Word Order in Biate

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Abstract

The paper aims to discuss the word order pattern in Biate (ISO639-3), an endangered and undocumented language spoken in Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya, Dima Hasao (North Cachar Hills) district of Assam and some parts of Mizoram and Manipur. Biate stands for both the people and the language. It is spoken by 19,000 speakers (Ethnologue 2019). Grierson-Konow (1904) and Graham Thurgood (2003) classified Biate to the Old-Kuki sub-group of Sino-Tibetan language family.

The paper will discuss and examine the word order pattern, which is one of the primary ways in which languages differ from one another. Biate is a verb-final language, with SOV as its basic word order. It exhibits a large number of characteristics expected of it as an OV language. Biate employs postpositions (PP), which follow the noun phrase they combine with. Like other Kuki-Chin languages, the genitive is indicated by the possessor which precedes the possessed item. The Adjective follows the noun (NAdj) in Biate. Noun modifiers like numerals and classifiers follow the noun. Relative clause precedes the noun (RelN) in Biate.

Keywords: Biate, Kuki-Chin, Word order, Tibeto-Burman

Introduction

Biate is one of the recognized tribes of Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Manipur under 'Any Kuki Tribes'. The word Biate has varied meanings; the most common meaning that seems everybody accepts is worshippers, referring to a common worship of a particular deity or different worship of various deities by their ancestors from time immemorial, (Remsiama Ngamlai, 2014[1]). Thus, they derived Biate as *Bia* 'worship' and *Te* 'people' which we can be literally translated as worshippers. According to Ramdina Lalsim (2012)[2] the Biates identified themselves as *'riam'* meaning 'human being' which also exclusively implies to their entire brethren Chin-Kuki-Mizo group.

Biate is one of the verb-final languages of Sino-Tibetan language family. It is mainly spoken in Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya, and Dima-Hasao (North Cachar Hills) district of Assam and some

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[1] Ngamlai, Remsiama (2014) *The Status of the Biate Tribe in North east India: A Study on Ethnic Minority Rights.* MA dissertation' IGNOU
[2] Lalsim, R. (2012) '*History of the Biates and their Folktales*'

parts of Mizoram and Manipur. It is one of the endangered languages of North East India. Grierson (1904) and Graham Thurgood (2003) classified Biate under the Old-Kuki sub-group of Kuki-Chin languages. They are a closely related to Hmar, Hrangkhol, Hiroi-Lamgang, Ranglong, Anal, Kom, Chiru, etc. It is spoken by 19,000 speakers (Ethnologue 2019). They inhabit the southeastern part of Jaintia Hills District of Meghalaya extending to the western part of North Cachar Hills district of Assam. The area lies approximately between 25˚5' to 25˚30' North latitude and 29˚28' to 93˚East Latitude and is mostly covered by thatch and thick forest having approximately 400 km in size (Lalsim, 2012). The Map of Northeast India and Biate inhabited area of Assam and Meghalaya is shown in the following;
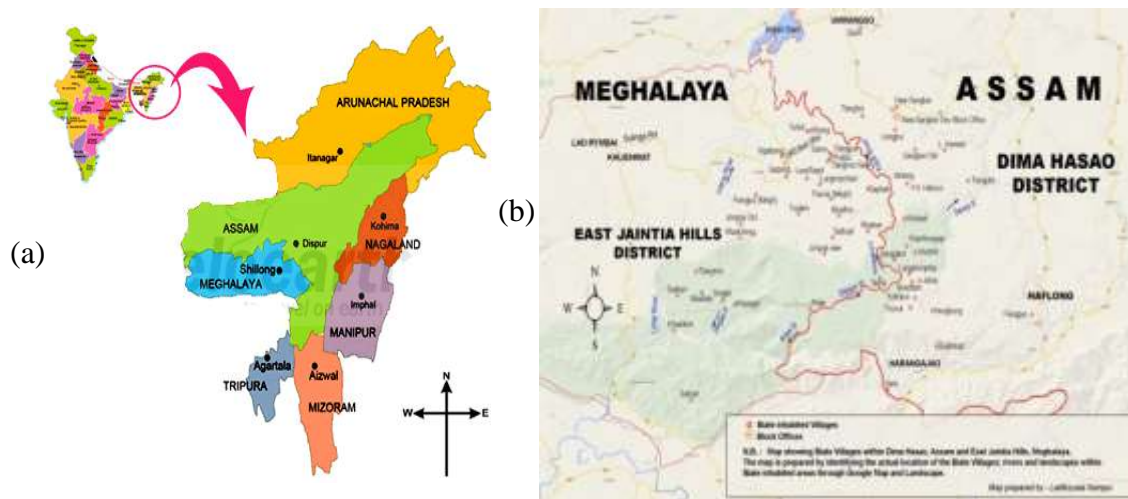

Figure 1: (a) Map showing North East India and (b) Map showing Biate inhabited villages of Assam and Meghalaya (prepared by Laldikzualla Nampui).

