

The Word Orders of the Bai Language

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The Bai Language is a Sino-Tibetan language spoken by more than 1 million speakers in the Northwest of the Yunnan, China. It is known to exhibit mixed features. Most discussed in the literature is Bai's philology, even though scholarly opinion remains divided between a linguistic affiliation with Chinese and that with Lolo-Burmese. In this paper we look at another area with similarly mixed features: the word orders of Bai. We will systematically examine different word orders in the language against Greenberg's (1963) universals and more recent work on typology (Hawkins 1983; Dryer 1991, 2003; Liu 2003). Apart from the standard sources (Xu & Zhao 1984, Wiesma 1990), data will be drawn from Bai folktales in print and our fieldworks. An analysis will be proposed taking into account the theory of word order universals, intra-dialect comparison, the distinction between native vs. loan patterns and area features.

Among the Bai's unusual word orders we find the following. It is a VO language with a V-PP, this puts Bai in the group of the only three languages of the 199 VO languages of Dryer (2003:49) to have V-PP. Bai is a VO language with preposition. These violate the universal tendencies of having the head on the same side (V and P) such as Cross-Category Harmony (CCH, Hawkins 1983), Moreover, Bai exemplifies the "impossible" language predicted by Hawkins (1983) by having the coexistence of the Noun-Demonstrative (and Noun-Numeral) and Relative Clause-Noun word orders and by having Relative Clause-Noun and Noun-Demonstrative word orders. The co-existence of these word orders violates parsing principles such as the Heaviness Serialization Principle (Hawkins 1983), in addition to the CCH. We will look at the theoretical significance of these 'anomalies' and what they can tell us between the inherited and foreign word orders.

Like any language, especially the language with mixed features, Bai often has two word orders: VO vs. OV, Preposition vs. Postposition, Aux-V vs. V-Aux, both of which will be examined in turn. Some word order will be argued to have been borrowed from Chinese, and others to be an historical relic.

Taken together, it makes more sense to consider Bai as historically close with Tibeto-Burman than with Chinese. Its unusual features result from the interplay of the substratum influence and structures borrowed from the dominant Chinese language.