



Morphological Compounding: How Poetic Mongsen constructs Meaning through Word Combinations

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This study investigates the morphological variations in terms of the compound word formation process between Poetic Mongsen, a near-extinct language used for traditional songs among the Ao people of Nagaland, India, and spoken Mongsen. Poetic Mongsen exhibits a derivational morphology similar to that of spoken Mongsen but also demonstrates unique features. Notably, Poetic Mongsen incorporates words from Chungli, another Ao language, resulting in Chungli loanwords, combining Mongsen and Chungli morphemes. Additionally, Poetic Mongsen employs metaphors extensively, leading to the formation of numerous exocentric compounds not found in spoken Mongsen. This article is based on fieldwork data gathered during interviews with nine consultants across five villages, which informs the analysis of these morphological variations. It attempts to contribute to the understanding of Poetic Mongsen's word formation process and provide valuable insights into the unique linguistic and artistic features of a poetic language.

Keywords: compound words, morphology, Tibeto-Burman, Poetic Mongsen, Mongsen Ao

Introduction

The inherently inventive nature of the human cognitive capacity of communication results in the production and development of language, music, and other creative communicative modes (Cross 2008; Sperber and Hirschfield 1999). An apparent fruition of these ideas can be observed in the Ao language family, part of the Tibeto-Burman language group spoken by the Ao-Naga people from Nagaland, a state in northeast India. The Ao language family consists of three languages: *Chungli*, *Mongsen*, and *Changki*. However, there is a fourth variant that is not spoken but sung, for which I use the term *Poetic Mongsen*.

The oral tradition of the Ao people is encapsulated in Poetic Mongsen, which serves as a profound medium for transmitting the rich cultural heritage, lore, and traditions

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of the Ao community. Poetic Mongsen has historically been a vital conduit for the preservation and dissemination of the Ao people's oral traditions. These songs and oral narratives captured in Poetic Mongsen not only convey the community's historical experiences and collective memories but also embody the linguistic and poetic artistry intrinsic to the Ao cultural identity. In this sense, Poetic Mongsen holds immense cultural significance as it captures the essence of the Ao people's way of life, their values, and their worldview. The songs in Poetic Mongsen are imbued with layers of meaning, often intertwined with the community's myths, rituals, and social practices. These songs serve as a repository of the Ao people's wisdom, offering insights into their social structure, spiritual beliefs, and interactions with the natural environment.

It should be noted that culturally, the Ao people refer to the 'song language' as just Mongsen and do not make a distinction between Mongsen and Poetic Mongsen. However, since this ongoing research aims to document the 'song language' and also to determine the differences between the spoken and the sung variants, the term Poetic Mongsen is a useful adaptation for this study. This is to make a clear distinction between the two (Aier and Koshy 2024).

While there is still debate on whether Poetic Mongsen is an archaic form of Mongsen or a variant that parallelly existed with the spoken register, considering the lack of a written script, it was used by speakers of all three spoken forms to sing all traditional songs, ballads, and folk narratives (Aier and Koshy 2024). However, over the past two generations, Poetic Mongsen has not been spoken or sung by native speakers, rendering the language moribund and critically endangered. It has fallen in disuse over the past two generations. At present, only a handful of the older generation still possess knowledge of these songs and their underlying meaning.

This article attempts to contribute to a greater understanding of the compound word formation process that Poetic Mongsen attests to in comparison to the current spoken Mongsen. It aims to look into some of the "morphological liberties" that speakers have taken with the language as they utilise the language in songs in its poetic form and is based on the author's ongoing research on this topic. During two rounds of fieldwork, recordings and interviews were conducted in-person with nine consultants across five villages, aged 62 to 90. Of the five villages, two were Mongsen-speaking villages (Longjang and Mokokchung), one was Chungli-speaking (Ungma), and the two others had both Mongsen and Chungli-speaking communities (Longkhum and Mopungchuket). We recorded sixty-six songs in total. The following data provides a representative example of some of the morphological changes observed.

Word formation process

Morphology, in linguistics, is the study of word structure and how words are formed and used in languages. It is concerned with the internal structure of words, delving into how words are formed and how they relate to one another within a language. The core unit of analysis in morphology is the morpheme, which is the smallest unit of meaning in a language. Morphemes can either stand alone as individual words (e.g., like the word "book") or be bound to other morphemes to form complex words (like "able" in "unbreakable"). Morphology, in other words, is about breaking down words into their smallest meaningful units and understanding how those units are combined to create new words. Word formation processes are fundamental to the growth and development of languages, allowing speakers to coin new terms to express emerging concepts, adapt to cultural shifts, and communicate effectively. Word formation is a complex and

dynamic process that includes inflectional and derivational morphology, with new words constantly being created. This paper examines compound word formation, one of the word formation processes occurring in Poetic Mongsen. While no prior linguistic research has been done on this, Coupe (2007), Walling (2017), and Jamir (2022) have given accounts of the nominal and verbal morphology of Mangmetong Mongsen and Khensa Mongsen, respectively.

Morphology of Ao Mongsen and Chungli

Mongsen and Chungli are two closely related Tibeto-Burman languages within the larger Ao language family, which is primarily spoken in Nagaland. Like most languages in its family, Mongsen is also a tonal language with three distinct tonal levels: low, mid, and high (Temsunungsang 2009). Scholars such as Clark (1893), Coupe (2007), Walling (2017), and Jamir (2022) have contributed to the linguistic study of these languages, including their grammar and morphology. While Coupe worked on Mangmetong and Waromong Mongsen, Walling on Khensa Mongsen, and Clark on Molungyimsen Chungli, their work provides a comprehensive framework for drawing general conclusions about the morphology of Mongsen and Chungli languages as a whole based on their findings.

