COMPETING SOUND CHANGES: 
EVIDENCE FROM KAM-TAI, MIAO-YAO and TIBETO-BURMAN

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1. Background

One of the fundamental discoveries about language is the rule-governed nature of linguistic processes. In the euphoria of this discovery, Neogrammarians confidently proclaimed exceptionless sound laws. Indeed, the perfect regularity of sound change made it possible to firmly establish genetic relations among languages and, in a broader sense, turned the study of language into a rigorous scientific discipline.

But, as any field worker quickly realizes, in real life languages simply do not follow this neat, pre-ordained Neogrammian game plan. In the face of irregularities, Neogrammarians usually point to analogy and dialect mixture as two principal forces responsible for creating apparent rather than real exceptions to phonetic laws. When such explanations fail, one could usually finger some other minor culprits such as tabu, phonetic symbolism, functional load (e.g. homonym avoidance) etc.

All these putative sources of irregularity have one thing in common; namely they are extraneous to the mechanism of phonological change per se. For instance, analogy is a morphological tendency toward paradigmatic symmetry, while borrowing or dialect mixture is extra-systemic altogether. They do not therefore in any way weaken the concept of sound changes as inerodable, sweeping laws of nature.

However, there remained a nagging sense that at least in some instances, the usual explanations for exceptional sound correspondences are ad hoc and unconvincing. Perhaps the mechanism of sound change itself should leave room for possible exceptions.
Back in 1969, William S-Y. Wang put forward the idea of competing sound changes as a source of residue. He argued that since sound changes do not happen overnight, but typically span decades, perhaps centuries, it stands to reason that these processes may overlap or intersect in time as pictured in (1):

(1) time --->
    change A  --------
    change B  --------
        ↑
        t

As the phonological changes work their way across the lexicon, certain lexical items at point t in time are simultaneously subject to either change A or change B. This indeterminacy can account for irregularities or 'lexical diffusion', a phenomenon that has been documented in too many instance and across too many languages to be regarded simply as minor disturbances stemming from particularistic, extraneous factors.


Looking back at the body of empirical data accumulated in the past two decades or so, it is fair to say that the majority of supporting data only show the lexically gradual nature of sound change, affecting one word (or one class of words) at a time. In many cases, residues are the modern reflexes of aborted sound changes or on-going sound changes arrested in mid-course. Wang's original notion of competing sound changes overlapping in time stands in need of further empirical substantiation.

Against this backdrop I wish to bring forth some evidence principally from the Kam-Tai, Miao-Yao and Tibeto-Burman languages to support the notion of competing, overlapping phonological processes.


3 The prevailing view among the Chinese specialists is that all these three language groups belong to the Sino-Tibetan family (see Wang, Fushi 1986. Miao-Yao yu de xishu wenti chutan [Initial inquiries into the
2. Kam-Tai

Kam-Tai and Miao-Yao languages characteristically split the original tonal categories A, B, C, D <4> into the yin (1, 3, 5, 7) and the yang registers (2, 4, 6, 8). Like their Sinitic counterparts, this split is conditioned by the voicing of the initial consonants. Not surprisingly, Tone Split interacts with Devoicing, widely attested in Kam-Tai. In most cases, the original voicing contrast is preserved in the tonal distinctions. This means that Tone Split must precede Devoicing, as seen in (1), taken from Lakkia. <5>

(1) 'aunt' (wife of mother's brother)
    bei C Ancestral form
    bei 6 Tone Split
    pei 6 Devoicing

Interestingly enough, there are cases where tone split is conditioned not by the protoforms, but by the modern reflexes, as in (2).

(2) 'fire'
    bui A Ancestral form
    pui A Devoicing
    pui 1 Tone Split

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5 Zhang, Junru. 1990. Yaozu Lajia yu yu Zhuangdong yuzu yuyan de bijiao [Comparison between Lakkia of the Yao people with the Kam-Tai languages]. Minzu Yuwen n.6,p.38-49.
There is evidence that both (1) and (2) once had a voiced onset, witness their cognates, e.g. [vai 6] 'aunt' in Maonan, [vɛi 2] (e = schwa) 'fire' in Lin-gao (Hainan), with a voiced [v] and a 'yang' tone (6 and 2).

The coexistence of examples like (1) and (2) represents a classic case of competing sound changes intersecting along the time dimension:

(3) time --->

---x------x---  Tone Split
---x-------    Devoicing
  \  /  
 (1) (2)

Case (1) undergoes Tone Split before the onset of Devoicing; case (2) undergoes Devoicing while Tone Split is still in effect.

The situation becomes even more interesting as we consider the converse of the picture. The Kam-Ti voiceless sonorants also undergo voicing. In the normal circumstances, the tonal distinction encodes the original voiced/voiceless contrast among the sonorants. This is the case in (4)

(4) (a)        (b)
  'hand'    'to climb'
mie A  JO B     [J = voiceless j; O = open o]
mie  2    JO  3  Tone Split
  --      jo  3   Voicing

Interestingly, there are also cases like (5)

(5) (a)        (b)
  Jau A  Wei B  [J,W = voiceless j,w]
jau A  wei  B  Voicing
jau  2    weI  4  Tone Split

When we put the facts of (1,2) and (4,5) together, we get the picture in (6):

(6) time --->

(4) (5)
  |  |
---x------    Voicing
---x-------x--- Tone Split
---x-------    Devoicing
  \  /  
 (1) (2)