

## Chungli Ao descriptions of cutting and breaking (C&B) events, and implications for typology

Chungli Ao (Tibeto-Burman; Nagaland, India) employs a rich system of verbs and lexical suffixes for describing events of the separation of material integrity (often designated ‘cutting and breaking’ hereafter ‘C&B’). This paper provides a descriptive account of this system, outlining the semantics of 4 lexical suffixes and 14 lexical verbs. Lexical suffixes are found to encode information about the result state of the affected theme, as well as information about event structure (Aktionsart). The data were collected via elicitation with a native speaker informant (a male speaker in his early 40s) conducted in Berkeley, California, U.S.A. between August 2008 and May 2009. The bulk of the data was obtained by showing our consultant a set of 61 video clips<sup>1</sup> depicting events of cutting and breaking, as well as a handful of opening, peeling and tearing events.

The lexical verbs are found to differ principally in (a) the instrument employed; (b) the physical properties/constitution of the theme object cut or broken; (c) the degree of control over the locus of separation/lesion (hereafter ‘control’); (d) the manner in which cutting or breaking is accomplished (e.g., steadily applied pressure vs. single blow). An example, presenting the lexical verb *lep* ‘cut with a machete’ coupled with the suffix *-tuk* ‘sever part from whole’ is given in (1) below:

- (1)     *te.pur.sa.ng-i*     *nuk*     *kha*     *pe.n-Vr*     *a.ru-r3*  
          man-AGENT     machete 1     carry-SEQ     come-SEQ
- sIng.tung*     *nu.ngi*     *sIng.sang*     *lep2.tuk2*  
          tree     from     branch/stick     cut.with.large.blade.PST-sever.part
- “The man, after bringing over a machete, cut a branch off a tree.”

In addition to the descriptive account, the system is considered in a typological perspective: the data lead us to posit two distinct classes of verbs (break-type and cut-type), and Majid et al.’s (2007) criterion of the predictability of the locus of separation in the affected theme is found to be a likely candidate for the primary cognitive criterion underlying the separation of these categories. The idea of two distinct verb classes is further supported by syntactic behavior: specifically, the Chungli Ao data provide extra support for Guerssel et al.’s (1985) observations regarding the different argument structure alternations available to cut-type and break-type verbs. Namely: (a) Break-type verbs participate in a causative/inchoative alternation, while cut-type verbs do not; (b) Cut-type verbs participate in the conative alternation, while break-type verbs do not; (c) Cut- and break-type verbs both participate in a middle voice alternation. However, I take issue with the notion of “variants” or “alternations” in a purely formal sense--such a conceptualization does not take into account the possibility of interpretational variants of identical lexical, syntactic and constructional form. We find such a situation in the Ao data, as in (2) and (3), below:

- (2)     *ma.ruk*     *pa.sa.sa*     *tSak.ma*  
          cup     self     break.PST  
          “The cup broke [on its own].”
- (3)     #<carrot>     *pa.sa.sa*     *rang-sa7*  
          carrot     self     cut.PST-in.pieces  
          Intended: “The carrot cut.”

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<sup>1</sup> The set of videos is the Bohnemeyer (2001) set. The author wishes to thank Alice Gaby (U.C. Berkeley) and Asifa Majid (Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics) for providing access to the video clips.

Note that (2) and (3) are identical in surface syntax, and both are interpretable (=grammatical). However, only (2) can receive an inchoative reading. In the possible interpretation of (3), *pasasa* ('self') must corefer with a non-surfacing (=dropped) argument; that is, while (3) cannot get an inchoative reading, it is interpretable as shown in (4):

- (4)      Ø<sub>j</sub>                      <carrot>              *pa.sa.sa<sub>j</sub>*              *rang-saʔ*  
          [nullAGENT]      carrot              self              cut.PST-in.pieces  
          "[Somebody] cut the carrot himself/herself."

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