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# A Research Overview of the Bonan Language

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**Abstract:** Bonan language is a special kind of Mongolian language. Due to historical migration and other factors, it can roughly divide into two dialects, the Tongren dialect in Qinghai Province and Jishishan dialect in Gansu Province. Compared with other languages of the same language family, the research on the Bonan language in China started relatively late. From the perspective of longitudinal time, it can be roughly separated into three stages: the embryonic period of Bonan language research (1956-1979); the beginning stage of Bonan language research (1980-2009); since 2010, the research on the Bonan language has been developing. As a whole, the research results of the Bonan language are not very fruitful, and the progress is relatively slow compared with other Mongolian languages. From the perspective of horizontal research content, the existing research on the Bonan language mainly focuses on phonological, supplemented by lexical investigation. Phonetic indagation contains a traditional description and experimental phonetic research, which complement each other and are indispensable. Vocabulary research chiefly involves loanwords, cognate comparisons, and lexicography. And the grammar research on the Bonan language is relatively insufficient. Some studies on language contact in the Ganqing area sometimes mentioned the example of the Bonan language, but few monographs systematically analyze the grammatical phenomena of the Bonan language. Structuralism is the chief method, and typology frameworks are rarely used for research.

**Keywords:** Bonan Language, Mongolian Language Family, Typology

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## 1. Introduction

Bonan is one of the minority ethnic groups with a small population in China, which is mainly distributed in Jishishan county, Linxia Hui Autonomous Prefecture, Gansu Province, and Tongren County, Huangnan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province. Bonan people originated from Bonan Town in Tongren County. During the reign of Tongzhi in the Qing Dynasty, most of them migrated to Ganhetan, Dadun, Gaolijia, Sibaozi, Xiaojia, Gaji, and other villages in Linxia, Gansu Province. People who spoke the same language stayed in the Tongren area at that time and became the Tu ethnic residents now in the four villages of Baoan Xiazhuang, Gasari, Guomari, and Nianduhu in Tongren County, Qinghai Province.

In terms of language, the Bonan people who migrated to Gansu still use the Bonan language. Because of continuous contact and integration with Han and other minorities in

their daily lives, their language is largely influenced by Chinese. The few Bonan residents who did not migrate and stayed in Tongren still spoke the Bonan language, but their tongues later began to fusion with the Tibetan. Since there are apparent differences in pronunciation, vocabulary, and other aspects between the two branches of the Bonan language, they are usually called the Jishishan and the Tongren dialect. According to the Atlas of Chinese Languages (Second Edition) [1], the Bonan language belongs to the Mongolian language family of the Altai Language family. As of 2000, there were about 6,000 members of the Bonan people in Gansu, and about 4,000 Tu people in Tongren, Qinghai Province, who also used the Bonan language. Among the two dialects, the Jishishan dialect can branch out into Ganhetan and Dadun patois; the Tongren dialect can separate into three dialects: Nianduhu, Guomari, and Gasari.

## 2. Three Stages of Bonan Language Research

In recent years, more and more scholars have paid attention to the research of the Bonan language, which started relatively late in Mongolian languages. The history of Bonan language research can be roughly separated into three stages of development.

### 2.1. *The Embryonic Period of Bonan Language Research (1956-1979)*

In 1956, the National Minority Language Survey Team of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences went to Qinghai and Gansu Province to conduct a language survey. The following year, they mimeographed the Mongolian Language Survey Report. The contents involving the Bonan language were later collated and published by Naixiong Chen.

The early scholars who investigated and studied the Bonan language were mainly Chinese Mongolian linguist Chinggeltei and Soviet Union's Todayeva. From 1957 to 1958, Chinggeltei devoted himself to surveying Mongolian languages and dialects in China, including the Bonan language. Based on materials collected in China, Todayeva published a monograph in Moscow in 1961 titled Bonan Language.

