoken as a lingua franca in the northern part of Chin state (Myanmar). Most of the Tiddim Chin speakers on the side of Myanmar can also speak Burmese, the official and educational language of the Union of Myanmar. The total number of its speakers is estimated about 344,000, according to Grimes ed. (1996: 717).

From a typological point of view, Tiddim Chin is a verb-final language (Word order: AOVt or SVi¹) like many other Tibeto-Burman languages (except Karenic languages). Tiddim Chin has an absolutive or ergative case marking system, and the grammatical relation between verb and arguments are represented by the enclitics.

Its phonological system² is rather simple compared with the other Chin

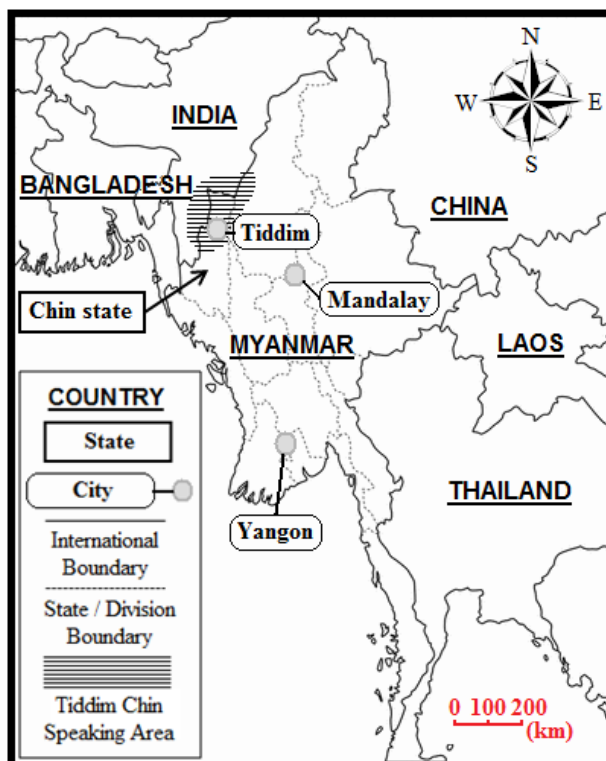


Figure 1 Tiddim Chin speaking area

¹ A: transitive subject, S: intransitive subject, O: object, Vi: intransitive verb, Vt: transitive verb.

² The syllable structure of Tiddim Chin can be represented as (C) V (C) / T (C: Consonant, V: Vowel, T: Tone). Tiddim Chin (except its complex sound symbols) has 19 consonants / p, t, k, ʔ, p^h, t^h, b, d, g, c [tɕ], s, x, h, v, m, n, ŋ, l, f /, 10 single vowels / a, a:, e, e: [ɛ:], i, i:, o, o: [ɔ:], u, u: /, 16 diphthongs / iu [iɯ], ia [ia], ei [ei], e:i [ɛ:i], eu [eɯ], e:u [ɛ:ɯ], ai [ai], a:i [a:i], au [aɯ], a:u [a:ɯ], ou [ou], oi [oi], o:i [ɔ:i], ui [ui], u:i [u:i], ua [ua] /, 4 triphthongs / iai [iai], iau [iaɯ], uai [uai], uau [uaɯ] /

languages, however, it has three distinctive tones, and tone sandhi occurs when each tone comes together in a phrase. Morphologically speaking, each Tiddim Chin verb has two stems, referred to as Form I (basic stem) and Form II (derived stem). This verb stem alternation is not linked in any simple way to a single parameter of variation such as tense, aspect, and mood. Form II stems occur in certain transitive and subordinate clauses.

Tiddim Chin has its own orthography developed by an American priest during the early part of the 20th century. This orthography has been used extensively among the speakers. Henderson (1965) noted that the written style differs from the colloquial style in Tiddim Chin³.

2. Why did I choose Tiddim Chin?

In this section, I will go over the rationale behind why I started to write the reference grammar of Tiddim Chin. In my undergraduate degree, I majored in Burmese (Myanmar) language at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies. At that time, I was captivated by the idea of backpacking (travelling), so I travelled a lot, exploring in Myanmar on school holidays. Travelling around the country, I noticed that there are many different kinds of languages spoken in Myanmar, and I found that many of the minority languages have not been described in a linguistic approach. Since then, I came to have a personal interest in researching any one of these minority languages and publishing my findings.

A Tibeto-Burman researcher in Japan indicated to me that there are relatively few reference grammar books on northern Chin languages, such as Tiddim Chin, and advised me to conduct research into Tiddim Chin. I also read an article (Nishida 1989: 995) stating that linguistic studies into Chin languages are still at an initial stage, although investigating Chin languages would play an important role in the studies of Tibeto-Burman languages. This is why I have decided to write its reference grammar.

Since I started my M.A. course in linguistics, I have conducted fieldworks four times in Myanmar. I have studied its phonology, morphology and syntax, mainly through elicitation (Interviews, using Burmese as a medium language). I have also recorded some monologues (folktales) and dialogues (free conversation) in Tiddim Chin to see some grammatical figures that cannot be extracted from interview data.

