

A Reference Grammar of Ersu, a Tibeto-Burman Language of China

ZHANG Sihong



Ersu is an underdocumented Tibeto-Burman language spoken in the southwest of China. It is a head-marking, verb-final, tonal and agglutinative language with an isolating tendency. It has a complex phonological system. Reduplication, compounding, affixation and cliticization are attested in word formation. The order of a simple clause is AOV/SV. However, the order may also vary due to pragmatic motivation. The "Topic-comment" strategy is frequently used in discourse. Ellipses occur quite often in speaking and a speech act participant is seldom mentioned. "Topic-comment" constructions occur with high frequency.

The grammar consists of 14 chapters that covers almost all the respects of the language such as phonology, word classes, nouns and nominal morphology, noun phrases, numeral systems, nominal and verbal action classification systems, verbs and verb phrases, aspect system, mood and modality, the expression of knowledge, clause types and clause combining, discourse analysis and discourse organization, language change and language endangerment.

The production of this book is based on the author's PhD thesis, which was commented as a model grammar for a Tibeto-Burman language by one of the examiners. The book fills an important lacuna in the descriptive literature of linguistic typology.

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Abstract

This grammar is a reference grammar of Ersu, a Tibeto-Burman language spoken in the southwest of Sichuan Province, China. Data supporting this work were collected through my immersion fieldwork conducted in Lajigu (腊吉沽), an Ersu village in Bao'an Township, Yuexi County, Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province (四川省凉山彝族自治州越西县保安乡). Theoretical framework is mainly based on *Basic Linguistic Theory*.

Ersu is a head-marking, verb-final, tonal and agglutinative language with an isolating tendency. Reduplication, compounding, affixation and cliticization are attested in word formation. Kinship terms, directional nouns, verbs and adjectives may contain a prefix. Suffixes include gender class, causative markers, nominalizers, etc. Ersu has a rich set of enclitics, including evidentials, aspectual markers, genitive markers, agentive markers, locative markers, etc. Nouns, verbs and adjectives constitute open word classes. Classifiers and adverbs form “semi-open” word classes. Closed word classes include pronouns, relator nouns, quantifiers, demonstratives, numerals, modal verbs, negators, onomatopoeias, coordinators, clause linkers and clausal- or sentential-final particles. In an NP, the head noun precedes modifiers such as numerals, classifiers, adjectives but follows genitive phrases and denominal adjectives. Demonstratives may precede or follow a head noun. The nucleus of a VP is a verb that may be followed by a causative, an evidential and an aspectual marker but always follows a verbal action classifier. The canonical constituent order of a simple clause is AOV/SV. However, any one of the constituents can be ellipsed in discourse. The syntactic constituent order may also vary due to pragmatic motivations. Like many other Tibeto-Burman languages in the southwest of China, discourse organization in Ersu is mainly driven by semantic and pragmatic principles rather than syntactic functions. “Tail-head” linkage strategy is frequently used in discourse, especially in narratives. Ellipses occur quite often in speaking and a speech act participant is seldom mentioned. “Topic-comment” constructions occur with high frequency in the language.

The grammar consists of 14 chapters. §1 provides background information for this work, including the people and their environment, traditions and customs, linguistic profile and how this grammar is written and organized. §2 introduces Ersu phonological systems, including segmental phonology, syllables, tones, phonological words, morphological process and the phonology of loanwords. §3 discusses word classes with a focus on adjectival class, including the criteria to differentiate the three open word classes: nouns, verbs and adjectives, “semi-open” classes and closed word classes. §4 presents nouns and nominal morphology, including noun structure, semantic subtypes, pronouns, nominal case markers, relator nouns and nominal quantification. §5 involves noun phrases, including their subtypes, constituent order

and structure, possession construction, coordination and apposition. §6 deals with numeral systems, including cardinal numerals, ordinal numerals, fractions and times, approximate numeration and current status of numerals used in Ersu. §7 describes Ersu nominal and verbal action classification systems, including gender differentiation devices, noun classifiers, numeral classifiers, repeaters, semantic subtypes of verbal action classifiers. §8 addresses verbs and verb phrases, including verb morphology, semantic subtypes, copula, existential/locative verbs, verbal transitivity, causative, light verb, serial verb construction, VP structure and VP coordination. §9 discusses the Ersu aspect system, including the presentation of 11 aspectual markers, their co-occurrence, and their correlation with other grammatical categories. §10 describes mood and modality, including declarative mood, imperative mood, interrogative mood, deontic modality and dynamic modality. §11 discusses the expression of knowledge, including evidential system, evidential strategies, epistemic strategy, information source conveyed through demonstratives and directional terms, parentheticals and some lexical verbs. §12 demonstrates clause types and clause combining, including simple clauses, coordinate clauses and subordinate clauses. §13 presents discourse analysis and discourse organization, including discourse genres, pragmatic variation of syntactic constituent order, ellipsis, sentence linking and supersentential constituents, quoted speech, anaphora and predicate repetition. §14 discusses language change and language endangerment, including phonological change, lexical change, syntactic constituent order change, the change of the native speakers' multilingual ability and the attitudes toward their mother tongue, and the factors resulting in those changes. §14 also discusses the limits of this work and suggests future research directions on Ersu.

The appendix includes six selected excerpts from narratives of various genres, and an example of a long conversation in Ersu.

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