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The Role of Verbal Suffix *-jei* in Liangmai

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the grammatical role of the verbal suffix *-jei*, a declarative marker in Liangmai, a Tibeto-Burman language spoken in northeast India. First, it examines the functions and occurrence of this declarative marker in different sentence types, including predicate nominals, predicate adjectives, and existential sentences. Evidence is provided that the particle *-jei* in Liangmai is not a copular verb. The suffix *-jei* does not occur in assertive future action contexts. Second, the paper also presents eight forms (allomorphs) of the declarative marker *-jei*, resulting from morphophonological processes, which typically follow both open and closed syllables. The paper offers insights for comparative studies of verbal suffixes in related languages and, more generally, contributes to the development of linguistic theories and frameworks, where these aspects pose interesting challenges and opportunities in linguistic analysis.

1. Introduction

This study aims to describe and analyze the grammatical function of the verbal suffix *-jei*, which serves as a declarative marker in Liangmai, a Tibeto-Burman language spoken in northeastern India. The paper is organised as follows: §1 provides a concise overview of the Liangmai people and their language, accompanied by a brief literature review. §2 outlines the study's objectives, while §3 details the research methodology employed. §4 introduces ten allomorphs of the declarative marker *-jei*, complete with illustrative examples. §§5 to 7 examine the role of the suffix *-jei* across various syntactic constructions, culminating in a conclusion presented in §8.

According to Liangmai oral history, the term "Liangmai" can be traced back to the Liangmai word *kyliangkhatmai*, a compound formed from *chaki* (house), *liang* (support or backing), *khat* (one), and *mai* from *chamai* (man). This translates roughly to "one-side-people" or "one team." The term originated when the children of three brothers dispersed from Makuilongdi, a significant historical site for the Zeliangrong² people. As they left Makuilongdi, one group moved southward to unoccupied lands. These people became known as *marongmei*, meaning "people who moved to unoccupied land." Over time, this term evolved into "Rongmei," now referring to one of the Zeliangrong tribes. Similarly, the second brother's group, which

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² Zeliangrong, an indigenous ethnic group, is a conglomeration of Zeme, Liangmai and Rongmei, each with separate languages. They live in contiguous areas in the Indian states of Assam, Nagaland and Manipur.

moved toward the plains in the northwest, was called *ramzengmai*, meaning "people of the plains." This term later transformed into "Zeme." The group that remained in Makuilongdi and continued living there was called "Liangmai".

Liangmai is one of the Naga tribes living in a contiguous area in southern Nagaland and north western Manipur states. According to the census of India 2011, there are 49,811 Liangmai speakers. The population is concentrated in Tamei sub division under Tamenglong district of Manipur with a significant population in the present districts of Senapati and Kangpokpi in Manipur and Peren district of Nagaland. Other names given to Liangmai by outsiders are Kacha-Naga, Lyangmai, Liangmei or Quoireng³. Before 2012, Liangmai and a related tribe called Zeme were grouped together and officially known as Kacha-Naga in Manipur, while the same two tribes are officially called as Zeliang in Nagaland. Since 1980s, there had been a strong effort from the communities to do away with the misnomer Kacha-Naga⁴. Consequently, following the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order (Amendment) Act, 2011 of the Parliament of India, and the subsequent notice by The Gazette of India dated 9th January 2012, this misnomer 'Kacha-Naga' was removed and the correct nomenclature(s) as 'Liangmai' and 'Zeme' were separately and constitutionally recognized⁵ for the two tribes in Manipur. However, in Nagaland state government documents, Liangmai and Zeme are still clubbed together and they are known as Zeliang (Mataina, 2022).

The ISO 639-3 code for Liangmai is njn. In his classification of Naga languages, Bradley (1997: 29) group Liangmai under the sub grouping within the Southern Naga group of Tibeto-Burman Languages. Post and Burling (2017) categorized Liangmai under the Western Naga [Zeliangrong]. Other languages listed under this group by Post and Burling are Zeme [Empeo, Kachcha], Mzieme, Liangmai, Nruangmei [Rongmei, Kabui], Puiron, Khoirao [Thangal] and Maram. Other Naga languages, though they are not all placed together under any sub group by Bradley or Post and Burling, are nevertheless linguistically close to Liangmai based on the author's intuition as a native Liangmai Naga speaker. These languages are Zeme, Rongmei, Thangal, Maram, Mao, Poumai, Chakhesang, Rengma, and Angami while languages like Ao, Lotha, Tangkhul and Sumi are a little less close to Liangmai (Mataina, 2022).

