

Field Notes on the Pronominal System of Zhuang

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1. Introduction

The Guǎngxī Zhuang Autonomous Region in southwestern China has one of the biggest number of minority languages in China, and indeed the largest minority language, Zhuang, which is the focus of this paper. It is thus one of the most multilingual regions of the country. In Guǎngxī, a child growing up in a Zhuang-speaking village would pick up Zhuang as a mother-tongue. If the village is adjacent to other villages where the other 10 minority languages of the region, including Yao, Miao, Mulao, Dong, Maonan, Hui, Yi, Jing, Shui, and Gelao, are spoken, the child may pick up one or more of these. When the child moves to the district capital or nearest town, she may pick up Guiliu if she is of northern Zhuang stock; or a variety of Cantonese (baakwa) if she is of southern Zhuang origins. If the child attends school she would have started learning how to speak, read, and write Mandarin (Pǔtōnghuà), the national language. By the time the child leaves her village, her district capital, or the nearest town for Nánning, the capital city of Guǎngxī, or any of the other Chinese cities like Guìlín, Guǎngzhōu, Shànghǎi, or the national capital, Běijīng, she would speak anywhere from three to four or more language varieties, including her dialect of Zhuang, one or two other minority languages, a lingua franca, such as Guiliu or Cantonese, and, of course, the national language, Mandarin (Pǔtōnghuà). Foreign languages, such as English and Japanese, may complete the picture.

Not only does the average rural-turned-urban Zhuang child have the possibility of speaking different languages, proficiency in these languages are also at different levels and, more importantly, there is a lot of code-mixing and code-switching phenomena in actual conversational situations, such that borrowing of words and expressions from one variety of speech to the other is not uncommon.

The Guǎngxī Zhuang linguistic area thus presents a scenario of multilingualism, polyglottism, and, consequently, language contact phenomena such as code-mixing and code-switching, leading to a veritable medley of language influence.

This kind of scenario presents challenges for linguistic fieldwork, especially that aimed at collecting authentic materials and systematically studying the structure of a particular language variety and how it is used in context. The challenges include how to identify and locate ideal and fluent speakers, how to identify and locate the right environments in which the language is used, and how to negotiate through the range of language contact phenomena in order to tease out the right linguistic structures one is investigating without influences from other linguistic systems.

This paper describes how these challenges were addressed during a series of field trips to the Guǎngxī Zhuang Autonomous Region between 2003 and 2006. We do this by first describing the fieldwork and language situation in Section 2, detailing the choices we made in selecting where to go and what techniques to use once we were there. Section 3 is an outline of the major linguistic features of the Zhuang language. Section 4 focuses on a description of the pronominal system, comparing and contrasting its major distinctive features with those of the pronominal system of languages such as English, Cantonese, and Mandarin. Section 5 summarizes and concludes the issues discussed in the paper.

2. Language Situation and Fieldwork

In this section, we first describe the language situation of Zhuang including its genetic classification and geographical spread before turning to a description of the fieldtrip activities.

2.1. The Language Situation

Zhuang is a branch of the Kam-Tai language group (along with languages such as Thai, Lao, and Dai), which in turn belongs to the larger Tai-Kadai language family (Edmondson and Solnit 1990). In 2002 the number of speakers were estimated to be about 16 million (more precisely 16,178,811 (PCO 2002)). Qin (2004) estimates Zhuang speakers to be about 20 million. In addition to the Guǎngxī Zhuang Autonomous Region, Zhuang is also spoken in the Zhuang-Miao Autonomous Prefecture of Yúnnán Province, in the Liánshān Zhuang-Yao Autonomous County of Guǎngdōng Province, in Cóngjiāng County of Guìzhōu Province, and in the Yao Autonomous County of Húnán Province, and, outside China, in northern Vietnam by the Tay and Nung Ethnic groups. These varieties are hardly ever mutually intelligible, and indeed the divide between Northern Zhuang and Southern Zhuang is more of an interlingual than an intralingual divide. In terms of literacy, there are two writing systems, a Zhuang character writing system based mainly on Chinese characters, and a romanization system, which is supposed to be the official writing system but which is not much used. On the whole Zhuang writing is not very much an everyday practice, even though

there are some Zhuang magazines like *Sam Nyied Sam* in Nánning that disseminate information in written Zhuang.

