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► **To cite this version:**

François Jacquesson. Persons and Grammar in Meyor. Mark Post, Stephen Morey, Scott Delancey (eds.). Language and Culture in Northeast India and Beyond. In Honour of Robbins Burling. , Asia-Pacific Linguistics, pp.100-113, 2015. halshs-01672242

HAL Id: halshs-01672242

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01672242>

Submitted on 23 Dec 2017

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Persons and Grammar in Meyor language (Tibeto-Burman).

F. Jacquesson

I will try to describe some features of persons, tense and aspect, and the grammar of “reported speech” in the language of Meyor people, a small group living in easternmost Arunachal Pradesh, India. I will conclude with some thoughts about languages being counter-intuitive and about grand-fathers being innovative.

1. Introduction

There are about 400-500 persons¹ speaking three varieties of Meyor language on the Indian side of the border, in Anjo District, Eastern Arunachal Pradesh. These Meyor people live mostly in nine villages between the border with China and the township of Walong. They are found in Musai (15 houses²), Tinai (13 h.), Walong-village (12 h.), Dong (10 h.), Kaho (9 h.), Khroti (5h.), Tilam (5 h.), Kundun (4 h.), Mulam Kembring (4 h.). These people do not have the same history, and belong to five groups, called Khordjap-pu, Litsi-pu, Netan-pu, Phitsi-pu and Sunggu-pu. Netan and Sunggu are the names of two Meyor villages on the Chinese side, and lineages of Netan-pu and Sunggu-pu come from these two places. Communication between both sides stopped after 1962. The three other groups apparently are not from specific places, or may have been living in their present location for a longer period. The last well-known batch of people coming from the Chinese side is the family of Tsering Tunduk Zakhring, whom, his people say³, British officials convinced in the 1940s to move this side. The varieties of speech that I know of are the Kaho speech (the last village up there before the border), the Walong speech, and the speech of the Netan-pu, reputed for its ‘tunes’: it is indeed the only one to have tones⁴. The three dialects are more or less inter-understandable, but have differences in prosody, lexicon, and grammar. Some Meyor people (actually *Meye* or *M’ye*, because the name Meyor seems to result from a British adaptation) also live in China. The language has many characteristics in common with Miju, the easternmost group of the so-called Mishmi. The examples given here are in Kaho dialect, all from Ajit Meyor, in his thirties, living in Kaho village and at Tezu.

Verb phrases in Meyor are made of a verb root, sometimes with a pre-verb, and a number of suffixes that express both person and tense/aspect. If negation occurs, it is placed before the verb root. The verb phrase is at the end of the sentence; arguments come before it. If definite, patients (O) are

¹ This paper is the result of a new investigation among the Meyor people living in Tezu, in February 2015. I thank my old and dear friend Dr Chhinjo Meyor for having organized my stay there and numerous fruitful contacts, and Ajit Meyor (the son of Chhinjo’s elder sister Rosalia), born c. 1980, for his courage and acumen during our long work sessions. The trip was funded by my Research Unit, the LACITO (French CNRS, UMR7107) associated with the Sorbonne Nouvelle University at Paris.

² Approximately. Total would be between 70 and 80 houses. A newly married couple shifts to its own house after one year. A few houses accommodate more than 6-7 people; a few only one person.

³ Chhinjo Meyor is one grand-daughter, through her mother Pema Lamu, of Ts. T. Zakhring.

⁴ Partition between groups whose speech has tones, and groups who do not have is a common phenomenon in Arunachal. As far as I know, this happens in the west (close to Bhutan) among Sherdukpens where only three small villages still have tones, among Adi where Padam people are said to have “tunes”, among Miju where only some remote villages “have tones”, and among Meyor where tones are the privilege of the Netan-pu. We always think of the influence of Hindi, indeed very considerable in Arunachal, but it may not be the sole reason, since Tibetan dialects also know of this partition.

marked with *-vik*; agents (A) with *-kui* if necessary; word order in such cases is AOV. In glosses, I will use s1, s2, s3, p1, p2, p3 for the six traditional persons. The apostrophe denotes a super short vowel.

