

Relax, let go, put, and leave: A colexification shared by languages of Mainland Northeast Asia

Abstract

We show that four major languages spoken in the area of Mainland Northeast Asia (MNEA) - Mandarin, Korean, Mongolian, and Manchu - share a similar pattern of colexifying the four meanings of ‘to relax (a part of oneself)’, ‘to release/let go’, ‘to put’, and ‘to leave (an object at a location)’. Considering that the colexification between ‘to put’ and ‘to release’ is rather rare typologically, we suggest that this may be an areal feature that characterizes this region. Furthermore, we aim to employ cognitive linguistic theories to explain how the colexification of these four meanings is conceptually feasible. We argue that these four meanings are different profiles of the same conceptual base of the event chain of object placement, which is prototypically represented by the human manual action of placing an object at a location.

1 Introduction

Schapper et al. [1] showed that the genealogically diverse languages of the Sahul area - the area grouping together Australia, New Guinea, and neighboring islands - tend to use the same lexeme for ‘fire’ and ‘firewood’, while such colexification is rare outside of Sahul. The authors showed how similar colexification patterns occur in many different languages within a specific geographical area, suggesting that this could lead us to analyze Sahul as a linguistic area, unlike the popular view of viewing Australia and New Guinea as separate linguistic areas. Like any areally biased linguistic features, areally biased colexification patterns can justify defining a linguistic area.

Similar to Schapper et al.’s study, we point to a recurrent colexification occurring in the four major languages of an area we call Mainland Northeast Asia (MNEA), which encompasses Northern China, Mongolia, and Korea, but not Russian Far East and Japan, somewhat analogous to the Mainland Southeast Asia (MSEA) sprachbund [2]. By “major” languages we refer to languages that have been used by the politically dominant groups in this area and had a long written tradition: Mandarin (Sino-Tibetan), Korean (Koreanic), Mongolian (Mongolic), and Manchu (Tungusic). These MNEA languages, who have had extensive contact with each other, colexify the the four meanings of ‘to relax (a part of oneself)’, ‘to release/let go’, ‘to put/place’, and ‘to leave (an object at a location)’. While the colexification between ‘to relax’ and ‘to release’ and that between ‘to put’ and ‘to leave’ are relatively common worldwide, we show that the colexification between ‘to release’ and ‘to put’ are quite rare typologically, which points to the possibility that this is an contact-motivated colexification similar to the colexification between ‘fire’ and ‘firewood’ in Sahul.

2 Previous literature

Several studies have pointed out the colexification between ‘to put’ and ‘to release’ in each of the four major MNEA languages. In this section, we will briefly summarize those studies.

Wu [3] categorized the wide range of meanings of the Manchu verb *sinda-* ᠰᡳᠨᡳᠳᠠ- ‘to put; to release; to emit; to loosen; to bury; etc.’ into two main meanings of ‘to put’ and ‘to release’, arguing that all other meanings stem from one of these meanings. Wu did not discuss how these two core meanings are related to each other, however.

Stolpe and Senderjav [4] suggest that the diverse meanings of the Mongolian verb *tavi-* тави- (Middle Mongolian *talbi-* ᠲᠠᠯᠪᡳ-), including ‘to put’, ‘to release’, ‘to park (a car)’, ‘to build (a road)’, ‘to give (a talk)’, and many others, imply the movement of “something [being] moved away from the body of the subject” (p. 351). For example, parking a car implies the car moving away from the driver, building a road implies the road moving away from the builder, and so on.

Similarly, Korean verb *noh-* 놓- (transcribed as *nwoh-* in pre-20th-century Korean) can express both ‘to put’ and ‘to release’. Noh [5] argues that these two senses form an event chain of the agent letting go of something and placing it somewhere. In other works, the act of putting (the movement away from the agent towards a location) implies the act of releasing (the movement away from the agent). Jang [6] makes a similar argument, positing the releasing sense as the prototypical meaning of *noh-*, and arguing that the putting sense is an extension of this prototypical meaning.

