

NOUN COMPOUNDING IN GARO

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Introduction

Anyone who has made a serious effort to learn one of the tribal languages of Southeast Asia must be impressed by the vast, varied and resourceful vocabulary used by its speakers. Gaining control over the lexicon of a language is always a formidable task, no less among rice farming mountaineers of Southeast Asia than among urban sophisticates of Europe. Indeed, since the processes of word formation are quite different in the two areas, it is Southeast Asia that poses the greater challenge for the European. In this paper, I want to describe just one of the means by which Garos, Tibeto-Burman highlanders of northeastern India, build up their rich vocabulary.¹

A distinctive characteristic of the Garo language is the use of numerous noun compounds constructed from a categorizing initial portion, most often a single syllable, to which is added one or more syllables that indicate the specific member of the category. For instance, do'- is used as the first syllable of the great majority of Garo names for birds: do'-qep 'duck,' do'-po 'owl,' do'-ka 'crow,' do'-kru 'dove,' do'-ok 'raven,' do'-ra-ja 'goose,' do'-ma 'wild goose,' do'-mat-chi 'sparrow,' do'-pat-chi 'swallow' and dozens of others, including even do'-bak 'bat.' The

¹An earlier version of this paper was distributed at the 12th International Conference on Sino-Tibetan Languages and Linguistics in Paris, October, 1979. My own knowledge of Garo derives from a two year field trip in the mid 1950's to the Garo Hills in what is now Meghalaya, India, a trip made possible by a generous fellowship from the Ford Foundation. To supplement my imperfect memory and imperfect knowledge I have turned to the three available Garo dictionaries, in particular to D. S. Nengminza's The School Dictionary, 1972, and the still unpublished, A Garo Word Collection, n.d. by Lucy M. Holbrook and Garo co-workers of the American Baptist Mission in Tura, Garo Hills. I repeat my offer, made on various occasions, to duplicate this 210 page typescript for anyone willing to pay the modest cost of xeroxing and mailing.

²In accordance with usual Garo writing conventions, I use an apostrophe to indicate the glottal stop. This has the substantial advantage of being available on my word processor. I also follow Garo convention in using the digraphs ch and nq, rather than fancier phonetic symbols,

second parts of most of these words are never used by themselves and lack any identifiable separate meaning of their own. They always come attached to the initial categorizing syllable.

In the case of do'- 'bird,' however, the initial part of these clusters can be used alone as an independent word. Do'-o, when used by itself, means 'domestic fowl,' much the most important bird in Garo life.' In many other cases, these initial syllables (which I will call "categorizers") have no independent life of their own. The Garo language has dozens of categorizers that act much like do'-, although only a few of them form as many compounds as it does, and they range in importance down to syllables that occur in a mere two or three closely related compounds.

Garo has a few double compounds in which a segment is attached to an already compounded term to further subdivide

for the voiceless affricate and velar nasal, respectively. I do, however, deviate from conventional Garo spelling in four minor ways: First, I write the sign for the glottal stop before rather than after its co-occurring m, n, ng, or l when they combine to form syllable final clusters. By writing the ' first, I make the morphophonemic alternation that involves echoing the preceding vowel in word final position somewhat more transparent (see footnotes 3 and 5). Second, in order to keep both phonological and morphological segmentation clear, I place a hyphen between all syllables. Third, I revise a few medial consonants or consonant clusters, generally those where the final consonant of one syllable and the initial of the following are homorganic and where Garos write only a single consonant. In some of these cases I feel there is sound linguistic reason for writing two consonants, one in each syllable. Finally, I use the vowel i in a few words to represent very short vowels where Garos write no vowel at all. In other words, some sequences which Garos write as clusters, I write as complete syllables. I have explained these conventions more fully in an earlier article (Burling 1981).

Do'-o is simply an obligatory morphophonemic alternate of do'-. It is required by a rigid Garo refusal to allow a glottal stop in word final position. A glottal stop can be syllable final or it can be a member of a syllable final cluster, but whenever that syllable threatens to turn up in word final position, its vowel must be echoed, adding a syllable and relegating the glottal stop to the penultimate syllable.

I use the awkward term "categorizer" because the rather more graceful term "classifier" has been pre-empted for the numeral classifiers, which play an equally important role in Garo grammar.

the class. For instance, in addition to do'-ka 'crow,' we find do'-ka re-chim 'raven,' and do'-ka-ro-ri 'magpie.' Do'- reng 'kite, hawk' enters into do'-reng at-to-re 'falcon,' and do'-reng qak-a-si 'a red kite' etc. This kind of double compounding is not terribly common, however, and it grades into more productive types of modification, examples of which we will see below.