2.2. Fieldwork in Guǎngxī: Choices, Methods and Techniques

Given that Zhuang-speaking communities are hardly found anywhere outside China, field trips to China and Guǎngxī, with the aim being to collect authentic and naturalistic data, and, of course, to understand the cultural context, are crucial. I believe that one should always go to the field with an idea of what sort of questions to ask (of course, with an open mind for new questions and issues), so most of the hypotheses and issues were often formulated after preliminary data elicitation from two speakers in Hong Kong (who are my students) and from the few written documents of Zhuang available in libraries and on the internet. Fieldwork began on the Zhuang language with funding support from grant institutions in Hong Kong and so far the following fieldtrips have been undertaken:

- i. Hong Kong—Nánning City—Débǎo County—Jìngxī County—Tiányáng County (April 2003)
- ii. Hong Kong—Nánning City—Mǎshān County—Jīnchāi Town—Dongping Village / Nánning City—Guilín City—Yángshuò County (December 2004)
- iii. Hong Kong—Nánning City—Mǎshān County—Jīnchāi Town—Dongping Village / Nánning City—Wǔmíng County—Luóxū Town—Xiānshān Village (October 2005)
- iv. Hong Kong—Nánning City—Běihǎi City—Qīnzhōu City—Chángtān Town—Butou Village (August 2006)

A major conundrum in Guǎngxī is the apparent conflict between economic development and cultural preservation. In general, each time a Zhuang-speaking settlement develops into a modern centre of business and commerce it ceases to be a Zhuang-speaking settlement because more Han-speaking people come into the area and the new town turns into a Mandarin- or Cantonese-speaking town or city! Of course, this situation is not limited to the Zhuang minority group alone, but it is of some concern for other minority groups in China as echoed by the Dalai Lama with regards to the Tibetan minority group in connection with the start of a new railway from Beijing to Tibet:

He said that while the Chinese constitution promised regional autonomy to minority nationalities, the guarantee was not “implemented fully.... What happens on the ground is that large populations from the majority nationalities have spread into these minority regions. Consequently, there is a danger of the languages and rich traditions of the minority nationalities becoming gradually extinct.” (Dalai Lama, 2007)

A careful look at the pattern of fieldtrip itinerary is one of city/town to village. We noticed that, as a result of this conundrum, Zhuang is hardly ever spoken as a public or common language of communication in any city. Indeed, Nánning, the capital city of the Guǎngxī Zhuang Autonomous Region, has ceased to be a

Zhuang-speaking settlement, and is now mainly a Mandarin-speaking city. In fact, the trend is that children born in the city to Zhuang-speaking parents generally do not pick up Zhuang as their mother-tongue. This important language use phenomenon was the basis of one of our first field trip choices: to do most of the data collection in villages rather than in towns. As mentioned above, communication in these cities is often characterized by a mix of languages (code-switching and code-mixing) such that even when a fluent speaker was found, it was not possible to find actual situations in which only Zhuang would be used over a considerable stretch of time. As a result, most of the recordings we made were done in rural settings by traveling to the villages of our informants.

