A Synopsis of Yongning Na (Mosuo)

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The language of the Na (Mosuo) is split between three dialects:  Yongning, Beiquba, and Guabie; Na itself is categorized as an eastern variety of Naxi, which most linguists ascribe to the Lolo-Burmese branch of Tibeto-Burman (Matisoff 1986, Ramsey 1987, Thurgood 2003).  This work focuses on Yongning Na, as spoken in the area around Lugu Hu in Yunnan Province.  Yunnan Province is located in southwestern China, and is north of Laos and Vietnam, east of Myanmar (Burma), southeast of Tibet, and west of Sichuan Province.

This presentation provides an overview of the key features of Yongning Na, including the structure of noun phrases, the sortal classifier system, verb phrases, copulas, grammaticalization, the aspectual system, and evidentials; additionally, a short description of the computing environment is given.  Data presented are taken from audio- and video-recordings of oral narratives such as folklore and mythology which I recorded with the aim of documenting the culture of the Na linguistic community, their natural speech patterns, as well as important aspects of Na belief systems and the Daba religion.  This methodology, the discourse-centered approach to language documentation (Urban and Sherzer 1988, Sherzer 1987, Sherzer and Woodbury 1987), also captures casual speech not obtained through formal elicitation and grammaticality judgments, thus yielding a more well-rounded data set.

The computing environment consists of a commercially available Unicode-compliant relational database and operating system (Microsoft Access XP and Windows XP) and Unicode-compliant fonts to customize a database that allows the user to:  1. enter data in multiple writing systems (here, English, IPA, and Chinese characters); 2. sort data by stipulated grammatical categories; 3. interlinearize a narrative text with multiple language glosses from a lexicon file; and 4. export the data in XML, a non-proprietary format.  The use of Unicode-compliant software and fonts allows the database to operate in multiple languages without misinterpretation of the language encoding of the data.  The fact that the data may be exported from the database in XML, a non-proprietary format, means that researchers running other database software or operating systems can use the data.  Additionally, the XML format is convenient for distributing data over the Internet.  This system is in line with the E-MELD recommendations for digital language documentation (E-MELD 2004).

E-MELD.  2004.  The E-Meld school of best practices in digital language documentation.  Available: http://emeld.org/school/index.html.

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