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Sociolinguistic typology in North East India: A tale of two branches

Abstract: Long-standing ideas about the “linguistic cycle” hold that languages naturally shift from analytic to synthetic morphological patterns and then from synthetic back to analytic in a long-term cyclic pattern. But the demonstrable history of actual languages shows dramatic differences in their tendencies to shift in either direction, and there are well-known examples of language families which preserve complexity or analyticity over millennia. We see the same thing within Tibeto-Burman, where some branches are highly synthetic and others analytic. Examining the history of a representative language from each of two TB branches in Northeast India, analytic Boro (Boro-Garo) and synthetic Lai (Kuki-Chin), suggests a possible sociolinguistic explanation for these tendencies. Trudgill and others have suggested that the tendency to develop and maintain strongly analytic grammatical patterns is associated with “exoteric” languages spoken by large populations, and regularly used to communicate with outsiders, while the development and maintenance of morphological complexity is characteristic of “esoteric” languages spoken by small communities and used only to communicate with other native speakers. This paper presents Boro-Garo and Kuki-Chin as exemplifying these tendencies.

Keywords: Tibeto-Burman, Boro, Kuki-Chin, linguistic complexity, sociolinguistic typology

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1 Introduction

This paper attempts to interpret some of the linguistic diversity of Northeast India (NEI) in terms of contemporary research on language complexity and sociolinguistic typology. I will contrast segments of the grammar of two Tibeto-Burman languages of NEI, Boro and Lai, and show that the two languages differ significantly in their propensity for developing morphological complexity, as shown by their very different development over the last millennium. I will suggest that this difference is not random or arbitrary, but exemplifies a hypothesis about the rela-

tion between language typology and social structure which has attracted growing interest over the last decade.

1.1 Determinants of linguistic structure

A generation ago Talmy Givón launched the modern conception of grammaticalization theory with the slogan “Today’s morphology is yesterday’s syntax” (1971: 413), an assertion which inspired much discussion at the time, but which today is hardly controversial. In the same paper he also suggested, albeit less directly, that “today’s syntax is tomorrow’s morphology” (1971: 413, fn. 1). This is a much stronger claim, and the data which we will examine here suggests that it is probably too strong.

The idea that over time analytic structures inevitably crystallize into morphological forms is an old one, and is one half of the venerable idea of a continual “Linguistic Cycle” of syntax and morphology to which all languages are subject (see Hodge 1970; Dahl 2004: 134–140; van Gelderen 2009). Givón summarizes the hypothesis:

Can a language remain forever either purely isolating, agglutinating or analytic? The tentative answer is no. This paper suggests the existence of an endless cycle: An isolating situation in which free lexical morphemes are arranged by the synchronic syntax eventually gives rise to an agglutinating situation in which some of the erstwhile free lexemes have become bound affixes – and some of the erstwhile ‘syntactic’ T-rules have become lexical T-rules as well. (Givón 1971: 411)

And since all morphology does indeed develop out of analytic source constructions, it is easy enough to find examples illustrating the process from a wide range of languages. On the other hand, the existence of a syntactic construction which has remained analytic over a long period of time is not automatically a refutation of the Linguistic Cycle hypothesis, since it is always conceivable that some time in the future it might decide to behave according to prediction. Nevertheless there are languages and whole language families where we see little or no evidence, sometimes over very long periods, of any tendency toward greater synthesis, and such evidence must surely inspire some doubts as to the inevitability in all cases of today’s syntax eventually morphologizing.

More recently we see a rise in interest in the question of relative complexity in typology (Dahl 2004; Givón 2008; Trudgill 2011, *inter alia*) – a set of issues which presuppose that languages vary in complexity for some reasons other than where they happen to be on a universal cyclic track. While the notion of “complexity” is difficult to define (see Section 5), we cannot maintain the traditional pretense

that all languages are structurally equally complex. In this paper we will examine certain morphosyntactic phenomena in two Tibeto-Burman languages which illustrate two very different paths of development, one of which has developed extensive innovative morphological structure while the other has done nothing of the sort. I will suggest that the difference may be best understood in the context of recent work in *sociolinguistic typology* (Trudgill 2011), which examines questions of simplification and complexification in relation to social structure, and particularly the degree to which a language is or is not used for communication outside of the community of native speakers.

1.2 A test case: Boro and Lai

Tibeto-Burman is an example of a family which exhibits significant variation among languages along the syntax-morphology axis. Many TB languages have complex verb morphology, including extensive systems of argument indexation. Many others show a very different pattern, in which verbs have little or no paradigmatic morphology, and in particular lack argument indexation and morphological transitivity operators. The languages of the Brahmaputra drainage, in and around the edges of Northeast India (NEI), present something of a typological microcosm of Tibeto-Burman. Although the extreme archaism of the Kiranti languages of eastern Nepal and the rGyalrongic languages of Sichuan is not represented in NEI, the Kuki-Chin, Nocte-Tangsa, and Kaman-Meyor languages preserve considerable archaic morphological structure. In contrast, the Tani group and the various languages lumped under the heading “Naga” lack this kind of paradigmatic morphology, while the Boro-Garo languages of the Assam plain are perhaps the most thoroughly creolized of any languages in the family outside of Sinitic. Moreover, the Kuki-Chin languages, while losing most of the original TB morphological system, have innovated morphological paradigms which replace many of the lost functions. The languages which we will compare, Boro and Lai, represent the two typological extremes to be found among the TB languages of NEI. They represent two branches, Boro-Garo and Kuki-Chin, of roughly comparable time-depth and divergence, but dramatically different linguistic history and synchronic structure.