- (1.1) mik khər-m sun is rising
 sun rise-Pst/s3
- (1.2) u m°-tai-mu he does not hear
 s3 Neg-hear-Hab/s3
- (1.3) ko i-vik thir-miŋ I am calling you
 s1 s2-O call-Pst/s1
- (1.4) (ko) phu m'-tsət-kiŋ I am not blowing (on something)
 (s1) 'phu' Neg-blow-PstN/s1

In the last example, with pre-verb, the positive form would be *phu tsət-miŋ* '(I) make *phu*, I blow' with the Pst/s1 *-miŋ* ending as in example 3. Negation triggers another ending, here labelled PstN/1s. Since *-miŋ* and *-kiŋ* can be used only in s1, the use of *ko* in the beginning of such sentence indicates focus, or stress.

2. Two kinds of 'you'

Personal pronouns in Meyor do not indicate gender. They are:

	1	2	3
singular	ko	no / i	u
plural	ki	ni	vi

Chart 1: Personal pronouns

The subject pronoun for 'you' is *no*, and the plural form 'youP' is *ni*. Yet, in many cases, instead of *no*, the *i*-form is used. Basically, the *i*-form is mostly found with a suffix; exceptions will be examined. It occurs with postpositions like *-tshi* 'both': *i-tshi* 'you both'; *phai* 'with': *ko kar-lik i-phai khuk-an* 'I came with you in a car' (I-car-in you-with come-Ps/s1); with *-yak* indicating determination or 'possession':

	subj.	my house
s1	ko	ko-yak nam
s2	no	i-yak nam
s3	u	u-yak nam
p1	ki	ki-yak nam
p2	ni	ni-yak nam
p3	vi	vi-yak nam

Chart 2: possessive prefixes

Most importantly, it occurs with *vik* that marks the definite patient or object:

- (2.1) ko i-vik suk-miŋ no ko-vik suk-i (wo)
 s1 s2-O see-Pst/s1 s2 s1-O see-Pst/s2

I am seeing you

you are seeing me

S1 *ko* has one form only, be it independant or affixing (here: agent or patient), while s2 is *no* when independant or subject and *i-* when affixing *-vik*. We could say that *no* is the direct form, *i* the oblique form.

Regarding s2/p2 persons, verb paradigms can be classified in 3 groups: the “*e* forms”, the “*i* forms”, the “*tsi* forms”. The “*e* forms” serve for noun predicates like ‘You are a Meyor’, *no Meyor e*, or ‘you are tall’ etc. In fact, *me* in s3 is dispensable. Suffix *ku* marks plural in p3 predicates.

		I am tall
s1	ko	khreŋ kiŋ
s2	no	khreŋ e
s3	u	khreŋ (me)
p1	ki	khreŋ ke
p2	ni	khreŋ neŋ
p3	vi	khreŋ ku

Chart 3: noun predicate conjugation

The “*i* forms” and “*tsi* forms” serve with verb roots. These *i* or *tsi* are often followed by a suffix. In the first example, *no andek tso i*, ‘you eat rice’, the 2nd person suffix is *i* or *i neŋ*. In the next examples, *i* is followed by a suffix, *mu* or *khuk*. In the ‘you like stories’ example, *no tampi go-i-mu*, *i* comes before *mu* or *map*. These *i* or *tsi* only occur with 2nd persons.