To reflect the new appearance of various minorities and strengthen ethnic unity, from 1956 to 1959, the Institute of Ethnic Studies of the Chinese Academy of Sciences sent a large number of scholars to minority areas across the country to conduct social and historical surveys. They later published *A Brief History and Description* co-edited of the Bonan Nationality [2], which mentions in its language section that the Bonan people have their own spoken, but not written language. The Bonan people have always used Chinese as a tool for social interaction. Bonan language has some relationship with the Mongolian, Daur, and Engel languages. Meanwhile, it is relatively close to the languages of Tu and Dongxiang. Chinese loanwords account for about forty percent of its commonly used words, furthermore, their pronunciation and grammar are also influenced by Chinese to a certain extent.

### 2.2. *The Beginning Stage of Bonan Language Research (1980-2009)*

It was not until the 1980s that systematic research on the Bonan language began to emerge. In June 1980, the Institute of Mongolian Language of Inner Mongolia University dispatched seven groups to survey the Mongolian languages in China. Subsequently, a batch of treatises and papers on the study appeared followed. Among them, the most important is the series of studies on the Bonan language by Buhe (布和), Zhaoxiong Liu, and Mongolian linguist Naixiong Chen.

Naixiong Chen was the first scholar to conduct a comprehensive and systematic analysis of the Bonan language. He recorded the phonological, lexical, and grammatical phenomena, with found some tendencies in the evolution of the Bonan language by comparing it with the Mongolian language. He made an in-depth investigation of the dialects of the Bonan language and carefully compared the differences between these dialects. In addition, he collected and published plenty of vocabulary and discourse materials, making crucial contributions to the research and protection of the Bonan language.

Compared with Naixiong Chen's research, Buhe and Zhaoxiong Liu [3] took Dadun Village, Jishishan County, Gansu Province, as the survey site. They adopted the traditional structuralist linguistics research method for the first time to describe the overall linguistic appearance of a single Bonan language dialect. Their research involves the origin, contact, and usage of the language. Meanwhile, they summarize word formation and analyze important grammatical categories. It is an essential reference for learning and researching the Bonan language. Zhaoxiong Liu later made a brief supplement while retaining the original manuscript as much as possible. Even though their research is quite valuable and contributing, there are still some limitations. For example, they rarely made comparisons from the perspective of related languages, nor did they analyze their data from the angles of typology, cognitive linguistics, valence grammar, and experimental phonetics. Specifically, the description of phoneme combinations and particular phonemes is relatively few. In addition, there are only a few explanations for the reasons and effects of loanwords. In terms of grammar, the description of related categories of speech acts, valence variations, and multi-verb structures, especially grammatical relations, clauses, and sentence patterns, can still be further improved.

Furthermore, Zhaoxiong Liu and Lianyun Lin [4] investigated the deterministic with the non-deterministic mood of the verb-predicate sentences in the Bonan and Salar languages. Wu [5] sorted out Naixiong Chen's research on the Bonan language in detail and annotated some corpora. Since 1996, Japanese scholar Nobuharu Sato also has published a series of papers on the Bonan language. Stefan Müller [6] conducted a comparative study of the grammatical categories of Mongolian languages of the Altaic family, including Bonan.

### 2.3. *The Development Period of Bonan Language Research (2010-)*

The third stage of Bonan language research began roughly in 2010. In this stage, the research papers mainly focus on phonetics and vocabulary. Using "Bonan language" as the keyword, the article conducts a visual analysis of 58 related papers retrieved in CNKI.



Figure 1. Overall trend analysis chart of the Bonan language research papers.

As can be seen from Figure 1, the research on the Bonan language in China gradually started around 1980, and it began to develop rapidly in about 2010, which also verifies the rationality of the article on the stages of Bonan language research from one aspect. In general, Bonan language research started relatively late, and its process is not remarkably rapid.