In this paper I will describe the way in which compounds are formed from these categorizers and give numerous examples, comment more briefly on the second parts of the compounds which they form, and offer some observations about prefixation and about the relationship of prefixation and compounding in the history of Tibeto-Burman languages.

Animals

Do'- is one of four important categorizers that organize much of the animal kingdom. The other three are na'-, used for fish, mat- for some, but by no means all four-legged animals, and jo'ng- for insects and other small bugs. Collectively, these four seem to divide the animal kingdom rather neatly: animals of the air, water and land, together with a special category for bugs. None of the other three are used as consistently as is do'-, however.

As an independent word, jo'-ong simply means 'bug,' in general, but in combination with other syllables it forms compounds that name particular species: jo'ng-bo 'A white worm that lives underground,' jo'ng-dol 'A species of large cricket,' jo'ng-me-ma 'a species of beetle,' jo'ng-su 'a kind of caterpillar', etc. Once I even heard a Garo medical technician refer, quite naturally, to my malarial parasites, which he was observing through a microscope, as jo'-ong. More bugs than birds have names that lack a categorizing first syllable, however. Many bugs, worms, and insects have names that are quite unanalyzable: tam-pi 'fly,' qang-qu 'mosquito,' tik 'louse,' ru'-at leech, and many others. For reasons that I always found quite mysterious, moreover, Garo also has at least two dozen distinct words for different kinds of ants. I discovered no important role that ants play in Garo culture and I am at a loss to explain this terminological efflorescence.

Na'- clearly carries the meaning 'fish' but, unlike do'-o and jo'-ong it is used only in compounds, never alone.

Jo'-ong, like do'-o, is a morphophonemic alternate of a combining form. In this case, the combining form, jo'ng-, must be modified by the addition of an echo vowel that separates the glottal stop from its following cluster partner, and thereby prevents the glottal stop from belonging to the final syllable of the word.

The general Garo term for 'fish' is na'-tok, and this gives the first example of a pattern that will recur many times: a categorizer that is not used alone, but that occurs as the first syllable of a general term that stands for the whole class. To speak of 'fish' in the general sense, one cannot simply say na'-a, but must instead say na'-tok. In the case of na'-tok, as in many others, the second syllable has no recognizable independent meaning, and it is never used alone. Specific names for fish species include: na'-ek 'a big flat fish,' na'-dang or na'-qraq 'eel like fish,' na'-wa-re 'a small flat fish,' and many others, as well as such species as na'-tik 'prawn,' and na'-nil 'eel,'

The fourth main categorizer of the animal kingdom is mat. Used alone, mat means 'squirrel.' I have no idea why the categorizer that is used for a number of large and important animals should, when used by itself, refer to such an insignificant animal as a squirrel. As far as I ever learned, squirrels are no more important to the Garos than they are to us. Perhaps I missed something.

The general word for 'animal' (primarily 'mammal' or at least 'land animal larger than a bug') is mat-bu-rung. When used without the initial mat-, bu-rung, means 'forest, jungle' so the meaning of mat-bu-rung might be expected to be 'wild animal, jungle animal' but, in fact, the word is used to refer to domestic animals as well. More specific animal names formed with an initial mat- include: mat-chu 'cow, cattle,' mat-cha 'tiger,' mat-cha-peng 'leopard,' mat-ma 'buffalo,' mat-chok 'deer,' mat-a'-ning 'wild pig,' mat-cheng-si 'skunk,' mat-chru 'civet-cat.' The majority of mammals, however, have independent names of their own, without mat- or any other categorizing first syllable.

In addition to compounds that denote particular species of the general class, several of these categorizers also enter into a more limited number of compounds that denote other things having to do with the class: do'-bik 'entrails of a fowl' (cf. bi-bik 'intestines') do'-bi-tip 'nest,' do'-chi 'egg' (cf. chi 'water'), do'-chol 'chicken-coop,' do'-qraq 'wing'; na'-ru 'a kind of creeper from which a poison is made that is used to stupify fish,' na'-mit-im 'fish fat' (cf. mit-im 'fat'), na'-kam 'dried fish' (which is a mixture of many species, cf. kam 'burn'), na'-kol 'fish hole' (see discussion of kol below), na'-qil 'fishing weir'; jo'ng-bi-bik 'cocoon' (cf. bi-bik 'intestines') jo'ng-ki 'insect dung' (see discussion of ki below). Many of these words have second parts with clearly identifiable meanings and even an independent use, and this seems to differentiate them from the species names, the second parts of which cannot typically be used alone. Even qraq can be used alone to mean 'wing' though it is also possible to use the rather redundant compound do'-qraq.