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Title

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Journal

Himalayan Linguistics, 19(2)

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Publication Date

2020

DOI

10.5070/H91150996

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Languages and Peoples of the Eastern Himalayan Region (LPEHR)

The function of the suffix -le as declarative marker in Maram

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ABSTRACT

The primary purpose of this paper is to describe the function of the suffix *-le* in the Maram language. This paper discusses the function of the suffix *-le* in marking the end of declarative sentences, and the occurrence of *-le* with predicate nominals, predicate adjectives, and the existential. The paper also explores the tonal changes of *-le* and its non-determination of tense/aspect.

KEYWORDS

Maram, declarative marker, Tibeto Burman

This is a contribution from *Himalayan Linguistics* Vol 19(2) – *Languages and Peoples of the Eastern Himalayan Region*: 95–103.

ISSN 1544-7502

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The function of the suffix -le as declarative marker in Maram¹

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1 Introduction

Maram belongs to the Zeme subgroup of the Tibeto-Burman or Trans-Himalayan language family (van Driem 2001). The term Maram denotes both the people as well as the language. The Maram language is spoken predominantly in the state of Manipur and mostly within the district of Senapati, which is located next to the Mao Hill station of Manipur. Bordering Nagaland, it is located on the National Highway No. 2 which passes through both Dimapur and Imphal. According to the Census of India 2001, the population of Maram speakers is about 37,000. It is one of the 34 languages recognized by the state of Manipur. Moreover, the Maram language has also been introduced in the primary level of school education by the Board of Secondary Education Manipur (BOSEM) since 2015.

There is no gap in the intergenerational language transmission of Maram, however, domains of its usage are limited. The language is used within the home and during community gatherings, viz. village's events, social occasions etc. Very few schools have introduced Maram in the primary level only. Subsequently, Maram can be placed under Level 6a (Vigorous) of the Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (Lewis and Simons 2010) which indicates that the language is still safe. However, multilingualism in this area crosses at least three or more languages, and there is not likely anybody living within the district of Senapati who is monolingual.

Maram is an agglutinating and a tonal language with high and low tone (Pebam 1984). Unlike in Kuki-Chin, there is no subject-verb agreement in the language.

The main purpose of this paper is to describe the function of this monosyllabic suffix *-le* as a declarative marker in the Maram language. Very little linguistic work has been done on Maram. The first attempt at a descriptive grammar of Maram was done by Pebam (1984). In his work, the suffix *-le* is described as a copula in an equational clause, and as a verbal suffix in non-equational clause structure. Pebam did not mention the suffix *-le* specifically as a declarative marker, but as a be-verb, present tense in non-equational and as a copula in equational clauses (Pebam 1984: 199, 226-227).

¹ We, the authors would like to acknowledge Mijke Mulder and two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments and suggestion on this paper. We are thankful to Scott DeLancey for his insightful comment and suggestion on this paper presentation at the NEILS 9 conference. We have incorporated the necessary changes in this paper. We are responsible for any remaining errors or misinterpretation of facts. We also thank our consultants L.V. Makinei and L. Vikui Emerson for their generous support.

The present paper, however, attempts to show that the suffix *-le* is a declarative marker and not a be-verb by providing relevant examples to show how the suffix *-le* is used as a declarative marker in the language. The Maram language spoken in Maram Khullen is considered as the standard dialect (Pebam 1984). The data for this study were elicited from Mr. L. Vikui Emerson (65 yrs) and Ms. L.V. Makinei (27 yrs), native speakers of the Maram language spoken in Taklung village, also known as Ngatan village, located approximately 90 kilometres towards the eastern side of Senapati headquarters (see Figure 1). The data used in this study were recorded in 2017 at Tezpur University. To understand the characteristic features of the usage of *-le* in Maram, different types of sentences, such as, declarative, imperative, interrogative, and negative sentences, and predicate nominals were selected and recorded.