Liu and Chang [7] argued that the two meanings of the Mandarin verb *fàng* 放, ‘to put’ and ‘to release’, are different profiles of a single image schema depicting a caused-motion of a figure from a source towards an endpoint. The meaning of ‘to put’ profiles the arrival of the figure at the endpoint, whereas the meaning of ‘to release’ profiles the departure of the figure from the source.

The five studies mentioned here, apparently conducted independently without the awareness of each other, largely concur that the meanings of the abovementioned verbs can largely be classified as ‘to put’ and ‘to release’, and that these two core meanings are related to each other.

3 Research question & Methodology

We would like to seek answer to three questions in this paper.

- (i) Is this common feature shared by MNEA languages an areal feature? In other words, is this colexification a special character of the MNEA region, or commonly found elsewhere as well?
- (ii) Do the MNEA verbs that colexify ‘to put’ and ‘to release’ also colexify other meanings in common?
- (iii) If (ii) is true, how can we, in terms of cognitive linguistics, explain the range of meanings colexified by these four languages?

In Section 4, we will draw data from the World Loanword Database [8] and CLICS³ [9] to show that the colexification of ‘to put’ and ‘to release’ is not common worldwide. This typological rarity paired with the fact that this colexification occurs in four main MNEA languages suggests that it may be an areal feature of the MNEA region. Furthermore, in Section 5, we will present

philological evidence from 17-18th century texts of the four MNEA languages to show that the verbs that colexify ‘to put’ and ‘to release’ also colexify ‘to relax (a part of oneself)’ and ‘to leave (an object at a location)’. Lastly, in section 6, we will use the theory of base-profile [10, Ch. 3] and force dynamids [11] to explain the cognitive motivation for this colexification.

4 Typological rarity

In this section, we argue that the polysemy between ‘to put’ and ‘to release, to let go’ is not a typologically common phenomenon. In other words, although not limited to the MNEA area, the colexification between ‘to put’ and ‘to release’ is relatively rare worldwide.

To make this argument, we first make use of the World Loanword Database [8], a database consisting of small online dictionaries of 41 languages around the world. All dictionaries share the same list of meanings, including ‘to put’ and ‘to let go’. Among the 41 languages, 38 are shown in the database to have a word for both meanings. It would be meaningful to examine whether any of the 38 languages use the same word for the two meanings. Table 1 shows the list of words meaning ‘to put’ and ‘to let go’ in the 38 languages.

It strikes us that none of the 38 languages are shown to have the same word for both meanings. Of course, this does not actually mean that none of these 38 languages colexify the two meanings. In some cases, the lexicographer has chosen to put different words to represent the two meanings even though one word can represent the two. Mandarin is represented by *fang4* and *bai3* (放 and 擺) for the meaning ‘to put’ and by *song1kai1* (鬆開) for the meaning ‘to let go’. Even though *sōngkāi* can indeed mean ‘to let go, to release’, we have shown in section 5 that *fàng* carries that meaning as well. Also, even though White Hmong is listed as having *rau* for ‘to put’ and *tso* for ‘to let go’, *tso* is also a commonly used verb to mean placement. But even if we take into consideration this limit of the data shown in Table 1, it still gives us the take-home message that the colexification between the two meanings of ‘to put’ and ‘to let go (release)’ is not common worldwide. Thus, if four languages of the MNEA region show this relatively uncommon colexification, then it is likely that this colexification is an areal feature characteristic of (although not limited to) that region.

Next, we consult the CLICS³ database [9], which is a database showing colexification patterns in 3156 language varieties (languages and dialects) around the world. For example, it shows that 18 language varieties colexify the concept of PUT and GIVE. We wish to see how many languages represented in the database colexify PUT and LET GO OR SET FREE. Table 2 shows that only four language varieties are shown to colexify the two concepts.