Like many Tibeto-Burman languages, Mongsen and Chungli follow the subject-object-verb (SOV) word order and exhibit agglutinative morphology. Coupe (2007, 2011) describes Mongsen Ao, or spoken Mongsen, as a highly agglutinating, mostly suffixing language. Mongsen utilises nominal compounding extensively to expand its lexicon, including processes that derive nouns from verbs. These compounds often involve both nominal and verbal roots, gradually becoming more lexicalised over time as the original meanings of the components are lost. For nominalisation, for example, the prefix *tə-* is commonly used to transform verb roots into nominal forms that can function as adjectives or as heads of noun phrases, as illustrated by the two examples given below:

1. *tá-màn* base/foothills
NYP-sit
2. *tə-kəm* life
NPZ-be.form

On the other hand, Mongsen verbs are categorised into intransitive and transitive classes, both of which occur at almost equal frequency. As per Coupe (2007), the language's highly agglutinative morphology is particularly evident in its verb morphology. Verbs can incorporate numerous suffixes, including those for resultative and directional aspects. This complexity is especially notable in clause-final predicates, where multiple grammatical meanings are expressed through a series of lexical suffixes that have been grammaticalised from verb roots. Mongsen also has distinct markers for various tense, aspect, and mood categories. The unmarked past tense is expressed by bare verb stems, while present tense, immediate future, irrealis, and anterior markers are affixed to verb roots to convey specific temporal and modal nuances. In terms of case markers, while Mongsen displays extensive oblique case marking, it has only one core case marker, the agentive.

Similarly, considering that Chungli is a language very closely related to Mongsen, according to Jamir (2022), Chungli also demonstrates agglutinative morphology with verb and nominal inflectional systems, with the language also utilising compounding and affixation for nominalisation. Chungli verbs also undergo various morphological changes to indicate tense, aspect, mood, and other grammatical categories. Chungli verbs are marked for tense and aspect through affixation. The valency of verbs in Chungli can be modified through processes such as causativisation, which increases the valency by adding an agent. Verbs can also be derived from other word classes through the addition of affixes, expanding the verbal lexicon and allowing for nuanced expression of actions and states.

Jamir (2022) also points out some key differences in the morphology of Chungli and Mongsen. While both languages use affixes extensively, there are differences in the presence and functional properties of these affixes. With affixes, Chungli tends to have more lexicalised forms than Mongsen, which means that words in Chungli are more likely to have undergone a process of becoming fixed expressions over time. For instance, in Mongsen, non-relational prefixes are attached to non-relational bound nouns to form nominals (e.g., *a-nuk* meaning ‘machete’, *a-luŋ* meaning ‘stone’, or *a-ki* for ‘house’). In Chungli, these prefixes are less frequently used due to the lexicalisation of the words (e.g., *nuk* for ‘machete’, *luŋ* for ‘stone’, or *ki* for ‘house’). Another prominent difference is with the affix *-nə*, which marks the agentive case, allative case, instrumental case, causatives, and other cases. This affix, while performing the same functions as in Mongsen, is marked by *-i* in Chungli.

In summary, the morphological study of Chungli and Mongsen dialects not only underscores their shared heritage but also highlights the distinctive features that make each dialect unique. Understanding these differences enriches our appreciation of the linguistic diversity within the Ao language family and provides a foundation for further linguistic and cultural exploration.

Compound word formation

As an agglutinative language, compounding is a very productive process of word formation in Mongsen, Chungli, and Poetic Mongsen. Compound words are formed when two or more individual words are combined to create a new word with its own meaning. However, it should be noted that as per the data given below, many compound words in Poetic Mongsen are not necessarily compound words in spoken Mongsen or Chungli. In some cases, like in the case of the words *lòŋdza-pətī* (‘north star’) and *tsak-fú* (‘husk’), compounds in Poetic Mongsen are also compound words in spoken Mongsen and Chungli, the compounds being identical in Mongsen, with just the word for husk being different in Chungli, *tsaksá*. However, for words like *juŋ-páŋ* (‘riverbank’) in Poetic Mongsen, its counterparts are not compounds, as seen from the terms *ajuŋ təpáŋ* and *ajùŋ paŋ* that are used in Mongsen and Chungli, respectively, which carry the same meaning. On the other hand, there are also compounds like *nək-na-raðr-la* (eye-LOC-come-F), a metaphor for first love, which is an entirely poetic construction in Poetic Mongsen and hence does not exist in the spoken languages. Instead, in spoken Mongsen and Chungli, the word used is *mənaŋ tə-miən* and *məzuŋ te-miəm* (first NPZ-be.love), which literally translates to ‘first love’. To differentiate whether compound words in Poetic Mongsen are also compounds in Mongsen and Chungli, all compound words are hyphenated in this article. If a compound is not

hyphenated in the Mongsen and Chungli versions, then it is not a compound in these languages.

Left-headed and right-headed compounds

When it comes to compound words, two important types are left-headed and right-headed compounds. Left-headed compounds, such as the English word ‘court-martial’, have the head on the left because the main idea is a type of court, specifically, a military court, while *martial* functions as a modifier indicating its relation to the military. Right-headed compounds such as the word ‘bathroom’ have the head on the right because in this case, the concept expressed through the compound is a room used for bathing. However, in English, compounds are largely right-headed (Bauer 1988). In Chinese, noun compounds tend to be right-headed and verb compounds left-headed, while adjective compounds do not exhibit a particular tendency toward either type (Wang 2014).

What then determines the head of a compound word? It is determined by two criteria, which are meaning (semantic head) and syntactic function (grammatical head). The semantic criterion of headedness asserts that the head of a compound determines the semantic category of the entire compound, making it a hyponym of its head (Altakhaineh 2016). This means that the head of a compound word plays a significant role in determining its overall meaning. In addition to semantic headedness, grammatical headedness is also a critical aspect of compound words. Grammatical compound heads determine the syntactic category and the agreement properties of the entire compound, influencing its overall grammatical structure and function within a sentence (Cui et al. 2018).

