

## A Synopsis of Yongning Na (Mosuo)

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The language of the Na (Mosuo) is estimated at 40,000 speakers (Yang Zhenhong, to appear), split between three dialects: Yongning, Beiquba, and Guabie (He and Jiang 1985:4). Na itself is categorized as an eastern variety of Naxi, which linguists variously characterize as an unsubgrouped Tibeto-Burman language (Thurgood 2003:19–20); on the periphery of Loloish (Matisoff 1986:47); close to but not part of Lolo-Burmese (Bradley 1975:93); and both classified as Yiish (Lolo-Burmese) by Beijing linguists and typologically extremely similar to Loloish languages, yet perhaps not actually Loloish (Ramsey 1987:265–266). This work focuses on Yongning Na (hereafter, YN 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, existential verbs, 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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## List of Abbreviations

1SG PRO	1st person singular pronoun
1PL PRO	1st person plural pronoun
1INC PRO	1st person plural inclusive pronoun
1EXC PRO	1st person plural exclusive pronoun
2SG PRO	2nd person singular pronoun
2PL PRO	2nd person plural pronoun
3SG PRO	3rd person singular pronoun
3PL PRO	3rd person plural pronoun
DL	Dual
ADV MAN	Adverbial (manner)
ADV PRTCL	Adverbial particle
AGT	Agentive marker
ASP	Aspect marker
CLS	Classifier
CMKN	Common knowledge/assumed evidential
COMP	Complementizer
COP	Copula
CSM	Change of state marker
CRS	Currently relevant state marker
DAT	Dative
EXIST	Existential
EXPER	Experiential aspect
FUT	Future
IMP	Imperative
INFR	Inference evidential
INTERJ	Interjection
LOC	Locative
NEG	Negative
NOM	Nominalizer
NOM <sub>Agt</sub>	Agentive nominalizer
NOM <sub>Loc</sub>	Locative nominalizer
NOM <sub>Purp</sub>	Purposive nominalizer
PERF	Perfective aspect
PL	Plural
POSS	Possessive
POSTP	Postposition
PROG	Progressive aspect
PRTCL	Particle
REFL	Reflexive pronoun
REL	Relativizer
REP	Reported/hearsay evidential
QM	Question marker
QUOT	Quotative evidential
QW	Question word

# A Synopsis of Yongning Na (Mosuo) <sup>1</sup>

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## 1. Introduction

- The language of the Na (Mosuo)<sup>2</sup>: categorized as an eastern variety of Naxi, which in turn has been characterized as:
  - an ungrouped Tibeto-Burman language (Thurgood 2003:19–20),
  - on the periphery of Loloish (Matisoff 1986:47),
  - close to but not part of Lolo-Burmese (Bradley 1975:93), and
  - typologically very similar to Loloish languages, yet perhaps not actually Loloish (Ramsey 1987:265–266)
- Eastern Na (Mosuo) has three dialects:
  - Yongning
  - Beiquba
  - Guabie
- Eastern Na has an estimated 40,000 speakers (Yang Zhenhong, to appear); no data for the number of speakers of Yongning Na
- Also different lexical items preserved in the Daba (Na religion) oral tradition

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<sup>2</sup> Although the term “Mosuo” is useful for information technology reasons (it is the term standard in the Chinese system of designating ethnic groups and is in common usage), it has several distinct disadvantages: 1. Na people state a preference for the use of the autonym Na rather than the exonym Mosuo, which they associate with opportunistic portrayals of the Na in the pop anthropology books and VCDs created by Han outsiders for the tourist market; 2. non-specificity: “Mosuo” was used to refer to the Naxi until the official designation of the ethnicities by the Chinese government in the mid-1950s; and 3. the Guabie Na are officially designated as “Mongolian” due to socio-historical circumstances.