In terms of methodology and technique, a major choice we had to make was very much related to this issue of language survival. The concern of most Zhuang people, even in the village, is how to document and preserve their language. We noticed that once we were in the village, people mainly got interested in what we were doing when they had some understanding that the work we were doing might lead to the documentation and preservation of their language. As a result of this, in subsequent visits, we decided to develop a technique of dialogue repetition and dramatization in the village based on linguistic texts we had carefully constructed from a proficiency course book (Bodomo and Pan 2007). Very often the villagers would be very amused about the texts and actually dramatize them, say them aloud, discuss them, saying what is authentically Zhuang and what is not, and finally suggesting better ways of making the conversation, and once everybody was satisfied with the texts, we then proceeded to do photo-, audio-, and video-recording of the dialogues. This way we got testimony from the language users themselves that what we were coming up with was indeed authentic linguistic data. Of course, other more spontaneous recordings took place in the form of participating in the everyday lives of the people, especially rites of passage like funerals and birth celebrations, routine farm work situations in which we followed the villagers to the fields and asked them to identify plant, insect, and animal names for us, during which we photo-, audio-, and video-recorded them. These semi-controlled dialogue settings along with the spontaneous settings ensured that we collected pronunciation, lexical items, and syntactic constructions of authentic Zhuang from fluent speakers and without the risk of influences from other linguistic systems through language mixing as we witnessed in the cities. Connecting one's linguistic field research explicitly to issues about language documentation, preservation, and revitalization is an important field research technique and strategy, in Guǎngxī, in particular, and other minority linguistic situations, in general.

3. Major Features of the Zhuang Language

In this section, we provide an outline sketch of the major linguistic features of Zhuang. Further information about the major linguistic features of the language can be found in our forthcoming grammar (Bodomo, in preparation).

3.1. Phonology

Each of the two dialects we have studied so far (Mashan in Northern Zhuang and Qinzhou in Southern Zhuang) has nine vowel phonemes. This is based on minimal pairs set up from our field notes (Bodomo, in preparation), including the close front vowels /i:/ and /ɪ/, the close-mid front vowel /e:/ (Mashan) /ɛ:/ (Qinzhou), the open front vowels /a:/ and /a/, the open-mid back vowel /ɔ:/, and the close back vowels /ʊ/, /ʉ/, and /u:/. There are a number of diphthongs and triphthongs in each of these dialects. Also based on minimal pairs from our field notes, we have 23 consonants for Mashan Zhuang and 19 for Qinzhou including bilabials, labio-dentals, dentals, alveolars, velars, glottals, palatals, labialized velars, palatalized bilabials, and palatalized velars, with the difference that the labialized and palatalized consonants occur in Mashan but not in Qinzhou.

Like other Chinese languages, Zhuang is a tone language, with six “stretchy” tones and two “checked” ones in both Mashan and Qinzhou. Tones in Mashan Zhuang are marked as Tone 1- 8: (Tone1= 53, Tone2=22, Tone3=242, Tone4=24, Tone5=33, Tone6=31; Tone 7 and 8 are marked respectively by letters p, t, k and b, d, g at the end of word/syllable boundaries). According to Zhang (1998) the so-called Standard Zhuang (this is based on the Wuming dialect but is barely intelligible with other dialects and is thus very little used by speakers of other dialects) has 22 initials and 108 finals, including six vowels, 12 compound vowels, 30 nasal vowels, and 60 vowels ending with codas.

3.2. Morphosyntax

The basic word order of the language is SVO as attested in the following declarative sentences with a nominal object in (1a) and a pronominal object in (1b):

- | | | | | | | | |
|--------|-------------------------|-------|------------|----|---------------|--------|---------|
| (1) a. | Gou | aeu | nohmou. | b. | Gou | gyaez | mwngz. |
| | Gou53 | aeu53 | no31mou53. | | Gou53 | gyae22 | mwng22. |
| | 1SG | take | pork | | 1SG | love | 2SG |
| | ‘I am picking up pork.’ | | | | ‘I love you.’ | | |

Interrogative structures are, at least, of two types, including in situ and A-not-A choice questions, as shown in (2):

- | | | | | |
|--------|---|--------|-----------|--------|
| (2) a. | Mwngz | gwn | gazmaz. | |
| | Mwng22 | gwn53 | ga22ma22. | |
| | 2SG | INGEST | what | |
| | ‘What are you eating?’ | | | |
| b. | Mwngz | gwn | ndi | gwn? |
| | Mwng22 | gwn53 | ndi53 | gwn53. |
| | 2SG | INGEST | NEG | INGEST |
| | ‘Are you going to eating something or not?’ | | | |

The negative particle *as* can be seen in (2) usually occurs between the subject and the verb, as shown in (3):

- (3) *Gou ndi gwn ngaiz.*
 Gou53 ndi53 gwn53 ngai22.
 1SG NEG INGEST cooked rice
 ‘I am not eating cooked rice.’

