

**On variation in descriptions of lesser-known languages:
A case study of verbal enclitics and auxiliary verbs in Shuhi (Tibeto-Burman)**
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This presentation focuses on variation as commonly found in published descriptions of lesser-known languages of China. Specifically, two or more studies occasionally yield widely differing descriptions of one and the same language, or of closely related varieties of that language. The studies may offer dissimilar inventories of grammatical markers, and/or distinct analyses of the same grammatical markers. This presentation looks at possible reasons for these differences, as well as ways to meaningfully interpret them while proceeding towards more a comprehensive analysis of the given language.

The discussion is based on one case study: a description of verbal enclitics and auxiliary verbs and the categories that they encode in Shuhi (a.k.a. Shixing, Xumi, ISO 639-3 *sxg*). Verbal enclitics and auxiliary verbs have been chosen, because they represent one notable area of disagreement in existing publications on that language, most importantly, (1) Sun (1983), further expanded in Sun et al. (2014); (2) Huang & Renzeng (1991); and (3) Chirkova (2009, 2017). Table 1 provides a comparative overview of verbal enclitics and auxiliary verbs along with their categorization by different authors.

Category	Sun (1983), Sun et al. (2014)		Huang & Renzeng (1991)	Chirkova (2017)
	1 or 2 person	3 person		
Prospective (将行体)	we ⁵⁵	we ⁵⁵ dzɿ ³⁵	gɜ ⁵⁵	gɜ, iẽ
Progressive (进行体)	ji ⁵⁵		ji ⁵⁵	ji (dynamic verbs)
Perfective (已行体)	teɛ ⁵³ sɿ ³³ , sɿ ³³	teye ⁵³	sɿ ^{33/55}	lɐ-
Perfect				sɿ
Direct (亲见体/亲验语气)	hɛ ⁵⁵ dzaŋ ³¹ , dzaŋ ³¹ , ɕaŋ ³¹		process	result
Durative			teæ ³³	(wu ³³) dzɔ̃ ³³
Perfect (完成体)	ts ^h a ⁵⁵ ha ³⁵ sɿ ³³		ts ^h a ³³ wu ³³ sɿ ³³	
Terminative or telic			ts ^h ɐ	
Experiential (经验体)	dze ⁵³		dzɜ ⁵³	

Table 1. Verbal enclitics and auxiliary verbs in Shuhi, as presented in Sun (1983) and Sun et al. (2014), Huang & Renzeng (1991), and Chirkova (2017)

One plausible explanation for the differences relates to the respective size and composition of the corpora underlying the three studies. In particular, the observed differences are likely due to the limited size and scope of each of the three corpora and the fact that they may represent different speech genres. This assumption is tested on the basis of a reasonably representative corpus of over 80 interlinear texts obtained through controlled and semi-controlled elicitation, experimental tasks, and more spontaneous speech events, recorded with over 20 speakers. As expected, that corpus encompasses all markers in Table 1, thereby allowing for a meaningful integration of related insights (such as person-related or process/result differences), while enabling a better understanding of the grammatical categories that these markers encode. On the basis of that new corpus, it is suggested that Shuhi exhibits a complex interplay between the lexical semantics of the verb (controllable and non-controllable, internal and observable state verbs), aspect (imperfective, perfective, progressive, continuous, experiential), and evidentiality and epistemic modality (direct knowledge, visual, inferential, hearsay, factual).

The presentation concludes with reflections on available methodologies of data collection and analysis, and on effective strategies for recovering complex linguistic structures at the intersection of evidentiality system with other semantic and pragmatic systems in lesser-known languages.

References

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