

PHUNOI OR CÔÔNG¹

DAVID BRADLEY

ABSTRACT

A substantial vocabulary of this Loloish Tibeto-Burman language follows some phonetic, phonological, and comparative observations. Phunoi usually has final /p/, /t/, /m/, or /n/ in reflexes of Proto-Loloish roots reconstructed with *-p, *-t, *-m, or *-n respectively. Phunoi is also conservative in preserving the three-tone system reconstructed for Proto-Loloish non-stopped syllables; in stopped syllables, the two-way tonal distinction has its southern Loloish phonetic reflex. Phunoi, like other Bisoid languages, has undergone a chain shift in manners of initials: *voiced stops have voiceless unaspirated reflexes, while *stop-prefixed nasals have voiced *stop* reflexes.

PREVIOUS WORK

The first vocabulary of this language appears in Lefèvre-Pontalis 1892, under the name 'Khong'. An excellent vocabulary, with tones indicated, is in Roux 1924; there is also ethnographic and historical information in this source. Several linguists, including Shafer and Nishida, have used the Roux material in comparison. Nishida 1966-7 shows that Phunoi is closely related within Southern Loloish to Bisu, a language of northern Thailand, and to Pyen in Burma, reported in Scott/Hardiman 1900; Matisoff 1972 uses the term 'Bisoid' for this subgroup. Harris has more recently worked with several informants, including mine. Ferlus has also done work on the language, and some ethnographic information on the Cồông in Vietnam is found in Vuong 1973.

PHUNOI AND THEIR SETTING

The Phunoi live in Phongsaly Province, northeastern Laos; the North-west Autonomous Region of Vietnam; and probably in China as well. In Vietnam, the Phunoi are called Cồông, and speak a slightly different dialect; according to the 1960 census, there are about 6,500 in all. In Laos, the Phunoi live in a concentrated area around Phongsaly town; Roux reports a population of 10,000 in 1923, which is now probably far too low. There are, according to informants, five major clans, each with a dialect; Roux reports one, Ferlus another, and Harris and myself a third. Some Phunoi also now live in Luang Phrabang and Vientiane Provinces, as they were unable to return home after serving in the Royal Lao forces. 'Phunoi' means *little man* in various Dai languages including Ly, and is probably not the original name for this group; Cồông [kho:ŋ] is more likely to be the original name. The relatively small areas inhabited by the Phunoi, and the large population concentrated in these areas, are both unusual among Loloish groups - which tend to be geographically scattered, and intermingled with other groups.

According to Phunoi tradition, they were under Burmese rule in the Muong Sing area of northwestern Laos until five generations before 1923. This location is much closer to the modern Bisu and Pyen, so genetic comparison supports the tradition. Then, after a Chinese invasion, they fled to their present area; perhaps this invasion can be associated with Yung Li, the last Ming emperor, and his Manchu pursuers; or with the later upheavals associated with the Mohammedan rebellion in Yunnan.² They were then involved, always on the losing side, in wars between the Burmese and the Vietnamese. The resettlement of populations after wars, in the territory of the victors, may account for the presence of Phunoi in Vietnam. The main concentration of Phunoi was in Muong U, a part of the Ly Federation [sip sŋ phan na:], *twelve thousand wet-rice fields*, when the French entered the area;³ there are strong Ly cultural and lexical influences on the Phunoi in the area. For example, the Phunoi adopted Ly Buddhism.

The history of Muong U has been extremely turbulent in the last century. Various armies of Chinese bandits caused chaos for more than thirty years at the end of the nineteenth century. These Chinese, called [hɔ] in most Dai languages of the area, are called /h_uo bà/ in Phunoi; several other Loloish languages have related forms, derived from *hek¹. These Chinese were eventually subdued by the Ly, who were in turn conquered by the French - who then received cession of the area from China, the nominal ruler, in 1895.⁴ There were major Ly revolts in 1908-10 and 1914-6;⁵ the French suspected the Phunoi of involvement

in at least the second of these.⁶ Between 1917 and 1924, the French built many roads in the area to consolidate their rule – using mainly Phunoi *corvée* labour.⁷ Most of the non-Phunoi population of the area went to China to avoid this work; thus, in 1921 the French moved their administrative centre to Phongsaly, in the Phunoi area of the province. There were constant bandit raids from China – one source lists ten between 1917 and 1930.⁸ The Phunoi began to serve in the French armies, and later benefitted from high opium prices, and Vichy government support of opium cultivation, during World War II. Anti-Japanese, Viet Minh, Pathet Lao, and CIA guerillas were active in the area at various times; the Royal Lao government also used the Phunoi in its forces. During a brief truce in 1958-9, the Royal Lao government tried to exterminate the Pathet Lao and Neutralist forces in the area.⁹ From 1959, Phongsaly Province became a Neutralist stronghold under Colonel Khammouane; he was supplied from China, and roads were built connecting northern Laos with adjacent areas of China. For about ten years, the area was subject to intensive US bombing. Now, at last, Laos has achieved peace; the Phunoi are certain to benefit.

TRANSCRIPTION: PHONETICS, PHONOLOGICAL INVENTORY

Items in brackets do not occur in the primary system, but only in the secondary system of loans. There are very many loans in Phunoi.

1. Minor Syllables (schwa vowel, pitch same as following syllable, with these initials)

	(t)	c	k		
		ch	kh		Xh are voiceless aspirated stops. /t/, /d/ are dental; /f/ is a bilabial or labiodental fricative. /ʒ/ here is [dʒ].
b	d	ʒ	g		
f	s				
w	l	j			

2. Initial Consonants (followed by full, tonal vowel)

p	p̣	t	c	(ḳ)	(ḳ)	k	?	
ph	pḥ	th	ch	(kḥ)		kh		As above, but /ʒ/ is a palatalized dental, weakly affricated. /b/, /ḅ/, /d/ are sometimes implosive. /ṃ/ and /p/ occur only in juncture in my data. /j/ is a palatal continuant; /hj/ and /hl/ are strongly articulated, voiceless-onset palatal and lateral continuants. /sh/ is an aspirated dental spirant. hN are voiceless nasals.
b	ḅ	d	j			g		
m	ṃ	n	ɲ					
hm	hṃ	hn	hɲ					
(f)		s	(ʃ)			(x)	h	
w	l	j				(y)	ɲ	
	hl	hj						
		sh						