As can be seen in the various sentences, the language has little inflectional morphology, as common morphosyntactic categories like gender, agreement, tense, and case are not marked on nouns and verbs. However, the language has aspectual markers attached to verbs as in (4) and quite an intricate system of nominal classifiers as shown in (5):

- (4) *Gou gwn-gva*
 Gou53 gwn53-gva33
 1SG eat-PERF
 ‘I have eaten.’
- (5) a. *song boux vunz* ‘two CL person’
 b. *song duz mou* ‘two CL pig’
 c. *song ndaen lwggam* ‘two CL orange’
 d. *song ndaen lwgmanh* ‘two CL pepper’

The major word classes of the language are listed in (6):

- (6) a. Noun *ngai* ‘cooked rice’
 b. Verb *gwn* ‘to eat’
 c. Adjective *sang* ‘tall’
 d. Determiner *bwnj saw naex* CL-book-DET ‘this book’
 e. Adverb *nyaeng* ‘slowly’
 f. Preposition *nywqgwnz daiz de* on-table-the ‘on the table’
 g. Conjunction *cimh* ‘and’
 h. Ideophone *hiz-liz-humh-lumh* ‘noisy actions’
 i. Pronoun *gou* ‘I’, *mwngz* ‘you’

We now focus on one of these word classes, the pronominal system in the next section.

4. The Pronominal System of Zhuang

Having outlined some basic choices and techniques of field research in a multilingual environment like Guǎngxī, and having sketched the major morphosyntactic features of Zhuang, we now focus on outlining some prominent features of the pronominal system of Zhuang based mainly on data from Mashan

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and Qinzhou Zhuang. The various kinds of pronouns include personal, possessive, reflexive, reciprocal, interrogative, and demonstrative pronouns. Relative and definite/indefinite pronouns do not exist in the language; relative constructions and definiteness are marked in other ways. For reasons of space we will concentrate on the personal, possessive, and reflexive pronouns here. For a more comprehensive description of the pronominal system, see Bodomo (in preparation).

4.1. Personal Pronouns

The first, second, and third person singular and plural personal pronouns for Mashan Zhuang and Qinzhou Zhuang are shown below in (7) and (8) respectively:

(7)

Items Person	Mashan Zhuang	Notes
1 st Person	<i>gou53</i>	1.SG: 'I'; 'me'
	<i>dou53 (exclusive)</i>	1.PL: 'we, without you'; 'us, without you'
	<i>raeu22 (inclusive)</i>	1.PL: 'we, including you'; 'us, including you'
2 nd Person	<i>mwng22</i>	2.SG: 'you'; 'you'
	<i>sou53</i>	2.PL: 'you'; 'you'
3 rd Person	<i>de53</i>	3.SG: 'he'/'she'/'it'; 'him'/'her'/'it'
	<i>gyoeng33de53</i>	3.PL: 'they'; 'them'

(8)

Items Person	Qinzhou Zhuang	Notes
1 st Person	<i>gu33/hong24gu33</i>	1.SG: 'I'; 'me'
	<i>toi53gu33 (exclusive)</i>	1.PL: 'we, without you'; 'us, without you'
	<i>toi53laeu33/hong24laeu33 (inclusive)</i>	1.PL: 'we, including you'; 'us, including you'
2 nd Person	<i>mung33/hong24mung33</i>	2.SG: 'you'; 'you'
	<i>toi53mung33</i>	2.PL: 'you'; 'you'
3 rd Person	<i>de33/hong24de33</i>	3.SG: 'he'/'she'/'it'; 'him'/'her'/'it'
	<i>toi53de33</i>	3.PL: 'they'; 'them'

In terms of person, number, gender, and case, as can be seen in the data from the personal pronoun charts in (7) and (8), Zhuang is similar to other Tai-Kadai languages. Unlike English, it does not mark gender and case.