The relationship between the semantic and grammatical head of a compound word is a topic of significant interest. The semantic head of a compound word determines the semantic category of the entire compound, making it a hyponym of its head. On the other hand, the grammatical head of a compound word determines the syntactic category and the agreement properties of the entire compound, influencing its overall grammatical structure and function within a sentence. However, it is important to note that the semantic and grammatical heads of compound words need not be mutually exclusive; rather, they are mutually inclusive and interact in complex ways. The processing of compound words is sensitive to both the constituents, that is, semantic transparency and grammatical structure. Thus, both semantic and grammatical relations play important roles in the processing and comprehension of compound words.

In Poetic Mongsen, an agglutinative language that is mostly suffixal in nature, the grammatical head is almost always right-headed. For the purpose of this study, I will consider headedness based on semantic meaning, i.e., focusing on the ‘core word’, that is, the word that contributes most of the meaning to the entire compound. The determination of headedness will be based on semantic meaning, which involves examining the primary concept or the central function of the compound. Nonetheless, it should be noted that in some circumstances, the semantic head might not be immediately obvious, considering that it can sometimes largely be influenced by context, especially in a poetic construction. A detailed description of how the semantic head is used to determine the headedness of the compounds is provided in the data below. In Poetic Mongsen, compound words can be both left-headed and right-headed regarding their semantic headedness, with left-headed compounds being a more productive morphological process.

Left-headed compounds

| | Poetic Mongsen | Mongsen | Chungli | English |
|----|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. | <i>tsak-fú</i> rice-husk | <i>tsak-fǎ</i> rice-husk | <i>tsək-sù</i> rice-husk | rice husk |
| 2. | <i>alī-anən</i> land-slide | <i>a-lí-anən</i> NRL-landslide | <i>anən-tsuì</i> slide-fall | landslide |
| 3. | <i>nájáŋ-tʃʰuŋ</i> nayang-plunge | <i>nájáŋ tʃʰuŋ</i> nayang plunge | <i>nájáŋ</i> nayang | plunged nayang (flower) |

In the examples given above, (1) and (2) are quite semantically transparent to be left-headed since ‘rice husk’ refers to the covering of a *tsak*, that is, a ‘rice’ grain, while the word ‘landslide’ refers to the phenomena of *alī* (‘land’) collapsing. However, the headedness is not as obvious for (3) because *cʰuŋ* (‘plunge’) is a verb while *nájáŋ* (‘nayang flower’) is a noun, and the grammatical category of *nájáŋ-cʰuŋ* is not obvious at first glance. By examining the sentence (a) below, we can ascertain that the singer is comparing herself to a nayang flower shoved in the thicket since she is being forcibly married off to a foreign village. Here, the core function of the comparative element is the noun *nájáŋ*, making the compound left-headed:

| | | | | | | |
|----|-----------|--------------|----------------------|---------------|---------------|------------------|
| a. | <i>nì</i> | <i>jukja</i> | <i>nájáŋ-tʃʰuŋ</i> | <i>pəntaŋ</i> | <i>ŋàŋpʰa</i> | <i>ta-ku-na.</i> |
| | 1SG | thicket | nayang-shove | foreign | marry | done-PST.PRF-EMP |
| | I | thicket | shoved nayang flower | foreign | marry | had been done |

Free English translation:

‘Like the nayang flower shoved in the thicket, I had been married off to a foreign land.’

In this paper, we employ a two-line glossing methodology. Given the examination of poetry and ballads incorporating various metaphors and imageries, it is important to note that the literal translation and the poetic translation may diverge. As a result, the first line of gloss offers a verbatim gloss of the etymology of the root words, while the second line of gloss emphasises the poetic interpretation of the words.

Right-headed compounds

| | Poetic Mongsen | Mongsen | Chungli | English |
|----|--|--|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1. | <i>məlúŋ-lám-jú</i> heart-warm-word | <i>náŋ-lák</i> be.promise-TERM | <i>naŋ-zək</i> be.promise-TERM | trustworthy word (promise) |
| 2. | <i>jìm-zaŋlu</i> village-make.PST | <i>a-jím zaŋlu</i> NRL-village make.PST | <i>jím jaŋlú</i> village make.PST | village creation |
| 3. | <i>dzùŋ-pùŋ-tsuì-r</i> mithun-M-fall-PRES | <i>a-tsʰù tsuì-r</i> NRL-mithun fall-PRES | <i>sə tʃʰì-r</i> mithun eat-PRES | mithun sacrifice |

In (1), as seen in the sentence (b) below, *məlúŋ-lám-jú* refers to the noun ‘promise’, not the verb ‘to promise’. In that way, *məlúŋ-lám* (‘heart-warming’) is the adjective that modifies the noun *jú* (‘word’); as such, the compound is right-headed. In the case of (2) and (3), the headedness depends on whether the words *jim-zanlu* and *dzùŋpùŋ-tsù-r* are used as verbs or nouns. If they refer to the action of creating a village or sacrificing a mithun, they would be right-headed; however, if they are referring to ‘village creation’ and ‘mithun sacrifice’ as an event, they would be nouns, and hence, left-headed. Examining the sentence (c) below, where both words are taken from, both compounds refer to the act of settling the village and sacrificing the mithun, making the verbs carry the core meaning of the compound. This makes both the compounds right-headed in nature.

| | | | | |
|----|----------------|-----------|----------------------------|------------|
| b. | <i>lúra-rù</i> | <i>tà</i> | <i>məlúŋ-lám-jú</i> | <i>saʔ</i> |
| | roll-come | that | heart-warm-word | say.PST |
| | come back | that | trustworthy word (promise) | said |

Free English translation:

‘You gave your promise to come back.’

| | | | | |
|----|---------------------|---------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| c. | <i>í-pá:-r-na</i> | <i>jim-zanlū</i> | <i>í-tí:-r-na</i> | <i>dzùŋ-pùŋ-tsūr</i> |
| | 1SG-father-POSS-AGT | village-make.PST | 1SG-older brother- POSS-AGT | mithun-M- sacrifice.PRES |
| | My father | created the village | my older brother | sacrifice mithun |

Free English translation:

‘My father settled the village, my older brother sacrifices the mithuns.’