		I eat rice	I like stories	I will go to Walong
s1	ko	tso miŋ	go maŋ	ti khuk kiŋ
s2	no	tso i	go i mu	ti i khuk
s3	u	tso m	go mu	ti khuk
p1	ki	tso me	go map	ti khuk ke
p2	ni	tso i neŋ	go i map	ti i khuk neŋ
p3	vi	tso m ku	go mu ku	ti khuk ku

Chart 4: Examples of “*i* forms” in 2nd persons

		I am ill	I have seen	I have forgotten
s1	ko	ndəm aŋ	ŋoŋ aŋ	tsak ki ŋ
s2	no	ndəm tsik	ŋoŋ tsik	tsak tsi ki
s3	u	ndəm e	ŋoŋ ik	tsak ki
p1	ki	ndəm eke	ŋoŋ eke	tsak ki yap
p2	ni	ndəm tsik neŋ	ŋoŋ tsik neŋ	tsak tsi ki yap
p3	vi	ndəm e ku	ŋoŋ ik ku	tsak ki ku

Chart 5: Examples of “*tsi* forms” in 2nd persons

In ‘you will go to Walong’, *no Waloŋ ti-i-khuk*, the verb ‘to go’ is *ti-*, but the final suffix is actually the verb meaning ‘to come’, *khuk-*, regular auxiliary verb for future. Among the various suffixes that express person+tense/aspect, only s2 *-i* comes before the auxiliary, while others, *-kiŋ*, *-ke*, *-neŋ* and *ku* all come after. If we consider the “*tsi* forms”, ‘you have forgotten’ *no tsak-tsi-ki* offers the same conclusion: only 2nd person *tsi* comes before the *ki* auxiliary ‘to do’, and other suffixes come after. In the other two examples ‘you are ill’ *no ndəm-tsik* and ‘you have seen’ (the common past tense) *no*

noŋ-tsik, the paradigms only differ in an important detail: active verbs have *-ik* where stative verbs have *-e*.

Verbs *khuk-* and *ki-* can be employed with their full meaning, for instance in sentences like:

(2.2) (u) khuk-e he has come
(s3) come-Ps/s3

(2.3) u sek ki-m what is she doing?
s3 what do-Pst/s3

Instead of considering the 2nd person, if we start our perusal from the 3rd one, we can formalize our remarks on the following chart.

if s3 ends in	then s2 is with	example	
zero	-e	you are tall	<i>no khreŋ e</i>
-m	-i	you eat rice	<i>no andek tso-i</i>
-mu	-i-mu	you like stories	<i>no tampi go-i-mu</i>
-khuk	-i-khuk	you will go	<i>no ti-i-khuk</i>
-e	-tsik	you are ill	<i>no ndam-tsik</i>
-ik	-tsik	you have seen	<i>no noŋ-tsik</i>
-ki	-tsi-ki	you have forgotten	<i>no tsak-tsi-ki</i>

Chart 6: Conjugation patterns

There are other possible endings in s3, for instance *-lek*, but these above will suffice to describe the main lines. The s3 *-m* form probably is the most common one; it means that you are doing something now or that you are now beginning doing it; it is also a narrative present. The s3 *-mu* form means you are usually doing that, for instance ‘you like apples’. The s3 *-khuk* form is a future, not an urgent one. The s3 *-e* form is a stative result, ‘you are now being ill’. The s3 *-ik* form is a past tense for active verbs. Finally the s3 *-ki* form is a recent past, ‘you have (just) forgotten’.

Such a chart, were it still more detailed, would not solve all problems, especially when persons are involved. Even within the scope of these charts, we shall remark that s2 *-i* form is found as a last or last but one element in “i forms” of verbs. It comes last in sentences like *no andek tso-i* ‘you are eating food (rice)’, and last but one in *no andek tso-i-khuk* ‘you will eat food’.

A last curious point is to be mentioned here about this *i-* meaning ‘you’. When you address a number of people one after the other, supposing you give them indications or orders, you will tell *i-vik* ‘you’ to the first one, but *no-vik* to the next ones.