In terms of person reference, the most distinctive thing by far is what I term here the “-clusivity” distinction, whereby the first person plural has two forms, one inclusive of the listener/hearer and the other exclusive of the listener/hearer.

- (9) a. Dou bae ndaem faex. (Mashan Zhuang)
 Dou53 bae53 ndaem53 fae24.
 1.PL go plant tree
 ‘We (not including the listener) go to plant trees.’

- b. Raeuz bae yohyaux.
 Raeu22 bae53 yo31yau24.
 1.PL go school
 ‘We (including the listener) go to school.’

- (10) a. Toihguz bae ma lanz. (Qinzhou Zhuang)
 Toi53gu33 bae44 ma44 lan33.
 1.PL go back home
 ‘We (not including the listener) go back home.’

- b. Toihlaeuz baij goiq.
 Toi53laeu33 bai24 goi11.
 1.PL walk first
 ‘We (including the listener) go first.’

However, this is not always the case for all the dialects of Zhuang. For instance, there is no distinction between the exclusiveness and inclusiveness of the first person plural in Wuming dialect, as shown in (11).

- (11) Raeuz bae haw.
 Raeu31 bae24 haw24.
 1.PL go market
 ‘We (either including the listener or not) go to the market.’

These features of exclusiveness and inclusiveness can also be found in some Chinese dialects (Mei & Yang 1995), particularly in the Beijing dialect, Dongbei dialect (Nie 1995), Min dialects, and Wu dialects. The data in (12) illustrates the ‘-clusivity’ features across various Chinese dialects.

(12)

Items Dialects	Singular	Plural
Beijing Dialect (Běijīng Region)	我 [wǒ]: ‘I’	我们 [wǒmen]: ‘we’ (exclusive)
		咱们 [zánmen]: ‘we’ (inclusive)

Min Dialect (Fújiàn Province)	我 [ŋuai ³³]: ‘I’	我各侬 [ŋuai ³³ kou ²¹ nøyŋ ⁵³]: ‘we’ (exclusive)
		侬家 [naŋ ²¹ ŋa ⁵⁵]: ‘we’ (inclusive)
Dongbei Dialect (Hēilóngjiāng Province)	我 [wǒ]: ‘I’	我们 [wǒmen]/姆们 [mǔmen]: ‘we’ (exclusive)
		咱们 [zánmen]/咱 [zán]: ‘we’ (inclusive)

In spite of the above mentioned areas, most Chinese speakers tend to use *wǒmen* in situations of either including or excluding the hearer/listener when they speak Standard Chinese/Pǔtōnghuà.

4.2. Possessive Pronouns

There are two types of pronominal possessive constructions in Mashan Zhuang: (i) possessee + pronoun (13); (ii) possessee + (possessive marker) + pronoun (14):

- (13) saw gou
 saw53 gou53
 book 1.SG
 ‘my book’

- (14) a. saw (duz) gou
 saw53 (du22) gou53
 book (DU) 1.SG
 ‘my book’

- b. * gou duz saw
 gou53 du22 saw53
 1.SG DU book

- c. maq gou
 ma33 gou53
 mother 1.SG
 ‘my mother’

- d. * maq duz gou
 ma33 du22 gou53
 mother DU 1.SG

- e. duz gou
 du22 gou53
 DU 1.SG
 ‘mine’

As we can see from (14a), the possessive marker *duz* is optional. In Mashan Zhuang, one can not use *duz* for expressing family relations (see 14d).

Not all dialects of Zhuang exhibit the two types mentioned above. For instance, type (ii) cannot be found in Qinzhou Zhuang. However, Qinzhou Zhuang has another way to express possession. The data from (15) to (16) illustrate two types of possessive constructions in Qinzhou Zhuang.