Most of the research papers in the third stage involve the discussion of phonology and vocabulary. In terms of phonetics, linguistic researchers mainly use the methods of experimental phonetics to conduct acoustic analysis and then compare the phonemic systems of Bonan with other related languages in the same family to find their features. In terms of vocabulary research, the origin, quantity, and way of loanwords are further in-depth. Scholars also focus on the cognates of the Bonan language with Mongolian. It is a pity that at this stage, there is still relatively little research on the grammatical and syntactic phenomena, which mainly distribute sporadically in papers of grammatical analyses of other languages of the Mongolian language family. Fried [7] described the phonetic inventory, prosodic structure, morphology, noun phrases, verb phrases, clauses, and sentences of the Qinghai Tongren Bonan language in detail under the guidance of the basic theory of linguistics. It is the first Bonan language reference grammar.

### 3. Overview of Bonan Language Research

#### 3.1. Phonetics Research

In the relevant literature of Bonan language research, the study on phonetics is relatively the most, followed by the survey of loanwords and cognates. The least adequately studied is syntax. Phonological research mainly includes traditional phonological description research and experimental phonetics research.

The traditional phonological description involves phonemic description, syllable structure, stress, and phonological changes. Naixiong Chen [8] took Nianduhu as his investigation point and sorted out the vowels and consonants of the Bonan dialect. He believes that the syllable

structure of Bonan has four types: vowel, vowel + consonant, consonant + vowel, consonant + vowel + consonant, and stress does not have the function of distinguishing semantics in Bonan. Buhe and Zhaoxiong Liu [9] detailedly sorted out the phoneme system of Dadun patois and listed nine types of syllable structures that may appear in the Bonan dialect. In terms of stress, he further proposed two situations of stress in the Bonan dialect compound words. Ling Jin [10] used the method of traditional linguistics to summarize and compare the dialects of the Bonan language from aspects like phonemes and voice quality.

In experimental phonetics research, a group of ethnographers represented by Qinggeertai and Huhe from Inner Mongolia University and Northwest University for Nationalities conducted phonetic experiments on Mongolian languages. They also build an acoustic database for Bonan language auditory research. Degjirhu [11] established the sound parameter database of the Bonan language and systematically analyzed the acoustic characteristics of short vowels, long vowels, and diphthongs. Ling Jin and Batugrzyle [12] examined the acoustic characteristics of nasal consonants /m/, /n/, and /ŋ/ in the Bonan patois and showed their articulation position and frequency characteristics. Most of these phonological studies also involve the internal comparison of the Bonan language, Mongolian language, and Bonan language dialects. They have made an essential contribution to the research of Bonan.

Although the previous phonetics studies are relatively sufficient, their analysis still has some differences. Therefore, this paper briefly summarizes and compares the research results related to Bonan language phonetics.

##### 3.1.1. Vowels

According to previous research, it is not difficult to find that the Jishishan dialect has more short vowels than the Tongren dialect, and Ganhetan has more long vowels. The vowel differences are mainly in roughly /a/ and /ə/ phonemes. Jishishan dialect does not have long vowels, but the Tongren dialect has long vowels. The number of diphthongs in the Jishishan dialect is more than in Tongren, among which Ganhetan has the most abundant diphthongs, including /ie/, /iɔ/, /iu/, /uɔ/, and other diphthongs not found in different dialects.

Table 1. The comparison of the short vowels in the Bonan language.

Research results	Dialect points	Short vowel
Naixiong Chen (1987)	Nianduhu	/a/, /ə/, /e/, /i/, /o/, /u/
Naixiong Chen (1995a)	Baoan Xiazhuang	/a/, /ə/, /e/, /i/, /o/, /u/
Naixiong Chen (1989)	Ganheta	/a/, /ə/, /E/, /i/, /o/, /u/, /A/, /ɔ/, /y/, /w/
Buhe & Zhaoxiong Liu (2009)	Dadun	/a/ or /ā/, /ə/, /e/, /i/ or /ī/, /o/, /u/ or /ū/, /y/
Degjirhu (2017)	Dadun	/ə/, /e/, /i/, /ə/, /o/, /u/

\* Naixiong Chen (1989) used /a/ to represent the back vowel /a/. Buhe & Zhaoxiong Liu (2009) did the same.