Since in most languages of the first type the morphological complexity is largely inherited from Proto-Tibeto-Burman (DeLancey 2010a), and most languages of the second type have undergone intense contact with other languages in the course of their history, we can refer to these two types *archaic* and *creoloid* (DeLancey 2013a). But the Kuki-Chin languages, and particularly the Central subbranch, do not retain archaic morphology; rather, they have developed

extraordinary secondary morphological complexity to replace lost archaic systems. DeLancey (2010b) and (2013a) show that the difference between archaic groups like Kiranti and rGyalrong and creoloid branches like Boro-Garo and Lolo-Burmese reflects loss of morphological structure in creoloid languages through language contact. But this provides no explanation for the secondary complexification of Kuki-Chin, and this will be the primary focus of this paper.

1.3 A preliminary study

This paper should be taken as a very preliminary study. I cannot present and contrast complete grammatical profiles of two languages here. We will look at one particular functional/morphosyntactic domain, that of argument structure and indexation, where we will see that Lai has developed a great deal of secondary verbal morphology in this area, while Boro has developed none at all. Likewise we cannot look in detail at the sociolinguistic context of either language beyond the fact that Boro is a widely-spoken former language of empire, while Lai speakers constitute a much smaller, more localized hill community. The essential point of the paper is that a correlation between greater morphological complexity and a more isolated sociolinguistic situation, as in Lai, and between less morphological development and status as the language of a large, widely distributed community as in Boro, is exactly what linguists such as Dahl and Trudgill would predict. So in a limited domain the facts of Boro-Garo and Kuki-Chin support this kind of claim about sociolinguistic typology.

In Section 2 we will look at some relevant background on the languages under examination. Section 3 will present some morphosyntactic features of Lai, a Central Kuki-Chin language, and Section 4 will describe corresponding aspects of Boro grammar. In Section 5 I will discuss how the differences between the two languages fit into the sociolinguistic framework proposed by Trudgill and other authors. The final section of the paper will briefly assess the implications of these results.

2 The Boro-Garo and Kuki-Chin groups

Boro-Garo and Kuki-Chin are both securely-established, inspectionally obvious genetic units. Their histories are very comparable in terms of time depth and divergence, but very different in terms of the external historical factors which have influenced their development.

2.1 Geography, history, and genetic relationship

Boro-Garo languages are spoken in Assam, Tripura, and Meghalaya states of Northeast India, and adjacent areas in Bangladesh, West Bengal and southwestern Nepal. Some languages of the branch are spoken in the hills, but Boro, by far the largest and most widely-spoken language in this branch, is, like Assamese, a language of the Assam plain. Kuki-Chin languages are spoken in the southern part of the mountain range which follows the India-Myanmar border, primarily in Mizoram and southern Manipur in NE India, Chin State in Myanmar, and the Chittagong region of Bangladesh. The largest subbranch in terms of number of speakers is Central Kuki-Chin, which includes Mizo, the official language of Mizoram, and Lai, which will be our focus here. In contrast to the valley-dwelling Boro, Kuki-Chin languages are spoken only in the hills; we will return to the significance of this difference in Section 5.

There is no consensus on how to group the languages and groups in the central part of the Tibeto-Burman world where these branches are found, although there is consensus that neither group belongs with either the Eastern (rGyalrong-Qiangic, Lolo-Burmese) or Western (Tibetic, Kiranti, Western Himalayan) branches of the family. Many scholars link Boro-Garo with the Konyak or Northern Naga languages and possibly with Jinghpaw, and Kuki-Chin with the Naga groups, and both of these groupings are very plausible. How closely these two larger groupings are related to one another remains an open question.

Boro-Garo and Kuki-Chin are roughly comparable in their apparent degree of divergence, though history suggests that the time depth of Boro-Garo may be greater. Boro-Garo traces back to a lingua franca of the early Kāmarūpa period and perhaps before (DeLancey 2010b, 2012a). We have no direct way to date the time of its original breakup. We can plausibly imagine the original divergence as having begun any time between the undocumented predecessor to historic Kāmarūpa around the beginning of the Common Era and the political diversification following the end of the Varman Dynasty in the 7th century CE. There is even less reliable information about the prehistory of the Kuki-Chin languages and their speakers, but oral tradition and population movements within historical times show a steady migration from the Chin Hills in Myanmar, with Central Chin speakers reaching their present location in and around Mizoram only in the last few centuries (Shakespear 1912). Kuki-Chin speakers traditionally have come to their present locations in India from the west and south, and some scholars trace them to back to Chindwin Valley kingdoms of the 7th–9th centuries (Luce 1959; Vumson 1986). If a 9th century collapse of some eastern kingdom(s), presumably connected with the invasion of the Burmans, was the occasion of the breakup of Proto-Kuki-Chin, and if the original diversification of Boro-Garo did not begin

until after the Varman Dynasty, then the time depths of the two branches are quite comparable. Both dates are speculative, but the available evidence strongly suggests that the divergence of Kuki-Chin does not predate that of Boro-Garo.

