The Language Corridor

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1. Introduction

Close study of the population distribution and dialect geography of some of the small languages in South China and northernmost Vietnam reveals an unmistakable but subtle pattern. This pattern indicates that there was a language corridor as reflected in a string of settlements of groups such as the Gelao, Bouyei, Pa-hng, Bolyu, Bugan, Kam, Sui, and possibly Yi (formerly called Lolo) along a line running from the western part of Guizhou Province across Guangxi Province along the Yunnan-Guizhou Plateau following then the course of the Sông Lô River into Hà Giang and Lào Cai Provinces in Vietnam. In many cases the main communities of these peoples are otherwise organized and the migratory pattern can be seen only by looking at small isolated remnant groups. For that reason and others it is not surprising that the language corridor phenomenon has not been noticed before. In this paper we will try to support the idea that the line-like locus of small groups is suggestive of an exodus route of peoples leaving the turmoil of conflicts in Guizhou, Yunnan, Guangxi, and Hunan, perhaps most recently in the period of the Taiping Rebellion to the more tranquil territory of Vietnam. It is quite likely that this escape route figured into previous migratory patterns of peoples into SE Asia as well. In plotting this track we will examine several the language groups and show by means of settlement and language variation how their current locations can best be understood as the result of their ancestors opting for an escape route to a better place. In some cases we will be using data from newly discovered languages or language data and information that were heretofore unavailable.

2. The Gelao

As has been reported before, the Gelao are divided into four or five linguistic subgroups, Edmondson 1991 and Chang and Edmondson 1994. These subgroups are classified roughly in a geographic pattern by Zhang 1993: (1) Southwestern Guizhou--\texttt{t\textasciitilde}6\textasciitilde5 or White Gelao; (2) Northcentral Guizhou--\texttt{ha}\textasciitilde3\textasciitilde1 or Green Gelao; (3) Central Guizhou--the Klau/Qau or Cape Draping Gelao; and (4) Western Guizhou--\texttt{pu}\textasciitilde5\textasciitilde5 or Mountain Gelao. There may be or have been another group, the Red Gelao, that is found in vanishingly few numbers in Hoàng Su Phì District of Hà Giang Province. According to Hoàng (1994), the three kinds of Gelao in Vietnam call themselves: (1) Tút Dût or White Gelao; (2) Ho Ki or Green Gelao; and (3) Voa Đê or Red Gelao. It is easy to recognize the connection between \texttt{t\textasciitilde}5\textasciitilde5 and Tút Dût, even without knowing that both are called White Gelao. Similarly, the \texttt{ha}\textasciitilde3\textasciitilde1 and the Ho Ki are presumably the same. The Red Gelao remain a mystery. According to statements of people who studied this group some 20 years ago, there was no one then who could speak fluently and in fact the only speaker at all was a shaman who could still sing some of the funeral songs without understanding their meaning. In China the Red Gelao are reported last to have lived far to the east in Lìping County on the Guizhou-Hunan border.
The Gelao in China are found today in mixed villages in Guizhou and also in Longlin County, Guangxi Province, near the Sino-Vietnam border south of Maguan, and as noted, in Hà Giang Province at Đồng Văn and Hoàng Su Phi Districts. It is somewhat risky to connect dots and expect to get clear picture. From the typology of the settlements and their own accounts the White and Green Gelao groups have a vector pointing from Guizhou into Vietnam.

3. The Kam.

It was reported in Các dân tộc ít người ở Việt Nam (các tỉnh phía Bắc) (1978) that a small number of Kam speakers migrated from Guizhou about 160 years ago to Tuyên Quang Province Yên Sơn District in northern Vietnam and have lived there since mixed with several other groups, including the Kinh (Vietnamese), Dao (Yao), and Tây. Some language data were also given in the Vẻ Văn Dề Xác Định Thành Phần Các Dân Tộc Thiếu Số ở Miền Bắc Việt Nam (1975:308-9).

The first author was able to conduct a three day study of this language in company with Professors Hoàng Văn Hạnh and Hoàng Văn Ma of the Linguistics Institute of the National Centre for Social and Human Sciences in October 1995. With the help of local authorities we believe we contacted the best and perhaps the last effective speaker of Kam in Vietnam, Mr. Thạch Kim Đồng or in Chinese Shi Jindong 石金侗.

As far as the linguistic features of Viet Kam are concerned, we found that Mr. Đồng speaks a kind of Kam that has not split its tones as fully as most kinds. Kam is one of the languages of Asia that has carried out tone splitting rather far. As has been described by Liang Min (1984), Wang (1984), Edmondson (1992a), and Edmondson and Yang (1988), the Kam spoken at Rongjiang in Guizhou Province in SE Guizhou Miao-Kam Autonomous Prefecture applied the rule of tone splitting twice. That led to nine tones in open syllables and an additional six in closed syllables (noting that the DL tones mirror the pitch trajectories of the C tones and DS tones mirror the trajectory of the A tones). In fact, this splitting of tones a second time occurred in four of the six geographic areas. These locations have what we might call maximal splitting.