Table 2. The comparison of the long vowels in the Bonan language.

Research results	Dialect points	Long vowel
Naixiong Chen (1987)	Nianduhu	/a:/, /e:/, /i:/, /o:/, /u:/
Naixiong Chen (1995a)	Baoan Xiazhuang	/a:/, /e:/, /i:/, /o:/, /u:/
Naixiong Chen (1995b)	Ganheta	Not found
Naixiong Chen (1995b)	Dadun	Not found

Table 3. The comparison of diphthongs in the Bonan language.

Research results	Dialect points	Diphthongs
Naixiong Chen (1987)	Nianduhu	/ai/, /au/, /əi/, /ua/, /ue/, /ui/, /uə/, /əu/, /iə/
Naixiong Chen (1995a)	Baoan Xiazhuang	/ai/, /au/, /əi/, /ua/, /ue/, /ui/, /uə/, /ia/, /io/
Naixiong Chen (1995b)	Ganheta	/ai/, /au/, /əi/, /ua/, /ue/, /ui/, /uə/, /əu/, /iə/, /ia/, /ie/, /io/, /iu/, /uo/
Buhe & Zhaoxiong Liu (2009)	Dadun	/ai/, /əi/, /ao/, /əu/, /ia/, /iə/, /io/ or /iao/, /iu/ or /iəu/, /ua/, /uā/, /uə/, /ue/ or /uai/, /ye/

3.1.2. Consonants

As shown in the following two tables, we can see that all dialects of the Bonan language have plosive /p/, /t/, /k/, /b/, /d/, /g/, /c/, affricate /ts/, /tʂ/, /tɕ/, /dz/, /dz/, /dz/, tremolo /r/, and lateral /l/. The Tongren dialect generally has more consonants than the Jishishan dialect, and the differences in consonants between diverse dialects are mainly in the fricative and nasal consonants. Dadun patois has no fricative /ʂ/, and the Tongren dialect has additional fricatives /ç/, /ʎ/, and /z/. There is an

affricate /cç/ in the Baoan Xiazhuang and no nasal /ŋ/ in Jishishan dialects. In terms of correspondence, the /w/ of Nianduhu and Dadun corresponds to the /v/ of Ganheta and Baoan Xiazhuang. The /x/ of Ganheta corresponds to /χ/ of other dialects. There are still differences in the phonemic induction of the three consonants /h/, /ɦ/, and /ʂ/ in different dialects. In terms of the plural consonants, there are some differences among the Bonan languages. Tongren dialect has more plural consonants beginning with /h/, /ɦ/, and /ʂ/.

Table 4. The comparison of the single consonant in the Bonan language.

Research results	Dialect points	Single consonant
Naixiong Chen (1987)	Nianduhu	/b/, /p/, /m/, /f/, /dz/, /ts/, /s/, /d/, /t/, /n/, /r/, /l/, /dz/, /tʂ/, /ʂ/, /dʒ/, /tɕ/, /e/, /j/, /g/, /k/, /ŋ/, /c/, /ç/, /h/, /ʂ/, /w/, /z/, /z/, /ʎ/, /ŋ/, /ç/
Naixiong Chen (1995a)	Baoan Xiazhuang	/b/, /p/, /m/, /f/, /dz/, /ts/, /s/, /d/, /t/, /n/, /r/, /l/, /dz/, /tʂ/, /ʂ/, /dʒ/, /tɕ/, /e/, /j/, /g/, /k/, /ŋ/, /c/, /ç/, /h/, /ʂ/, /v/, /cç/, /z/, /ʎ/, /ŋ/, /ç/
Naixiong Chen (1995b)	Ganheta	/b/, /p/, /m/, /f/, /dz/, /ts/, /s/, /d/, /t/, /n/, /r/, /l/, /dz/, /tʂ/, /ʂ/, /dʒ/, /tɕ/, /e/, /j/, /g/, /k/, /ŋ/, /c/, /x/, /h/, /ʂ/, /v/
Naixiong Chen (1995b)	Dadun	/b/, /p/, /m/, /f/, /dz/, /ts/, /s/, /d/, /t/, /n/, /r/, /l/, /dz/, /tʂ/, /ʂ/, /dʒ/, /tɕ/, /e/, /j/, /g/, /k/, /ŋ/, /c/, /ç/, /h/, /w/
Buhe & Zhaoxiong Liu (2009)	Dadun	/b/, /p/, /m/, /f/, /dz/, /ts/, /s/, /d/, /t/, /n/, /r/, /l/, /dz/, /tʂ/, /ʂ/, /dʒ/, /tɕ/, /e/, /j/, /g/, /k/, /ŋ/, /c/, /ç/, /h/, /w/