## Southwestern China



Redrawn from map in *Lonely Planet Guide to South-West China* (1998: map insert between pp. 16–17)

## 2. Language typology

- Tends toward analyticity
- Grammatical relations mainly indicated by:
  - Word order
  - Lexical choice
  - Pragmatics
- Word order most common in unmarked, non-idiomatic, pragmatically neutral constructions: SOV
- Agreement is not marked by inflection, although person often can be extrapolated because of the conjunct/disjunct system as in Tibetan (Agha 1993, Bickel 2000, and DeLancey 2001)

## 3. The noun phrase: Many typical TB features

- N + ADJ + ADV + NUM + CLS word order
- Relation between nominalization, relativization, and possession (as in Lahu: Matisoff 1972; Tibetan and Newari: DeLancey 1986; Chantyal: Noonan 1997; Athpare, Belhare, Limbu: Bickel 1999; Thulung Rai: Lahaussais 2003)
- Classifier system

## 4. The verb phrase: Many typical TB features

- Verb-final, although aspect markers, interjections, and evidentials can follow the verb
- Multiple existential verbs: (4) (cf. Qiang: LaPolla 2003b, Nosu Yi: Walters and Ndaxit 2005)
- Aspectual system
- Conjunct/disjunct system

## 5. Other characteristics:

- Rampant grammaticalization: (8) processes found so far
- Evidentiality

## 6. Grammaticalization

### Overview

- a. xĩ33 ‘person’ => xĩ33 NOM<sub>Agt</sub> => xĩ33 NOM
- b. di33 ‘place’ => di33 NOM<sub>Loc</sub> => di33 NOM<sub>Purp</sub>
- c. ki33 ‘give’ => ki33 BEN => ki33 DAT
- d. dzɔ33 EXIST/LOC => dzɔ33 PROG
- e. bi33 lexical verb => bi33 AUX (movement to a location) =>  
bi33 AUX (no movement to a location) => bi33 FUT
- f. xɔ33 (desire) => xɔ33 (willingness) => xɔ33 (intention) =>  
xɔ33 (prediction)
- g. ku13 AUX (ability) => ku13 FUT (prediction)
- h. xə33 AUX (movement to a location) => xə33 FUT (remote)

- a. **xĩ33 ‘person’** => xĩ33 NOM<sub>Agt</sub> => xĩ33 NOM

xĩ33 means ‘person/people’:

- (1) 

xĩ33	t <sup>h</sup> ɿ33	t <sup>h</sup> ɿ33 ni13	ku13	zɔ33.
person	this	this way	FUT	CRS
人	这	这样	会	了

  
 This type of person will be like this.  
 这样的人会这样的。  
 Tsodeluyizo103

xĩ33 ‘person’ => **xĩ33 NOM<sub>Agt</sub>** => xĩ33 NOM

- (2) 

lɔ33 yi33	-xĩ33
labor	-NOM <sub>Agt</sub>
劳动	
laborer(s)	

  
 Tsodeluyizo4

- (3)    pi33   dzæ33   -xī33,   lu33   dzæ33   -xī33,   zuæ33   dzæ33   -xī33,  
       yak   ride   -NOM<sub>Agt</sub>   tiger   ride   -NOM<sub>Agt</sub>   horse   ride   -NOM<sub>Agt</sub>  
       牦牛 骑                    老虎 骑                    马 骑  
       the yak rider, the tiger rider, the horse rider,  
       骑牦牛的人, 骑老虎的人, 骑马的人  
       yongzhutser12

xī33 ‘person’ => xī33 NOM<sub>Agt</sub> => **xī33 NOM**

- (4)    lə33            zuu33    -xī33  
       ADV MAN    say       -NOM  
                   说  
       words  
       说的  
       Fangzi63

b.    **di33 ‘place’** => di33 NOM<sub>Loc</sub> => di33 NOM<sub>Purp</sub>

di33 means ‘land, earth, place’:

- (5)    nɔ13   zɔ33   lə33            zɿ33   zɔ33    di33-kuɔ33   bu33   mu33 zɔ33    gɑ33  
       REFL son    ADV MAN    take    CSM    earth-LOC    POSS    young woman    with  
       自己 儿子                    拿 了    地里        的    姑娘        跟  
       She said, “It is not possible for my son to court  
       她说他们家的儿子不可能和  
       gemu26

se33 se33   tsə31    mu33-    yī33    pi33.  
       court    okay    NEG-    can    QUOT  
       恋爱    行                    会  
       a regular girl.”  
       民间的女孩子恋爱。

