Tibetan Evidence for Nunglish Metathesis

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LaPolla (1987), in a valuable etymological investigation of Nunglish, identifies two clear cases (LEECH and DREAM) and two possible cases (BRAID and AXE) where Nunglish has metathesized an earlier prefix + C.¹ Sun (1986:14) identifies four cases of metathesis in Nunglish (and other languages), DREAM, FORGET, NAME, and FLOW. In this note I will present several more sets, involving comparisons between Nunglish and Tibetan, which demonstrate a fairly prevalent process of metathesis in the development of Nunglish. To the sets presented by LaPolla and Sun we can add four secure etymologies: BLADDER, TRIUMPH, ARROW, and DAUGHTER-IN-LAW. I will also discuss a few other sets where there is some reason to think we may be dealing with metathesis along with some other complicating processes.

Nomenclatural confusion is as great with respect to Nunglish as for other parts of Tibeto-Burman. It is best, and consistent with the practice of previous scholars of the language (cf. Barnard 1934, Morse 1962, Morse and Morse 1966, Sun 1983, LaPolla) to refer to a “language”, Nunglish, consisting of a large number of “dialects” (Morse claims that there may be more than sixty). I will use the spellings Tarong and Anung² (LaPolla’s “Dulong A” and “Dulong B”), Rawang (Barnard 1934, Morse 1962, 1965), and “Trung” (Lo 1945) which appears to be distinct from any of the above.³ This could as well be called a Nunglish “branch”, consisting of the Trung, etc. languages, but it appears from the published descriptions that the variation among the subdivisions of Nunglish is on the order of that of the Tibetan or Jingpho “dialects”, and markedly less than that among, say, the Kuki, the Burmish, or the Kiranti languages.

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² These are the autonyms given in Sun 1982:220; the spelling “Tarong” is taken from Morse 1962. I have previously used “Trung” for “Tarong”, and this spelling is also used in the English translation of Sun 1986. While I am reluctant to add further terminological confusion to the area, it seems that Lo’s “Trung” is distinct from Tarong (see the following note), and it has prior claim on that spelling.
³ LaPolla (p. 1, fn.3) suggests identifying Rawang with Nujlang Anung and Lo’s Trung with Tarong, but all four are distinct. Rawang stands apart from the other documented varieties in having lost all initial clusters except for stop + /w, y/. (In this and some other ways Rawang seems to have participated in some Burmish phonological tendencies that are not reflected in the more northerly forms of Nunglish.) Lo’s Trung shares with Anung and Rawang the third stop series which is absent in Tarong.
Preliminaries

Two of the etymologies suggested here depend on the dissimilatory development in Nungish of *dental + r clusters, exemplified by LaPolla with three sets. (Numbers in brackets represent LaPolla’s set numbers. Sets given in full in this journal by LaPolla or Sun are abbreviated here):4

CUT/CHOP [169]: Tarong a-xrįát, A. a-xrįát, WT dra (pf. dras)

SIX [177]: Tarong kų, A. kų, WT drug; PTB *d-ruk k *d-k-rok

SEW [178]: Tarong kųp, A. khųp, WT 'drub, PTB *d-rup = *drup

LaPolla notes that the *dr - > kr- shift also occurs in Burmese and Zaiwa, and that the k- form occurs in SIX in several other languages. (This presumably is the basis for the suggestion [Matisoff 1972 #35] that SIX be reconstructed with both *d- and *k- prefixes).

This correspondence is also discussed by Sun (1986:13-4), who presents six sets, four of which involve good Nungish comparisons.5 These are SIX and the following:

MULE: Tarong tə-kų, A. te-kų, WT dre(1)6

BEDBUG: Tarong gré-šĩ̂, A. gi-ṣ̌̂, WT 'dre shig, Jg. jã këp. (cp. Monpa dʒê ṣ́̂k, with regular development of the initial cluster).

ASK: Tarong kį, A. khį, WT 'dri

To these sets we can add (see also TRIUMPH below):

RUB/WIPE: Tarong a-kř̃t, A. a-kř̃t, WT 'drud

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4 Tarong and Anung forms follow Sun’s transcriptions, except that I have used underlining to replace his short vowel diacritic, schwa for his /w/, and his tone letters are replaced by tone marks — /Æ/ high level, /Æ/ high falling, /Æ/ low falling.
5 Sun’s sixth set, DIG, includes a more dubious Nungish equation which we need not consider here.
6 dre, dreu, and drel all occur in WT.
7 The second element of the Nungish, Tibetan, and Monpa forms is clearly ‘s-rík ‘louse’. The first element is analyzable only in Tibetan, where ‘dre is ‘demon, ghost’. The Jg. form is clearly related to WB /kʰrìp/ ‘lach-Insect; cochnéal’ and Lahu /a-kį/ ‘lac’, all reflecting a variant with final *-p [cp. Matisoff 1972 #347]. The open-syllabled WT form might represent a folk etymology; alternatively, the form ‘bedbug’ might have been borrowed into Nungish from Tibetan. A priori the first alternative seems more plausible.
LaPolla, on the basis of comparison with reconstructed PTB forms, identifies the Nungish (and other) velars as secondary. Sun, while noting that the matter is far from clear, seems to suggest on the basis of the wide distribution of the velar forms (in Monpa, Jingpho, Lolo-Burmese, Mishmi, and other languages, as well as Nungish) that the WT dental form may be secondary.\textsuperscript{8}