3. Aspects

One difference between *ko tampi tsar-miŋ* and *ko tampi tsar-maŋ* ‘I am telling story’⁵ is that with *tsar-miŋ* you are actually now telling one, while with *tsar-maŋ* you are just mentioning a habit; *tampi tsar-maŋ* could also be translated as ‘I have/had been telling many stories’. Would you use *tsar-aŋ* you would tell ‘I was telling stories’ (in some more or less remote past), and with *tsar-kiŋ* ‘I was just telling a story’ (when you came in, for instance).

⁵ This translation is ‘baby English’, in order not to decide which stories are told and how or when.

(3.1) *ko raptse simu-vik vale tampi tsər-marj*
 s1 own daughter-O much story tell-Hab/s1
 I have been telling many stories to my daughters

Yet, if it is a matter of custom or habit, and not a repeated action, we fall back to *-miŋ* type. Suppose you are interested to know whether French people eat fish, the question is:

(3.2) *Frans-lik, kəntshi tham-i.nəŋ wo?* In France, do youP eat fish?
 France-Loc fish eat⁶-Pst/p2 Int

Interrogative final *wo* is used only when necessary for clarity or stress.

The aspectual contrasts are different with a verb like *ŋi-* 'sleep, get asleep': *u ŋi-m* is 'he is going to sleep' (see chart 4 at n°1), *u ŋi-lo* 'he just fell asleep, he (now) sleeps', *u ŋi-e* 'he is sleeping (please don't disturb!)' (see chart 5 at n°1). About aspects (in a wide sense), requests from colleagues may extend to contrast between 'to sit' and 'to be sitting' etc. The Meyor answer, consistent with the example concerning 'getting asleep', is this one:

(3.3a) *ts'-lap!* sit down!
 lp-sit

(3.3b) (ko) *ato lap-miŋ* I (am going to) sit down
 (s1) now sit-Pst/s1

(3.3c) (ko) *lap-aŋ* I am sitting
 (s1) sit-Ps/s1

(3a) shows the Imperative prefix *ts'-* at work. Imperative negative would be with prefix *he-* instead of *ts'-*. (3b) is for action and is a typical use of the *-miŋ* paradigm which often indicates something now occurring, about to occur etc. (3c) is for station, and a good opportunity for the *-aŋ* paradigm (chart 5 n°2), which is a present-past, often a 'perfective' if we mean the description of the present result of a past action.

Moreover, there is a distinction for 'actual witnessing':

(3.4a) *uŋ maiso ndzur-e* that girl is pretty (look!)
 that girl pretty-Ps/s3

(3.4b) *uŋ maiso ndzur-tek* that girl is pretty

The use of *-e* in (4a) shows that you are seeing her, whereas *-tek* in (4b) is a more general indication when talking about girls with friends. In the negative, only *-e* is possible; the nuance disappears. Persons (in the grammatical sense) of course make a difference in aspect during conversation. Suppose you call a girl or lady who is walking over there; she does not hear you. You may tell a friend:

(3.5) *ko u-vik thir-miŋ. U m'-tai-mu*
 s1 s3-O call-Pst/s1 s3 Neg-hear-Hab/s3
 I am calling her, she does not hear.

⁶ Verb *tham-* is used only for meat and fish; otherwise, the average verb is *tso-*.

Because the ‘calling action’ is seen as going on, it triggers the usual present tense. The ‘not hearing action’ does not go on at all, and is seen as an inability to hear. Suppose you then decide to tell your friend: ‘I am not calling her’, you could perhaps say *ko u-vik m’-thir-kiŋ* (the expected negative for *-miŋ* endings) but in this context the sentence is a bit awkward, and a certainly more natural reaction is *ko u-vik m’-thir-khuk-kiŋ* ‘I will not call her (anymore)’, with a future tense stressing purpose or vexation.