300 language varieties have a word meaning PUT and a word meaning LET GO OR SET FREE represented in CLICS³. Out of these 300 language varieties, only four are shown to colexify the two concepts. Again, this does not reflect the reality in complete faithfulness: Mandarin and White Hmong are both included in the 300 language varieties, but CLICS³ does not represent them as colexifying the two concepts, when in fact they do. Nevertheless, data from CLICS³ also suggests that only a small fraction of the world’s languages colexify ‘to put’ and ‘to release’.

Table 1: Word for ‘to put’ and ‘to let go’ in the languages of the World Loanword Database

Language	‘to put’	‘to let go’
Archi	eʔ:as	atis
Bezhta	gul-	-eccak’-
Dutch	leggen	loslaten
English	put	let go
Gawwada	hawwad	pinni
Gurindji	yuwa-	purrul yuwa-
Hausa	sâa	sàkaa
Hawaiian	waiho	ho’oku’u, leikō
Hup	w’ob-	poʔ-
Imbabura Quechua	churana	kacharina
Indonesian	menaruh, meletakkan	melepas
Iraqw	qaas	geemaw
Japanese	oku	hanasu
Kali’na	ili	nonta
Kanuri	yikkò	kòltá
Ket	dij	ultij
Kildin Saami	pijje	lūšš’te
Lower Sorbian	położyś, scyniś	pušciś
Malagasy	manisy, mamètraka	manàfaka, mandèfa
Mandarin Chinese	fang4, bai3	song1kai1
Mapudungun	tukun	neykümün
Old High German	leg(g)en	firlâzan
Oroqen	nə:-	nɔ:da:-
Otomi	pegi, ’ba’mi, hots’e, kats’I, kàts’I, pogi	hegi
Q’eqchi’	xk’eeb’al, b’aaxink	tob’ok, ach’ab’ank
Romanian	a pune	a da drumul
Sakha	u:r	i:t
Saramaccan	butá	disá
Selice Romani	thoven	muken
Seychelles Creole	mete	delivre, large, lase, desarze
Swahili	-weka, -tia	-acha
Takia	-gane, -ga	-bsei- -aw
Tarifiyt Berber	ssās	đ’řəq
Thai	waan	plòy
Vietnamese	đẽ	buông
White Hmong	rau	tso
Wichí	itihí, ithathu, itikfwfi, iti’pe’, itiklafwete,	ilanhi, yomet, ileyej
Yaqui	itikpho yecha, joa	su’utoja

Table 2: Four language varieties that colexify PUT and LET GO OR SET FREE according to CLICS³

Language	Family	Words colexifying both concepts
Hausa	Afro-Asiatic	saka
Wapishana	Arawakan	miida-n
Tacana	Pano-Tacanan	iča-
Yangliu	Sino-Tibetan	p ^h i ²¹

5 The meanings colexified by the four languages

In this section, we will show that the MNEA verbs in question not only colexify ‘to put’ and ‘to release’, but also ‘to relax (a part of oneself)’ and ‘to leave (an object at a location)’. The overlap of this range of four meanings further strengthens the hypothesis that their shared colexification is not a coincidence but an areally motivated feature.

In order to show that the four meanings are shared by the verbs of the four languages, we have taken parallel texts from various versions of *Nokeltay* 老乞大 series, a series of foreign language textbooks in Korea published until the 18th century. The contents of the different versions of *Nokeltay* are nearly identical, sharing the plot of a Korean merchant visiting China to sell horses and other goods. We have collected parallel phrases in four languages from four versions of *Nokeltay*, shown in Table 3.