Table 5. The comparison of the consonant cluster in the Bonan language.

Research results	Dialect points	The first consonant of consonant clusters
Naixiong Chen (1987)	Nianduhu	/n/, /ŋ/, /m/, /h/, /ʂ/, /r/, /s/, /ʂ/
Naixiong Chen (1995a)	Baoan Xiazhuang	/n/, /ŋ/, /m/, /h/, /ʂ/, /r/, /s/
Naixiong Chen (1995b)	Ganheta	/n/, /ŋ/, /m/, /ʂ/, /s/, /f/, /x/, /k/
Naixiong Chen (1995b)	Dadun	/n/, /ŋ/, /m/, /ʂ/, /s/, /f/, /x/, /k/, /t/, /l/
Buhe & Zhaoxiong Liu (2009)	Dadun	/n/, /ŋ/, /m/, /ʂ/, /f/, /ç/, /t/, /r/, /l/

3.2. Lexical Semantic Research

Research papers on the lexical semantics of the Bonan language mainly involve the comparison of cognates and loan words, and monographs mainly include dictionaries,

textbooks, and discourse materials.

3.2.1. Research Papers on Vocabulary

The scholar with the most comprehensive research on vocabulary is Naixiong Chen. His research mainly involves three parts, the situation of loanwords in each dialect, the

influence of loanwords on the evolution, and comparing the word formation within each language. Naixiong Chen [13] briefly introduced the way of word formation in the Bonan language, the origin of inherent words, and the relationship between cognate words and Mongolian when discussing vocabulary issues. Naixiong Chen [14] believes that the Tongren dialect usually absorbs Tibetan loanwords, while the Jishishan dialect contains many Chinese words. He also gives examples to compare the differences in the loanwords. Buhe and Zhaoxiong Liu have also summarized the word formation methods of the Bonan language.

Other research papers related to Bonan language vocabulary, such as Hua Kan [15] analyzed the types, semantic characteristics, and word formation methods of Tibetan loanwords in the Bonan Language. Lisarula (李萨如拉) [16] investigated the semantic correspondence types of cognate words in the Bonan language and Mongolian. Hong Xu [17] and Siqinhu (斯琴呼) [18] respectively took the kinship appellations and human body vocabulary of the Bonan language as objects and summarized their use, sources, and semantic changes. These three articles were all completed under the guidance of Hasengerel (哈申格日勒) and not written in Chinese characters. Chunfang Min, Bingxin Du, and Xing Liu [19] analyzed the characteristics of Chinese loanwords in the Jishishan Bonan language from the synchronic level, summarized the borrowing mechanism of vocabulary, and introduced the influence of the inherent vocabulary system to loanwords.

### 3.2.2. Dictionary and Discourse Materials

Bonan language has become an endangered language. Compiling dictionaries and discourse materials can help us understand this language and serve as a reference for bilingual education and one of the tools for language investigation. The publication of these materials is conducive to rescuing endangered languages and protecting ethnic and cultural diversity.