2.2 Parallel loss and innovation

Boro-Garo and Kuki-Chin share a number of typological similarities beyond the verb-final, clause-chaining syntax common to almost all Tibeto-Burman languages, including iambic sesquisyllabic word structure, tone, noun classifiers, postverbal negation, productive verb serialization, and a set of derivational verb suffixes derived from serial verbs. All of these features are associated with languages in the southern part of the Tibeto-Burman area, and may reflect common substratum influence. Boro-Garo and the Central subbranch of Kuki-Chin also share almost complete loss (in the case of Boro-Garo) or replacement (in Kuki-Chin) of old Tibeto-Burman derivational and inflectional morphology. Like most Tibeto-Burman languages, both Boro (Joseph 2008) and Lai (VanBik 2002) retain some traces of the ancient transitivizing **s-* prefix, but this derivation is not productive in either language, and thus not relevant to our topic.

The nearest relatives of both Boro-Garo (i.e. the Nocte-Tangsa languages within the Konyak branch) and Lai (the Northern and Northwest or “Old Kuki” subbranches of Kuki-Chin) retain an unusual argument indexation system, in which verb agreement occurs in syllables phonologically independent of the verb stem, derived from old inflected auxiliaries (DeLancey 2011, 2013b, 2013c). Boro-Garo has lost this paradigm completely. I assume it to have been absent in Proto-Boro-Garo by the time of its divergence into the daughter languages, although Deuri has an aspectual morpheme *-r- ~ -n-* (Jacquesson 2005: 172–174) which could conceivably be connected with elements of the Nocte-Tangsa and Jinghpaw agreement word systems. The paradigm is reconstructible for Proto-Kuki-Chin, and is retained to some extent in three of the five subbranches (DeLancey 2013c), with traces even in Mizo, a close relative of Lai within Central Kuki-Chin. It appears to be completely lost in Lai.¹ So it seems to have been lost in Boro for well over a millennium, quite possibly two, while in Lai it has been lost for only a few centuries at most.

¹ Lai does retain a few bits of the archaic TB conjugation in the cohortative forms of the jussive system (Peterson 2003: 415).

2.3 Contrasting typology

Sections 3 and 4 present a brief sketch of transitivity-related morphosyntax in Lai, and of relevant syntactic phenomena in Boro which illustrate the radical differences in morphosyntactic structure which distinguish these languages and the branches which they represent. We will see that, beginning with Proto-Kuki-Chin and continuing to the present, Lai has fulfilled the implicit prediction of the cyclic model, and innovated extensive new morphology to encode argument structure and reference and manage syntactic transitivity. Boro, in contrast, has developed no new structure whatsoever for these functions, which, indeed, the language seems quite unconcerned with. The discussion of Lai is based on Peterson (1998, 2003), Smith (1998), and VanBik (2002), and the reader is referred to those sources for a more complete account. The description of Boro is based on unpublished work by myself and Krishna Boro.

3 Transitivity and argument indexation in Central Kuki-Chin

Kuki-Chin languages are morphologically quite complex, in the sense of having extensive paradigms and numerous syntactic constructions encoded morphologically. On the other hand, they are morphologically very transparent, in the sense that every grammatical morpheme has a clear unitary function, and many are shallow enough that their etymologies are recognizable on their face. Virtually all of their complex morphology, especially in the Central languages, is innovative either at the PKC level or more recently.

3.1 Transitivity

The Kuki-Chin languages all share a system of stem alternation, in which every verb has two stem forms (called stem 1 and stem 2, indicated by subscript numeral in the gloss line), whose distribution in verb forms is subject to various morphological and syntactic conditioning in different languages. Often Stem 1 is associated with main, and Stem 2 with subordinate clauses and particular morphological constructions may require one or the other. In Lai the stem alternation marks transitivity (among other things):² Stem 1 is used in intransitive, and stem 2 in transitive clauses, as in exx. (1–2):

2 For a fuller description of the use of the two stem forms in Lai see VanBik (2002).

- (1) *tsewmaŋ (khaa) ʔa-thii*
 Tsewmang DEIC 3SU-die₁
 ‘Tsewmang died.’
- (2) *ʔa-ŋ-thoʔŋ-hnaa*
 3SU-2OBJ-hit₂-PL.OBJ
 ‘S/he hit you.pl.’

Thus the importance of transitivity in the language is marked in the fundamental morphophonemics of the verb.

As further evidence for the centrality of transitivity, Lai and other Central Chin languages have consistent ergative alignment in case marking in the basic transitive clause type:

- (3) *paalaw=niʔ thil ʔa-baʔ*
 Paalaw=ERG clothes 3SG-hang.up₂
 ‘Palaaw hung up the clothes.’

This is unusual for Tibeto-Burman; more common, especially in Northeast India, is the pragmatic “ergative” pattern where agentive arguments, often of intransitive as well as transitive clauses, are case-marked only under pragmatic conditions of contrast or emphasis (DeLancey 2012b).

There is an alternate antipassive-like construction in which neither argument of a transitive clause has case marking. This construction uses the intransitive Stem 1 instead of the transitive Stem 2 of the verb (Peterson 2003: 413):

- (4) *paalaw thil ʔa-bat*
 Paalaw clothes 3SG-hang.up₁
 ‘Palaaw hung up the clothes.’

Note that the two constructions in exx. (3–4) are formally distinguished by the choice of verb stem as well as case marking on the subject.

