

Autonyms: ought or ought not

Paul K. Benedict
Briarcliff Manor, New York

In the classic work on Tibeto-Burman nomenclature by James A. Matisoff (1980), 'autonym' was introduced as the term for a group's name for itself (and its language), as opposed to 'exonym,' a name used by outsiders. As Matisoff points out, autonyms tend to be ethnocentric ('human speech,' 'the speech of men') whereas exonyms tend to be *'pejorative'* (JAM's italics) rather than complimentary, especially where there is a real or fancied difference in the cultural level between the ingroup and the outgroup.' Linguists have learned to avoid exonyms, particularly those that lend themselves to an interpretation of this kind, e.g. the writer continues to use 'Greek' and 'German' but has substituted 'Thai' for his earlier 'Siamese.' The comparativist must ask, however, 'What to do about proto-languages'?

Where a newly formed group of languages is involved, the problem is easily resolved by creating a 'neonym' (Matisoff), e.g. the writer's 'Kadai.' In most cases, however, a group of long standing is involved and a neonym is not readily acceptable. To make matters more complicated, cases exist in which an original autonym has been 'exonymized' (this term *not* in Matisoff), with subsequent 'pejorativization' (also *not* in Matisoff). Two such cases, each involving a prominent group of languages in SEA, are presented here.

1. Burmese-Lolo or Lolo-Burmese, the latter a relative newcomer (introduced by Burling), with BL/LB specialists of the present day employing either the former (Bradley et al.) or the latter (Matisoff et al.). The 'Lolo' part, which concerns us here, is the earlier Chinese exonym, almost certainly of autonymic origin (see Matisoff: Forthcoming: 28 for one possible etymology). It has long been considered pejorative, however, and Chinese linguists have substituted another exonym: Yi (etymology uncertain), which is more appropriate for the 'Northern Lolo' group. Their Western colleagues, while sensitive to the basic difficulty involved here, have gone on using 'Burmese-Lolo' or 'Lolo-Burmese,' restricting 'Yi' to the 'Northern Lolo' group and avoiding the awkward 'Yi-ish.'

2. Miao-Yao. These are standard Chinese exonyms, still in use by Chinese linguists today although also applied in a most

confusing manner to 'nationality' as well as to 'language,' as are 'Yi,' 'Yao,' and other names. In all probability both 'Miao' and 'Yao' are of autonymic origin, the former and perhaps the latter to be compared with Bunun (Formosan) *tamlaw* 'human being,' i.e. both have been 'exonymized,' as in the case of 'Lolo.' The very fact that Chinese linguists continue to use these names firmly attests to their complete acceptability in China today. Many Miao-Yao speakers living outside China, however, in the United States or elsewhere, deem them to be offensive and insist on the replacement by the autonyms for 'human being:' Hmong (for Miao) and Mien (for Yao). This has led to a movement on the part of David Strecker and other specialists in the field to substitute Hmong-Mien (and 'Hmongic,' 'Mienic') for the standard 'Miao-Yao' ('Miao,' 'Yao'), as long used by all workers in the field (Downer, Haudricourt, Chang, Benedict, Solnit, et al.). Ironically, 'Hmong' itself in all probability represents an old loan that was 'processed' in Chinese (see Benedict 1986), with a direct connection to 'Miao,' i.e. the name was first 'exonymized' in Chinese at a very early level, then 'autonymized' later in Miao as a back-loan. Thus the Hmong of the present day have got their name back, so to speak, with the linguistic aid of their Chinese neighbors.

What is the comparativist to do about these names? At least three possibilities present themselves:

- a. He can follow the lead of the Chinese and employ 'Burmese-Yi' (or 'Yi-Burmese,' not to be confused with 'Ye Burmese'), along with 'Miao-Yao.'
- b. He can follow the dictates of certain extra-territorial Miao-Yao speakers and modify the latter to 'Hmong-Mien.'
- c. He can follow logic and continue to employ 'Burmese-Lolo' (or 'Lolo-Burmese') and 'Miao-Yao.'

The point here, it seems to the writer, is that proto-languages are linguistic constructs and as such are hardly liable to the restraints imposed on living languages. Even though the writer, unlike some of his colleagues, does conceive of the proto-languages that he devises as actually having been spoken, he must face up to the fact that no informants are available to question about autonymity and the like. One can hardly visualize an Indo-Europeanist working with a German speaker in Hoboken changing 'Proto-Germanic' to 'Proto-Deutschish' or the like to please his informant, in the period following World War I when 'German,' along with 'Hun,' had become a vastly opprobrious epithet. Why, then,

should the Austro-Taiist change 'Miao-Yao' to 'Hmong-Mien' to please an informant living in Kalamazoo? Or, for that matter, in Laos. The linguist should, by all means, remain aware of the autonym/exonym problems that so often present themselves, but this does not necessarily mean, for example, giving up 'Chinese' for 'Han.' And, a proto-speaker (gloss: 'speaker of a real proto-language such as those devised by the writer') probably wouldn't have minded if one had got his autonym wrong provided only that he had reconstructed his proto-language reasonably well.

The writer was surprised recently to learn (p.c. from David Bradley) that a leading Chinese linguist has remarked that the name 'Lolo' is *offensive only when written with the 'dog' radical*, hence matters are even more complicated than indicated in the text. There is undoubtedly here some reflection of the underlying Chinese equation of 'word' with 'written character,' providing a clue to the 'pejorativization' of 'exonymized' names of this kind: by writing my name with a 'dog' alongside it you are calling me a 'dog' (and in Chinese this is a unisex epithet). The modern Chinese practice is to write these tribal names with the 'human being' radical, thereby raising their level of acceptance.

References

- Benedict, Paul K. 1986. Early Chinese Dialect 'Processing.' Sino-Tibetan Conference XIX. Columbus.
- Matisoff, James A. 1980. The languages and dialects of Tibeto-Burman: an alphabetic/genetic listing, with some prefatory remarks on ethnonymic and glossonymic complications. 86 pp. ms.
- _____, forthcoming. The Dictionary of Lahu.

Addendum

Although 'autonym' and 'exonym' (the latter credited to Gérard Diffloth) appear to have been innovations in the mainland Southeast Asian field of linguistics, both terms were in use a decade or more earlier in the Austronesian area. Professor Robert Blust (Hawaii) recently (February 1986) informed the writer that he and his colleagues have been using 'exonym' for some time now, with the term appearing in print as early as 1968 (by G. N. Appell in *Oceanic Linguistics*), while he himself made use of 'autonym' in a 1972 article in that same journal (Vol. XI:2:168).