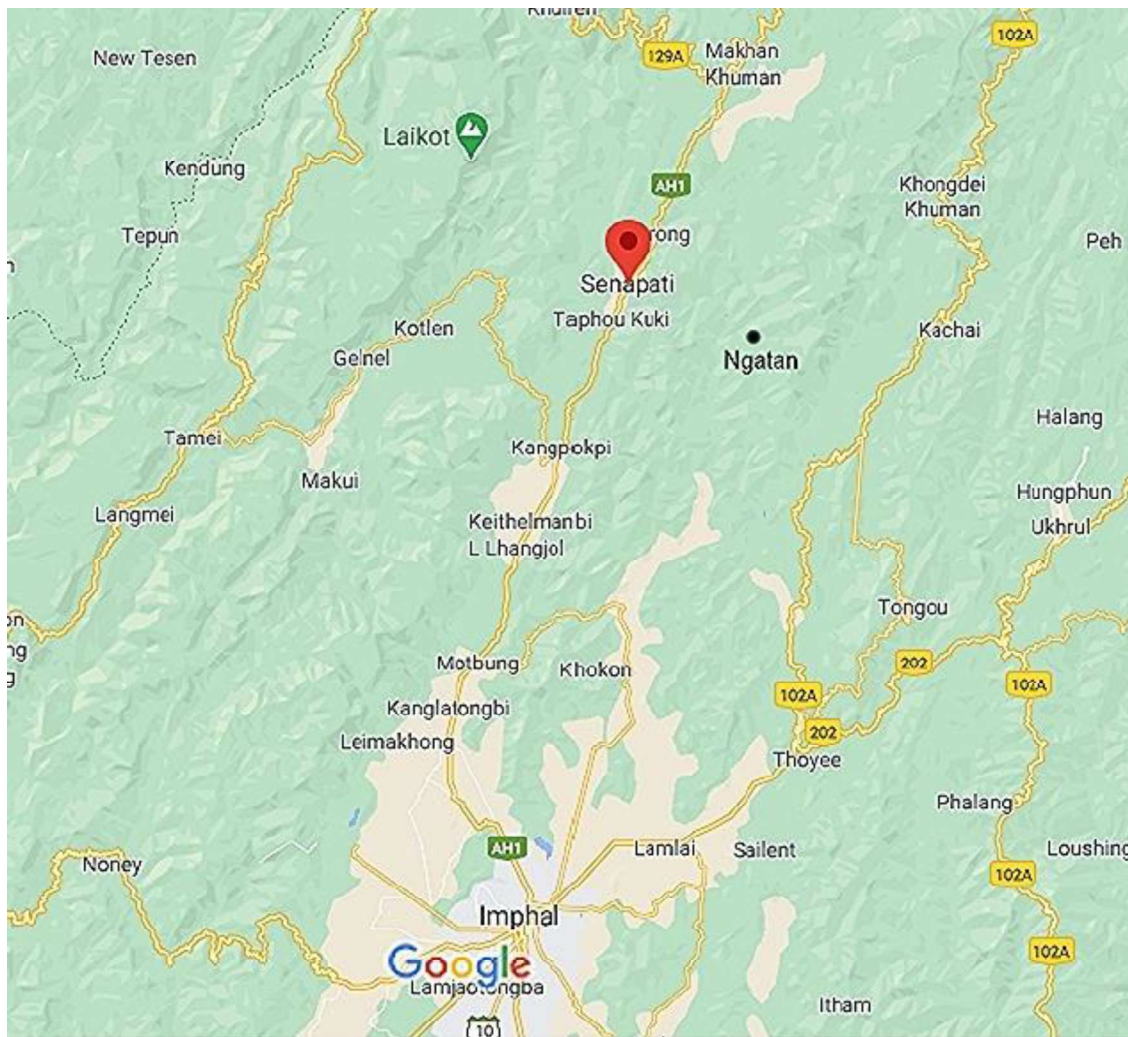


Figure 1: Location of Ngatan village, Senapati district, Manipur²

² Map data: Google.

The remainder of the paper has the following structure: In §2, we discuss the grammatical function of the suffix *-le* in marking the end of declarative sentences. The present study also discusses the tense/aspect information and the changes of tone in the suffix from high to low or vice-versa based on the preceding verbal inflecting morphology. The paper also discusses the absence of this suffix in imperative and interrogative clauses. In §3, §4, and §5 we discuss predicate nominals, predicate adjectives, and existentials in Maram respectively. The discussions in §2, §3, §4, and §5 are followed by our concluding remarks.

2 The grammatical functions of the suffix *-le* in declarative sentences

This section discusses the grammatical functions of the suffix *-le* in declarative sentences and other types of sentences.

2.1 Declarative sentences

The primary function of the suffix *-le* in Maram is to indicate the end of a declarative clause or sentence. It identifies the statement or expression as an assertion in declarative clauses. However, this final particle cannot occur in interrogative or imperative clauses. Examples of *-le* in declarative clauses are provided in examples (1)-(4).

- (1) *i a-cao tiŋcoi sak-ø-le.*
 1SG NRL³-tea morning drink-PRS-DECL
 'I drink tea in the morning.'
- (2) *a a-tak ča-tak-le.*
 3SG NRL-rice eat-PRF-DECL
 'He ate rice.'
- (3) *a a-tak ča-lei-le.*
 3SG NRL-rice eat-PROG-DECL
 'He is (still) having food.'
- (4) *i-nə ləŋ təŋ-le.*
 1SG-AGT⁴ cook IRR-DECL
 'I will cook (for you).'

³ Like in the Ao languages, nominal bound forms, such as body parts and kinship terms, are prefixed with *a-* and so are some of the common nouns and mass nouns in the Maram language, viz. *a-ba* 'non-relational-hand', *a-cao* 'non-relational-tea' etc.

⁴ Many of the Tibeto-Burman languages show the presence of the pragmatic ergative (DeLancey 2011:9-20). In Maram, *-nə* is a pragmatic agentive marker with a notion of agency or with an intention.

From the above examples, it can be noted that the present tense is a zero morpheme (\emptyset) or unmarked category. The actualized or the completed event is marked by perfect marker *-tak*; ongoing activities or incomplete acts are marked by *-lei*; unrealized or irrealis are marked by *-təŋ*. It is found that the suffix *-le* is placed after tense, aspect, and mood markers. Therefore, it substantiates with the statement that it is an indicator of the end of declarative sentence.

The tonal changes of the suffix *-le* itself are found to play no definite role in determining the tense/aspect of the sentence. However, the changes are found to be influenced by the preceding tense/aspect markers found in the verb and tone may shift from high to low or vice-versa (examples are provided in Table 1). Contrary to the Ao languages, one of the sub-groups of Southern Naga, in which the past tense is a zero morpheme or unmarked, while present tense and other tense categories are overtly marked (Coupe 2013), Maram has an unmarked present tense

| Examples | Gloss | Tone of <i>-le</i> |
|---|--------------|--------------------|
| <i>dət-\emptyset-le</i> beat-PRS-DECL | 'beat' | low |
| <i>dət-təŋ-le</i> beat-IRR-DECL | 'will beat' | low |
| <i>dət-tak-le</i> beat-PRF-DECL | 'has beaten' | high |

Table 1: The tone of *-le*

2.2 Imperatives

In imperative sentences, the suffix *-le* is not available. Instead, we find an imperative marker *-lo* which is attached to the verb as a suffix.

- (5) *tei pi-lo.*
salt give-IMP
'Pass (me) the salt.'
- (6) *dui pek nina pi-lo.*
water glass one give-IMP
'Give me a glass of water.'
- (7) *tu-su-lo.*
go-PROH-IMP
'Don't go!'

2.3 Interrogatives

In the Maram language, the declarative marker *-le* does not occur in interrogative clauses, similar to its lack of appearance in imperative clauses. The content interrogative

sentences comprise one of the interrogative words, namely, *take* 'who', *tama* 'whose', *dadou* 'when', *dakəmtu* 'which', and *dakəmpa* 'how', followed by the question marker *-po*. On the other hand, the suffix *-de* denotes polar questions. For example:

(8) *kamba ai take-po?*
 PERS.NAME PROX WH.Q
 'Who is (this) Kamba?'

(9) *a aiki lei-de?*
 3SG here EXIS-PQ
 'Is she here?'

(10) *a-nə ηəm-de?*
 3SG-AGT win-PQ
 'Did she win?'

However, if the declarative marker *-le* is attached to the question particles then the sentences formed are unacceptable, as verified by our informants. Thus, from the above examples, (8)-(10), it is noted that question word or particles cannot co-occur with the declarative marker *-le* in the final position of interrogative sentences.

2.4 Negation

Negation is shown by the insertion of negative marker *-mak* to the corresponding affirmative. There are no differences in tense/aspect categories in comparison to the corresponding declarative or the affirmative sentences, i.e. the negative construction is symmetric in Maram. The presence of a declarative marker *-le* indicates the forceful statement of fact or belief. Negation by means of *-mak* is illustrated by examples (11) - (14).

(11) a. *a kaŋba-le.*
 3SG PERS.NAME-DECL
 'He is Kangba.'

b. *a kaŋba mak-le.*
 3SG PERS.NAME NEG-DECL
 'He is not Kangba.'

(12) a. *kaŋba ai oja-le.*
 PERS.NAME PROX teacher-DECL
 'Kangba is a teacher.'

b. *kaŋba ai oja mak-le.*
 PERS.NAME PROX teacher NEG-DECL
 'Kangba is not a teacher.'