Table 3: List of *Nokeltay* textbooks used as sources

Title	Language	Year of publication
<i>Nokeltay Enhay</i> 老乞大諺解	Korean and Mandarin	1670
<i>Cwungkan Nokeltay Enhay</i> 重刊老乞大諺解	Korean and Mandarin	1795
<i>Monge Nokeltay</i> 蒙語老乞大	Korean and Mongolian	1741
<i>Chenge Nokeltay</i> 清語老乞大	Korean and Manchu	1704

The examples (1-5) show the four meanings of put-release verbs shared by Mandarin (a.), Korean (b.), Mongolian (c.), and Manchu (d.).

(1) ‘To relax (a part of oneself)’

- a. 這麼 我們 明日 一早 好 放心 去了
zhè-me wǒ-men míng-rì yì-zǎo hǎo fàng-xīn qù-le
 this-ADV 1SG-PL bright-day one-early good relax-heart go-PRF

‘Then let’s leave tomorrow morning without worries [lit. relaxing our heart].’ (*Cwungkan Nokeltay Enhay* 23b)

- b. 이라면 우리 來日 일즈기 무음 노하 가자
ile-myen wuli noy-il ilcok-i moom nwoh-a ka-cya
 such-if 1PL come-day early-ADV heart relax-INF go-HORT

‘If so, then let’s leave tomorrow morning without worries [lit. relaxing our heart.]’ (*Nokeltay Enhay* 1:24)

c. ነጻሚ ባላባላ ገላግላ ለሰላም ር ከሰላም ጠቅላይ ለሰላም ነጻሚ ገላግላ
 eyimü bolqula bida sanayan-i sula-qan **talbi-ju** manayyar erte
 such if 1PL thought-ACC weak-DIM relax-IPFV.CVB tomorrow early

ሮገጥ ገ
 eçiy-e
 leave-HORT

'If so, then let's not worry [lit. let loose the thought]' and leave early tomorrow.'
 (Monge Nokeltay 2:10a)

d. ሁሉም ገላግላ ገላግላ ገላግላ ገላግላ ገላግላ ገላግላ ገላግላ ገላግላ ገላግላ
 uttu oci be cimari mujilen **sinda-fi** erde-ken-i gene-mbi kai
 if so 1PL tomorrow heart relax-PRF.CVB early-DIM-GEN go-IPFV SFP

'If so, then let's not worry tomorrow [lit. relax the heart] and leave early in the morn-
 ing.' (Chenge Nokeltay 2:13a)

(2) 'To release':

a. 你 喫了 飯 着 兩箇人 趕 馬 放 去
 nǐ chī-le fàn zhuó liǎng-ge-rén gǎn mǎ fàng qù
 2SG eat-PRF meal send two-CLF-person drive horse **release** go

'When you have eaten, send two people to lead the horses and release them there.'
 (Cwungkan Nokeltay Enhay 51b)

b. 네 밥 먹거든 두 사람으로 하여 말을 모라
 ne-y pap mek-ketun twu salom-ulo ho-ye mol-ul mwol-a
 2SG-NOM meal eat-if two person-INS do-INF horse-ACC drive-INF
 노하라 가
nwoh-ula ka-0

release-INTENT go-INF

'When you [finish] eating, let two people go lead the horses and release them there.'
 (Cwungkan Nokeltay Enhay 51b)

c. ገላግላ ለሰላም ገላግላ ገላግላ ገላግላ ገላግላ ገላግላ ገላግላ ገላግላ ገላግላ
 ta buda ide-sen qoyin-a qoyar kümün mori abçi-ju **tende talbi**
 2PL meal eat-PRF after-LOC two person horse take-IPFV.CVB there **release**

'After you have eaten, two people [among you] take the horses and release them there.'
 (Monge Nokeltay 4:1b)

d. ሰ ገላግላ ገላግላ ገላግላ ገላግላ ገላግላ ገላግላ ገላግላ ገላግላ ገላግላ
 si buda je-ke manggi juwe nofi morin be bošo-me tuba-de
 2SG MEAL eat-PRF.PTCP after two person horse ACC lead-IPFV.CVB there-DAT
 ገላግላ ገላግላ ገላግላ ገላግላ ገላግላ ገላግላ ገላግላ ገላግላ ገላግላ ገላግላ
 gama-fi **sinda-ci** hefeli ebimbi dere
 take-PRF.CVB **release-COND.CVB** belly full-INF likely

‘After you have eaten, if two people [among you] lead the horses to that place and release them there, they will probably eat their full.’