3.2 Argument indexation

As we have noted, old agreement paradigms survive in some branches of Kuki-Chin, but not in the Central languages, where the older system has been replaced by a new proclitic conjugation based on possessive pronominal forms. These languages have all developed additional complexity in this system since

PKC, and differences in both subject and object indexation between Lai and Mizo show further development subsequent to the breakup of Proto-Central KC. The common core of the prefixal system, and all that can be reconstructed for PKC, is a simple subject-agreement system (DeLancey 2013d):

Table 1: PKC subject proclitics³

	SG	PL
1	#ka-	#ka-n- EXC #i- INC
2	#na-	#na-n-
3	#a-	#a-n-

And this system is at the core of the Lai paradigm, which, however, has expanded the paradigm to a much more elaborate system of biactantial agreement (Peterson 2003 and personal communication):

Table 2: Agreement indices in Lai

Subject	Object				
	1SG	1PL	2SG	2PL	3SG
1SG			<i>ka-ñ-</i>	<i>ka-ñ-... hnaa</i>	<i>ka-</i>
1PL			<i>ka-n-ʔin-</i>	<i>ka-n-ʔin-... hnaa</i>	<i>ka-n-</i>
2SG	<i>na-ka-</i>	<i>na-ka-n-</i>			<i>na-</i>
2PL	<i>na-n-ka-</i>	<i>na-n-ka-n-</i>			<i>na-n-</i>
3SG	<i>ʔa-ka-</i>	<i>ʔa-ka-n-</i>	<i>ʔa-ñ-</i>	<i>ʔa-ñ-... hnaa</i>	<i>ʔa-</i>
3PL	<i>ʔa-n-ka-</i>	<i>ʔa-n-ka-n-</i>	<i>ʔa-n-ʔin-</i>	<i>ʔa-n-ʔin-... hnaa</i>	<i>ʔa-n-</i>

The boldface italic elements are innovations since Proto-Kuki-Chin, and, with the possible exception of the 2OBJ prefix *ʔin-* ~ *ñ-*, since Proto-Central KC. The 2OBJ form may reflect an older 1/2 object form, but if so it has changed its function and distribution significantly in the very recent history of Lai.

³ The PKC provenience of the subject forms is clear. The plural formative #n- is probable but less securely established.

3.3 Transitivity alternations

Lai, like many other Kuki-Chin languages, has an elaborate system of transitivity operators, including transitivity and detransitivizing constructions and several applicatives. We will illustrate only two here, which will neatly exemplify the contrast between Lai and Boro in this respect.

Proto-Tibeto-Burman had a morphological middle-reflexive suffix $^{*}(n)si$, which has been lost in both Boro-Garo and Kuki-Chin. As we will see in Section 4.3, Boro-Garo expresses reflexivity with an emphatic pronoun construction. But Kuki-Chin languages, including Lai, have developed a new middle-reflexive prefix, thus recreating the PTB strategy out of new material. The middle-reflexive prefix has two allomorphs, a prefix $?ii-$ following consonants, or lengthening the vowel of a vowel-final agreement prefix (Smith 1998):

(5) *ka-tho?η*
 1SG-hit₂
 ‘I hit [him].’

(6) *ka-a-thoon*
 1SG-REFL-hit₁
 ‘I hit myself.’

Note that the reflexive construction is formally intransitive, as shown by the use of stem 1 of the verb.

Lai has at least seven distinct applicative suffixes (Peterson 2003: 418–419), including a comitative applicative suffix *p̄ii*, which licenses a semantic comitative in direct object function:

(7) *kayma?=hee ka-law ?an-thlaw*
 I=with 1SG-field 3PL.SU-hoe₁
 ‘They hoed my field with me.’

(8) *ka-law ?an-ka-thlo?-pii*
 1SG-field 3PL.SU-1SG.OBJ-hoe₂-COM
 ‘They hoed my field with me.’

In the simple transitive construction in (7), the comitative argument is coded as an oblique with the postposition =*hee*, and, as an oblique, is not indexed in the verb. In the applicative construction in (8) the verb indexes the 1st person comitative as an object.

4 Verb and clause in Boro-Garo

The Boro verb presents a very different picture from what we have seen in Kuki-Chin. Boro-Garo languages are similarly transparent, but cannot be called “complex” in the same sense in which we applied it to Kuki-Chin. There is no verb agreement, no productive transitivity modification, no dedicated morphological reflexive. Indeed, argument structure and the notion of transitivity are barely relevant to the morphosyntax of the language.

4.1 Case-marking and alignment

There is no ergativity in Boro-Garo. There are distinct postpositions associated with subjects, direct objects, and recipients, but only the last is obligatory. The subject and object markers occur only to mark definiteness or contrast, much as in Burmese. Space does not allow a full discussion of the functions of subject and direct object marking in Boro; we can only look briefly at a few examples which demonstrate that case marking is deeply involved with pragmatic factors which have nothing to do with transitivity or clause structure.

4.1.1 Differential object marking

Boro has fairly typical differential object marking, associated with humanness, animacy, and definiteness. Note the variation in the marking of *bihamzw* ‘daughter-in-law’ in the following sequence from the beginning of a fairytale:

(9a) *da bihamzw gwzan-nipharai nai-nanwi lai-gwn*
 Now daughter.in.law afar-from see-NF bring-FUT
 ‘Now they sought a daughter-in-law from far away.

(9b) *lai-nanwi be bihamzw-a-bw birat lwkhiban manswi*
 bring-NF this d.i.l-SU-also very lucky person
 Having brought [one], this daughter-in-law was a very lucky person.

