

# **Chapter 7**

## **Summary and Conclusion**

### **7.1 Summary**

This thesis has addressed the phenomenon of minor syllables, an areal feature of Southeast Asian languages that is prevalent in many, even unrelated languages (Enfield 2005: 186). Other than agreeing that minor syllables share certain characteristics, there has not been consensus on how to analyze this type of syllable, nor on what terminology to use for this type of phonological structure. This thesis has reviewed research on what has been labeled as a minor syllable or related terms and used the results to analyze minor syllables in Lemi Chin, a Tibeto-Burman language.

#### **7.1.1 Definition of Minor Syllables**

Minor syllables can originate from fossilized lexical morphemes, bound grammatical morphemes, and syllable expansion through epenthetic vowels. While the role of stress has often been given a high standing in the discussion of minor syllables, an analysis of the weight of minor syllables provides a better descriptive framework for understanding this phenomenon. The loss or lack of semantic meaning in minor syllables results in their lack of weight. Considering minor syllables to be non-moraic and non-nuclear explains minor syllables characteristics of vowel neutralization, a reduced inventory of consonants, and a lack of prosodic features including tone, stress, and vowel length.

#### **7.1.2 Application to Lemi Chin**

The phonological analysis of Lemi Chin found 22 consonants, 21 vowels, and 3 tones. Minor syllables in Lemi Chin display characteristics that are generally expected based upon the literature review regarding this syllable type. The consonant inventory is limited, the vowel is non-phonemic, and there is no

contrastive tone marking. Lemi Chin major syllables in contrast always display vowel and tone contrast. The vowel of a major syllable is also significantly longer than that of the pronounced vowel of a minor syllable. While the vowel of a minor syllable is non-contrastive, its phonetic pronunciation is influenced by the surrounding environment.

## 7.2 Conclusion and Recommendations

A wide range of terminology is used to refer to minor syllables, as discussed in section 4.3.5. In order to aid clearer communication, it is recommended that the term “reduced syllable” be used to refer to syllables demonstrating reduced vowel and tone contrast, and the term “minor syllable” be used to refer to those with neutralized vowel contrast.

Because the vowel in the minor syllable is non-distinctive, this can create a challenge when creating or modifying orthographies. Three of the basic options for how to handle the vowel, or lack thereof, in a minor syllable, is to not write it at all, to write it with a unique vowel, or to write it with a vowel symbol that also represents a distinctive vowel that occurs in major syllables (often /a/). It is recommended that one of the first two options be given priority in orthography development since the use of a symbol also used for a phonemic vowel can lead to confusion for readers.

## 7.3 Outlook

There are many linguistic topics relating to Chin languages that warrant further research. One area of interest is the role of tone sandhi in Chin languages. Many questions also remain as to the complete classification of Chin languages and dialects and their relationships to each other. The formation of compounds is another area ripe for further research, and could also help provide insight into the cause of minor syllables that are fossilized lexical morphemes. Regarding minor syllables, an interesting area of further research would be to take the methodology used in this thesis, and to apply it to other Southeast Asian languages, especially some from other language families.