My interpretation below of the KICK and TRIUMPH sets below as involving metathesis of \textit{*rd} followed by \textit{*dr-} \textit{> kr-} can stand only if LaPolla's interpretation is correct, since these show Nungish \textit{kr-} from clearly secondary \textit{*dr} clusters. The argument from PTB forms is somewhat precarious, since the relevance of SIX is unclear, and the TB reconstructions in the STC rely heavily on precisely the WT forms whose provenience is in question. However, there is a strong distributional argument in favor of LaPolla's interpretation: WT has, along with its dental + \textit{r} clusters, velar + \textit{r} clusters in great abundance, while Nungish has only \textit{kr-}, but no \textit{tr-}. Thus these sets contrast with LaPolla's [173] VILLAGE and [174] FEAR, where Nungish \textit{kr-} corresponds to WT \textit{kr-} or \textit{gr-}, and we must assume that the two onset types have merged in Nungish. This, of course, requires that we posit a similar merger in the other languages cited by Sun; whether this indicates a particular genetic relationship among them or requires some other explanation remains to be elucidated.

\textbf{Sets showing metathesis}

The sets (including those proposed by LaPolla and Sun) showing metathesis are arranged according to category of prefix and initial. (Monpa and Taruang forms are from Sun et al., Taraon from Anon. n.d.)

1) \textit{Metathesis of liquid prefix and stop initial:}

BLADDER: Tarong \textit{tši kłâŋ}, A. \textit{tšhí kłâŋ}, WT \textit{1gâng-pa}

TRIUMPH: Tarong \textit{krâ'?}, A. \textit{khrâ'?}, WT \textit{rduq} ‘conquer, vanquish’

This is perfectly regular, given the \textit{*dr > kr} change discussed above.

\textsuperscript{8} Cp. Sun 1983. There is scattered evidence for sporadic shifts in a number of languages. One revealing set is ELBOW: Tarung /\textit{ur krú mú}/, A. /\textit{k'ur-\textit{mú}/, Taraon /\textit{la: kra:p}/, WT /\textit{gru-\textit{mô}/}\textit{gre-\textit{mô}/}\textit{dre-\textit{bô}/}. The WT variants suggest that \textit{*dr > gr} may have sporadically occurred in Tibetan as well. This fits with Sun's evidence, where for some etyma different dialects of Tibetan disagreed on the place of the cluster.
KICK: Tarong tə-kláʔ; WT rədog 'any action with the foot; footstep; stride, pace', rədeg(s)-pa 'beat, strike, smite; push, thrust, knock, kick', Garo ɡa-tek 'kick'; Tangkhul Naga ɡekeṭhek 'id' [cp. Matisoff 1972 #14]

PUSH: Tarong də-ql5ʔ?, Monpa Atśk thəʔ?, WT rdegs

These last two sets are both dubious, but are included because they partially support one another. The implied shift of PN *kr > k là is irregular (but cp. the same irregular shift of liquid in DREAM), as is the disagreement in voicing of the initial in KICK.9

STALK (n.): Rawang kələŋ, Tarong ke-ləŋ, A. ke-ləŋ, WT rkaŋg 'foot, leg; lower part; stem, stalk, esp. leaf-stalk' (Jäschke); PTB *kʊŋ

The semantics of this set are not perfect, since it appears that 'foot' rather than 'stalk' might be the primary sense of the WT form. However, the STC *kʊŋ (359) 'stem', based entirely on non-Tibetan forms, suggests that the 'stem, stalk' sense may be original, in which case the metathesis explanation allows the Nungish forms to be linked with the *kʊŋ root. There are also phonological problems. The equation requires an irregular shift of *kr > *k là (the opposite of the shift required for THROAT below). This may be explicable; STC cites Jg. lə-kuŋ 'branch, limb' as belonging to this set, giving evidence for the correct prefix. More troublesome is the unnecessary epenthesis, breaking up an allowable initial cluster; the epenthesis is completely irregular in Rawang, which regularly loses medial liquids. (Cp. also Taraon ma-lenŋ 'stalk', supporting the possibility of a distinct *lanŋ root which could be reflected in the Nungish forms).

THROAT: Tarong, A. tši-xrāʔ?, WT 1kəg-ma 'gullet', cp. Taruang šə tə gəro (‘gullet’)

The correspondence of Nungish medial -r- to earlier *-l- is irregular (and exactly the opposite of the irregular shift in the previous sets). The (necessarily subsequent) spirantization of the velar before -r- is regular (LaPolla p. 21; LaPolla suggests xə- from original clusters, but not from *prefix + r.) There is a WT form gə-ə-bu 'throat' which could correspond

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9 If the Jingpho form /la-hkåt/ 'kick (as a horse)' is related to this set, then it provides evidence for a pre-PN *-l- prefix, rather than the *r- implied by the WT form (cp. the identical pattern in STALK), as well as for a voiceless root initial. However, the mismatch of the rimes makes this problematic.