Endocentric compounds

Compounds are also classified into endocentric or exocentric compounds based on the presence of a head and its influence on the entire compound’s meaning and grammatical category. Here, in endocentric compounds, there is a clear head that determines the overall meaning and grammatical category of the compound. For instance, in the examples given below, all compounds are left-headed, except for (4) which is right-headed, and all compound words are of the same grammatical category as the head of the compound. For example, in *jun-páŋ*, the head of the compound is *jun* (‘river’), which is a noun, and hence the compound *jun-páŋ* is also a noun. Another characteristic of endocentric compounds is that they are semantically more transparent than exocentric compounds. Given that in endocentric compounds, the head determines the overall meaning of the compound, and the relationship between the compound’s elements is clear, the meaning of the compound is more easily inferred from the meanings of its constituents.

| | Poetic Mongsen | Mongsen | Chungli | English |
|----|--|--|-------------------------------------|-----------------|
| 1. | <i>juŋ-páŋ</i> river-mouth | <i>ajuŋ təpáŋ</i> river mouth | <i>ajùŋ paŋ</i> river mouth | river source |
| 2. | <i>tsak-fú</i> rice-empty | <i>tsak-fǎ</i> rice-empty | <i>tsàk-su</i> rice-dead | rice husk |
| 3. | <i>ap^ha-páŋ</i> tray-mouth | <i>ap^ha-páŋ</i> tray-mouth | <i>pàr-paŋ</i> tray-mouth | mouth of a tray |
| 4. | <i>su-jìm-la</i> born-village-PTCL | <i>tə-su-jìm</i> RL-born-village | <i>ta-su jìm</i> RL-born-village | native village |
| 5. | <i>alī-anàn</i> NRL-landslide | <i>a-lí-anàn</i> NRL-landslide | <i>anàn-tsuì</i> slide-fall | landslide |

Exocentric compounds

Exocentric compounds lack a clear headword and are also semantically opaque. The meaning of the entire compound cannot be directly derived from the meaning of its individual parts, and they often create new grammatical categories that are different from their constituents. As can be gathered from the examples below, there is no clear head for any of the compounds, and hence, none of the compound words are semantically transparent. There is also no consistency in terms of grammatical category or semantics between the individual elements of the compound words and the meaning derived from the complete compound word. For instance, *sə-pùk-narú* ('cloth-under-flower') consists of two nouns and a postposition, where the meaning of any of the individual components does not have any correlation to the resultant meaning 'child'. This compound is also entirely a poetic construction that is not used in spoken Mongsen or Chungli.

Another example is the compound *roŋ-manŋ*, where *roŋ* is the root for the Mongsen word *təruŋ* ('bunch') and *manŋ* is the root from the Mongsen word *təmanŋ* ('body'). While it may seem that neither of the two constituents of the compound has any connection to the term 'house décor', there is a correlation because the term refers to the rooftop decoration of traditional Ao houses made from bamboo with straw roofs, where a bunch of dry hay or straw is tied together and formed into various shapes to decorate the roof trims.

| | Poetic Mongsen | Mongsen | Chungli | English |
|----|---|---|---|------------------|
| 1. | <i>sə-pùk-narú</i> cloth-under-flower | <i>a-nu-zá</i> NRL-child-DIM | <i>tanúr</i> child | child |
| 2. | <i>wa-tsə-wa-sáŋ</i> bird-FEM-bamboo-tip | <i>wa-tsə wa-pùŋ</i> bird-FEM bird-M | <i>wa-tsə wa-pùŋ</i> bird-FEM bird-M | men and women |
| 3. | <i>roŋ-manŋ</i> bunch-body | <i>roŋ-manŋ</i> bunch-body | <i>roŋ-manŋ</i> bunch-body | house decoration |

| | Poetic Mongsen | Mongsen | Chungli | English |
|----|------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|
| 4. | <i>məlúŋ-lám-jú</i> | <i>náŋ-lák</i> | <i>naŋ-zək</i> | trustworthy word (promise) |
| | heart-warm-word | be.promise-TERM | be.promise-TERM | |
| 5. | <i>a-li-paŋ-təm-ru</i> | <i>a-lima tə-təm-páŋ</i> | <i>a-lima ta-təm-páŋ</i> | end times |
| | NRL-land-edge-end | NRL-world NR-end-edge | NRL-world NR-end-edge | |

Synthetic compounds

Synthetic compounds are particular types of compound words where the head is derived from a verb by affixation, and the non-head fulfils the function of argument or complement of the verb. They are also known as verbal compounds. In such compounds, the verb has to undergo derivation first before being attached to the non-head element in the compound. Given below are examples of synthetic compounds found in Poetic Mongsen, such as the compound *apì-jaŋu-la-i*, where the gender marker *-la* derives the verb *jaŋu* to form the nominalised *jaŋu-la*, which is then marked by the agentive case *-i* before being attached to the noun *apì* to form the synthetic compound. Similarly, the agentive nominaliser *-ər* is attached to the verb form *kut* to derive the nominal form before undergoing compounding process in the word *nuk-zən-kut-ər*.

| | Poetic Mongsen | Mongsen | Chungli | English |
|----|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. | <i>apì-jaŋu-la-i</i> | <i>túv təsù-la-na</i> | <i>tə-tsuú tasùlai</i> | by the birth-mother |
| | mother-make-F-AGT | mother birth-F-AGT | RL-mother birth-F-AGT | |
| 2. | <i>nuk-zən-kut-ər</i> | <i>anuk azən kut-ər</i> | <i>nuk ain akut-ər</i> | an accomplished warrior |
| | machete-power-have-ANOM | machete power have-ANOM | machete power have-ANOM | |

Compound word structure by word class

In Poetic Mongsen, compounds are formed by combining different types of words, such as nouns with other nouns, or nouns with verbs. These compounds result in new words that maintain their grammatical category and can convey nuanced meanings. In this section, I examine compound words in Poetic Mongsen according to the word class of the compounds.