Today, the Liangmai language is being passed down from parents to children in many villages. However, the long-term viability of the language remains uncertain. While many speakers are highly motivated to preserve and promote Liangmai, their efforts often fall short in practice. This is largely due to the limited economic prospects associated with the language, which leads to a greater emphasis on dominant languages such as English, Hindi, and Manipuri (also known as Meitei) across various spheres of life. There is no radio or tv programme in Liangmai. In some schools such as Hamai English High School, Langmei High School, Tamei, Olivia Higher Secondary School, Kanglatongbi introduced Liangmai as a subject of learning up to class ten based on the Board of Secondary School Education, Manipur.

There are scant reports on linguistic studies of Liangmai, particularly in the descriptive approach. Some of them are PhD theses (Charengna, 2011; Mataina, 2014; Raguibou, 2015;

³ 'Quoireng' is not the same as 'Koireng/Koren' which is a tribe found in Manipur. The term 'Quoireng' was first used by McCulloch (1859) and later by Grierson (1903).

⁴ This term is considered to be derogatory by some people. It is a corrupted word from an original Angami Naga word *ketsa* loosely meaning 'forest'.

⁵ The gazette of India, Ministry of Law and Justice (2012) (<https://tribal.nic.in/DivisionsFiles/elm/25.pdf>)

Daimai, K., 2016; Daimai, G., 2016). More recent works in Liangmai include studies on Liangmai classifiers (Daimai, 2020), and reports on aspects such as morphology and morphosyntax of Liangmai can be found in Charengna (2011, 2014), Mataina (2013, 2018), Guichamlung Daimai (2013), Kailadbou Daimai (2019, 2020), I.D. Raguibou (2014), and Kailadbou Daimai & I.D. Raguibou (2020). However, the above studies have not specifically reported on the role of the declarative marker *-jei*.

2. Research Objective

The aim of this article is to describe and analyze the grammatical role of the verbal suffix *-jei*, a declarative marker in Liangmai, a Tibeto-Burman language spoken in northeastern India. It examines the functions and occurrences of *-jei* across different sentence types, such as predicate nominals, predicate adjectives, and existential clauses, providing evidence that *-jei* is not a copular verb. The article identifies why *-jei* is used in certain contexts and omitted in others, such as interrogative or imperative sentences, and presents the morphophonological processes in Liangmai that yield eight different allomorphic forms of *-jei*. This analysis contributes to comparative studies of verbal suffixes in related languages and aims to advance linguistic theories and frameworks by examining the unique challenges posed by such morphological and syntactic features in Liangmai. In addition, the paper with plenty of data from the native speakers and the author as native speaker will be invaluable for language documentation of the language.

3. Research Methodology

The study presented in this paper is based on a functional approach, focusing on understanding the practical roles that language structures play in communication. It examines the communicative functions of Liangmai grammatical structures, particularly how elements like *-jei* contribute to expressing statements, intentions, or information. Data were gathered in a way that highlights the various contexts in which *-jei* is used, drawing on naturalistic examples. The analysis identifies how *-jei* functions across different sentence types, contexts, and communicative needs. The data used in this study were primarily taken from northern Liangmai villages. A brief dialectal grouping is reported by Mataina (2022). The majority of the data analyzed in this study are based on the dataset from the author's unpublished PhD thesis (Mataina, 2014). This dataset consists of 200 recorded sentences and 2,000 words, including items from Swadesh's word list.

4. Various forms of the Declarative Marker *-jei*

The declarative marker *-jei* in Liangmai has ten allomorphs due to morphophonological processes. They are *-pēi*, *lēi*, *gei/kēi*, *ŋēi*, *mei*, *nēi*, *ōi*, *jēi*, and *wēi*. They are presented in table 1 below.

Form	Example showing the underlying form (1st column) and assimilated forms (2nd column)	Gloss
Verb root having closed syllable		

/j/ → /p/ ___[p]	kāp-jēi →	kāp-pēi	‘cry (-DECL)’
/j/ → /l/ ___[t]	tat-jēi →	tat-lēi	‘go (-DECL)’
/j/ → /g/ ___[k]	dāk-jei →	dāk-gei/dāk-kēi	‘weave (-DECL)’
/j/ → /ŋ/ ___[ŋ]	tíŋ-jēi →	tíŋ-ŋēi	‘stingy (-DECL)’
/j/ → /m/ ___[m]	tām-jeī →	tām-meī	‘less (-DECL)’
/j/ → /n/ ___[n]	tʰón-jēi →	tʰón-nēi	‘thank (-DECL)’
Verb roots having open syllable			
/j/ → /oi/ ___[ɔ]	bō-jēi →	bōi	‘NOM-DECL’
/j/ → /j/ ___[i, e, a u]	tī-jēi →	tī-jēi	‘small (-DECL)’
	pè-jēi →	pè-jēi	‘pluck (-DECL)’
	pá-jēi →	pá-jēi	read (-DECL)’
	pù-jēi →	pù-jēi/pù-wēi	busy (DECL)’

