A Study of Tones and Initials in Kam, Lakkja, and Hlai

Jerold A. Edmondson

This study describes the linguistic interaction of initial consonants, phonation types, and tones in three Kadai languages (Benedict 1942) of southern China: Kam, Lakkja, and Hlai. This interaction will be analyzed using both a developmental-comparative perspective of a type that has distinguished Professor Gedney's work on Tai, and a phonetic approach that utilizes computer-assisted acoustic techniques. Recently, there has been more interest in comparing the Kadai languages. Yet, to my knowledge, quantitative research methods of the type used here have not been applied to any significant extent to this group of languages. Please note that not all three of the languages under discussion here are treated equally. Because the tones and initials in the varieties of Lakkja and Hlai examined here appear to preserve fewer tonogenetically revealing features (Matisoff 1973), I will concentrate more on Kam and regard Lakkja and Hlai as foils against which the Kam features may stand out. In this regard, three aspects will be singled out for special emphasis: (a) the so-called tonal tripartition in Kam is probably reducible to a sequence of two bipartitions; (b) Lakkja, Hlai, and Kam have fundamental frequency shapes generally resembling the descriptions of their respective tones with some unexpected anomalies; and (c) the breathy phonation in Kam is probably responsible for the second bipartition.

The course of the exposition begins with a brief summary of past scholarship on the qualitative properties of the three languages; then examples of tone-initial interaction using Gedney's (1972) checklist procedure are given. The next portion of this essay provides a computer-aided, quantitative description of the tonal contours produced from collapsing multiple repetitions of the same lexical item into a single tonal

---

1 I would like to express my thanks to the Central Institute for Nationalities, Beijing, China, and its staff members Su Defu, Wen Mingying, and Yang Quan for providing me the informant help needed for this study; to Professor Elliott D. Ross, Behavioral Neurology Lab, University of Texas Health Science Center, Dallas, Texas, who developed the programs for the PDP-11 used here, and to Professors C-J Bailey, Paul K. Benedict, André Haudricourt, David Strecker, and Graham Thurgood for their comments on a version of this paper. A part of this research was supported by the Organized Research Fund of the University of Texas.
composite plot. It is unfortunate that tone tokens from only one speaker for each language could be included. In future work it is hoped that these results can be augmented with data from multiple subjects. In the interim, however, I will report on the treatment of data already gathered from the native speaker experts at the Central Institute for Nationalities, Beijing: (a) Yang Quan (Kam) from Tongdao, Hunan; (b) Su Defu (Lakkja) from Jinxiu Yao Autonomous District, Guangxi; and (c) Wen Mingying (Hlai) from a site on the southern coast of Hainan Island in Ya Township. Each was kind enough to assist me in the summer of 1985 in making a series of high-quality recordings with multiple tokens of the distinctive sounds of their respective languages and to point out to me particular features of each.

**Introduction**

**Demography, Geography, and Status**

While I employ the names Kam, Lakkja, and Hlai for these languages, they are often referred to by their Chinese names: Dong, Lajia, and Li, respectively, though native speakers prefer to be called by their own designations. The Kam people, who numbered more than 1,425,000 at the last census, reside mostly in eastern Guizhou in northern and southern settlements geographically separated from each other. A smaller number of speakers also live in southwestern Hunan near Tongdao and in north-eastern Guangxi at Sanjiang. They are recognized as one of China’s fifty-five official minorities. The Hlai, like the Kam, have a relatively large population. For that reason, they show geographic variation and constitute the majority in the local areas of habitation in the southern half of Hainan Island. The recent count of peoples in China put the Hlais at over 600,000 speakers. They are also an officially recognized minority and, like the Kam, possess a new romanized writing system of which they are justly proud. The Lakkja are much smaller in number (8,000 speakers) and are usually treated together with the Yao minority (Haudricourt 1967; Mao, Meng, and Zheng 1982). See figure 1.
Figure I
A Sketch of Previous Research

Detailed research on linguistic aspects of these languages is only now beginning to appear in large amounts. Indeed, there has been a dramatic increase of information about Kam and Hlai in the last five years. Li (1965) reported having conducted fieldwork on Kam before the Second World War. Yet, until 1980 there was very little written about Kam; the comprehensive bibliography of Chinese materials (1949-1982) in *Minzu yuwen yanjiu wenji* (1982) lists only five items. Aside from a 1958 report on the new Kam orthography, the earliest published works listed are *Dong-Han jianming cidian* and *Han-Dong jianming cidian*, both from 1959. Haudricourt (1972) cites the former as the source for his information about Kam tonal tripartition. An introduction to Kam by Liang Min appeared in 1965 and *Dongyu Jianzhi* [Sketch of the Kam language] in 1980. Generally, research on Kam seem to have been more limited than that on other minority peoples of comparable size (Haudricourt 1972: 68 n.19, emphasis mine).

Since the Kam are called in Chinese "Tung" (= Dong J.A.E.), I think it is preferable so to name this people of 712,000 souls, *whose language has not been recorded by any European traveller*.

Information about Hlai outside of China has been available in greater abundance and for a longer time. A few foreigners worked on Hlai during the Republican period; most significant is the important work of Stübel (1937) and especially Savina (1931). After 1949 there is the important contribution of Wang Li and Qian Sun (1951) on Baisha (White Sands) Hlai as well as thirteen other works listed in *Minzu yuwen yanjiu wenji* (1982) and especially Ouyang and Zheng (1980, 1983).

Lakkja, probably because of its size, has received much less attention. Haudricourt (1967: 165) states that he learned of its existence only in 1962 from work by the Russian linguist Yakhontov and then from a work on Yao from 1959. Lexico-statistic studies from this period suggested that Lakkja may occupy a position between Kam and Hlai (Solnit 1988; Thurgood 1988). In fact, the names Kam and Lakkja themselves suggest a relationship; *nomen est omen*. Yang Quan believes that Lakkja in reality may be cognate with the name Kam. Lakkja, he says, is a compound from *la:k* 'child/people' and *ta*¹, a variant of *kam*¹, for example, *kja(m)*¹. Were the name to be rendered in Kam, it would be *lak*⁷*kjam*². This etymology is lent more credence from the fact that in some places the Kam employ the names *kjam*, *kjam*, *tam*, *lam*, or *kolam* for themselves. Wang and Zheng in the *Sketch of Mulam* (Wang Jun 1984:

---

² Another account suggested to me, however, is that *kja³* in Lakkja means 'mountain'.