Chapter 1
Introduction

The present thesis is an analysis of the verb complex of Santa Mongolian, the language spoken by the Chinese minority group called Dongxiang (东乡). The present chapter gives an overview on the people group and the sociolinguistic status of the language. In Chapter 2, a discussion on the previous literature on Santa and related languages is given, as well as a discussion of the main linguistic concepts relevant to this thesis. In order to give some linguistic background to the readers, a grammatical overview is presented in Chapter 3, covering the main features of the language. The analysis on the verb complex *per se* begins in Chapter 4, where a more detailed explanation on the morphology applied to verbs is presented, as well as other elements that have semantic and syntactic impact on verbs. Santa's tense-aspect system is rather simple if compared to other Mongolic languages, however it has many nuances that make possible expressing the vast range of meanings that all languages need. The analysis of the tense-aspect system is discussed in Chapter 5. Another important aspect of Santa is the usage of non-finite verbs (converbs) to provide adverbial modification to the finite verbs as well as linking clauses. An overview of these markers is provided in Chapter 6.

1.1 Socio-cultural Background

The Dongxiang people group (also called Dunsiang, Mongolian Muslim, Mongolian Huihui, Dongxiang Huihui) is one of the 55 Chinese minority groups. They call themselves Santa, which is probably derived from the term *sart*, historically used refer to Persian and Turkic-speaking traders and urban people in Eastern Central Asia (Kim 2003). The Santa are conservative Sunni Muslims and religion is the main source of ethnic identity. Actually, currently the term "Santa" simply means 'Muslim' and embodies anyone who follows Islam. When asked in Mandarin, the Santa speakers will call themselves either "Dongxiang" or "Hui". The Hui is the largest Chinese Muslim people group. They speak Chinese and historically have had great impact on Santa language and culture. The term "Hui" has also developed the ethnonymic sense of 'Muslim'. The term "Dongxiang" is Chinese for 'eastern village' and comes from the fact that Hezhou area (today's Linxia Prefecture) was divided in

four: north, south, east and west. The Santa people used to live in the eastern part, which is know as *Dongxiang.*

Due to the lack of writing records, it is hard to precisely indentify the origin of this people group. There are two theories about it: the first one, less accepted, is that they are Mongolians converted to Islam; the second one is that they were Muslim artisans from Central Asia captured by the Mongolian Army on its western expeditions during the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century and forced to learn Mongolian (Field 1997). Kim (2003) states that both theories are probably true, but the proportion of Mongolian and Central Asian origin is not clear.

According to the 2010 census, their population numbers 621,500. They are mostly located in the Dongxiang County, but there is also a considerable population in neighboring Linxia and Lanzhou City in Gansu Province, as well as Ili Autonomous District in Xinjiang Province. Due to severe drought in Dongxiang county, the Chinese government promoted mass relocation to Xinjiang in the 60's and 80's and to other Gansu areas more recently. The people that have migrated kept their mother tongue. Their main economic activity is agriculture (mainly potato, wheat and corn) and cattle breeding (mainly sheep and cow).

1.2 Linguistic Background

Even though, Santa Mongolian is the third largest Mongolic language, it is one of the least researched. Genetically, Rybatzki (2003) proposes a division on Mongolic languages that correlates geographically. The six areas proposed are: Northeastern, with Dagur; Northern, including Khamnigan Mongol and Buryat; Central, including Mongol proper, Ordos and Oirat; South-Central, with Shira Yughur; Southeastern, including Mongghul, Mangghuer, Bonan and Santa; and Southwestern, with Moghol.

Nugteren (2011) makes a slightly different division, introducing a sub-group called the Southern Periphery. This southern periphery is also called Qinghai-Gansu Sprachbund languages, because these languages are spoken in the border area between Gansu and Qinhai province, in northwestern China. The Santa Mongolian language is part of this group, but it is unintelligible with any other languages within the group. Because of centuries of isolation from other Mongolic languages, these languages have developed many idiosyncratic innovations, making it a special group. These languages have been under major influence from Chinese, Tibetan and Salar – a Turkic language. Nugteren (2011), proposes a division for the Qinghai-