- (13) a. *i tu-le.*
1SG go-DECL
'I go.'
- b. *i tu-mak-le.*
1SG go-NEG-DECL
'I do not go (there).'
- (14) a. *i kami ca-le.*
1SG meat eat-DECL
'I eat meat.'
- b. *i kami ca-mak-le.*
1SG meat eat-NEG-DECL
'I do not eat meat.'

3 Predicate nominals

Payne (1997) opines that predicate nominals are those clauses in which the semantic content of the predication is embodied in a noun. This definition distinguishes predicate nominals from similar constructions such as predicate adjectives, predicate locatives, and others.

Predicate nominals in Maram express equation. The subject of the clause is identical to the predicate nominal, which is also known as an equative clause. The equative clause in Maram is illustrated by examples (15) and (16).

- (15) *i maram mei-le.*
1SG Maram man-DECL
'I am a Maram man.'
- (16) *lily ai oja-le.*
PERS.NAME PROX teacher-DECL
'Lily is a teacher.'

It is noted that the suffix *-le* merely acts as a declarative sentence-final marker, also with predicate nominals as in examples (13) and (14).

4 Predicate adjectives

Predicate adjectives are similar to that of predicate nominals or equative clauses in Maram language. The predicative adjective in Maram is demonstrated in examples (17) and (18).

- (17) *rose ai gang-le.*
 rose PROX red-DECL
 'This rose (flower) is red.'
- (18) *ngaonila ai ngoubi-le.*
 PERS.NAME PROX beautiful-DECL
 'Ngaonila is beautiful.'

Thus, from the above examples, it is observed that the predicate nominal and predicate adjective are followed by the declarative marker *-le*. Interestingly, in Maram, a declarative sentence may not inflect for tense when time is indicated lexically, except for future/irrealis. This is exemplified in the examples (19)-(21).

- (19) *danei majuṅ-le.*
 yesterday cold-DECL
 'Yesterday was cold.'
- (20) *tijnei majuṅ-le.*
 today cold-DECL
 'Today is cold.'
- (21) *sapounei majuṅ-təṅ-le.*
 tomorrow cold-IRR-DECL
 'Tomorrow will be cold.'

5 Existentials

In Maram, the existential construction is formed by the presence of existential verb *lei*, which yields a meaning of existence. The existential verb *lei* obligatorily asserts the existence of something, it may be animate or inanimate. It is preceded by a locative adposition and followed by the declarative sentence-final marker *-le*, as shown in examples (22)-(25).

- (22) *leirik tei teble-gam lei-le.*
 book DIST table-on EXIS-DECL
 'That book is on the table.'
- (23) *ətsəna tei bəm-kəṅto lei-le.*
 dog DIST chair-under EXIS-DECL
 'The dog is under the chair.'
- (24) *səfəmei tei ki-kito lei-le.*
 boy DIST house-in EXIS-DECL
 'The boy is in the house.'

- (25) *suzoŋ nina kiluŋ-kito lei-le.*
monkey one room-in EXIS-DECL
'There is a monkey in your room.'

6 Conclusion

This paper has discussed the function of the monosyllabic suffix *-le* as a declarative marker in the Maram language. The primary function of *-le* is found to indicate the end of a declarative clause. The declarative marker cannot occur in interrogative or imperative clauses. Secondly, this paper has illustrated that the tonal changes of the suffix *-le* itself is found to play no definite role in determining the tense/aspect of the sentence. However, the changes are found to be influenced by the preceding tense/aspect markers found on the verb and tone may shift from high to low or vice versa. Thirdly, this paper has also illustrated that the predicate nominals, predicate adjectives and existential constructions end with the declarative sentence-final marker *-le*, while the marker does not occur in imperative and interrogative clauses. This paper focused on declarative marking in Maram. How declarative marking in Maram relates to declarative marking in other Tibeto-Burman languages is a topic worthy of further investigation.

ABBREVIATIONS

| | | | |
|------|-----------------------|-----------|----------------|
| 1 | first person | PERS.NAME | personal name |
| 3 | third person | PRF | perfect |
| AGT | agentive marker | PROG | progressive |
| DECL | declarative | PROH | prohibitive |
| DIST | distal | PROX | proximal |
| EXIS | existential | PRS | present |
| IMP | imperative | PQ | polar question |
| IRR | irrealis | SG | singular |
| NEG | negative | WH.Q | Wh-question |
| NRL | non-relational prefix | | |

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