

# Evolution of the initial consonant clusters “pl”, “kl”, “ml” in the Hongshuihe vernacular of Zhuang

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Initial consonant clusters were once the significant feature of the Zhuang language. But nowadays, in most of the Zhuang speaking areas, this feature has already been lost. Initial consonant clusters (mainly *pl*, *kl*, *ml*) can only be found in a few geographical locations such as Wuming, Binyang, Pingguo, Henxian, etc., in other places, these initial consonant clusters have been simplified as relevant pure single consonants, palatalized consonants or consonants *p*, *k*, *m* followed by *ɣ*. In this paper, the present writer analyzes the historical evolution of the initial consonant clusters *pl*, *kl*, *ml* in the Hongshuihe vernacular of the Zhuang language.

The Hongshuihe vernacular of the Zhuang language includes such areas as Hexian, Yangshuo, Lipu, Luzhai, Guiping, Guigang, Wuxuan, Xiangzhou, Laibin (the southern bank of the Hongshuihe River), Shanglin, Xincheng (the southern part), Du'an, Mashan in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. It is one of the important vernaculars in the northern dialect of the Zhuang language. According to the latest dialectal investigation, initial consonant clusters *pl*, *kl*, *ml* were not found in these areas. But from historical records in the local annals of the Qing Dynasty, we can see that these three initial consonant clusters surely existed in this vernacular. It said: “In Zhuang language, people call ‘fish’, ‘bila’, which can be transcribed in Chinese characters as 壁拉, and call ‘vegetable’, ‘pole’, which can be transcribed as 迫勒 with Chinese characters.....”. This information was cited from “The Annals of Liuzhou Prefecture (*Liuzhou Fuzhi*)”. The prefecture was included in the Hongshuihe vernacular. In the modern Zhuang language in these areas, the word for ‘fish’ is pronounced as *pja*<sup>1</sup> or *pa*<sup>1</sup>, while the word ‘vegetable’ is *pjak*<sup>7</sup> or *pak*<sup>7</sup>, all of which are monosyllabic and with a palatalized consonant or single consonant. But why they were all recorded as disyllabic words in the annals? The most reasonable and acceptable explanation is that there once existed initial consonant clusters in these areas. In some other geographic locations outside of this vernacular such as Wuming, Pingguo, etc., the initial consonant clusters are still retained. For example, in Wuming, the word for ‘fish’ is *pla*<sup>1</sup> and the word for ‘vegetable’ is *plak*. Thus we have sufficient evidence to deduce that the words for ‘fish’ and ‘vegetable’ in Hongshuihe vernacular were pronounced similarly to those in Wuming in ancient times, at least around the Qing Dynasty. In *Liuzhou Fuzhi*, *p* in *pla*<sup>1</sup> ‘fish’ was transcribed as Chinese *bi* (壁), and *la* as Chinese *la* (拉); while *p* in the word *plak*<sup>7</sup> was transcribed as Chinese *po* (迫) and *lak* as Chinese *le* (勒). The ethnic name of “Gelao (仡佬)” --an ethnic group in Guizhou Province, can be

important circumstantial evidence. The registered name “Gelao ( 仡佬 )” is a disyllabic word transliterated from *klau*<sup>55</sup>, a name this group of people call themselves, which is obviously a monosyllabic word with an initial consonant cluster *kl*.

The above-mentioned historical evidence indicates that there existed an initial consonant cluster *pl* in Hongshuihe before the Qing Dynasty, which has been merged into other consonants in the modern language. The historical records provided us only with *pl* of the Hongshuihe vernacular, but according to the systematicity and harmony of phonetic systems, this initial consonant cluster has coexisted with other initial consonant clusters, namely *kl*, and *ml*. This can be proved by some modern Zhuang dialects, e.g.