The paper attempts to describe the word order typology of Biate and shows the importance of different syntactic constituent of Biate. One of the primary ways in which languages differ from one another is in the order of constituents, or, as it is most commonly termed, their word order. When people refer to the word order of a language, they often are referring specifically to the order of subject, object, and verb with respect to each other (Mathew S. Dryer 2007). All languages in the world have six possible basic word orders: they are SVO, SOV, VSO, VOS, OSV, and OVS. Of these six, however, only three normally occur as dominant orders. The three which do not occur at all, or at least are excessively rare, are VOS, OSV, and OVS (Greenberg 1963). The present paper is divided into three sections: the first section discusses Greenberg's word order universal correlation with Biate. In the second, the predicted OV characteristic of Tibeto-Burman languages by Mathew S. Dryer with Biate is discussed. The third section discusses the remaining word order of Biate other than what had discussed in the first and second section.

1. Correlation of Greenberg's Universals Word Order with Biate Word Order

In this section we correlate some of the Greenberg's universals of word order typology which are relevant to Biate word order. It is discuss in the following.

Universal 1: It states that in declarative sentences with nominal subject and object, the dominant order is almost always one in which the subject precedes the object.

Biate has SOV word order where the nominal subject precedes nominal object. Thus, we can conclude that Biate agrees with Greenberg's universal 1 as shown in (1).

(1) *Alal-in   tʰeihai   a-fak*
    Alal-ERG   mango   3SG-eat
    'Alal ate Mango'

Universal 2: In languages with prepositions, the genitive almost always follows the governing noun, while in languages with postpositions it almost always precedes.

Biate agrees the second universal as the language has postpositional and the genitive precedes the governing noun. It has no separate genitive marker but like in other Kuki-Chin languages, genitive is indicated by word order in which the possessor precedes the possessed item as shown in (2) and (3).

(2) *Lalpu   lekʰabu*
    Lalpu   book
    'Lalpu's book.'

(3) *ki-pa   zakua   almira-a   a-om*
    my-father   coat   almira-PP   3SG-exist
    'My father's coat.'

Universal 3: With overwhelmingly greater than chance frequency, languages with normal SOV order are postpositional.

Biate shows postpositional ad position and its basic word order is SOV hence, Biate agrees with the fourth universal as shown in (4)

(4) *lekʰabu   dotsam   tsuŋa   a-om*
    book   table   PP   3SG-exist
    'The book is on the table.'

Universal 4: If a language has dominant SOV order and the genitive follows the governing noun, then the adjective likewise follows the noun.

Biate is an SOV language where the genitive precedes governing noun as stated and shown with example in the second universal above. Thus we can conclude that Biate doesn't correlate universal 4.

Universal 5: If in a language with dominant SOV order, there is no alternative basic order, or only OSV as the alternative, then all adverbial modifiers of the verb likewise precede the verb.

Biate agrees the seventh universal and its examples are given in (6), (7), and (8)

(6) *Athaŋ-in   bu   a-nek*
    Athang-ERG   rice   1SG-eat
    S   O   V
    'Athang ate rice.'

(7) *bu   Athaŋ-in   a-nek*
    rice   Athang-ERG   1SG-eat
    O   S   V
    'Athang ate rice.'

(8) *naite   rattak   a-ṭap*
    child   loudly   3SG-cry
    'The child cries loudly.'

2. Predicted OV characteristics of TB languages by Dryer in relation with Biate

The distribution of OV and VO order among Tibeto-Burman languages is fairly clearcut and easy to describe. VO order is found only in two groups, namely Karen and Bai, and the remaining languages are all not only OV but generally fairly rigidly verb-final (Mathew S. Dryer, 2008). The OV characteristics of Tibeto-Burman languages as predicted by Mathew S. Dyer which are related to Biate are discus below.

The SOV word order of Biate is illustrated in (9).

(9) *amampu-n   iva   a-mu*
    he-ERG   bird   3SG-see
    S   O   V
    'He sees the bird'

Postposition and postpositional phrases precede the verb and a word 'able' and 'want' follow the verb it governs as illustrated in (10) and (11)

(10) *ninreŋkan   biakin-aʔ   nin-fe   tʰei*
     everybody   church-LOC   21PL-go   able
     'everybody can go to church'

(11) *in-aʔ   ki-fe   nuam*
     home-LOC   1SG-go   want
     'I want to go home'

Like in Tibeto-Burman the predicate nominal in Biate precedes the copula as in example (12) where *ipa* 'man' precedes the copula *'a-ni'*.