Noun-noun compounds

In Poetic Mongsen, compounds formed by combining a noun with another noun give rise to another noun. These compounds do not change their grammatical category and

typically maintain a semantic relationship between the constituent parts. For instance, in the first example given below, the compound *jón-páj* combines *jón* (‘river’) and *páj* (‘mouth’) to form a noun that denotes a riverbank.

| | Poetic Mongsen | Mongsen | Chungli | English |
|----|---------------------------------------|--|--------------------------------------|-----------------|
| 1. | <i>jón-páj</i> river-mouth | <i>ajun tápáj</i> river mouth | <i>ajun paŋ</i> river mouth | riverbank |
| 2. | <i>nú-tʰəm-tuŋ</i> child-LNOM-tree | <i>a-nú-mən-tʰən</i> VOC-child-sit-LNOM | <i>nú-mən-tʰən</i> child-sit-LNOM | womb |
| 3. | <i>rùn-maŋ</i> bunch-body | <i>rùn-maŋ</i> bunch-body | <i>rùn-maŋ</i> bunch-body | roof decoration |

Noun-verb compounds

Noun-verb compounds in Poetic Mongsen can result in both nouns and verbs, depending on the headedness of the compound. These compounds can be left-headed or right-headed, influencing the grammatical category and meaning of the resultant word. For instance, in the first example given below, the compound *nájáj-tʰuŋ* combines the words *nájáj* (‘nayang flower’) and *tʰuŋ* (‘shove’). The head of the compound is the noun *nájáj*, making it a left-headed compound that functions as a noun describing the flower that has been shoved in. On the other hand, we get a right-headed compound in *jìm-zanlu*, which combines *jìm* (‘village’) and *zanlu* (make.PST). This right-headed compound functions as a noun or verb depending on the context, describing the act of creating a village.

| | Poetic Mongsen | Mongsen | Chungli | English |
|----|--|--|--------------------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. | <i>nájáj-tʰuŋ</i> nayang-shove | <i>nájáj tʰuŋ</i> nayang shove | <i>nájáj tʰuŋùk</i> nayang shove | shoved nayang (flower) |
| 2. | <i>jìm-zanlu</i> village-make.PST | <i>a-jím zanlu</i> NRL-village make.PST | <i>jím janlú</i> village make.PST | village creation |
| 3. | <i>dzùn-pùŋ-tsuù-r</i> mithun-M-fell-PRES | <i>a-tsʰù tsuù-r</i> NRL-mithun fell-PRES | <i>sə tʰì-r</i> mithun eat-PRES | mithun sacrifice |
| 4. | <i>alì-anən</i> land-slide | <i>a-lí-anən</i> NRL-land-slide | <i>anən-tsuù</i> slide-fall | landslide |

Noun-adjective compounds

Noun-adjective compounds in Poetic Mongsen combine a noun with an adjective to create descriptive phrases. These compounds can be understood by analysing the individual components and how they interact to convey a unified meaning. Examining some of the examples given below, the compound *rəm-sa-puŋ-pàʔ* literally means ‘beautiful

back’, describing something with an aesthetically pleasing appearance from behind. The noun *rəm* (‘back’) is modified by the adjective *puŋ* (‘beautiful’), with the word *sa* (‘across’) adding a spatial description, and *pàʔ* acting as a nominaliser. Similarly, in the compound *lòŋ-tərók* (‘six stones’), the word *lòŋ* (‘stone’) is the noun, and *tərók* (‘six’) is the numeral adjective modifying the noun. This straightforward combination provides a clear numerical description of the stones.

In the examples below, the author has not provided the spoken Mongsen and Chungli equivalents for the compound *páj-mərəm-la* because there are no compounds with the same meaning in these two languages. In both spoken Mongsen and Chungli, the compound *páj-mərəm-la* would mean a woman with red lips, consisting of the words *páj* (‘mouth’) *mərəm* (‘red’), and *la* (‘female marker’). In Poetic Mongsen, however, the compound *páj-mərəm-la* means a ‘woman who stands out’. This meaning draws on a cultural metaphor: traditionally, men in the community wore black shawls that had a small section of red threads at the ends. The red threads stood out strikingly against the black background, enhancing the shawl’s beauty. Similarly, the woman referred to in the song stands out because of her beauty, just as the red thread transforms the shawl, her presence makes everything else beautiful.

| | Poetic Mongsen | Mongsen | Chungli | English |
|----|---|---|---|----------------------|
| 1. | <i>məlún-lám-jú</i> heart-warm-word | <i>nánlák</i> promise | <i>nanʒək</i> promise | love confession |
| 2. | <i>páj-mərəm-la</i> edge-red-F | <i>páj-mərəm-la</i> lips-red-F | <i>páj-mərəm-la</i> lips-red-F | woman who stands out |
| 3. | <i>rəm-sa-puŋ-pàʔ</i> back-across-beautiful-NR | <i>tə-rəm tə-puŋ</i> RL-back NPZ-beautiful | <i>tə-pərəm tə-pur tatfún</i> RL-back NPZ-looks good | beautiful back |
| 4. | <i>lòŋ-tərók</i> stone-six | <i>alún-tərók</i> stone-six | <i>lòŋ-tərók</i> stone-six | six stones |

Verb-verb compounds

Verb-verb compounds in Poetic Mongsen combine two verbs to form another verb. These compounds are rare but do occur and typically maintain the verb’s grammatical category. For example, the compound *lúra-rù-ta* combines the words *lúra* (‘roll’) and *rù* (‘come’) in the past tense with an emphatic marker *-ta*. The two verbs together convey the meaning of ‘to come back’, indicating the action of returning.

| | Poetic Mongsen | Mongsen | Chungli | English |
|----|---|--|---|--------------------|
| 1. | <i>lúra-rù-ta</i> roll-come.PST-EMP | <i>lúra ra-uʔ</i> roll come.PST-EMP | <i>luá aru-àʔ</i> roll come.PST-EMP | to come back |
| 2. | <i>mə-lúra-li-na</i> NEG-roll-be.IRR-EMP | <i>lúra mə-ra-i</i> roll NEG-come-IRR | <i>luá ma-ru-tsə</i> roll NEG-come-IRR | will not come back |