Wuming	Pingguo	Binyang	Hengxian	Meaning
pla <sup>1</sup>	pla <sup>1</sup>	pla <sup>1</sup>	pla <sup>1</sup>	‘fish’
pla:i <sup>3</sup>	pla:i <sup>3</sup>	pla:i <sup>3</sup>	pla:i <sup>3</sup>	‘walk’
plu:k <sup>7</sup>	plu:k <sup>7</sup>	pli:k <sup>7</sup>	plə:k <sup>7</sup>	‘taro’
plak <sup>7</sup>	plak <sup>7</sup>	plak <sup>7</sup>	plak <sup>7</sup>	‘vegetable’
plo:m <sup>1</sup>	plo:m <sup>1</sup>	plo:m <sup>1</sup>	plo:m <sup>1</sup>	‘thin’
kja <sup>4</sup>	kja <sup>4</sup>	kla <sup>4</sup>	kla <sup>4</sup>	‘orphan’
kja <sup>3</sup>	kja <sup>3</sup>	kla <sup>3</sup>	kla <sup>3</sup>	‘rice seedling’
kjai <sup>1</sup>	kjai <sup>1</sup>	klai <sup>3</sup>	klai <sup>3</sup>	‘far’
kje:ŋ <sup>1</sup>	kje:ŋ <sup>1</sup>	kle:ŋ <sup>1</sup>	kle:ŋ <sup>1</sup>	‘hard’
m <sup>2</sup> la	m <sup>2</sup> la	m <sup>2</sup> la	m <sup>2</sup> la	‘fruit with five edges’
m <sup>2</sup> la:i	m <sup>2</sup> la:i	m <sup>2</sup> la:i	m <sup>2</sup> la:i	‘saliva’

We can see from the examples shown above, that in Wuming and Pingguo the initial consonant cluster *kl* has changed into *kj*, which might be the first to change among the three (*pl*, *kl*, *ml*), while in Binyang and Hengxian, *pl*, *kl*, *ml* are still retained. It is thus clear that *pl*, *kl*, and *ml* appeared simultaneously in ancient times (probably before the Qing Dynasty) in the Hongshuihe vernacular. Now, in this vernacular these initial consonant clusters have disappeared, but the initial forms corresponding to them still exist. Those forms differ between the eastern part of Hongshuihe (EPH) and the western part of it (WPH). In EPH, the forms corresponding to *pl*, *kl*, *ml* are mainly *pɣ*, *kɣ*, *mɣ*, e.g.

Lipu	Luzhai	Binyang	Meaning
pɣa <sup>1</sup>	pɣa <sup>1</sup>	pla <sup>1</sup>	‘fish’
pɣa:i <sup>3</sup>	pɣa:i <sup>3</sup>	pla:i <sup>1</sup>	‘walk’
pɣak <sup>7</sup>	pɣə:k <sup>7</sup>	pak <sup>7</sup>	‘vegetable’
mɣa <sup>2</sup>	mɣa <sup>2</sup>	m <sup>2</sup> la	‘fruit with five edges’
--	mɣa:i <sup>2</sup>	m <sup>2</sup> la:i	‘saliva’
kɣu <sup>1</sup>	kɣu <sup>1</sup>	klou <sup>1</sup>	‘salt’

In WPH, *pl*, *kl*, *ml* correspond to *pɣ*, *kɣ*, *mɣ*, *pj*, *kj*, *mj*, and *p*, *kj*, *m*, as well, e.g.

Binyang	Lipu	Shanglin	Du'an	Mashan	Meaning
pla <sup>1</sup>	pɣa <sup>1</sup>	pja <sup>1</sup>	pa <sup>1</sup>	pa <sup>1</sup>	'fish'
pla:i <sup>3</sup>	pɣa:i <sup>3</sup>	pja:i <sup>3</sup>	pa:i <sup>3</sup>	pa:i <sup>3</sup>	'walk'
plak <sup>7</sup>	pɣak <sup>7</sup>	pjak <sup>7</sup>	pak <sup>7</sup>	pak <sup>7</sup>	'vegetable'
plo:m <sup>1</sup>	pɣo:m <sup>1</sup>	pjo:m <sup>1</sup>	po:m <sup>1</sup>	po:m <sup>1</sup>	'thin'
mli:i <sup>1</sup>	mɣa:i <sup>2</sup>	pja:i <sup>2</sup>	ma:i <sup>2</sup>	ma:i <sup>2</sup>	'saliva'
kla <sup>3</sup>	kɣa <sup>3</sup>	kja <sup>3</sup>	kja <sup>3</sup>	kja <sup>3</sup>	'rice seedling'
klai <sup>1</sup>	kɣai <sup>1</sup>	kjai <sup>1</sup>	kjai <sup>1</sup>	kjai <sup>1</sup>	'far'
klou <sup>1</sup>	kɣu <sup>1</sup>	kju <sup>1</sup>	kju <sup>1</sup>	kju <sup>1</sup>	'salt'