Table 1: Various allomorphic forms of -jei in Liangmai

5. The role of -jei

The declarative marker in Liangmai signals to the listener that the utterance is intended as a declaration of fact or opinion and, most importantly, indicates the end of the sentence. It always appears at the end of sentences, suffixed to the verb, negative marker, nominal and adjectival predicates, TAM markers, or existential constructions. The following sections discuss the role of the declarative marker -jei in Liangmai and its occurrence and non-occurrence in sentences. In the construction of assertive future, imperative, interrogative, and other sentence types, the declarative marker is absent, with each type having its respective markers. The mid-tone declarative marker in Liangmai, one of the language’s four tone levels, remains unchanged. While the declarative marker -jei can be omitted from a sentence, which may make the sentence sound less natural, this is acceptable in certain contexts, such as when the speaker is in a hurry or wishes to sound casual.

5.1 Declarative

1. i náí-mətsəŋ tē tiu-jēi
 1SG day-every rice eat-DECL

‘I eat food everyday.’

2. nāimik tīŋbāŋ lāmsū pət-lēi
 sun east from come-DECL

‘The sun rises in the east.’

3. ələŋ-rà tətʰè-tīŋ nīu wī-tʰü-jēi
 1SG.POSS-for-DEL winter-time CONTR good-SUP-jēi

‘For me, winter is the best season.’

In Liangmai, omitting the declarative marker, as in example (4), is grammatically correct but may sound impolite. It is acceptable to omit it when expressing anger or sulkiness.

4. ī tē tiu
 1SG cooked-rice eat

‘I ate food (yesterday).’

5. ī tət lək
 1SG go NEG

‘I won’t go.’ -(expressing in anger)

5.2 Imperative

As noted above, a declarative marker is absent in imperative constructions. The imperative clause is marked with the imperative marker *-lau*. It should be noted that if an imperative clause is a negative construction using the negative marker *-mak*, a different imperative marker, *-nei*, is used (see discussion on negation in §3.4).

5. wāŋ-lāu
 come-IMP

‘Come!’

6. ñ.tǎu-láu

sit-IMP

‘Sit!’

7. tət^hi tu fúi-lāu

PRE-dog ACC watch-IMP

‘Watch out for the dog’ (to avoid its biting).

8. kám tú-lāu

‘do PROH-IMP’

‘Do not do’.

9. pəgég bām sāi ə-tū kól kám-lāu

need exist-then 1SG-ACC call do-IMP

‘If needed, call me.’

5.3 Interrogative

As is common with many Tibeto-Burman languages, three types of interrogative clauses can be identified in Liangmai: content questions, polar questions, and Wh- questions. Additionally, yes/no questions and tag questions are present but are not discussed here. As noted above, the declarative marker does not occur in interrogative constructions. The interrogative marker always occurs at the end of a sentence. The two interrogative markers in Liangmai are -ma and -lau. Either of these markers is used, depending on the type of interrogation; in some cases, both are used.

5.3.1 Content interrogative

Content question or Wh- questions are formed by suffixing an interrogative marker -lau. Examples 10-12 illustrate content questions.

Form	Gloss	Class
ñdē	what	thing
ñdē-lām	where	location
ñdē-zəŋnīu	why	reason
ñdē-gǎ	where	location (definite/goal)

sāu	who	person
ṅdē-tsiu	how	manner
ṅdē-zī	which	person/thing
ṅdē-zìu	how many	quantity/price
ṅdē-dāu	when	time

Table 2. *Interrogative pronouns in Liangmai*

10. nāṅ ṅdē-ga luṅ bam-lau?

2SG where live exist-QPTCL

‘Where do you live?’

11. pà sāu-lau?

3SG who-QPTCL

‘Who is he?’

12. tsəmāi k^háṅ ṅdēzìu nəkì-gā bām-lāu

PRE-man CL- how 2SG.POSS-house-PP exist-QPTCL

‘How many person(s) are there in your house?’

5.3.2 Disjunctive interrogative

For disjunctive interrogative construction, two interrogative particles -ma and -lau are used, where the later marker -lau can be optional. Both occur at the end of the interrogative clause. Examples 13-16 illustrate disjunctive interrogative constructions.

13. nāṅ wī-mā sà-lau?

