

COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES,  
ARTS, AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

## Research Highlights 'Interview'



### Self-Introduction

- Briefly introduce yourself, the department and school that you are in.

*I am **Associate Professor Alexander Coupe**, an anthropological linguist in the Linguistics and Multilingual Studies programme of the **School of Humanities (SoH)**, and the founding director of the NTU Language Documentation Lab [www.ntulangdoc.com](http://www.ntulangdoc.com). The research of our team members and students focuses on the documentation and analysis of the languages and cultures of China, Southeast Asia and South Asia.*

### Elaboration

- Share with us what is your research project.

*Our lab currently has a JSPS-NTU grant titled 'Ethnolinguistic contact across the Indo-Myanmar-Southwestern China mountains: migration routes, intercultural interactions and linguistic outcomes' in a collaboration with Japanese colleagues.*

*This region of Asia is home to over 300 languages belonging to four different language families, many of which will probably disappear in the current century, so this project presents a timely opportunity to understand how the region became so linguistically and culturally diverse.*

*A key focus is the comparative study of vocabulary that can enhance our understanding of migration pathways and contact, terminology relating to the cultivation of crops, and technologies such as weaving and metallurgy, as it is known that such cultural knowledge is transmitted intergenerationally in much the same way that language is transmitted, and it may be possible to chart its origin and spread.*

*Other important domains we are currently investigating include ethnobotany, folklore, and linguistic convergence.*

- **What inspired you to embark on this research project?**

*Most researchers only intensively investigate one or two languages in a lifetime because of the enormity of the task of documenting an undescribed language, and they rarely have time to develop equally profound knowledge of more than one or two other languages of a region.*

*We wanted to create a project that could transcend the research obstacles created by the artificial political borders of the region, and also the limitations placed on individual researchers working in isolation. As it turned out, the expertise of the Japanese colleagues perfectly complemented that of the NTU colleagues.*

*This allowed us to create a project that could leverage on an unprecedented combined knowledge of Austroasiatic, Indo-Aryan, Sino-Tibetan and Tai-Kadai languages, dovetailing the expertise of specialists working in Southwestern China, Myanmar and Northeast India for the first time in the history of ethnolinguistic research in the region.*

- **What is/are the most interesting finding(s) of this project?**

*It is still early days, but last month we concluded our first set of informal meetings with Japanese colleagues and a 2-day public workshop held at NTU, during which there was a strong focus on comparative folklore studies in a number of presented papers.*

*One of the interesting findings that emerged was that the same motifs recur frequently in the languages of the region. This has inspired us to set up a comparative database of motifs, the aim being to see if they are confined to particular regions, and if they can be tracked back to their linguistic homelands. The workshop also permitted us to refine and develop our focus on particular research themes, and between now and our next meeting we will be coordinating our fieldwork to collect comparable data across all our linguistic field sites.*

- **How do you think your research can impact society?**

*For academia, we hope that our research project will shed new light on pathways of migration, modes of intercultural transmission and linguistic classification in this neglected corner of Asia, thereby advancing scientific knowledge of the prehistory of human population movements, and contributing to a better understanding of how linguistic convergence in multilingual communities shapes language.*

*Our work potentially has a very positive social impact on the actual speakers of these minority languages as well. As much of our work involves collecting lexicons, folktales and other cultural knowledge, this research has the added benefit of empowering speakers of oral languages to develop orthographies and dictionaries for their languages, and from there it is but a small step to developing pedagogical materials that will permit children to study in their mother tongues. Many of the linguistic communities in which we work already feel that they are marginalized in their own nations, so empowering them through written language is a constructive way to address their current states of disadvantage.*

## Future Plans

- Tell us about your future research plans and if you are looking for any research collaborators!

*Our next series of meetings and workshops will be held in Tokyo in July 2020. We advertised this year's project by word-of-mouth to colleagues and students, resulting in the development of some exciting new research ideas and input by graduate students working on minority languages of the region. We are particularly interested in attracting more collaborators who work in the region and have anthropological interests that broadly intersect with our research objectives.*

## Photo of our Workshop Participants:

