12.1 Introduction

David Bradley has a long-standing interest in the Sino-Tibetan languages, and his many significant contributions to the study of these languages have advanced our knowledge in the diverse fields of phonetics, phonology, language policy, historical-comparative linguistics, sociolinguistics, language documentation, and language endangerment, especially in the minority languages of China and Southeast Asia. He has also supervised the research of numerous graduate students who have gone on to make their own contributions to Sino-Tibetan linguistics. This chapter pays tribute to his many achievements in scholarship, and also draws inspiration from his diachronically informed approach to linguistic research.

The present article addresses some aspects of my interest in nominalization and clause linkage in the languages of South Asia and those of Northeast India in particular, which began with my work on the grammar of Mongsen Ao. I am indebted to David Bradley for supervising my doctoral research, and for first introducing me to the many theoretical issues surrounding nominalization and relativization in Tibeto-Burman. Nominalization is perhaps the most fascinating aspect of morphosyntax...

* I am grateful to the editors, an anonymous reviewer and Katharina Haude for comments on an earlier draft. The usual disclaimers apply. Thanks are also due to Peh Yang Yu for the artwork of Figure 12-1. Data presented in this paper are sourced from narrative texts and primarily derive from my personal fieldwork on the Tibeto-Burman and Indo-Aryan languages of Northeast India, except where acknowledged by citation of other publications. Where possible, I have used Mongsen Ao examples from published sources, but the publication of this chapter precedes the processing and archiving of other data presented. Transcriptions closely conform to IPA conventions. Rising intonation (an important prosodic component of sequential converb clauses in some languages) is encoded by ↗ where relevant to the analysis. Tones are marked by diacritics following the usual Asianist conventions, or by ‘tone letters’ (Chao 1930). In some cited examples, glosses have been modified to preserve consistency with the conventions of the volume.
in Tibeto-Burman, and it is intimately implicated in the development of grammatical complexity in these languages.

The focus of this chapter falls upon the diachronic processes responsible for nominal morphology developing a clausal dependent-marking function. The paper will propose some historical pathways by which clause-linking constructions plausibly grammaticalize in Tibeto-Burman languages and will then correlate the findings with their development in other languages of South Asia and beyond, the objective being to identify some commonalities in the diachronic development of syntactic complexity. As my personal research focus is on the Tibeto-Burman languages spoken in Northeast India, and seeing that these languages are not well known to the field, it is appropriate that they will provide the bulk of examples for the following investigation.

While the origins of clause-linking morphemes in Tibeto-Burman languages can often be transparently traced back to their respective diachronic sources in nominal morphology, the actual trajectories of grammaticalization leading to reanalysis – whereby an originally referential function is reinterpreted as encoding a predicative function – are not as well explained nor sufficiently addressed in the literature. Genetti (1986, 1991) and Thurgood (1986) investigated syncretism between case-marking postpositions and clausal subordinating morphology in Bodic, Kathmandu Newari and Lolo-Burmese respectively and found common pathways of grammaticalization consistent with metaphorical extensions of nominal meaning. In her 1991 paper, Genetti acknowledged the important role that nominalization plays in this diachronic process; it is nominalization that initially permits verbs to accept case-marking morphology prior to their reanalysis as clausal subordinators. What remains to be explained is how nominalizers can also develop a clause linking function, sometimes in the absence of the erstwhile case-marking postpositions identified in the above-mentioned papers.

Another issue to ponder is how nominalization arises in the first place. In Sino-Tibetan languages it is widely reported that many nominalizing affixes reflect historical sources in ‘light’ or generic nouns expressing class meanings like ‘person’, ‘place’, ‘time’, ‘thing’ etc. (cf. Beyer 1992: 300; LaPolla 2003: 223; Coupe 2007b: 218–219; Yap & Wang 2011; Xu & Matthews 2011). For example, Mongsen Ao jiptʃə̄n ‘bed’ and mə̄ntʃə̄n ‘chair, stool’ are transparently understood as lexicalizations deriving from ‘sleep-place’ and ‘sit-place’, in which ‘place’ was plausibly the head of a verb-noun compound that subsequently underwent a grammaticalization process.

The morpheme ʃə̄n no longer occurs as an independent lexical noun in the language, but it is noteworthy that a segmentally identical form can be used synchronically (albeit infrequently) as a nominalizing suffix to