(9c) *bi-ha bihamzw-khw lai-w-nanwi*
 he-POSS daughter.in.law-OBJ bring-AFF-NF
 They having brought the daughter-in-law

nókhor-a birat dhoni za-bai
 family-SU very wealthy become-PERF
 the family became very wealthy.’

In the (9a), *bihanzw* ‘daughter-in-law’ is nonreferential; the family is seeking a bride for their son, but has not yet found one. Thus although *bihanzw* is the object of *lai-gwn* ‘will bring’, it has no object marking. In the next sentence, (9b), an actual daughter-in-law appears, and is the subject of *lwkhiban manswi* ‘lucky person.’ Thus, when the same noun occurs in (9c), again as the object of *lai* ‘bring’, it is definite and takes object marking.

4.1.2 Differential subject marking

Subject marking likewise is not automatically associated with syntactic function, but dependent on pragmatic status. Like the object marker, it is associated with definiteness, referentiality, and humanness. Compare the following two sentences, from a story of a magic bamboo plant. When we first encounter the bamboo, it is climbing into the protagonist’s fishtrap:

(10a) *ua mwn-se-lo bi-ha zekhai-wu wthi-bai thayw*
bamboo CL-one-only s/he-POSS fishtrap-LOC climb-PERF stay
‘Only a bamboo (root) kept climbing into her fishtrap.’

(10b) *iniphraitho ua mura wthi-bala*
then bamboo root climb-when
‘Then, when the bamboo root climbed . . .’

At this point the bamboo root is referential, and, by the second clause, definite, but it is not yet being portrayed as a serious actor in the narrative, and so it does not really matter, at least to the protagonist, that it is this specific bamboo root rather than any other. Neither instance of *ua* or *ua mura* has subject marking. Later in the story, after the protagonist has planted the bamboo root, and it has become clear to both the characters in the story and the audience that it is a magical source of good fortune, an antagonistic character comes to steal it, and speaks the following sentence:

(11) *bihamzw gâi-nai ua-ya mube da-lai*
daughter.in.law plant-NMZ bamboo-SU which now-INTIMATE
‘The bamboo which the daughter-in-law planted is which one, now?’

This particular bamboo is by now a major thematic element in the story, and it is this and only this bamboo which carries good luck, and this and only this bamboo which the speaker wants to steal. Thus we have *ua-ya*, with subject marking.

4.2 Intimations of verb agreement?

Although the BG languages are typologically SOV, full SOV sentences are not that frequent in text. These are not obligatory pronoun languages, so recoverable referents are freely omitted. Moreover, word order is very flexible, and is part, along with omission vs. expression of arguments and pragmatic case marking, of a subtle and complex system of reference management. It is common for a continued topic, if it is not omitted entirely, to be placed after the verb:

- (12) *isamis rwn̄-thar-a barai-a*
 Assamese know-completely-NEG old.man-SU
 ‘Didn’t know Assamese at all, the old man.’

- (13) *gws-w-zw̄n̄ sán-bai bi-w*
 mind-INSTR think-PERF she-SU
 ‘She thought in her heart.’

In sentences of this kind a lexical noun or noun phrase following the verb is usually set off by a pause, while a postverbal pronominal subject may be pronounced under a single intonation contour with the verb. Because only established and currently topical referents occur in this construction, postposed subjects are often pronominal:

- (14) *da mwn-se bostu bí-nw phai-dw-mwn aŋ-w*
 now CLgen-one thing ask-INF COME-REAL-PAST I-SU
 ‘Now I have come to ask for something.’ (*Treasure*)

In conversation, a postposed pronominal subject often has a sense of contrast. In response to a question, *aŋ mithi-a* ‘I don’t know’ is a neutral answer, but *mithi-a aŋ* suggests a contrast between the postposed subject and some other possible referent: ‘I wouldn’t know that, why are you asking me?’

Jacquesson (2001: 116–118) argues that Tiwa, another Boro-Garo language, has developed a subject-agreement system, presumably through crystallization of this construction (Jacquesson mentions Bengali influence as a possible causal factor). Dawson (2013) shows that this claim is exaggerated. She describes a construction with postposed subject pronouns, as in Boro, and shows that, for 1st person only, there is a further, more integrated construction in which the 1st person singular pronoun is directly attached to the verb. Example (15) shows the ordinary postposed subject construction with a 1st person pronoun, and (16) the more grammaticalized version (Dawson 2013: 97):

(15) *lí-ga-bo* *ang*
 go-PST-CERTAIN I
 ‘I went.’

(16) *lí-ga-ng-bo*
 go-PST-1SG-CERTAIN
 ‘I went.’

There is no such alternation for any other pronoun; all others can occur only in the construction illustrated in (15). Still this extra grammaticalization of the 1SG pronoun could plausibly be the first step in the direction of a full-fledged verb agreement system, so presumably such a thing is possible in Boro-Garo. But when we compare this tiny step in one Boro-Garo language with the efflorescent paradigms of Lai and the other Kuki-Chin languages, there is more than sufficient difference to require some kind of explanation.

4.3 Reflexive construction

Boro does not have a dedicated reflexive construction. Reflexive reference is indicated through the use of a contrastive emphatic pronoun *gau* or *gaugai* ‘oneself’. In subject position it generally means ‘rather than someone else’:

(17) *gau(-nw)* *thán-bai*
 self(-CONTRAST) go-PERF
 ‘He went himself (instead of sending someone else)’.