(12) *ipa   a-ni*
man   3SG-be
'He is a man'

In a comparative construction in TB languages, the standard of comparison precedes the adjective, which is also applicable in Biate. We can also say that the marker of comparison follows the standard of comparison as in (13)

(13) *amampu ki raŋin   a-toi   ual*
he   I   than   3SG-short COMPM
'He is shorter than me.'

Complementizers marking clauses functioning as arguments of the verb occur at the end of the clause, as illustrated by the complementizer *'in'* in (14).

(14) *ofiz-a   ki-mu   raŋ-in   rilpek-ro*
office-LOC   1S-see   FUT-COMP   tell-IMP
'tell him that I will see him in the office'

Similarly, Subordinators marking adverbial subordinate clauses occur at the end of the clause, as illustrated by *intsu* 'after' in (15).

(15) *a-hoŋ   intsu   ki-fe   raŋ*
3S-come   after   I-go   will
'After he comes, I will go'

The above example (15) also illustrates how subordinate adverbial clauses precede the main clause. Similarly, purpose expressions precede the main verb, as in (16).

(16) *ama   tual-a   imu   ki-fe-raŋ*
he   out-LOC   see   1SG-go-will
'I will go out to meet him'

Question particle *im* in Biate occurs at the end of the sentence, as in (17) and (18).

(17) *ni-tʰo   tʰei   im*
you-do   can   QM
'Can you do it?

(18) *iva   ni-kap   im*
bird   2SG-shoot   QM
'Did you shoot the bird'

3. Word Order Features in Biate

In this section eleven different word orders of Biate that are not discussed in the previous sections will be discussed. This section mainly discuss on the order of noun and its modifiers adjectives, relative clause, demonstration, numerals, classifiers and the orders between the degree words and adjective, negative and verb, indirect and direct object, time and place adverbial.

3.1 Biate as an Ergative Language

Like many Tibeto-Burman languages, Biate is an ergative language in which all subjects of transitive verbs are marked by the ergative suffix *-in or -n,* regardless of their semantic role as in (19) and (20)

(19) *amampu-n   iva   amu*
       he-ERG   bird 3SG-see
       'He sees the bird'

(20) *naipaŋ-in   tʰiŋkuŋ   ata   tʰei   ara-mal*
       child-ERG   tree   from   fruit   PST-pluck
       'The child plucked the fruit from the tree'

3.2 Pro-drop

Like Hindi and Telugu, Biate also permits a pronoun occurring in the subject position to be dropped. However, they are recoverable via pronominal clitics that are incorporated in the verbal morphology. For example, in a sentence such as (21), the subject pronoun can be dropped and the sentence is still grammatical.

(21) *amampu-n   iva   a-mu*
       he-ERG   bird   3SG-walk
       'He sees the bird'

(22) Ø *iva   a-mu*
       Ø   bird   3SG-walk
       'He sees the bird'

[Ø (zero) indicates that the pronoun is dropped.]

Thus, even when the subject is dropped in (22), the subject can be recovered from the subject agreement marker **a**-, which is prefixed to the verbal root.

3.3 Adjective and Noun

A noun can be modified, beautified, degraded by an adjective. Adjective gives information about the noun it refers. The relation and order between adjective and noun in Biate is NAdj i.e. an adjective follows a noun as shown in (23).

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(23)   *nupaŋ   meltʰa*
       girl   beautiful
       'beautiful girl'

In a noun phrase which contain one or more modifiers like adjective, demonstrative and numeral the word order of this phrase is demonstrative-noun-adjective-numeral i.e. adjective and numeral follow the noun whereas demonstrative precede the noun as shown in example (24)

(24)   *so   nupaŋ   meltʰa   itʰumka-hei*
       this   girl   beautiful three-PL
       'These three beautiful girls'

3.4 Relative Clause and Noun

The relative expression precedes the noun in Biate. Or the relative clause precedes the main clause as shown in (25)

(25)   *rei   inru   pa   kʰa   ki-mu*
       axe   steal   man   REL   1-see
       'I saw the man who steal an axe'

3.5 Demonstrative and Noun

Biate has a split determiner system where the determiner precedes as well as follows the noun as in (26).

(26)   *ama   ipa   hiʔ*
       DEM   man   DEM
       'This man.'

3.6 Numerals and Noun

The order of numeral and noun in Biate is NNum, i.e. numeral follows the noun as shown in (27).