Verb-adjective compounds

Verb-adjective compounds in Poetic Mongsen combine verbs with adjectives to form new verbs. These compounds are typically left-headed, except for exocentric compounds (like in example 3) where the meaning is not as transparent nor directly related to the constituent words. In example (1) given below, the compound *tijáŋ-sán* combines the verb *tijáŋ* ('be sieve') with the adjective *sán* ('new'). This left-headed compound means 'to make new'. In example 3, *atsù-li-puŋ-la* combines the verb *atsù* ('see') with *li* ('do') and the adjective *puŋ* ('beautiful'), followed by the feminine marker *-la*. This exocentric compound means 'beautiful woman'.

| | Poetic Mongsen | Mongsen | Chungli | English |
|----|---|---|---|----------------------|
| 1. | <i>tijáŋ-sán</i> be.sieve-new | <i>tásán jaŋer</i> new sieve-PRES | <i>tasán ajaŋ-er</i> new sieve-PRES | to make new |
| 2. | <i>pəràŋ-púŋ</i> be.shine-beautiful | <i>pəràŋ-a puŋ</i> shine-PST.PROG beautiful | <i>pəràŋ-a təpúr ajaŋ</i> shine-PST.PROG looks good | to shine beautifully |
| 3. | <i>atsù-li-puŋ-la</i> see-do-beautiful-F | <i>təvər puŋ-la</i> looks beautiful-F | <i>təpúr ajaŋ-la</i> looks good-F | beautiful woman |

Verb-noun compounds

Verb-noun compounds in Poetic Mongsen combine verbs with nouns to form new compounds, resulting in nouns. Given the limited data, few examples of such compounds have been found in the songs collected. In the example below, the compound *su-jìm-la* combines the verb *su* ('to be born') with the noun *jìm* ('village'), followed by the particle *-la*. Correspondingly, this left-headed endocentric compound means 'native village', indicating a place where someone was born.

| | Poetic Mongsen | Mongsen | Chungli | English |
|----|--|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------|
| 1. | <i>su-jìm-la</i> be.born-village-PTCL | <i>tə-su-jìm</i> RL-born-village | <i>ta-su jìm</i> RL-born-village | native village |

Adjective-noun compounds

Another category that is rare in Poetic Mongsen is the adjective-noun compound, most likely because Poetic Mongsen, like Mongsen and Chungli, is an SOV language and hence, adjectives normally appear after the noun they modify. In example 1 given below, it is not a pure adjective-noun compound, as that the adjective *lám* ('warm') modifies the noun *məlúŋ* ('heart') to give rise to an adjectival complex, which is then compounded with the word *jú* ('word') to form the compound *məlúŋ-lám-jú*.

| | Poetic Mongsen | Mongsen | Chungli | English |
|----|---|-----------------------------------|--|-------------------------------|
| 1. | <i>məlúnj-lám-jú</i> heart-warm-word | <i>náj-lák</i> be.promise-TERM | <i>naŋ-zək</i> be.promise-TERM | trustworthy word (promise) |
| 2. | <i>mijá-làr</i> thousand-slave | <i>mijá-làr</i> thousand-slave | <i>mirtfánj- làr</i> thousand-slave | thousand slaves |

Semantic transparency and opaqueness

In linguistics, semantic transparency and opaqueness refer to the degree to which the meaning of a compound word can be easily understood based on the meanings of its individual components. Semantic transparency refers to the extent to which the relationship between a compound word and its constituent morphemes is clear (Wang et al. 2019). For example, in the compound ‘blueberry’, the meaning is transparent as it combines ‘blue’ and ‘berry’, indicating a berry that is blue in colour. Contrastingly, in the compound ‘butterfly’, the connection between the meanings of the two words ‘butter’ and ‘fly’ and the meaning of the resulting compound is not immediately obvious, which is why it is an opaque compound.

Semantic transparency in compound words is a critical factor in morphological processing. Research has shown that the level of semantic transparency significantly impacts how compound words are recognized and stored in the mental lexicon (Juhasz, Lai, and Woodcock 2014). Additionally, the influence of constituent meanings on compound meanings varies, resulting in different effects of semantic transparency (Günther, Marelli, and Bölte 2020). Hence, the semantic transparency of compound words is significant to understanding how relationships between constituent morphemes affect the recognition and organization of complex words.

Semantic transparency and opaqueness of compound words are also a matter of degree, as the level of transparency can vary among different compound words (Günther, Marelli, and Bölte 2020). In Poetic Mongsen, while the meaning of endocentric compounds is usually semantically transparent, such as in the example of the compound *alí-anàn* (‘land-slide’), exocentric compounds are not so, especially because many of them have been formed to poetically and metaphorically describe something or someone. Many of the exocentric compounds found in Poetic Mongsen are even more semantically opaque because there are usually other common and accepted terms in the lexicon of the spoken language for these words. For example, the word *sə-púk-narú* is not used to refer to a child in Mongsen or Chungli because words for ‘child’ exist in both languages, namely *a-nu-zá* and *tanúr*. Contrastingly, the literal meaning of the compound *sə-púk-narú* (‘cloth-under-flower’) does not immediately invoke the notion of a child.