(3) ‘To put’

- a. 都 在 房子裏 放着
dōu zài fáng-zi-lǐ fàng-zhe
 all at house-DIM-LOC put-CONT

‘Put all [the wagons] into the house.’ (*Cwungkan Nokeltay Enhay* 35a)

- b. 다 도히 집의 드러 노하 두고
ta tyoh-i cip-uy tul-y-e nwoh-a twu-kwo
 all good-ADV house-LOC enter-CAUS-INF put-INF keep-and

‘Put all [the wagons] nicely into the house.’ (*Nokeltay Enhay* 2:33)

- c. འཇམ་མཚོ་ལ་ རྩེ་ལྷན་གྱི་ རྩེ་ལྷན་ འོ་ལྷན་ འོ་ལྷན་
tere terge-yi čöm sayiqan ger-te orol-ju talbi
 that wagon-ACC all good house-LOC insert-IPFV.CVB put

‘Put all those wagons nicely into the house.’ (*Monge Nokeltay* 7:2a)

- d. རྩེ་ལྷན་ རྩེ་ལྷན་ རྩེ་ལྷན་ རྩེ་ལྷན་
gemu sai-kan boo-de dosi-mbu-me sinda
 all good-DIM house-DAT enter-CAUS-IPFV.CVB put

‘Put all [the wagons] nicely into the house.’ (*Chenge Nokeltay* 7:2a)

(4) ‘To leave (an object at a place)’

- a. 只 在 這 店裏 放着
zhǐ zài zhè diàn-lǐ fàng-zhe
 only at this shop-in leave-CONT

‘Just leave [the horses] in this shop.’ (*Cwungkan Nokeltay Enhay* 54)

- b. 그저 이 店에 노하 두라
kuce i cyem-ey nwoh-a twu-la
 only this shop-LOC leave-INF keep-IMP

‘Just leave [the horses] in this shop.’ (*Cwungkan Nokeltay Enhay* 54)

- c. རྩེ་ལྷན་ རྩེ་ལྷན་ རྩེ་ལྷན་
jüger ene diyan-du talbi
 only this shop-LOC leave

‘Just leave [the horses] in this shop.’ (*Monge Nokeltay* 4:18b)

- d. རྩེ་ལྷན་ རྩེ་ལྷན་ རྩེ་ལྷན་
taka ere diyan-de bibu
 yet the store-DAT leave

‘For now, leave [the horses] in this shop.’ (*Chenge Nokeltay* 5:2a)

Even though Manchu uses the verb *bibu-* ‘to leave’ rather than *sinda-* in (4d), *sinda-* is used to mean ‘to leave’ in other sentences, such as (5).

- (5) ነብ ክሳብ ስላሳ ስላሳ ነብ ዳቦ/ ስላሳ ስላሳ ዳቦ/ ስላሳ ስላሳ ስላሳ ነብ ክሳብ ስላሳ ስላሳ
 ere šolo-ho efen dulin šahūrun dulin halhūn. halhūn ningge be take
 this bake-PRF.PTCP bread half cold half hot hot SUBST ACC yet
- ሰንዳ-ፍታ ገብረ-ክ
 sinda-fi je-ki
 leave-PRF.CVB eat-OPT
 ‘Among these baked loaves of bread, half are cold and half are hot. Let’s leave the hot ones [here] and eat them for now.’ (*Chenge Nokeltay* 4:14a)

These examples show that the four MNEA languages not only colexify the two meanings of ‘to put’ and ‘to release’, but a wider semantic range consisting of ‘to relax’, ‘to release’, ‘to put’, and ‘to leave’. This high degree of semantic overlap makes it difficult for such similarity to be coincidental, and further supports the possibility of a contact-induced feature.