(18) *gaugai gái-nai uwa-khw dán-hw-a bihamzw-a*
 self plant-NMZ bamboo-OBJ cut-give-NEG daughter.in.law-SU
 ‘The daughter-in-law wouldn’t let anyone cut the bamboo which she had planted herself.’

This form usually has a reflexive sense when it occurs in non-subject position, where it is interpreted as having coreference with the subject:

(19) *bi-w gau-khwu aina-ao nai-dwŋ-mwn*
 s/he-SU self-OBJ mirror-LOC see-REAL-PAST
 ‘He saw himself in the mirror’

(20) *aŋ gau-nw mwn-se bantha hw-bai*
 I self-DAT CL-one gift give-PERFECT
 ‘I gave myself a gift.’

- (21) *aina-wu nu-bai gaugai-ni mohor-khw-nw*
 mirror-LOC see-PERFECT self-GEN image-OBJ-CONTRAST
 ‘In the mirror [she] saw [her] own image.’

The reflexive sense is easily derivable from the basic emphatic/contrastive function: since our normal expectation is that the object and goal of an action are different from the subject, *gau* as direct object or recipient in these examples can easily be understood as having a sense of ‘instead of somebody else’. Indeed, the reflexive interpretation is not obligatory; in context a non-subject *gau* does not have to be interpreted as coreferential with the subject:

- (22) *aŋ gau-niphrai-nw mʷn-dwŋ*
 I self-from-CONTRAST get-REAL
 ‘I got it from you yourself.’

Note that, unlike the Lai reflexive prefix, the occurrence of *gau* is not dependent on, and has no effect on, the transitivity of the clause.

4.4 Syntagmatic complexity in Boro

All this is not to say that the Boro-Garo languages have not developed complexities of their own over two millennia. But these are of an entirely different type than what we have seen in Lai.⁴ Complexity in Boro is syntagmatic rather than paradigmatic, involving combining essentially lexical meanings rather than paradigms of grammaticalized options.

4.4.1 Lexical suffixes

All BG languages have a category of what I will call *lexical suffixes* (Burling’s [2004] “adverbial affixes”; van Breugel’s [forthcoming] “event specifiers”, Joseph’s [2007] “derivational affixes”). These are, for the most part, grammaticalized serial verbs (Boro 2012), although some derive from expressives. There are over 150 of these in Boro, with meanings ranging from the extremely narrow

⁴ Kuki-Chin languages do have a category very similar to the Boro-Garo lexical suffixes, and this is probably the source construction for the development of applicatives. I do not have sufficient information on this category in KC languages to know whether it is comparable to the BG category in complexity and extent.

(-*glab* ‘out loud and boisterously, of laughter’; -*khao* ‘(split) along the axis (of bamboo)’ to the very broad (-*hwi* ‘somewhere else’, -*la* ‘aimlessly, purposelessly’). They express categories which we are used to seeing as grammaticalized in other languages (-*phin* ‘again’, -*zwb* ‘to completion’), as well as more lexical meanings:

- (23) *pulis-phwr-a manswi-phwr-khou bu-gluŋ-zwb-bai.*
 police-PL-SU man-PL-OBJ beat-GLUNG-exhaustively-PERF
 ‘The police have beaten up the public.’ (hither and thither, violently)
- (24) *manswi-phwr-a khar-gluŋ-zwb-bai*
 man-PL-SU run-GLUNG-exhaustively-PERF
 ‘All the people have scattered away.’ (hither and thither, confused, in panic)
- (25) *domphang-phwr-a bai-gluŋ-zwb-bai.*
 tree-PL-SU break-GLUNG-exhaustively-PERF
 ‘Trees have been uprooted everywhere.’ (violently, hither and thither)

Lexical suffixes can in principle be concatenated. In natural discourse we seldom find more than two in a verb form, but speakers will happily accept and even concoct examples like:

- (26) *dán-so-hwi-zwb-phin-lia-mwn*
 cut-in.two.horizontally-at.a.distance-exhaustively-again-NOT.
 ANYMORE-PAST
 ‘no longer intend to cut all into two pieces horizontally someplace else again’

Lexical suffixes often have semantically complex senses; e.g. -*der* ‘together with someone with negative implications’, as in:

- (27) *nwŋ bi-zwŋ zo-der-naŋ-a*
 you s/he-with sit-der-need-NEG
 ‘You mustn’t sit with him.’ (for fear of some negative consequence)
- (28) *bi aŋ-zwŋ zo-der-phwi-dwŋ-mwn*
 s/he I-with sit-der-come-ASP-PAST
 ‘He came and sat with me.’ (which I did not want)
- (29) *nwŋ bi-zwŋ zo-der*
 you s/he-with sit-der
 ‘Sit with him.’ (so that you can do something bad to him)

Mastery of this system must make special demands on the language learner, and certainly there is an intuitive sense of “complex” in which this system constitutes added complexity in the language. The important point for our present purpose is that this is syntagmatic and lexical rather than paradigmatic morphosyntactic complexity.

4.4.2 Lexical suffixes and transitivity

Lexical suffixes such as those described in the preceding section never have any effect on the transitivity or other syntactic structure of the clause. The valence of a verb is determined by the main verb, and cannot be affected by lexical suffixes. Some lexical suffixes make reference to another participant, but never introduce a new subject or object argument. Note in exx. (27–29) above that the participant with whom the subject is or is doing something is marked with the comitative postposition. It cannot be marked as a direct object. So *der*, although it explicitly brings another referent onto the scene, has no effect on transitivity.