Gansu languages, shown in Figure 1. According to this figure, Bonan and Kangjia are the languages more closely related to Santa.
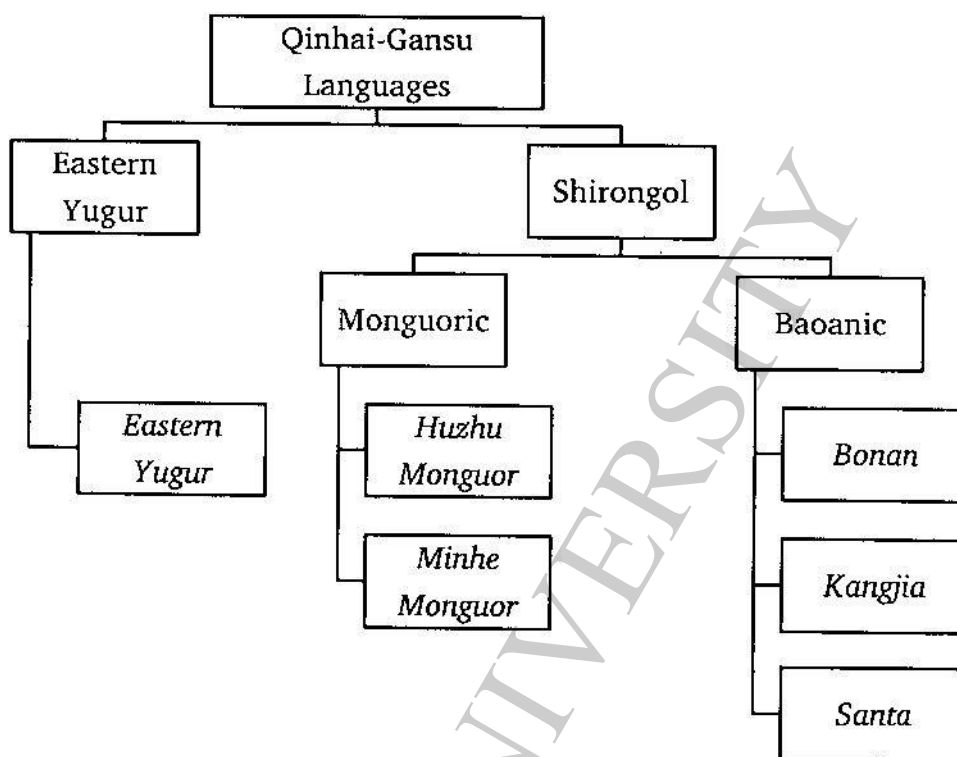

Figure 1 Qinghai-Gansu language taxonomy

Santa is a single language by itself, but it can be divided into three dialectal areas, according to Kim (2003). These three dialects are Wanjia, Suonan and Sijiaji, which have slight phonological and lexical variations and are mutually intelligible.

Santa has been under heavy Chinese influence. According to the Dongxiang Language Dictionary (Buhe 1983), about 50% of the Santa lexicon is borrowed from Linxia Hui Chinese dialect. Fields (1991) raises the hypothesis that such a large percentage of loan words is because Santa was originally a pidgin of Mongolian with a rather impoverished lexicon. According to his hypothesis, the Santa people were originally Islamic artisans captured by Mongolian forces and forced to acquire their language, and were strongly influenced by the Chinese Muslims of the Linxia area during this process. This would also explain the absence of some features common to Mongolic languages, such as vowel harmony and contrastive vowel length. Another source of borrowings is Arabic (mainly for religious terms), Turkic and Persian to a less extent.

According to Lewis (2009), there are 200,000 Santa speakers, 80,000 from those being monolingual. Even though the language attitude is positive, the language is threatened, with the population shifting to Chinese. However, Santa is still used in the domains of home, religion, local commerce, and oral tradition. According to Kim (2003) by 1992, only 17% of the Santa population was literate in Chinese.

Typologically, Santa Mongolian, differently from many Mongolian languages, has no distinctive vowel harmony and vowel length properties. The syllable structure is relatively simple, having only approximants happening in consonant clusters. Santa is considered rich in consonants, having also borrowed the retroflex obstruents. Stress usually falls on the last syllable, with very few exceptions only in borrowed words.

Santa is an agglutinative language that uses only suffixes on its morphology. Santa has a case system with five different cases. Santa has preserved a full set of suffixes that occur on the possessed noun, indicating who the possessor is. These markers are attached to nouns to express belonging, even if the possessor is not expressed in the sentence. Santa is an SOV language. However, there is some space for flexibility, since it has a case marking system.