*pl*, *kl*, *ml* correspond to *pɣ*, *kɣ*, *mɣ* in Lipu, to *pj*, *kj*, *mj* in Shanglin, and to *p*, *kj*, *m* in Du'an and Mashan, respectively. Analyzing the dialectal materials above, we can affirm that *pl*, *kl*, *ml* is the oldest group of initial consonants from which the other 3 groups, i.e. *pɣ*, *kɣ*, *mɣ*, *pj*, *kj*, *mj* and *p*, *kj*, *m* have developed, and *pɣ*, *kɣ*, *mɣ* might be the second oldest group, as the language that *Liuzhou Fuzhi* referred to was mainly distributed in EPH (including Lipu, Luzhai, Laibin, Yangshuo, etc.) in which *pɣ*, *kɣ*, *mɣ* exist. It is possible that *pɣ*, *kɣ*, *mɣ* have developed from *pl*, *kl*, *ml* directly since the Qing Dynasty in EPH. Physically, *pɣ*, *kɣ*, *mɣ* are back-palatalized sounds that can easily shift to the front points of articulation and develop into front palatalized sounds *pj*, *kj*, *mj* in the course of their evolution. The case of Yangshuo is a good example to explain the phenomena in which *pɣ*, *mɣ* have developed into *pj*, *mj*, e.g.

Lipu	Yangshuo	Meaning
pɣak <sup>7</sup>	pjak <sup>7</sup>	'vegetable'
pɣa <sup>1</sup>	pja <sup>1</sup>	'fish'
mɣa:i <sup>2</sup>	mja:i <sup>2</sup>	'saliva'
mɣa <sup>2</sup>	mja <sup>2</sup>	'fruit with five edges'

But *kɣ* is still retained, e.g.

Lipu	Yangshuo	Meaning
kɣau <sup>3</sup>	kɣau <sup>3</sup>	'head'
kɣai <sup>5</sup>	kɣai <sup>5</sup>	'egg'
kɣan <sup>1</sup>	kɣan <sup>1</sup>	'snore'
kɣa <sup>4</sup>	kɣa <sup>4</sup>	'knife'

This data shows that back palatalized sounds *pɣ*, *kɣ*, *mɣ* tend to change into front palatalized sounds *pj*, *kj*, *mj* in the Zhuang language.

Phonetic simplification is the final evolution of the initial consonant clusters according to the developmental tendency of the phonological system in the Zhuang

language. Therefore, *pl*, *kl*, *ml* (*pʏ*, *kʏ*, *mʏ* and *pj*, *kj*, *mj* are also included) will certainly be simplified to *p*, *k*, *m* just like Mashan and Du'an in the examples listed above. Though *kj* has not changed yet, it will eventually develop into *k* in the future, for *kj* of the other dialects (e.g. Yongning) has changed into *k* already, e.g.

Binyang	Lipu	Shanglin	Yongning	Meaning
klu <sup>1</sup>	kyu <sup>1</sup>	kju <sup>1</sup>	ku <sup>1</sup>	'salt'
klai <sup>1</sup>	kyai <sup>1</sup>	kjai <sup>1</sup>	kai <sup>1</sup>	'far'
kla:ŋ <sup>1</sup>	kyɑ:ŋ <sup>1</sup>	kja:ŋ <sup>1</sup>	ka:ŋ <sup>1</sup>	'middle'

Thus it can be seen that the general developmental order of *pl*, *kl*, *ml* (in Hongshuihe) is as follows:

*pl* → *pʏ* → *pj* → *p*  
*kl* → *kʏ* → *kj* → *k*  
*ml* → *mʏ* → *mj* → *m*

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