di33 ‘place’ => **di33 NOM<sub>Loc</sub>** => di33 NOM<sub>Purp</sub>

- (6)    zu33- di33    tu33    mu33-    ni31    nɔ33    wuu33-di33    tu33    tʰɑ33-    xɔ33    pi33.  
       warm- NOM<sub>Loc</sub>    plant    NEG-    COP    2SG PRO    mountain- NOM<sub>Loc</sub>    plant    NEG-    go    QUOT  
       热的地    播种                    是 你    山地    播种    不 去  
       The heavens said, “If it’s not a warm place you can’t plant them, in the mountains, you can’t plant them.”  
       说, “除了热的地方以外, 高山的山地方, 你不可以种。”  
       Tsodeluyizo254





ki33 ‘give’ => ki33 BEN => ki33 DAT

- (11) a33 pa33 tɔ31 ki33 tʰu33.  
 Apato DAT arrive  
 Apato 到  
 He went to Apato’s place.  
 到了 Apato 那里。  
 Tsodeluyizo60

d. dzɔ33 EXIST/LOC => dzɔ33 PROG

- Grammaticalization from locative to progressive is cross-linguistically very common—Bybee et al. go as far as to say, “... aside from movement sources, reduplications, and constructions with verbs meaning ‘to keep on’, all progressives derive from locative constructions.” (Bybee et al. 1994:131)

- (12) wu31 dze33 dt33 wɔ33 dzɔ33 tɕʰi pʰuə tɕʰi pʰuə tɕʰi pʰuə tɕʰi pʰuə pi33.  
 bird one type EXIST tɕʰi pʰuə tɕʰi pʰuə tɕʰi pʰuə tɕʰi pʰuə QUOT  
 鸟 一种 有 tɕʰi pʰuə tɕʰi pʰuə tɕʰi pʰuə tɕʰi pʰuə  
 There was a type of bird that says, “cheeper cheeper cheeper cheeper.”  
 有一种鸟说, “tɕʰi pʰuə tɕʰi pʰuə tɕʰi pʰuə tɕʰi pʰuə”。  
 Tsodeluyizo81

dzɔ33 EXIST/LOC => dzɔ33 PROG

- (13) ǎ13 qy33 -kuɔ33 ni33 zɔ33 dt33 mi31 tʰl33 ǎ31 dzɔ33 zɔ33 xɔ33  
 cave -LOC fish one CLS ADV MAN stick EXIST little boy  
 山洞 鱼 一 量词 卡住 有 小男孩子  
 There was a fish caught in the cave;  
 有一条鱼卡在山洞里头;  
 ɕinami37

tʰl33	lɔ33	ʂe33	xǎ13	zɔ33	tʰl33	bu33	dzɔ33.
this	CLS	meat	cut	PERF	ADV MAN	roast	PROG
这	个	肉	割	了		烧	正在

the boy was roasting the fish to eat.  
 这个小孩儿正在烧鱼肉吃。

e. **bi33 lexical verb** => bi33 AUX (movement to a location) => bi33 AUX (no movement to a location) => bi33 FUT

This path of grammaticalization also adheres very closely to the patterns of grammaticalization found by Bybee et al., here, for verbs of movement (Bybee et al. 1994:267–270).

(14) tʰæ33 tʰi33 ni13 my31 tɕɔ33 bi33 mu33- tʂʰuu33.  
 often this way below go NEG- allow  
 经常 这 样 下边 去 准

Often in this way he was not allowed to go down to earth.

经常这样不准他去下面。

gemu28

bi33 lexical verb => **bi33 AUX (movement to a location)** => bi33 AUX (no movement to a location) => bi33 FUT

(15) pʰæ31 tɕʰi33 mu33 zɔ33 -'æ31 ʃ13 bu33 lɔ33 yi33 bi33 mu33- zɔ33.  
 man young woman -PL REFL labor go NEG- use  
 男 姑娘 们 自己 劳动 去 用

Men and women don't need to go labor (in the fields).

Change9

bi33 lexical verb => bi33 AUX (movement to a location) => **bi33 AUX (no movement to a location)** => bi33 FUT

(16) tʰi13 nɔ33 bu33 tʰa33 'ə31 dʒɔ33 bɔ13 ɛ13 pɔ33 lə33 ku33 ni31  
 so 2PS PRO POSS book EXIST pig skin use ADV MAN make COP  
 所以 你 的 书 猪皮 用 书 做 是

So he said, "Your book is made from pig skin,

所以说, "你的书是猪皮做的,

muphadaba14

ʃ13 -zɪ31 lə33 dʒɪ33 æ31 bi33 pi33.  
 REFL -DL ADV MAN eat QM go QUOT  
 自己 吃 吗 去

why don't we eat it up?"

