

## Book Review

**Seino van Brueghel.** *A grammar of Atong* (Brill's Studies in South and Southwest Asian Languages 5). Leiden: Brill, 2014, 660 pp., ISBN 9789004258921. €231,00 (Hb)

Reviewed by **George van Driem**, Linguistics Institute, University of Bern, Länggassstrasse 49, Postfach 999, CH 3000 Bern 9, Switzerland, E-mail: vandriem@isw.unibe.ch

DOI 10.1515/jsall-2016-0012

Atong is a language of the Bodo-Koch branch of the Trans-Himalayan, or Tibeto-Burman, language family.<sup>1</sup> Within Bodo-Koch, which is a relatively cohesive but still internally diverse subgroup of languages, Atong shows close genetic affinity with Rabha. Atong is spoken by an uncounted number of people, perhaps numbering in the several thousands, in the South Garo Hills district, in scattered settlements in the south-central Meghālaya north of the town of Bāghmārā. The Atong speaking area is increasingly swamped by the Garo speaking majority, who dominate the western half of the Meghālaya. The Rabha inhabit the low hill tracts and plains abutting the Garo Hills in the north, whilst the Atong occupy a similar habitat to the south, but the intervening highlands are Garo speaking.

The author writes simply under the unassuming pen name of Seino van Brueghel, although his complete surname is Clifford Kocq van Breugel, his given names Egbert Joost Seino, and his noble title that of a *Jonkheer*. He conducted field work in the Atong area for almost a year, from June 2005 to May 2006, then again for three months between early June and early September 2007, and finally for a month at the end of 2012. The grammar is a comprehensive and holistic description of the language. Though arguably no language has been exhaustively described, for all intents and purposes Seino van Breugel's

---

<sup>1</sup> The world's second most populous language family was originally known as Tibeto-Burman and is now called Trans-Himalayan. Proponents of a certain family tree model have for several decades also called the family 'Sino-Tibetan', but as of today no evidence has ever been adduced for that particular phylogenetic model. The new term Trans-Himalayan, with its agnostic phylogeny incorporating only recognised and newly validated subgroups, has been adopted in Chinese as 跨喜馬拉雅語系 *Kuà xīmǎlāyǎ yǔxì* (George van Driem. 2014. 'Trans-Himalayan', pp. 11–40 in Nathan Hill and Thomas Owen-Smith, eds., *Trans-Himalayan Linguistics*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter; Wú Wō. 2015. 'Kuà xīmǎlāyǎ yǔxì: Jiān lùn běn pǔxì shuō duì shǐqián réngún qiányí zhī qǐfā' ['The Trans-Himalayan language family: A neutral name based on the geography of prehistoric migrations of subgroups'], *Hàn Zàng Yǔ Xuéào*, 8: 10–20).

grammar is quite a remarkably thorough account of a language which had hitherto been completely undocumented.

The grammar is tidily and logically organised, lucidly presented and well written. Despite being so all-encompassing, the grammar is completely accessible, and the presentation is user-friendly. The grammar is a veritable treasure trove replete with language data. Analytically, the grammatical account is both sophisticated and lucid throughout. The table of contents is well structured, complete and detailed, and reflects the outline of a well-organised language description. The list of abbreviations is complete and consistent. The glosses and abbreviations are entirely transparent and well chosen.

The cross-referencing is thorough, yet not overdone, so that the user can make his way through the grammar, navigating back and forth to gain insight into different aspects of related grammatical phenomena in the language. The interlinear glossing and translation are used properly and intelligently, maximising the utility of the grammar. A highly respectable volume of lexicon is presented on this previously entirely undocumented language. The corpus of texts is sizable, and the meticulous morpheme-by-morpheme glosses and savvy translations render the text corpus a major contribution of enduring value in and of itself.

The introduction provides a succinct but rigorous overview of the language community, the relevant linguistic family and subgroup, and the geography and ethnolinguistically pertinent history of the region. The discussion of the linguistic literature and the intelligent listing of relevant sources throughout the main body of the grammar contextualises all facets of the presentation within the current linguistic state of the art without resorting to superfluous gobbledegook.

This grammar of Atong is everything that a detailed and comprehensive account of a hitherto completely undocumented language should be. The savvy and rigorous presentation takes the reader by the hand, captivates, instructs and enlightens. The description contains a wealth of data, and these data are insightfully analysed, glossed and explained. The grammatical regularities of the language at all levels of description are analysed, explained and presented in a sophisticated and insightful fashion. This grammar is truly a monument to the author's scholarship, an enduring contribution to linguistics and to the Atong language community, to whom the author has dedicated the book. This work contributes not just to our understanding of the Atong language but also to our knowledge of the Trans-Himalayan language family as a whole.