And this is generally true. An even better candidate for grammaticalization as an applicative, because it is semantically less specific, is *pha* ‘together with someone’. Recall that in Lai this notion is grammaticalized in an applicative construction which formally alters the transitivity of the clause (Section 3.3). In Boro the only formal indication of transitivity is the possibility of one argument taking the differential object marker *khw*, and this is purely a property of the lexical verb, never affected by any lexical suffix:

(30) *aŋ be haba-khwu krisna-zwŋ mao-pha-dwŋ-mwn*
 I this work-OBJ Krishna-with work-with-REAL-PAST
 ‘I did this work with Krishna.’

(31) **aŋ be haba(-khwu) krisna-khwu mao-pha-dwŋ-mwn*
 I this work(-OBJ) Krishna-OBJ work-with-REAL-PAST

It is simply impossible to treat the comitative argument referenced by *pha* as a grammatical object. Thus, while this suffix has the same semantic contribution as Lai *pii*, it shares none of its syntactic behavior.

5 “Complexity”, creolization, and sociolinguistic typology

From one perspective there is nothing particularly new in these data. We know that languages vary considerably in morphological complexity, and so it should

be no great surprise to see that some languages develop such complexity while others don't. The comparison becomes interesting if we can offer some explanation for the difference. Current work on simplification and complexification in language offers a possible line of explanation for the differential development of Boro-Garo and Kuki-Chin languages.

5.1 Simplification and complexification

I will invoke two distinct but related streams of research here. The problem of language simplification has been approached mainly from the perspectives of creole studies and language contact, while many explorations of relative complexity have roots in linguistic typology. Both lines of investigation converge on a model which associates complexification with certain kinds of isolation, and simplification with large-scale language contact.

Ansaldo and Matthews (2001) propose the idea of a *creoloid* language type associated with situations of intense language contact. They refer to such languages as creoloid, rather than creole, because they do not arise out of pidgin languages, but through the radical de-structuring of a language as a result of “non-normal” (Thomason and Kaufman 1988), “suboptimal” (Dahl 2004) or “interrupted” (McWhorter 2007, 2011) transmission in a contact situation in which the language comes to be widely used as a second language:

The most extreme outcome of pidginization is the development of a pidgin language, but this is a very rare occurrence. It is only pidginization at its most extreme, together with a number of other unusual factors, which combine to lead to the development of pidgin and, even more rarely, creole languages. Pidginization can be said to occur whenever adults and post-adolescents learn a new language. (Trudgill 2009: 99)

That such intense contact can have such effects is hardly controversial; a more radical, and more interesting, claim is that this process, which I will call creolization, is the major or even the only circumstance in which radical simplification occurs:

[I]n the uninterrupted transmission of a human language, radical loss of complexity throughout the grammar is neither normal, occasional, nor rare, but *impossible*. The natural state of human language is one saddled with accreted complexity unnecessary to communication. Wherever this complexity is radically abbreviated overall rather than in scattered, local fashion, this is not just sometimes, but *always* caused by a sociohistorical situation in which non-native acquisition of the language was widespread enough that grammar was transmitted to new generations in a significantly simplified form. (McWhorter 2007: 4–5, emphasis original).

As I have argued elsewhere (DeLancey 2010b, 2012a, 2013a), there is ample historical evidence to support the idea that this is the explanation for the original typological restructuring of Boro-Garo. But while the creoloid history of Boro is a clue to the solution to our puzzle, it is only a partial solution. Our present problem is not how the ancestors of Boro and Lai came to lose ancient Proto-Tibeto-Burman morphological structure, but why the two languages have developed so differently since then. The answer lies in a new way of thinking about typology, what has recently been labeled sociolinguistic typology (Trudgill 2011).

In reaction to older conceptions of “primitive” languages, linguists have tended to be skeptical of suggestions of relationship between linguistic typology and any kind of extra-linguistic factor. Only in the last twenty years has it become respectable to pay attention to apparent correlations between linguistic patterns and social structure (e.g. Perkins 1992). The last decade has seen an explosion of work exploring correlations between linguistic typology and factors such as community size and frequency of contact with speakers of other languages (e.g. Dahl 2004; Trudgill 2011; Lupyán and Dale 2010; Gavin et. al. 2013).

With variations in detail and in type of explanation, the work of these scholars converges on a picture in which morphological complexity and opacity, what Dahl (2004) calls “mature linguistic phenomena”, are associated with small speech communities with less contact with outsiders, and transparent, regular and simple morphological constructions with larger speech communities in constant contact with other speech communities with widespread multilingualism – Thurston’s (1994) *esoteric* and *exoteric* languages. The sociolinguistic patterning of Northeast India, with large language communities in constant interaction in the valleys, and small, more insular communities in the hills, is a perfect environment in which to explore this approach.

5.2 Lai and Boro

Although different scholars present different definitions of complexity, by any published criterion which can be applied to the data presented in Sections 3–4, Lai is much more complex than Boro. While we may find in Boro a great deal of what Bisang (2009) calls “hidden complexity”, i.e. the subtle knowledge necessary to extract precise meaning from underspecified grammar, the language has nothing comparable to the unpredictable stem forms, elaborate morphological paradigms, and syntactic alternations which we see in Lai. Clearly the contrast which we see here exemplifies “the historical development of new morphological categories in low-contact varieties which are not paralleled in other related higher-contact varieties” (Trudgill 2011: 73). The simple fact that grammatical

morphemes attach morphologically to the verb is the essence of complexification (Dahl 2004: 106). McWhorter (2011) argues that ergativity is not found in maximally simple languages. And inflectional morphology, especially verb agreement, occupies a central place on every list of complex phenomena.