我们两个要不要把它吃掉了? "



xɔ33 (desire) => xɔ33 (willingness) => **xɔ33 (intention)** => xɔ33 (prediction)

- (20) a33 pa33 tɔ31 ki33 tʰu33 nɔ33 tʰi13 zu33 mi33 ɛi33 **xɔ33** ni31.  
 Apato DAT arrive then so wife find FUT COP  
 Apato 到 才 所以 老婆 找 是  
 When he arrived at Apato's place, then he would go find a wife.  
 到了 Apato 那里, 才去找老婆。  
 Tsodeluyizo48

xɔ33 (desire) => xɔ33 (willingness) => xɔ33 (intention) => **xɔ33 (prediction)**

- (21) tʰi33 kʰuu33 lu33 pi33 dzɔ33 mɿ33 la33 di33 lə33 tɔ31 pi13 **xɔ33.**  
 this CLS till if heaven and earth ADV MAN turn over FUT  
 这 量词 耕 的话 天 和 地 翻转  
 If this piece of land is tilled, heaven and earth will switch places.  
 如果这块儿地耕种的话, 天和地会翻转。  
 Tsodeluyizo26

g. **ku13 AUX (ability)** => ku13 FUT (prediction)

- (22) tʰi33 ni13 zɔ33 ɛi33 gu33 ʃi3 sɔ33 ku31 ɛ31 ki31 zɔ33 pa33  
 this way PERF shuttle for weaving hemp cloth 1PL PRO isn't that right shuttle  
 这样 了 织麻布的槽 咱们 是不是 槽  
 This way, don't we have a kind of shuttle for weaving hemp cloth,  
 我们有一个织麻布的槽, 是不是,  
 Tsodeluyizo238

ɗi33 li33 dzɔ33 **ku13** tʰi33 ni13 ɗi31 si33 ki33 tʰi33 si33 ki33  
 one CLS EXIST can this way there pass DAT here pass DAT  
 一 量词 有 会 这样 那边 贯串 这边 贯串  
 that can be passed back and forth  
 拿这个槽在麻布上贯串过来,

tʰæ33 ni31.  
 often COP  
 经常 是  
 [through the weft].  
 贯串过去。

ku13 AUX (ability) => **ku13 FUT (prediction)**

- (23) dzɪ33 qy33 tʰɿ33 dɿ33 lɿ33 tʰɿ33 di33 ku13 tsɿ13.  
 spring this one CLS ADV MAN EXIST FUT REP  
 泉水洞 这 一 量词 有

It is said that there would be a spring there.  
 听说会有一个泉水站在（那里）。  
 Tsodeluyizo107

h. **xə33 AUX (movement to a location)** => xə33 FUT (remote)

- (24) tʰɿ33 ɲi33 ni31 bə13 lu13 la33 tʰɿ33 ni13 xə33  
 everyday pig feed and this way go  
 每一天 猪 放 和 这样 去

Everyday he went to feed the pigs and such.  
 每一天去放猪阿这些。  
 ɕinami14

xə33 AUX (movement to a location) => **xə33 FUT (remote)**

If there were intermediary stages in the grammaticalization from auxiliary indicating movement to a location to remote future marker, these are no longer attested in the language.

- (25) tʰi13 nə33 ni33 dzɯ13 dɿ33 wə33 zɯ31 gə33 tsʰi33 læ33 tʰæ13  
 so 2PS PRO AGT good one bless illness and such  
 所以 你 好 一 保佑 病痛 和 那些

To ask, “Please carefully protect the child so that illness and such  
 说请你好好的保佑一下病痛和那些  
 muphadaba36

- dɿ33 tʰa33- xə33 pi33.  
 arrive NEG- FUT QUOT  
 得到 会  
 won't come.”  
 不要让他得到。

## 7. Conclusion

One of the most striking aspects of these data is that judging by cross-linguistic studies of available paths of grammaticalization, in several cases, all or many of the stages along the grammaticalization path in YN Na are co-present. Lexical items change into grammatical markers, and yet each usage remains in the language and each retains its phonological shape. For example, processes e. and f. each have four stages, and yet all of these stages can still be attested for YN Na. This is fortunate, because as YN Na is not a written language, and there are no written records of previous incarnations of the language.

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