Furthermore, the degree of transparency/opaqueness need not be just semantic or morphological, as compounds can be transparent or opaque regarding their native/non-native speaker contexts as well. For instance, the compound *məlúnj-lám-jú* (‘heart-warm-word’) can be more semantically transparent to a native speaker since the term ‘heart-warming word’ can be more closely associated with a promise or a word of reassurance to a native Mongsen speaker as opposed to a non-native speaker. Yet, at the same time, there are compounds like *pəràŋ-púnj* (‘to shine beautifully’), which may seem

to be semantically very transparent to both a native and non-native speaker. However, in the context of its meaning in Poetic Mongsen, this word might be semantically transparent to a non-native speaker but semantically opaque to a native speaker. This is because the word *pəràŋ-pún* exists in spoken Mongsen but with a wholly different meaning. The word *pəràŋ-pún* in spoken Mongsen and Chungli means ‘gun’, with *pəràŋ* denoting the ‘bang’ sound of a shooting gun and *pún* meaning ‘container’, implying the gun as a container or hollow object making a banging sound. However, considering that the words are homophonous, the meaning of *pəràŋ-pún* as captured in Poetic Mongsen would not be immediately obvious to a native speaker because culturally, the word is now more closely associated with a weapon.

In Poetic Mongsen, the transparency and opaqueness of compound words significantly affect their interpretation and processing, both semantically and contextually. While endocentric compounds tend to be semantically transparent, exocentric compounds often exhibit a higher degree of opaqueness, particularly when used metaphorically or poetically. This complexity is compounded by the interplay between native and non-native speaker perceptions, as cultural and contextual factors influence the understanding of compounds. The examination of compounds such as *sə-pùk-narú* and *pəràŋ-pún* highlights the intricate nature of semantic transparency in Poetic Mongsen, revealing the dynamic relationship between language, meaning, and cultural context. Understanding this relationship is crucial for a deeper comprehension of how compound words function within the language and how they are processed by speakers and listeners alike.

Compounds unique to Poetic Mongsen

The unique position of Poetic Mongsen as not just a language that exists in poetry and songs but also as a language that is equally used and claimed by both Chungli and Mongsen speakers has given rise to different types of compound words that only occur in Poetic Mongsen but not in the spoken varieties of either Mongsen or Chungli. There have been studies on the intentional creation and utilisation of compound words by poets for the sake of poetry in literature, such as Boase-Beier (1987), which delves into the use of poetic compounds in British poetry between 1956 and 1985, presenting long excerpts from poems and entire poems by British authors, thereby shedding light on the creative and deliberate use of compound words in poetry. However, there has been very little research in this regard in the field of oral literature, including the oral literature of Poetic Mongsen. Some of the different types of compounds that are formed in Poetic Mongsen due to liberty in poetic construction are discussed below.

Mongsen-Chungli compounds

There are interesting cases of compound words in Poetic Mongsen that have emerged due to Chungli-Mongsen contact, having been formed by combining a Mongsen and a Chungli morpheme. Nonetheless, these compounds do not exist in the same form in either spoken Mongsen or Chungli.

| | Poetic Mongsen | Mongsen | Chungli | English |
|----|--|--|--|---------------|
| 1. | <i>kijùŋ-tsur</i> family-woman | <i>kijùŋ anəti</i> family woman | <i>kibùŋ tətstur</i> family woman | married woman |
| 2. | <i>lúra-rù-ta</i> roll-come.PST-EMP | <i>lúra ra-u?</i> roll come.PST-EMP | <i>luá aru-à?</i> roll come.PST-EMP | to come back |
| 3. | <i>ju-anəp-sán</i> word-soft-man | <i>aju-anep-tfan</i> word-soft-man | <i>u-anep-sán</i> word-soft-man | gentle man |

In example 1, *kijùŋ* is the Mongsen word for family, while *tsur* is the Chungli word for woman. The resulting compound *kijùŋ-tsur* does not exist in either of these two languages, as seen above. As such, it is a uniquely Poetic Mongsen formation. While the difference between the Poetic Mongsen compound and the Mongsen and Chungli compounds is thus lexical in example 1, the differences between the Chungli and Mongsen words in examples 2 and 3 are phonological because the syllables *-ra* and *aru* ('come') as well as *-tfan* and *-sán* ('man') appear to be variants of the same word.

Chungli-Chungli compounds

There are also purely Chungli-Chungli compounds used in the songs of the Poetic Mongsen language. This is remarkable because Poetic Mongsen, as the name suggests, is supposed to be a Mongsen language. Given below are instances of purely Chungli-Chungli compounds found in Poetic Mongsen. These are not as highly attested because Poetic Mongsen is a variant of Mongsen. However, it is interesting to note that unlike example 2 below, which is a Chungli compound collected from a Chungli-speaking village (Ungma), example 1 was collected from Longjang village, a village that entirely consists of Mongsen speakers. While the word for mithun is different in Poetic Mongsen and Chungli in the second example, I have categorised this word under Chungli-Chungli compounds because while *dzùŋ-pùŋ* is used as a poetic form in all three languages, it is also used in the spoken form of Chungli and Mongsen.

| | Poetic Mongsen | Mongsen | Chungli | English |
|----|--|---|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. | <i>ki-jú-nə-la</i> house-go-AGT-F | <i>aki wamì-la</i> house go-want-F | <i>ki u-nə-la</i> house go-want-F | woman who wants to get married |
| 2. | <i>dzùŋ-pùŋ-tʃú-r</i> mithun-M-sacrifice-PRES | <i>a-tsʰù tsù-r</i> NRL-mithun fell-PRES | <i>sə tʃʰi-r</i> mithun eat-PRES | mithun sacrifice |

Poetic compounds

Given the very poetic nature and the archaic form of the language, Poetic Mongsen also features compounds that are only used for poetic purposes and obsolete compounds that no longer exist in the spoken forms of Mongsen and Chungli. A word like *nə-ví-janru-la-*

nə ('your mother') is more semantically transparent to contemporary native speakers due to the presence of the word *nə-ví* for 'your mother' (see example 5 below). The other compounds listed below are either semantically opaque due to the way the words have been compounded, even though the words still exist in the spoken variant, such as *atsù-li-puŋ-la*, which native speakers will translate as seeing something beautiful instead of 'beautiful woman' (example 4). There are also obsolete words such as *tsuŋ-tfajà*, where the words used in Poetic Mongsen for both sun *tsuŋ* and shine *tfajà* are no longer used in spoken Mongsen or Chungli (example 2). Another interesting yet culturally nuanced word is *saʔ-nik-ju-nik* ('meat-pieces-word-pieces'), which means 'traditions' (example 6). This may, at first glance, seem like an opaque compound, especially to a non-native speaker, but it is more semantically transparent to a native speaker because culturally, the cutting up ('piecing') of meat is culturally significant among the Ao community. Once the 'word' (i.e., tradition and customary laws) was set, often the ritualistic thing to do was kill an animal to feast with, and the meat was always cut up to be distributed among the clan or community, with very specific cuts and pieces always designated to certain members of the clan or community. This designation of meat often translated to seniority or hierarchy in the clan or community and hence was crucial to the traditions of the Ao people.