(27)   *nai-ipa   ini*
       son-boy   two
       'Two sons.'

3.7 Classifier and Noun

Kuki-Chin languages have a large set of classifiers referring to special semantic fields which include round or oblong items, drops of liquid, flat items, thin items, etc. The word order of the elements (noun, classifier, numeral) is that the classifier follows the noun and precedes the numeral as shown in (28).

         rimai   pum   ithumka

3.8 Degree Word and Adjective

The adjectives in Biate can be modified and can make it better or higher by adding *tak* to the adjective as in example (29). The adjective modifiers or degree words in Biate follows the adjective.

(29)   *aṭʰa*   *tak*
        good   DEG.
        'best'

3.9 Negative and Verb

Negation is a grammatical term which expresses the contradiction of the meaning of an affirmative (positive) sentence. There are three negative morphemes in Biate; *-mak, -no* and *–maŋ*. These three negative morphemes are suffixed to the verb and make the sentence or the verb negative. Thus, we say that the negative morphemes follow the verb as in the following sentences (30), (31), and (32)

(30)   *kei*   *fe-no-niŋ*
        I   go-NEG-FUT
        'I will not go'

(31)   *ama*   *skul*   *fe-mak*
        e   school   go-NEG
        'He does not go to school'

(32)   *alʰum*   *fa-ŋai-maŋ*
        sweet   eat-HAB-NEG
        'I don't eat sweet'.

3.10 Indirect Object and Direct Object

The indirect object *sel* 'cow' precedes the direct object *bu* 'food' in the example sentence (33). Thus, it is said that the indirect object precedes the direct object (IO-DO) in Biate. On the other, unlike some other verb-final languages, Biate permits both orders (IO-DO and DO-IO) as shown in (33) and (34).

(33)   *Zovi-n*   *sel*   *bu*   *a-pek*
        Zovi-ERG   cow   food   3SG-give
        'Zovi gave food to the cow.'

(34) *Zovi-n   bu   sel   a-pek*
　　　Zovi-ERG   cow   food   3SG-give
　　　'Zovi gave food to the cow.'

3.11 Time Adverbial and Place Adverbial

　　　The time adverbial in the following example (35) precedes place adverbials when they occur together in a sentence which is one of the basic word order characteristics of Biate.

(35) *ła   nok-a   delhi   a   naŋ mu-ŋ   ki-te*
　　 month   next-CONJ Delhi   LOC   you see-FUT   1SG-DECL
　　 'I will meet you in Delhi next month.'

　　　On the other, time and place adverbials in Biate occur in descending order as illustrated in (36) & (37)

(36) *kum   saŋ-nika   tualbuol   ła   tarik   somleiriŋ   dar   iriatka   nizan*
　　 year two thousand   January   month   date   fifteen   time   eight   night
　　 'At eight o'clock at night on the 15th of January in the year 2000'

(37) *Assam   hafloŋ   fiaŋpui   biakin- aʔ   rimu-ŋ   ei-ti*
　　 Assam   Haflong   Fiangpui   church-LOC   see-FUT   2INCL-DECL
　　 'We will meet in the church at Fiangpui in Haflong, Assam.'

Conclusion

　　　From the above discussion, we can conclude that Biate is a verb-final language, with SOV as its basic word order and an ergative and pro-drop language. Biate employs postpositions (PP), which follow the noun phrase they combine with. Postposition and postpositional phrase precede the verb in a sentence. Adjectival modifiers of nouns like numerals, and classifiers follow the noun they govern. Adverbial modifiers also precede the verb whereas adjective follows the noun. Adverbial subordinators come at the end of the subordinate clause and the question particle in Biate occurs at the end of the sentence. Biate has a split determiner system where one determiner precedes as other follows the noun. Negative morphemes follow the verb in a clause or sentence. Time and place Adverbials occur in descending order in Biate. The Indirect object in Biate precedes direct object and vice versa. The word order characteristics of Biate from the present study can be given as SOV/PP/GN/NAdj /RELN/NNum/DEMNDEM/NCLSNum. From the present study, it can be concluded that word order is a rule-governed. Biate exhibits most of the typological characteristics of Tibeto-Burman OV languages and it also agrees with most of the Greenberg's Universals. This is the initial stage of exploring this language and there is more room for further in-depth analysis.

Abbreviations

NEG	Negative
PL	Plural
SG	Singular
PP	postposition
LOC	locative
ERG	ergative
FUT	future
DET	determiner
QM	question marker
CLS	classifier
GEN	genitive
SOV	subject, object, verb
OV	object, verb
COMP M	comparative marker
CONJ	conjunction
TB	Tibeto-Burman

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