/e:/ and /o:/ are realized as [ɛ] and [ɔ] before the final consonant /ʔ/. Tiddim Chin also has three distinctive tonemes (“rising or high tone”, “level tone”, and “falling or low tone”)

³ As far as my investigation goes, these two styles are mainly different in verb clause structure, but they share the same phonological system, morphological process and vocabulary. My current study focuses on the colloquial style.

● TYPE II⁴ Structure: **VC + NC with COP + SUB (+ CONJ)**

Function: Reason, Concessive ...

(5) tua sùtàm ká= hí? =há:ŋ =a: ámà? hè? =vèt =kéi
 DEM break^I 1^{PP} = COP^{II} =SUB =CONJ 3SG angry^I =at all =NEG
 “Although I broke it, he didn’t get angry at all” [CONCESSIVE]

(6) tua sùtàm ká= hí? =ciánŋ =a: ámà? kàp zìà?zià?
 DEM break^I 1^{PP} = COP^{II} =SUB =CONJ 3SG cry^I OMTP
 “Because I broke it, she cried loudly.” [REASON]

● TYPE III Structure: **NC + SUB (+ CONJ)**

Function: Conditional, Reason, Temporal, Concessive ...

(7) tua ká= sùktàp =há:ŋ =a: ká= puà? kú:l á= hí =ve:
 DEM 1^{PP} = break^{II} =SUB =CONJ 1^{PP}= repair^{II} need^I 3= COP^I =PTCL
 “Because I broke it, I had to repair it.” [REASON]

(8) tua ká= sùktàp =ciánŋ =a: sèk zàŋ =zé:l =ìŋ
 DEM 1^{PP} = break^{II} =SUB =CONJ hammer use^I =often =1SG.RLS
 “When I break it, I often use a hammer.” [TEMPORAL]

Table 1 The structures of a clause combining in Tiddim Chin

Coordination		TYPE I	-	-
Subordination	Conditional ⁵ , Reason <i>etc.</i>	TYPE I	TYPE II	TYPE III
	Concessive <i>etc.</i>	-	TYPE II	TYPE III ⁶
	Temporal <i>etc.</i>	-	-	TYPE III

The grammar sketch is different from the comprehensive grammar review in that the volume (number of pages) is limited and restricted. I could come up with three possible ways to describe clause combining so far, but I do not know which to choose. Table 2 summarizes the three ways to describe clause combining in Tiddim Chin.

(A) may be the most loyal to the Tiddim Chin language in that the linguists do not have to re-interpret its language and describe the language as it is, but at the same time,

⁴ VC and NC with COP in this structure are closely bound prosodically and syntactically.

⁵ The examples of the conditional clauses are shown below.

- (A) tua sùtàm =lè:cìn ámà? á= hè? suák =inté? “If you break it, he’ll get angry.”
 that break^I =SUB.2SG^{EP} 3SG 3^{PP}= angry^{II} born^I =3SG.IRR [TYPE I]
- (B) tua sùtàm ná= hí? =lè? ámà? á= hè? suák =inté? “do.”
 that break^I 2= COP^{II} =SUB 3SG 3^{PP}= angry^{II} born^I =3SG.IRR [TYPE II]
- (C) tua ná= sùktàp =lè? ámà? á= hè? suák =inté? “do.”
 that 2^{PP}= break^{II} =SUB 3SG 3^{PP}= angry^{II} born^I =3SG.IRR [TYPE III]

⁶ The example is omitted here.

by using all the peculiar terms such as “=*cián* clause” and “=*há:ŋ* clause”, it may confuse readers who know little about the language.

(B) focuses on the structure so it is easy to understand how the clause structure is related with other types of clauses that I described in other sections. However, the functions are described here and there and the readers go to and fro.

(C) may be the most ideal for many of the learners and some of the linguists, because it is easy for the learners to look up the usages, and also attractive to some of the linguists who are interested in comparing the language with other languages.

In either case, the concrete target of readers includes linguists. This may be the problem that every language could have, but at the same time, this is one of the major issues in writing a grammatical sketch of Tiddim Chin. Which one would you choose, (A), (B), or (C)?

Table 2 Three ways to describe a clause combining in Tiddim Chin

(A) Morphological level	(B) Syntactic level	(C) Functional level
1. = <i>cián</i> clause	1. Type I clause	1. Conditional clauses
2. = <i>há:ŋ</i> clause	2. Type II clause	2. Reason clauses
3. = <i>lè?</i> clause	3. Type III clause	3. Temporal clauses
...		...

ABBREVIATIONS

1	1st person	2	2nd person	3	3rd person
CONJ	conjunction	COP	copula	DEM	demonstrative
DIR	directional prefix	EP	enclitic pronoun	ERG	ergative
IRR	irrealis	NC	nominal clause	NP	noun phrase
OMTP	onomatopoeia	PP	proclitic pronoun	PTCL	particle
RLS	realis	SG	singular	SUB	subordinator
VC	verbal clause	VP	verb phrase	I	Form I (verb stem)
II	Form II (verb stem)	-	affix boundary	=	clitic boundary

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