2SG good-QPTCL

‘Are you a good (person) or bad?’

14. tāt-ma, bām-lāu?

go-QPTCL stay-QPTCL

‘(will you) go or stay?’

15. kəbək zàn-ma, mətōm zān-lau?

PRE-pig meat-QPTCL cow meat-QPTCL

‘Pork or beef?’

16. tsə̀lù tət-mā tət-māk-lāu?

PRE-field go-QPTCL go-NEG-QPTCL

‘(Will you) go to field or not?’

5.3.3 Polar interrogative

Polar questions are formed by suffixing *-ma* at the end of the sentence. This type of question is usually responded to with a single word, such as repeating one of the verbs from the interrogative sentence, using another verbal suffix such as negation or a future marker, or responding with *jō* ‘yes’ or a humming utterance like *hm-hm*, which is difficult to transcribe and means ‘no.’ Determiner *hái* is the alternative negative particle used to express ‘no’ when responding to any polar question. This negative particle is often used by the listener in situations where the speaker offers a polar question to the listener to take something in kind. However, this particle is very informal.

16. nāŋ wī bām-mā?

2SG good PROG-QPTCL

‘How are you?’ (Lit. Are you good?)

17. tsə̀lù tət-mā ?

PRE-field go-QPTCL

‘(Will you) go to field?’

18. tühòì-rà sī-mí-mā?

now-DEL know-PERF-QPTCL

‘Have you understood now?’

5.4 Negation

The seven negative markers in Liangmai are *màk*, *lāk*, *tù*, *tā*, *nùu*, and *hā*. There is one more negative marker, *hái*, used to express ‘no’ in response to a polar question. Among them, */mak/* and */lak/* can occur in almost all types of clausal constructions, including interrogative sentences, except for imperative constructions. The declarative marker *-jei*, when following a velar coda *-k* (as in *-mak* and *-lak*), becomes *-gei* due to assimilation. In the South Eastern Liangmai variety, the declarative marker *-kēi* is common after these two negators, e.g., *tət-lāk-kēi* ‘(I) will not go.’ However, the role of this marker remains the same; it declares a statement or indicates the end of a sentence.

3.4.1 The negative particles *-mak* and *-lak*

The two negative markers, *-mak* and *-lak*, each have distinct functions. The negator *-mak* is used to express sentences that convey non-future actions and prohibitive sentences, while the negator

-lak is used to express future actions and interrogative clauses. Examples of the usage of the negator -mak are shown in 19-21 below, while examples of the negative marker -lak are shown in 22-24. Table 3 summarizes the negative markers in Liangmai.

19. i ñdànāi kəhúì tət-màk-gēi

1P yesterday Kohima go-NEG-DECL

‘I didn’t go to Kohima yesterday.’

20. năimík tīŋ-pī lămsū pət-màk-gēi

sun atmosphere-head from come-NEG-DECL

‘The sun does not rise from the north.’

21. tiu-màk-néi

eat-NEG-FUT

‘Do not eat (it).’

22. tīŋ sà-làk-gēi

weather rain-NEG-DECL

‘It will not rain.’

23. tsəgän tiu-sà-làk-gēi

PRE-curry eat-bad-NEG-DECL

‘The curry will be good to eat (Lit. the curry will not be bad to eat).’

24. pà nə-tū füt-làk-gēi

1SG 2SG-ACC leave-NEG-DECL

‘He will not leave you.’

Negative particle	Function
màk,	non future; prohibitive, hortative sentences
làk	future and interrogative sentences
tù	prohibitive
tā	imperative, politeness, assertive statement, reportive statement

nǐu	taboo
hā	expressing absence
hái	expressing no to polar question

Table 3: Summary of negative particles in Liangmai

5.5 Exclamatory

The declarative marker -jēi occurs in the exclamatory sentence and occurs at the end of the sentence. They are shown in 25 and 26 below.

25. ɪ ə̌-tsun wī-zū-jēi

1SG 1SG.POSS-mind good-adv-DECL

‘I am very happy!’

26. hīŋ! ə̌-sōŋ hā-jēi

EXCL 1SG.POSS-mind absent-DECL

‘Oh, I am surprise. (Lit. oh, my mind disappeared).’

5.6 Conditional

The declarative marker -jēi does not occur in exclamatory sentences, except in a type of conditional sentence that expresses a possible future situation and its likely result, as in 28. The conditional marker or conjunction sái ‘if’ and the future marker -néi are used to express future conditional sentences, as shown in 27-29, while the same markers are also used for past hypothetical conditional constructions with the perfect aspect marker bām ‘have,’ as shown in 30 below.