Meyor language is sensitive to “immediacy”: it makes a grammatical difference if things happen at once or not, if the past was just now (*-ki* past, see chart 5 n°3) or not (*-ik* past, chart 5 n°2), are to happen right now (*-m* ‘present’, see chart 4 n°1) or not (future with *khuk*, chart 4 n°3). The same is true when actions are to follow. Where English has to use ‘as soon as’, Meyor uses a specific *-lek* verb form, here glossed as ‘So’:

(3.6) *i-yak tsaj phri-lek dzapma, ko-vik ndzom-wa-i.khuk?*
 s2-G work finish-So after s1-O meet-can-Fut/s2
 Right after finishing your work, can you visit me?

Note that if, on the contrary, you mean ‘before you do something, do something else’, you will have, as in French, to use a negative dependant clause:

(3.7) *ko tsaj m’-thruï tongu i-vik ko ndzom-khuk.kiŋ*
 s1 work Neg-work before⁷, s2-O s1 meet-Fut/s1
 Before I work (my work), I will meet you
 Je te verrai avant que je ne me mette au travail

This sentence also shows a more relaxed word order, a natural way of telling things. The second *ko* might be dropped altogether.

4. Telling stories

Most stories, either true or not, need at least three persons: you who listen or tell, the other one who tells or listens, and that other person, the topic of all gossip, a raja, a girl, a frog. However, complications arise when rajas tell about girls or frogs, and you in turn tell what they tell. By far the most common grammatical solution to the problem of reported speech is to report it as it was spoken. If the raja said: ‘Laila, my girl, what a godly person you are’, it is far more economical to state it as (a) than as (b):

(4.1a) “And the raja said: ‘Laila, my girl, what a godly person you are’ “

(4.1b) “And the raja said that Laila, his dear girl, was indeed a godly person.”

Complicated grammar such as (b) would rapidly throw us in dire embarrassment, were Laila to tell stories about frogs to her raja, and were these same frogs then to tell her stories about me - these embedded frames that story-tellers love. Yet, in a number of languages, techniques have been developed to trace who is speaking. Sometimes, anaphora develops as a sub-department of deixis, and special pronouns are used to indicate which third person is talking about another third person. In Meyor, the solution is different.

⁷ *Tongu* does not really mean ‘before’ but ‘earlier, in the past’.

First, we should know the difference between *sro-*, *ndo-* and *tsər-*. The verb *sro* means ‘speak’, like in:

- (4.2) ko Meyor lai m'-sro-kiŋ I do not speak Meyor language
s1 Meyor language Neg-speak-PstN/s1

More important for us, *ndo-mai* is ‘saying’ and *tsər-mai* is ‘telling’. If you request someone to give you his mobile phone number, while he is busy with something else, he may realize after some time you requested it, and then ask you:

- (4.3) ko ndo-aŋ wo? Did I say (it)?
s1 say-Ps/s1 Int

- (4.4) no ŋyit-i-mu wo ato i-vik sek ndo-aŋ
s2 know-Hab/s2 Int now s2-O what say-Ps/s1
Do you know what I told you (said to you) just now?

With ‘say’ the stress is more on form and sound, with ‘tell’ rather on meaning. In English as in Meyor, you can ask if you have said (the sound) *shglumph*, but can hardly say that you ‘told’ *shglumph*. You can say that French cocks say *kokoriko* while German ones say *kikiriki*, you cannot say they ‘tell’ it. You say something, but you can tell about something. Here we have come back to the beginning of this chapter.

If no hearer is mentioned, you may have sentences like:

- (4.5) i-yak tsepni tampi tsər-m tha Your brother was telling a story
s2-G brother story tell-Pst/s3 Past

This is normal past continuous tense in Kaho dialect: the present-past marked with *tha*. Without *tha*, the sentence would be interpreted as a present continuous ‘He is telling a story’. The short past is also possible:

- (4.6) u tsər-ik He told (something)
s3 tell-Ps/s3

This would be, probably, an answer to your question: ‘Did he tell it?’ - He told it, yes. If you told a story, even mentioning to whom, the tense setting remains ‘normal’.

