Information structure in Prinmi

Picus Sizhi Ding

(in collaboration with project D2 „Typology of Information Structure")

1. Object language

Prinmi is a Tibeto-Burman language spoken exclusively in the mountainous region of southwestern China. The autonym of this ethnic group is "prin-mi". Due to a split in identity in terms of official nationalities, native speakers of Prinmi are classified as *Pǔmǐ* in Yunnan (pop. 30,000) and as *Zàng* (or Tibetan) in Sichuan (mainly in Muli and Yanyuan; pop. 40,000). As use of language is not included in Chinese censuses, field observation suggests the total number of active speakers, in two major dialectal groups, is not likely to exceed 50,000.
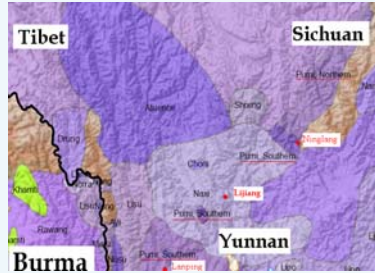

Figure 1. Names in red indicate places where the researcher has conducted fieldwork on Prinmi. (Locations shown are approximate only, adapted from Steve Huffman's China Languages, Data from World Language Mapping System, www.gmi.org/wlms)

Data collection:
December, 2004	Kunming, Yunnan, China
January, 2005	Lijiang, Yunnan, China
January–April, 2005	Ninglang, Yunnan, China
December, 2005	Lijiang, Yunnan, China

3. Empirical observations

3.1 Syntax

Elicitation using experimental stimuli in the Project has corroborated that Prinmi has no passive voice. The large set of data in the Visibility task is designed to test the effect of agent visibility and argument animacy. Elicited data show that words which mean "someone" or "something" and body parts such as "hand" or "foot" are consistently used when the identity of agent is unclear in the context.

On the other hand, the 64 carefully-designed tasks have revealed some interesting properties of expressing arguments in transitivity situations. In stark contrast to unidentifiable agents, which always receive explicit expression in transitive clauses, a contextually established argument is often expressed implicitly as a zero pronoun. The use of implicit arguments relies on complex sentences to handle information status of NPs before zero pronouns are exploited.

Figure 2 and Figure 3 illustrate data collected for all transitivity situations intended in the experiment, although a few are rendered as intransitivity. The Topic Comment Construction is employed in Figure 2, but not in Figure 3. In this specific experiment, the topic constituent in the construction is either marked by the topic clitic *ggi*, indicated by [Tp] in the label, or marked by a fusion of the topic and ergative clitics — *ggon*, indicated by [Er] in the label.
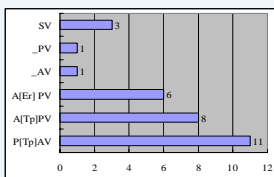

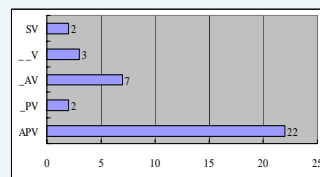*Figure 2: Use of the Topic Comment Construction in Visibility Experiment*

Figure 3: Non-use of the Topic Comment Construction in Visibility Experiment

As the task is not designed to elicit the topic-comment construction, speakers tend to use it relatively less. The data reveal that this discourse sensitive construction, when taking simplex structure, favors explicit expressions of both arguments of transitive verbs.
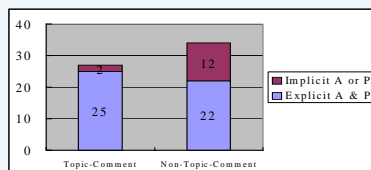

Figure 4: Arguments Expression in Transitive Clauses in Visibility Experiment

2. Information Structure

As is typical with understudied languages, the information structure of Prinmi has not been thoroughly investigated. Ding (1998; 2003) notes the following fundamental properties of information structure in Prinmi:

WORD ORDER, aided with morphological means, is employed to yield Topic Comment Constructions:

Simple Topic Comment Construction: Topic + Comment

Double Topic Comment Construction: $Topic_1$ + $Topic_2$ + Comment

Embedded Topic Comment Construction: $Topic_1$ + $[Topic_2 + Comment_2]_{=Comment_1}$

Chained Topic Comment Construction: Topic + $Comment_1$ + $Comment_2$ + …

Anti-Topic Construction: Comment + Topic

Topic marking ny means of clitics is complex, as the person hierarchy is involved and sometimes the topic can receive no overt marking.

CLEFT CONSTRUCTIONS: The copula can be used with the Topic Comment Construction together to produce a cleft-like construction, which often takes the following form:

VP Topic (clausal topic) + NP Comment (focused element) + Copula.

ELLIPSIS is a crucial and effective way for foregrounding/backgrounding selected information in sentences.

3.2 Phonology

Intonation can be used for emphasis, e.g. in correcting information. As Prinmi has a fully-fledged pitch-accent system (Ding 2001), the basic shape of lexical pitch on an emphasized word remains unchanged, but the range of pitch is expanded. The following is an illustration, where the first instance of "Ciri" receives a higher pitch range, to indicate information corrected from the previous sentence:
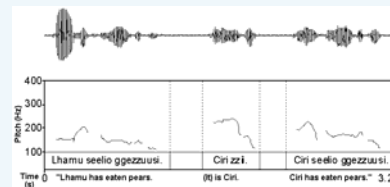

Figure 5: Range Expansion

The pitch-accent system is sensitive to phonological domain. Some speakers tend to merge the phonological domain of a verb with that of its object or a preceding word. This happens in faster speech, which requires reduction in the number of phonological phrases, as less time is available.

4. Summary

The following points have been learned from the QUIS elicitation tasks regarding the information structure of Prinmi:
• Effect of intonation on lexical pitch-accent system in Prinmi: pitch range expansion
• Non-existence of passive voice in Prinmi
• Agents and patients are expressed explicitly in a simplex Topic Comment Construction
• Ellipsis is a complex device for conveying discourse information in Prinmi, which involves more than merely the general condition of givenness. It is best approached with the concept of zero pronoun.

  • All 64 tasks in the Visibility task contain an argument whose information status is "given" after its introduction in the first picture. There is only one instance of a zero pronoun directly in a simplex sentence when describing transitivity situations. In all other cases where the zero pronoun occurs, speakers use a complex sentence to handle the new argument in the second picture, and then render one of them (or both, in rarer cases) in accordance with the speaker's need to create an appropriate information structure.

5. References

Ding, Sizhi. 1998. *Fundamentals of Prinmi (Pumi): A Tibeto-Burman Language of Northwestern Yunnan, China.* Unpublished dissertation.
Ding, Picus S. 2001. The pitch-accent system of Niuwozi Prinmi. *Linguistics of the Tibeto-Burman Area* 24/2: 57-83.
Ding, Picus S. 2003. Prinmi: a sketch of Niuwozi. In G. Thurgood and R. LaPolla (eds.) *Sino-Tibetan Languages.* London: Routledge Press. Pp. 588-601.

http://www.sfb632.uni-potsdam.de/

picus_ding@yahoo.com.hk