

Diachronic sources of converb morphology in Ao

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Abstract

In common with the vast majority of Tibeto-Burman languages of the Indosphere and most predicate final languages of South and Central Asia, the Ao language of Nagaland makes great use of specialized non-finite verb forms, or *converbs*, for linking clauses in complex sentences. These perform the functions of lexical subordinators and conjunctions in the better known languages of Europe. Ao converbs express a range of propositions that qualify their matrix clause predicates with respect to sequence, simultaneous activity or state, reason, concession, condition, manner of activity, circumstance, iteration and duration. Examples (1-2) illustrate the use of converbs for expressing condition and sequential activity respectively in the Mongsen dialect of Ao:

- (1) *nàŋ atʃu mə-ləp-tʃuk-pàla aki .iŋ-i-ù?*
2SG that NEG-cut-PERF-COND house burn-IRR-DEC
'If you don't cut out that [knot of wood], the house will burn.'
- (2) *tə noksənsaŋ-pà? nə sə-əɪ hlà.*
thus personal.name-MASC AGT say-SEQ descend+go.PST
'Thus, Noksensangba said [that] and went down.'

Many of the converb suffixes of Ao have transparent origins in case-marking postpositions, nominalizing/relativizing/genitivizing morphology and, to a lesser extent, other lexical and grammatical morphemes. The conditional converb suffix of (1), for example, is formed from a fusion of the general nominalizer/relativizer suffix *-pà?* with the topic particle *la*, while the sequential converb suffix of (2) has grammaticalized from the agentive nominalizer/relativizer/genitivizer suffix *-əɪ*. All nominalizing/relativizing/genitivizing suffixes continue to be used synchronically for a range of older nominal functions in Ao, in addition to performing their newer grammaticalized functions as converb suffixes.

This paper discusses the diachronic origins of the converb system of Ao and presents some possible diachronic pathways by which erstwhile nominal forms have grammaticalized as converb markers.