27. nāŋ wāŋ-nēi sái, ɪ k^hōn-nēi

2SG come-FUT if 1SG wait-FUT

‘If you will come, I will wait.’

28. tīŋ-rīu sái, ə̌līu tət-lāk-gēi

weather-shower if 1PL go-NEG-DECL

‘If it rains, we will not go.’

29. nāŋ māi-tù ɲk^hā sái, māi nə̌-tū ɲk^hā-néi.

2SG person-ACC help if person 2SG-ACC help-FUT

‘If you help other, other will help you.’

30. i nǎtū ŋāu sái, nǎtū dín-bī bām-néi
 1SG 2SG-ACC see if 2SG-ACC say-give ?-will

‘Had I seen you (yesterday), I would have told you.’

5.7 Hortative

The declarative marker -jēi does not occur in hortative sentence. Examples of hortative sentences are illustrated in 31-33 below.

31. tàt ñtsám-k^hēi

go same-HORT

‘(Let’s) go together.’

32. tūhōi tē tiu-k^hēi

now rice eat-HORT

‘(Let’s) eat rice now.’

33. zī-k^hēi

sleep-HORT

‘(Let’s) sleep.’

6. Nominal Predicates

Nominal predicates typically express qualities, identities, or states of being without the need for a copular verb, such as ‘to be’ in English, in Liangmai, like in many Tibeto-Burman languages. While the declarative marker can be omitted in nominal predicates, sentences sound more natural when it is included. Examples 34-37 illustrate identity, while examples 38-39 indicate quality, and examples 40-41 express a state of being.

34. ī hòi ñpūi-jēi

1SG EMP road-DECL

‘I am the way.’

35. sì-zī sīŋgū-wēi

DIST-EMP river-DECL

‘That is a river.’

36. pǎ ǎ-tsi-jēi

3SG 1POSS-brother-DECL

‘He is my brother.’

37. hāi-nā-sī ṅpíu-māi-jēi

PROX-DET male-person-DECL

‘He is a man.’

38. pǎ nṅtṅ-ṅēi

3SG wise-DECL

‘He is wise.’

39. ǎ-püi wī-jēi

1SG.POSS-female good-DECL

‘My mother is good.’

40. pǎ kepten-nēi

3SG captain-DECL

‘He is the captain.’

41. tsǎ-gǎn-dūi t^híu-wēi

PRE-curry-water hot-DECL

‘The soup is hot.’

7. Adjectival Predicates

As is well known, adjectival predicates, which describe the qualities or states of the subject, often exhibit different morphosyntactic behaviours in Tibeto-Burman languages. The word order for adjectival predicates in Liangmai is Subject-Adjective (42-45). The declarative marker appears at the end.

42. ī kú-wēi

1SG high-DECL

‘I am tall.’

43. nāŋ tán-nēi

2SG strong-DECL

‘You’re strong.’

44. ī ətsūn wī-jēi

1SG 1POSS-heart good-DECL

45. ī lək-gēi

1SP tire-DECL

‘I am tired.’

7. Existential

The declarative marker is present in existential constructions. An existential marker indicates the existence or presence of something and asserts the existence of a person, object, or event. The grammatical marker -bām is used to indicate an existential construction in Liangmai. The homophone -bām is also used to mark the present continuous aspect in Liangmai, as in *pəliu tət bām-mēi* ‘They are walking.’ Examples 46-49 show existential sentences in Liangmai. It is important to note that the pitch of the tone in example 49 changes due to the tone alternation process.

46. tsəkì sùm bām-mēi

PRE-house three EXIS-DECL

‘There are three houses.’

47. tsəlù gā tsə-mài bām-mēi

PRE-farm PP PRE-man EXIS-DECL

‘There is a person in the farm.’

48. tōzón sŋ-bāŋ gǎ bām-mēi

‘monkey wood-tree PP EXIS-DECL

‘The monkey is on the tree.’

49. pəkǎ gā bām-mēi

‘INAL-branch PP EXIS-DECL

‘(He) is in the corner.’

8. Conclusion

The paper focuses on the grammatical role of the verbal suffix -jei in Liangmai, a Tibeto-Burman language. The suffix functions as a declarative marker, signalling the end of a sentence and indicating that the utterance is a statement or declaration of fact. This marker is used in various sentence types, including declarative sentences with verbs, nominal predicates, adjectival predicates, and existential constructions. Overall, this paper provides a detailed account of the syntactic and morphophonological behaviour of the -jei suffix, contributing to a broader understanding of verbal suffixes in Tibeto-Burman languages. It could serve as a basis for comparative studies in related languages.

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