6 The colexification explained by cognitive linguistics

In this penultimate section, we will employ cognitive linguistic theories to explain the motivation for four languages to colexify the semantic range from ‘to relax’ to ‘to leave’. We will specifically use Langacker’s theory of conceptual base and profile [10, Ch. 3] and Talmy’s theory of force dynamics [11].

According to Langacker’s theory, the basis for an expression’s meaning is a wide range of semantic “body”, which he refers to as the conceptual **base**. An expression directs our attention to a specific part of the base, which he refers to as the **profile**. For example, the English expressions *hub*, *spoke*, *rim*, and *wheel* all share the same base - the wheel - and yet profile different parts of the base to express different parts of a wheel.

We argue that this theory can be employed to explain the colexification of the four meanings of ‘to relax/release/put/and leave’. That is, the four meanings all share the same base of an **event chain** [12, cf.] as presented below:

- (i) The agent **relaxes** a part of themself.
- (ii) By (i), the agent **releases** the patient.
- (iii) By (ii), the agent **puts** the patient at an endpoint.
- (iv) By (iii), the agent **leaves** the agent at an endpoint.

This chain of events is prototypically represented by the human manual action of placing something somewhere. When we want to place, say, a book on a table, we must first relax our hand to loosen the grip, then release the held book onto the table, thereby placing it there, and finally leave it there so that it is moved no further. As Lakoff and Johnson [13] have argued, the human way of thinking is based on our everyday bodily experience. We thereby argue that our bodily experience of placing something with our hand onto somewhere construes the conceptual base that starts with relaxing and ends with leaving, and that the four MNEA verbs can profile any of the four parts of this event chain.

The colexification of these concepts can also be explained in terms of Talmy’s force dynamics theory, which argues that we conceptualize the events we perceive as the interaction between

the **agonist** and the **antagonist**. The antagonist is the entity exerting greater force to the agonist, either causing or permitting it to act or to rest. For example, the phrase *I move the cake from the box* would be the antagonist (*I*), by greater force, **causing** the agonist (*the cake*) to **move**, against its inertia to remain in the box. On the other hand, the phrase *I leave the cake in the box* would be the antagonist **permitting** the agonist to **rest**, as it already is in the box.

In view of this theory, ‘to put’ is the antagonist causing the rest of the antagonist, whereas ‘to leave’ is the antagonist permitting the rest of the antagonist. In other words, putting the wagons into the house is causing the wagons (that are not in the house) to rest in the house, whereas leaving the horses in the shop is permitting the horses (who are already in the shop) to rest in the house. Furthermore, ‘to release’ can express the antagonist permitting the agonist to act (move). For example, releasing the horses can be seen as the antagonist permitting the agonist (the horses) to move freely. (This applies only to cases where the agonist has the tendency to move, however. Phrases like *I let go of the handle* cannot be seen as permitted motion.)

Thus, given the two parameters of cause *v.* permit and action *v.* rest, we can say that the three meanings of the MNEA verbs express three of the four possible combinations of the two parameters: caused rest (‘to put’), permitted rest (‘to leave’), and permitted action (‘to release’). The remaining combination, caused action, which would be ‘to move’ or ‘to send’, is not represented by the four MNEA verbs.

7 Conclusion

In this paper, we have seen that the four major languages of the MNEA region colexify four meanings that are prototypically associated to the human event of manually placing an object at a location. We saw that although this colexification is explicable in terms of cognitive linguistics, it is nevertheless uncommon worldwide and yet occurring in four languages of MNEA, which shows a possibility for this region to be a linguistic area. Of course, one linguistic feature is far from enough to define a linguistic area. We wish that this study can motivate future studies investigating whether there are any other features shared by the languages spoken in this specific area that we have brought the reader’s attention to.

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