- (4.7) ko moŋor i-vik tampi tsər-aŋ tha I have told you a story yesterday
s1 yest. s2-O story tell-Ps/s1 Past

As soon as three ‘roles’ are at stake, we shift out of the normal setting:

- (4.8) i-yak tsepni-kui i-vik tampi tsər-pu
s2-G brother-A s2-O story tell-RS
Your brother has told you a story

Here, each function is marked: agent who told (with *-kui*) and patient who is told (with *-vik*). More remarkably, the verb ending is specific: *-pu* (in Kaho speech, in Walong pronounced *-phu*) makes it clear that the teller is a 3rd person. The same *-pu* would work in sentences like:

(4.9) laŋ gədzom siŋ ko-vik tshar ki-pu Some people made fun of me
 other person PL s1-O joke do-RS

This ‘joke’ implies telling things. In reported speech, the *-pu* form naturally occurs. Compare the two following sentences.

(4.10) dzik-kui tsor sat-ki A tiger has killed a cow
 tiger-A cow kill-Pl/s3

(4.11) laŋ gədzom-kui ko-vik sai-pu dzik-kui tsor sat-ki
 other person-A s1-O report-RS tiger-A cow kill-Pl/s3
 Someone told me that a tiger killed a cow

Until now, a 3rd person told something. I or you also can tell a story to somebody.

(4.11) ko i-vik tampi tsər-e ko-apa-yak
 s1 s2-O story tell-RS1s1-father-G
 I will tell you a story about my father.

(4.12) no ko-vik tampi tsər-tsu
 s2 s1-O story tell-RS2
 you (will) tell me a story

The previous (11 and 12) examples need a (virtual) hearer to be valid. The point is not only to “tell stories”, but to tell them to someone definite. The pattern *no ko-vik...-tsu* has a possible plural with *ni ko-vik...-tsu-neŋ*. However, with s1 or sp2 agents, the respective *-e* and *-tsu* endings suggest future, and are equivalent to a polite request in (12), and to a promise in (11).

(4.13) ko-vik sabun tat-tsu - ko to tat-e
 s1-O soap give-RS2 - s1 now give-RS1
 Give me soap please. - I will give (it) now.

It may be that the *-tsu* suffix is related to the Imperative *ts-* prefix, or maybe to the “tsi forms” in our chapter 2 but, whatever the link, these three suffixes, *-pu*, *-tsu*, *-e*, do not belong to a formal paradigm: they express distinct positions in speech, are difficult to compare within a convenient common frame, and are apparently not to be considered as variants of a same situation. Although they do not form a paradigm, and are more difficult to pinpoint when the investigation starts from formal questionnaires, they have an interesting role in the grammar of story-telling.

5. On persons and paradigms

Is there a paradigm for persons in Meyor? The question is biased by our idea of the three grammatical persons, which is derived from rhetorics or semantics, a dialogue with a topic: someone talks to someone else, and this “else” now takes over and answers; they are talking about somebody or something, the traditional 3rd person. Since we accept this frame as granted, we look for “the 3 persons” in any language - and we usually find them. Linguistic documentation has shown a number of interesting cases about “4th persons” or switch reference, but this is the domain of reference or 3rd person, not the scene of dialogue that accommodates the first two ones.

If we look at the Meyor ‘new’ verbal morphology, the morphology which shows with the auxiliaries *khuk-* and *ki-*, we observe its striking dissymmetry. 1st person is marked after the auxiliary, 2nd person is marked before, and 3rd person is not marked at all.

		aux.	
s1	V	khuk	kiŋ
s2	V	i	khuk
s3	V	khuk	

		aux.	
V		ki	ŋ
V	tsi	ki	
V		ki	

We are not surprised by the 3rd person ‘zero’ marking. Benveniste, more than 60 years ago, has shown the characteristics of the 3rd person, cross-linguistically, on semantic and morphological grounds. He observed that, most often, this person is not a person at all, but anything (“rain fell, darkness came with melancholy, everything was blurred, light itself seemed dull”) and in some cases a person. He remarked that many languages do not trace this false person by any marker; his favorite examples were in Semitic languages, but the remark can be verified in hundreds of cases, Meyor included.