(15) possessee + pronoun

a. ma guz
ma44 gu33
mother 1.SG.
'my mother'

b.* guz ma
gu33 ma44
1.SG mother

c. *guz de ma
gu33 de44 ma44
1.SG. DE mother

(16) pronoun + possessive marker + possessee

a. guz de lauxsae
gu33 de44 lau22sae44
1.SG. DE teacher
'my teacher'

b. * lauxsae guz
lau22sae44 gu33
teacher 1.SG

At first, the two constructions in (15) and (16) might look like expressing the differences between alienable and inalienable possessions as found in the system of many African languages. However, it seems that, in Qinzhou Zhuang, the difference is rather between possession involving family relations and non-family relations.

4.3. Reflexive Pronouns

Zhuang does not have an indigenous morpheme for expressing reflexivity like *-self* in English, and *-meme* in French. For instance, in expressing the idea of 'I cut myself', Mashan Zhuang employs the following construction in (17) but Qinzhou does not, as shown in (18):

(17) Gou raemj gou. (Mashan Zhuang)
Gou53 raem242 gou53.
1.SG cut 1.SG
'I cut myself.'

(18) *Guz laemj guz. (Qinzhou Zhuang)
Gu33 laem24 guz.
1.SG cut 1.SG

However, influenced by Mandarin, in which *zìjǐ* indicates the reflexive, a second way of expressing reflexivity in Zhuang is using a borrowed morpheme, such as *swheij* in standard Zhuang, and *seihgeij* and *sakga* in Mashan and Qinzhou Zhuang, respectively.

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- (19) Gou raemj gou seihgeij. (Mashan Zhuang)
Gou53 raem242 gou53 sei31gei242.
1.SG cut 1.SG self
'I cut myself.'
- (20) Guz laemj sakga. (Qinzhou Zhuang)
Gu33 laem24 sak53ga44.
1.SG cut 1.SG self
'I cut myself.'

More details on the reflexivity of Zhuang pronouns can be found in Bodomo (2005).

What the discussion of even just these three types of pronouns alone shows us is that contrastive and comparative studies of the various dialects of each language, on the one hand, and of the target language and neighbouring languages or languages of influence, on the other, is crucial in understanding some intricacies. Intra-dialect comparison is needed in all three cases to tease apart the differing uses of the '-clusivity' feature, and in understanding the differing ways of marking family relations between Mashan and Qinzhou, etc. Interlingual comparative studies were necessary to identify and understand the surprising lack of reflexive pronouns in Zhuang and how this is resolved with borrowings from Mandarin.

5. Summary and Conclusion

In this paper, we have outlined the experiences and the lessons we learned from doing fieldwork in a multilingual environment in southwestern China. We have shown this part of China to be a highly multilingual region, home to many minority languages and cultures such as the Zhuang, Yao, and Mulao, in which inhabitants show a high degree of polyglottism. A major case of language shift is occurring in which the use of Zhuang and other minority languages is restricted mainly to rural areas because Zhuang-speaking villages, like Jingxi, which develop into towns, become more and more Mandarin-speaking towns. Zhuang-speaking villages become non-Zhuang-speaking towns! And children of Zhuang-speaking parents in cities are likely not to speak Zhuang as a mother-tongue. This scenario of multilingualism and language shift has consequences for doing fieldwork. For fieldwork to be effective, and in order to collect authentic data, choices must be made to do the data collection in rural rather than in urban settings. Given that the population is justifiably anxious about the survival of their language and culture, fieldwork must be explicitly couched in terms of not only mere language documentation and preservation, but also language revitalization, such as writing proficiency books and designing language acquisition programmes with the field materials we have collected for the community and for foreigners. This is certainly one way of giving back to the community what has been taken from them. A second major aspect to collecting reliable data in a

multilingual environment is to explicitly design methods and techniques for teasing out what actually belongs to the target system of investigation and what is borrowed. We have shown that even with a very basic and closed subsystem within the language, like the pronominal system, one has to do not only inter-dialectal contrastive and comparative surveys, one also has to do a systematic comparative analysis of the target language and its neighbouring languages. Gathering data from a multilingual fieldwork situation involves an intricate negotiation between the target language system and those of surrounding languages.

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