| | Poetic Mongsen | Mongsen | Chungli | English |
|----|---|---|---|----------------------|
| 1. | <i>nək-na-raər-la</i> eye-LOC-come-F | <i>mənaŋ tə-miən</i> first NPZ-be.love | <i>məzuŋ te-miəm</i> first NPZ-be.love | first love |
| 2. | <i>tsuŋ-tfajà</i> sun-shine | <i>tsùŋi tə-saŋá</i> sun NPZ-be.light | <i>anù tə-saŋwá</i> sun NPZ-be.light | sunshine |
| 3. | <i>páŋ-mərəm-la</i> edge-red-F | <i>páŋ-mərəm-la</i> edge-red-F | <i>páŋ-mərəm-la</i> edge-red-F | woman who stands out |
| 4. | <i>atsù-li-puŋ-la</i> see-do-beautiful-F | <i>təvər puŋ-la</i> looks beautiful-F | <i>təpúr ajuŋ-la</i> looks good-F | beautiful woman |
| 5. | <i>nə-ví-jaŋru-la-nə</i> 2SG-mother-make-F-AGT | <i>túv təsù-la-na</i> mother birth-F-AGT | <i>tə-tsuú tasùlai</i> RL-mother birth-F-AGT | your mother |
| 6. | <i>saʔ-nik-ju-nik</i> meat-pieces-word-pieces | <i>a-saʔ-nik a-ju-nik</i> NRL-meat-pieces NRL-word-pieces | <i>u-nák fi-nək</i> meat-pieces word-pieces | traditions |

Nested compounds

Nested compounds in linguistics refer to the complex structures formed by combining multiple compound words within a single linguistic unit. In Poetic Mongsen, the compounds that come under this category describe the presence of two compounding events, that is, when a word is attached to an already compounded word to form a new compound. For example, in the nested compound *ku-paŋ-jáŋ-nə* ('by the ends of your

hair’), the word *ku-paŋ* can be regarded as an independent compound that refers to the ends of the hair. Added to this is the word *jaŋ* (‘cut’), referring to a specific traditional style of men’s haircut. Joining these two words results in a compound carrying the meaning ‘by the ends of your hair’ (example 1). Similarly, the word *tfaŋ-ju* (‘footstep’) is a compound in its own right, which is part of the nested compound *tfaŋ-ju-puŋ-ər* (‘our footsteps are even’) (example 2). Lastly, the nested compound *aruŋ-mi-tuŋ* (‘spear decor’) consists of the words *mì-tuŋ* (‘spear’) and *arung*, meaning red-dyed goat’s hair, which is used for the decoration of spears, machetes, and dresses (example 3). In the case of such nested compounds, the previously existing compound becomes the head of the resulting compound.

| | Poetic Mongsen | Mongsen | Chungli | English |
|----|-----------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. | <i>ku-paŋ-jaŋ-nə</i> | <i>kuwa paŋ jaŋ-na</i> | <i>ku páŋ-aki</i> | by the ends of your hair |
| | hair-end-cut-INST | hair end cut-INST | hair end-INST | |
| 2. | <i>tfaŋ-ju-puŋ-ər</i> | <i>tfaŋ-ju matəm-ər</i> | <i>tsùŋ-suu matəm-ər</i> | (our) footsteps are even |
| | feet-step-even-PRES | feet-step even-PRES | feet-step even-PRES | |
| 3. | <i>aruŋ-mì-tuŋ</i> | <i>amì-tuŋ ənt^haŋ aruŋ</i> | <i>nà-tuŋ int^haŋ rúŋ</i> | spear decor |
| | decor.hair-spear-pole | spear-pole of decor | spear-pole of decor | |

Conclusion

This study investigated the compound word formation processes within Poetic Mongsen, an agglutinative language characterised by high morphological complexity. The analysis reveals a diverse array of compounding mechanisms, highlighting the language’s rich potential for creating new vocabulary. Notably, compounding processes in Poetic Mongsen demonstrate both continuity and divergence when compared to spoken Mongsen and Chungli. On the one hand, many compound types found in spoken Mongsen and Chungli are also found in Poetic Mongsen, which underscores the shared linguistic heritage of these languages. This shared foundation provides a basis for understanding the core mechanisms of compounding in Poetic Mongsen. Concurrently, the study also showed evidence of compounding strategies that are specific to Poetic Mongsen. The discovery of unique compound formations not attested to in spoken Mongsen suggests a distinct process of word creation tailored to the poetic register. These compounds likely contribute to the evocative nature of Poetic Mongsen and its ability to express complex ideas and imagery. Furthermore, Poetic Mongsen exhibits a heightened degree of morphological creativity in its use of compounding. The study found instances where words not considered compounds in spoken Mongsen were adapted through clipping to form new compounds within the poetic context. This deliberate manipulation of existing words demonstrates the flexibility and expressiveness of Poetic Mongsen.

While this study has shed light on the various compound word formation processes in Poetic Mongsen, further research is necessary to fully understand the driving forces behind these unique linguistic features. A deeper exploration into the historical development of Poetic Mongsen could reveal the reasons why certain words are no

longer used in spoken forms or why their compound variants are absent in everyday speech. Additionally, investigating the sociolinguistic factors that influence the use of compound forms in poetic contexts could provide valuable insights into the interplay between language and cultural expression.

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