

Title:

Derivational Morphology in Lesser-Described Languages: The Building Blocks of Meaning and a Contribution to Lexical Innovation

Abstract:

This paper investigates how derivational morphology functions as a core mechanism of lexical innovation and grammatical flexibility in a lesser-described language of the Tibeto-Burman family like Tedim Chin and Kharam. In contrast to languages where derivation plays a peripheral role, this language presents a verb-heavy morphological system in which derivational processes are central to meaning-making and syntactic structure.

The study focuses on two major patterns: (1) nominalization of verbs, and (2) verbalization of nouns. Verb-to-noun derivation includes a range of productive morphemes yielding agentive, instrumental, locative, eventive, and abstract nouns. These are often formed through layered affixation, where morphemes such as causatives, classifiers, and directionals combine in stacked structures. For instance, a verb may be causativized before undergoing nominalization, resulting in an agent noun with embedded semantic nuance.

Conversely, noun-to-verb derivation is achieved through verbalizing morphemes that attach to nominal roots. These derived verbs regularly participate in aspectual and directional constructions and often become the basis for further morphological elaboration. This bidirectional flexibility reveals a fluid boundary between lexical categories, where roots readily shift roles depending on their morphological context.

Drawing on elicited data, natural conversation, and narrative texts, the paper analyzes the productivity, semantic transparency, and structural constraints of these derivational patterns. Special attention is given to instances of semantic shift and incipient grammaticalization, such as when nouns denoting tools or roles evolve into verbs expressing habitual actions.

By documenting these patterns in a lesser-described language, the paper contributes to the typology of derivational morphology. It highlights how derivation supports not only lexical expansion but also syntactic and discourse flexibility, offering insights into the interaction between derivation, argument structure, and information structure. The findings challenge traditional boundaries between derivation and inflection and underscore the significance of derivational morphology as a building block of meaning