Naixiong Chen [20] took Nianduhu as the primary investigation point and collected many Bonan words. The dictionary consists of common words, supplemented by new words and uncommon words, and has organized more than 5,000 entries. It not only annotates parts of speech and semantics but also marks the loan words from Tibetan, Mongolian, Turkic, Uygur, and Chinese and their written forms. Zhu Sun [21] also recorded plenty of words in the Bonan language. Peiting Ma and Nobuharu Sato [22] produced a relatively accurate and comprehensive dictionary annotated in Chinese Pinyin. Chao Mo and Jianjun Zhang [23] compiled the first English-Chinese dictionary of the Bonan language, which includes some phrases. Naixiong Chen [24], and Hasengerel [25] also recorded the often-used words, historical stories, and customs of Bonan. However, these existing dictionaries and materials may more or less have somewhat inaccurate. In addition, they usually annotate with Chinese pinyin or even Chinese characters, and the overall quality of the materials is not uniform.

## 4. Grammatical Research

In contrast to phonological and lexical studies, there is relatively little research on the grammar of the Bonan language. Most importantly, Buhe, Naixiong Chen, and Zhaoxiong Liu conducted a relatively comprehensive and systematic analysis of the grammar of Bonan. Fried gives a very detailed description of the grammar of the Tongren Bonan language, which is of a great reference value. Meanwhile, there are only a few papers devoted to the grammatical phenomenon of the Bonan language. Nobuharu Sato and Peiting Ma [26] compared the semantic differences between the degree adverbs /moölñ/ and /gý/ in the Jishishan dialect. Chunfang Min [27] mentioned the Bonan language when analyzing the case category of languages in Gansu and Qinghai. Jiaying Chen [28] and Xiaodan Fan [29] take Bonan and other languages as examples when discussing such specific grammatical items as negation marks, verb categories, and plural noun marks. The following is a brief summary of some previous research achievements.

In the aspect of grammar, linguists usually first introduce the word classes of the Bonan language and the functional characteristics of various word classes. Their classification is basically the same, but some are more detailed in dividing adjectives, numerals, and particles. Naixiong Chen has a relatively in-depth study on the word types of the Bonan language. He not only pointed out the characteristics and functions of each part of speech but also further investigated the representation method of numerals, the derivation way of adjectives, the meaning of modality words, and other detailed grammatical issues.

Regarding the related categories of nouns, most scholars believe that nouns in Bonan have no gender categories, only number, case, and possession categories. They have slightly different views on the field of number category, the main difference is whether the Bonan language has an exact distinction between singular and neutral numbers. Besides, the previous scholars have roughly the same understanding of the case and possession category. They often believe that the case form of the Bonan language is more concise than that of the Mongolian language. Hence they focus on the corresponding relation between the Bonan and the Mongolian language in the case category. In addition to discussing the markers of possession, scholars also pay attention to the diachronic origin of the possessive component.

The grammatical category of Bonan language verbs is quite complex, but there are relatively few papers on the related category of Bonan language verbs. According to the position and function of the verb in the sentence, the former scholars usually divide the verb into three forms: terminal form, multifunctional form (adjective verb), and connecting form (adverbial verbs). In addition to investigating tense and aspect categories of verbs, they also distinguish from the perspective of definite mood and non-definite mood. Most of the existing studies follow the framework of Mongolian language research. On the whole, From the

standpoint of traditional structuralism, they describe the relevant categories of verbs as a whole, which has a certain reference value for the study of grammar. However, the rationality of some analyses still needs to be further verified and improved. The syntactic research on the Bonan language is even rarer.

## 5. Conclusion

Therefore, to sum up, since the 1950s, related research on the Bonan language began to appear and continue to develop. These studies mainly focus on synchronic description, and diachronic analysis is relatively rare. Most research used qualitative analysis methods, and few used professional equipment or software for quantitative analysis. From the perspective of the research group, it is mainly a few linguists and their students who have paid attention to the Bonan language for a long time. From the point of dialect, the research on the Tongren Bonan dialect is relatively sufficient. Analyzing the research status will help us to continue the study and investigation based on the current research results of the Bonan language. The possible future direction of Bonan language research is to combine phonological description with experimental phonetics, pay equal attention to lexical record and etymology, and conduct more detailed grammatical analysis of single dialect or sub-dialect points under the typology framework.

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