

The perils of reconstruction: the case of Proto-Yao

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From time to time the writer has informally expressed the view that it often proves easier to reconstruct at an earlier level, say Proto-Sino-Tibetan, than at a later level, say Proto-Sinitic (Chinese/Bai). This has been described as an 'illusion' (Matisoff 1990:117), but cases continue to surface that support the notion. It is even possible for a whole series of related components to be involved, as in a recent case that has come up involving the Miao-Yao (MY) family.

One of the key features of MY phonology is the dominant role played by 'nasal increment' forms, typically with initial nasal + stop, reflecting the same features in Proto-Austro-Tai (PAT) [see Haudricourt 1954]. The reflexes vary elsewhere, with Proto-Tai paralleling Pazeh (Paiwanic) in its voicing and nasal shifts and with Japanese taking the latter a step further (^H for 'high' tone, ^L for 'low' tone; F = [h] ~ [ʃ] before *u*):

| AT NASAL INCREMENT REFLEXES | | | | |
|-----------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| PAT | *p | *mp | *b | *mb |
| Pazeh | p | b | b | m |
| P-Tai | *p | *b | *b | *m |
| Japanese | F/b | m | F/b | m |
| PMY | *p | *mp | *b | *mb |
| P-Yao (until now) | *p ^H | *b ^H | *p ^L | *b ^L |

The PMY voicing contrast can be reconstructed for P-Miao whereas in P-Yao it has been transphonologized into tones. It has always seemed certain that the nasal component had been lost at the P-Yao level, as indicated above. Recently, however, material on two Yao dialects, both closer lexically to Mien rather than Mun, has become available: Cengang and Tashi, spoken in Yueliangshan, Guizhou. In looking over this material the writer discovered, much to his amazement, that both dialects have typical Miao reflexes as

regards nasal increments, e.g. *mp^H- < PMY *mp- vs. *m p^L- < PMY *mb-. Cengang at least **looks** Yao, after a fashion, despite the above reflexes and the loss of P-Yao final *-ʔ. Tashi, on the other hand, has lost all final stops as well as final *-m, reduced to vocalic and -n/ŋ finals, and looks for all the world like just another Miao dialect/language. This 'camouflaging' can no doubt be attributed to immersion of the language in a Miao-speaking population, although supporting data are not at hand. The retention of the nasal increment initials, however, is another matter, with Cengang and Tashi both testifying to the presence of this feature at the P-Yao level. It turns out that we comparativists were right all along about PMY; it was the later P-Yao that stuck us!

REFERENCES

- Haudricourt, A-G. 1954. "Introduction à la phonologie historique des langues Miao-Yao." BEFEO 44:560.
- Matisoff, James A. 1990. "Discussion note: on megalocomparison." *Language* 66.1:106-20.