Analysis of Rime-Groups in Northern-Burmish

Jakob Dempsey
Yuan-ze University, Taiwan

Within the large Yipo-Burmic (= Lolo-Burmese) branch of Tibeto-Burman, the Burmese language itself has received the most study. Old Burmese inscriptions, most of which date from the twelfth century, are in volume and antiquity no way comparable to Tibetan, let alone Chinese records, but they still remain the third-most useful set of early documentation for Sino-Tibetan languages, and the reconstruction of Burmese has served as both a model and tool for tracking the early development of many languages in East Asia.

Linguistic reconstruction is most useful when we can compare related languages or dialects. It is therefore unfortunate that even present-day, not-to-mention earlier stages of Burmese dialects have been so poorly recorded. This lacking, the small group of Achang dialects and the four languages of the Zaiwa-group (Zaiwa, Langsu [=Maru,Longwo], Bola, Letsi), collectively known as Northern Burmish (nBsh), must figure most importantly in a reconstruction of Old Burmese (oBrm) since these languages are the closest living relatives of Burmese. The nBsh languages have received scant attention because their speakers are few in numbers and live in remote border-regions of Burma and China (Yun-nan province). In recent years the material available has greatly increased, so that it is now possible to attempt a historical phonology of these languages and thus a more accurate reconstruction of the whole Burmish (nBsh + Brm) sub-group. This being the first time such a large-
scale reconstructive effort has been applied to the nBsh group, I have been unable, except for a few instances, to compare my ideas with other published reports. Several scholars have presented phonological reconstructions for Old Burmese, but with the emphasis on its correspondences with distantly related languages such as Tibetan or Chinese. I believe that the comparative method is more reliable when applied to closely-related languages, thus my own views on Old Burmese (q.v. LTBA 24.2) are largely based on the evidence from the nBsh group, Hpun, the Burmese dialects themselves, and early Burmese inscriptions.

About 520 sets of correspondences were collected (from Fu 1991, Huang 1992 plus other sources mentioned) and divided up into about 40 groups within which similar patterns of correspondences are found. Such groups should represent the major proto-rimes of Common North Burmish (cnBsh). When the same set of correspondences appears in several or more matched words from a group of languages, that set must represent a cnBsh proto-rime common to all those languages, unless loan-words are involved (q.v. below). At the top of each table is a suggested reconstruction for the proto-rime as well as the number of examples found. Below each table are comments on the development of the proto-rime within the various languages, as well as details concerning specific words.

The reconstructions of these rime-groups have been reasoned out in a way which hopefully explains all observed data while at the same time avoiding contradictions in logic. For example, in Tables 20 and 22 the reflex in wBrm (and sBrm) is -i for both sets, but the distinct reflexes in nBsh indicate that the proto-vowels in
these two groups must have also been distinct, with Rime 20 being a higher vowel than Rime 22, since no other factors can be found to explain the difference in reflexes. This would then mean that Burmese -i is the product of a merger since it must go back to the same Burmish source as the nBsh rimes. Reconstructing mid-vowels for Rimes 20 and 22 but a high rime for Rimes 16-18 (‘heavy’, ‘die’ etc.) not only accounts more simply for the reflexes in nBsh and sBsh (i.e. Burmese) but also is more compatible with the reflexes seen in most other TB language-groups, q.v. Dempsey 2001.

The rightmost column in the tables represents Nusu unless a form is preceded by some other language (X) plus colon. For reconstructing the Burmish rimes, the group of Nusu dialects plays an important role; if we divide Yipo-Burmic into Yipoish and Burmish, then Nusu seems rather more on the Burmish side, but the exact lineage is still unclear. References are to the Central dialect unless otherwise marked. Other forms in this column are mostly from the Yipoish branch, or from the Qiangic branch, with occasional other languages.

The last part of the paper includes a discussion about the mechanisms of certain sound-changes, issues in phonemicisation, and the general significance of this investigation’s findings as well as what related tasks remain.

Segmental / diacritical transcriptions:

- in the Zaiwa Group denotes tense vocalisation.

-ː, -h: tone marks, cf. next section.

-ː = final glottal stop.

= any high central vowel (as a phoneme), i.e. [+HI] but not i or u.

= written vowel-complex often transcribed (inadvisably) as ui.

= homorganic prenasalisation of the stop C.

-ː = dz-, ɣ= dz-. 

= nasalising of vowel; = comparatively lower vowel; -ː = raised vowel.

My Lahu e/o (the unmarked mid vowels) are often transcribed by others as e/o.

Tonal retranscriptions:

As a step away from depicting raw, surface-form data, I have first replaced numerical values with the following accent-marks:

1) Achang dialects: 55 → ā, 35 → ā, 31 → ā, 51 → ā.

2) Zaiwa: 51 → ā, 55 → ā, 21 → ā.

3) Langsu: 55 → ā, 35 → ā, 31 → ā.

4) Bola: 55 → ā, 35 → ā, 31 → ā, 51 → ā.

5) Leqi: 55 → ā, 33 → ā, 31 → ā, 53 → ā.


7) sBrm: 22 → a (plain), 55 → aː, 53 → ah (-a in wBrm).