The 3rd person is not marked because it is the most obvious candidate or default subject for any predicate. Even in a parody of “simple talk”, sequences like < bull angry >, < house big >, < text stupid > make sense immediately. It would be less obvious with examples like < John pig watching >, but the ambiguity concerns who watches whom, not the predication itself: marking comes in for disambiguation. Why is it so often different for < me you watch >? It is of course possible to follow the same default pattern, as many languages like Chinese or Garo or Deori do show. Perhaps can I suggest that the pressure for marking persons has semantic grounds: precisely because ‘me’ or ‘you’ induce a bias on who acts (we expect that I act, and you are acted upon), it is considered necessary to make clear who does what.

It seems we can observe a pageant of possibilities. The null-marking is common, especially in Eastern Asia, a region where cultural/linguistic habits refrain from showing persons - even if the map of person non-agreement does not completely correspond with the map of polite escape from pronouns. The marking of s1, s2, s3, as in many Indo-European languages, cannot hide the fact that the s3 marking *-t is a demonstrative, while the marks for s1 and s2 are not. The marking of s1 and s2 (not s3) in Semitic languages, which was one major example of Benveniste, is not a uniform pattern because the two groups of morphemes (verb prefixes and noun/verb suffixes) are similar for s2 but not for s1. The problem of the two series of morphemes is also found in Tibeto-Burman, for instance in Kuki languages, often with the same difference between verb and noun forms, sometimes (as with Kamhau in Tiddim, according to Henderson) with stylistic formatting. In Meyor, the two series are identical for s1 but not for s2: noun forms (s2 *i-*) are distinct from verb forms (s2 *no*). The result is that you use s1 *ko* whichever the function, while you have to choose which you use for s2, depending on subject (s2 *no*) or non-subject (s2 *i*).

This pattern seems all the more significant for being fragile. Analogy would rapidly erase such a morpho-syntactic idiosyncrasy, or awkward point. In Standard Miju, it does not exist in syntax, although it is still clear in morphology: s1 and s2 are both consistently *ki* and *nyo*, but the trace of s2 *i* is still clear in the verb suffix.

(5.1a) *ki nyo-wi ŋuŋ-mi* I will see (find) you

	s1	s2-O	see-Fut/s1	
(5.1b)	nyo	ki-wi	ŋuŋ-yi.maŋ	you will see (find) me
	s2	s1-O	see-Fut/s2	

I am not saying the Meyor pattern is archaic and precious, while Miju would be on the road to modern mass-treatment; I hope to have evaded such sweeping pseudo-historicism. Moreover, what about the strange usage of marking the s1 object by a suffix in Miju, and only this one?

Yet, it seems only reasonable to admit that small groups of people who speak a specific language at home would more easily either shelter awkward features as typically theirs or produce innovative awkward ones that would seem homely to them. It is more difficult to maintain or evolve dyssymetries when your language is spoken by millions, because so many people have to learn it as a second language, and would tend to minimize its difficulties by analogy - except perhaps if this language has a strong and prestigious literacy. On the whole, the problem is not whether such dyssymmetric features are old ("archaic") or new ("innovative") because innovation may of course appear any time, grand-fathers' included. The problem is to wonder if dissymmetric features are random or guided by semantics. If they are random, I cannot well see why people like Robbins Burling or me have spent so much time pestering for details these people in North-East India. If they are not, or if randomness is guided by semantics, then the awkward features we discover are what luck and obstinacy bring to us, and among them are features that give us an idea of some of the tendencies that human minds do have.

Tezu, Arunachal Pradesh. 2015 Feb 19.