Trudgill (2011: 73–88) describes several aspects of complexification, each of which is easily applied to Lai in contrast to Boro. The first is the addition of new morphological categories, and we have seen that Lai has innovative agreement, middle-reflexive, and applicative morphology not paralleled in Boro. Another is increase in syntagmatic redundancy, which refers to extra marking of information available elsewhere in the clause, such as verb agreement. Again Lai counts as more complex than Boro, although it is unclear to what extent the new prefixal agreement system actually added redundancy as opposed to taking over the function previously carried by the postverbal agreement system. Trudgill's third and fourth types of complexification, increase in morphological opacity and irregularization, both refer to degrees of non-transparent allomorphy. Lai has not had time to develop extreme irregularity, but the distinct and unpredictable allomorphy of the 2OBJ prefix *-ʔin-* ~ *-ŋ-* (Section 3.2, Table 2) and the reflexive prefix *-ʔin-* ~ *-:-* (Section 3.3) represents greater complexity than we see in any morphological alternation in Boro.

We cannot explain this difference in terms of time. The complexity of Lai is not ancient; we can be certain that Boro has had at least as much time to develop such structure, and probably more – but it has not done so. Can work like Dahl's, McWhorter's and Trudgill's offer any kind of explanation for this difference? Indeed, the consensus association of complexity with esoteric and simplicity with exoteric languages is easily applicable to the case of Boro and Lai. Throughout the Tibeto-Burman region, and the rest of mainland Southeast Asia, there is a clear and important cultural differentiation between “Hill” and “Valley” cultures (Burling 1965; Scott 2009). Valley peoples are wet-rice farmers, with cities, kings, armies, writing, and institutionalized religion with priests and temples. Valley cultures are imperialistic, incessantly fighting with and conquering or being conquered by the kings of the next valley. Thus Valley languages are necessarily exoteric. Although in contemporary Assam Boro is a minority language, until a few centuries ago it must have been the dominant language of the region. So regardless of the correctness or otherwise of the claim that Bodo-Garo originated as a creoloid lingua franca (DeLancey 2012a), the external history of the Boro-Garo languages, and particularly Boro, since that time is quite different from that of most Tibeto-Burman groups, including Kuki-Chin, and is precisely the kind of history which McWhorter and Trudgill predict will impede complexification.

In contrast to Valley kingdoms, Hill peoples practice swidden agriculture, and live in small communities with no higher-level political organization or orga-

nized religious structures. Thus their languages tend to be esoteric. The Lai and other Kuki-Chin-speaking communities belong to the Hill system, so a history of complexification here is, again, just what we expect. In fact, Lai is one of the larger and more exoteric of the Kuki-Chin languages, with something like 100,000 speakers. But it is still purely a local language, confined to a small geographical area. So just as with the comparison of morphological complexity, even if we cannot quantify the differences in the sociolinguistic situations of Boro and Lai, it is self-evident that there is an important difference, and in what direction.

6 Conclusions and directions

So a partial study of two languages, out of the 100–200 in NEI, shows a predicted correlation between morphosyntactic typology and sociolinguistic situation; the facts of Boro and Lai to conform to the proposals of Dahl and Trudgill. But, obviously, this is only a very preliminary result. For one thing, the claims of sociolinguistic typology are at the level of whole languages, not particular morphosyntactic subsystems. I am confident that a full-scale comparison of the grammatical and phonological structures of Boro and Lai would give us the same picture (although perhaps raising some questions about syntagmatic complexity, which is a feature of the Boro TAM system), but have not demonstrated that here.

More problematically, if the differential development of Boro and Lai is attributable to the sociolinguistic difference between an exoteric Valley and an esoteric Hill language, then we should expect to see the same patterns in other languages. The simplest prediction we could make is that we should expect to see simple structure in Valley languages and complexity in Hill languages. Many of the languages of NEI follow these predictions. We find only morphological simplicity in Valley languages such as Karbi and Meitei, and complexity only in Hill languages such as Kuki-Chin and Nocte-Tangsa. But we also find creoloid typology in some Hill languages, notably the Tani languages of Arunachal Pradesh and the Ao, Angami-Pochuri, Zeme, Tangkhul, and Chang-Phom languages of Nagaland and northern Manipur.

The observed situation among the Tani languages appears to reflect a fairly recent episode of language expansion and subsequent creolization, which would make it a principled exception to the pattern. Recent work by Mark Post and Yankee Modi (Post and Modi 2011; Post 2013) suggests that Tani may represent a relatively recent expansion over an area which, to judge from the strong evidence of not very deeply submerged substrata in many of the languages of the group,

was previously much less homogenous than it is now. The “Naga” languages⁵ are more problematic; there is no obvious explanation for their aggressive morphological simplicity as compared with the Kuki-Chin languages to the south or the Nocte-Tangsa languages to the north. These languages may then represent an important test case for sociolinguistic typology.

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⁵ Until recently all of these except the Chang-Phom group were considered to form a genetic unit, in part because of their common typological profile. At present many experts are skeptical about the reality of this “Naga” branch.

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