Not all Kam locations were so generous with tone splits. In two places—namely area 5 (in extreme southwest Guizhou at Congjiang Guandong) and areas 6 in Rongshui County of Guangxi Province on the very southern edge of Kam-speaking territory—there are fewer tones than in most places, but for that they have preserved a larger inventory of consonant initials. What we might call minimal splitting. We found that Mr. Đồng speaks a kind of Kam that has six tones, not nine, a type with minimal splitting. In fact, he speaks unmistakably the kind of Kam found in Area 5. The organization of his tones may be described as follow (the numbers after the category are the tone values according to Y.R. Chao's scale-of-five systems):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proto tone A</th>
<th>Proto tone B</th>
<th>Proto tone C</th>
<th>Proto tone DL</th>
<th>Proto tone DS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tone 1 44</td>
<td>Tone 3 24</td>
<td>Tone 5 53</td>
<td>Tone 7L 13</td>
<td>Tone 7S 44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tone 2 212</td>
<td>Tone 4 31</td>
<td>Tone 6 33</td>
<td>Tone 8L 31</td>
<td>Tone 8S 11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The main community of Kam speakers is found in SE Guizhou bordering on and overlapping into Hunan and Guangxi. It is an area some distance from the basic north-south line connecting the Gelao to Vietnam. The Kam represent the easternmost entry to the language corridor.
4. The Pa-hng

We have described the Pa-hng (Red Yao) language of Guangxi Province, China (Edmondson 1992b). It was mentioned there that there were also Pa-hng in Guizhou and Pa-hng (Pa Then) and Na’e in northern Vietnam. It is now possible to report more details about the Pa-hng of Vietnam. In October 1995 we interviewed Mr. Lý Văn Minh (46 years of age) and Mr. Phán Văn Đông (45 years of age) both from Hồng Quang Village of Чиём Hòa District in Tuyên Quang Province. Mr. Phán was a Pa-hng and Mr. Lý was a Sui married to a Pa-hng. Each of them spoken several languages including Vietnamese, Pa-hng, Sui, Tây, and some Guan Hua (the kind of Mandarin spoken on the Sino-Vietnam Border). The analysis here is based on examples produced by Mr. Phán, although he was occasionally coached by Mr. Lý. They were both agriculturalists and had spent their entire lives in the village. They report that Pa-hng speakers are found in several other settlements in their area and also in Bắc Quang in Hà Giang Province to the north. Pa-hng in Vietnam are called the Miao Hoa or Flowery Miao.

There are eight tones in Tuyên Quang Pa-hng, organized according to their historical sources as follows (the numbers after the category are the tone values according to Y.R. Chao’s scale-of-five system and dots under the number indicate breathy voice quality):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proto tone A</th>
<th>Proto tone B</th>
<th>Proto tone C</th>
<th>Proto tone D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tone1 42</td>
<td>Tone3 44?</td>
<td>Tone5 55</td>
<td>Tone7 55?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tone2 33</td>
<td>Tone4 1,1</td>
<td>Tone6 2,4</td>
<td>Tone8 3,1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Pa-hng of Guangxi Province (cf. Chang Kun 1947 and Edmondson 1992b) have different tone values than those found in the Pa-hng of Hồng Quang. The tone values for Guangxi Pa-hng are: 1=24; 2=22; 3=11; 4=11; 5=55; 6=44; 7=53; and 8=41. The Pa-hng tone values gathered by Chang Kun at Yongcong, Guizhou (today called Congjiang) are: 1=24; 2=33; 3=22; 4=11; 5=53; 6=44; 7=53; and 8=31. Notably, in Hồng Quang (like Yongcong) the B tone has split, whereas as in Guangxi data this tone either remerged or never split. Unlike the other two locations Tones 3 and 7 in Hồng Quang end in a glottal stop or closure. Very generally, this form of Pa-hng is rather different from either the Guangxi kinds or the Yongcong kinds. For that reason we believe that Viet Pa-hng may correspond to that found to the west in Rongjiang, Sandu, and Libo Counties of Guizhou. Research is currently underway to pinpoint its location more precisely. If this hypothesis hold up, then it would account for the current ties between the Sui and Pa-hng and suggest that they may have journeyed together from the Sandu Guizhou area into Tuyên Quang in Vietnam.

5. The Sui

The Thuy or Sui nationality of Vietnam is one of the smallest. According Các dân tộc ít người ở Việt Nam (các tinh phía bắc) 1978 there were only 55 Sui speakers. The population today numbers about 100. They are all located in Hồng Quang Village of Chiêm Hòa District in Tuyên Quang Province. Hồng Quang is located about 62 km to the NW of Chiêm Hòa city near the border with Hà Giang. According to the old people, eight families moved to Vietnam; the time of settlement is unknown. The Sui there live with the Pa Then or Pa-hng and the Tây. In October 1995 we collected data on this language and will report later on it in detail.
Much of the material on the Sui language of China, aside from the well-known studies by Li Fang Kuei, has not been published. Li collected data at three locations; Chinese scholars have since gathered more at nine locations: (1) Guizhou Sandu Sandong 三洞; (2) Guizhou Sandu Zhonghe 中和; (3) Guizhou Sandu Jiujian 九龙; (4) Guizhou Sandu Yaoqing 瑶庆; (5) Guizhou Sandu Hengfeng 恒丰; (6) Guizhou Sandu Shuilong 水龙; (7) Guizhou Duyun Pandong 潘洞; (8) Guizhou Rongjiang County 桑江; (9) Guizhou Sandu Yang'an 阳安. We can determine that the Sui spoken in Hồng Quang is similar to that in locations 2 or 3 and differs in some respects to that of the other places. The diagnostic vocabulary from Suiyu Diaoche Baogao (1958) are given here with the number of their location:

1. ‘blood’ phịếţ (Hồng Quang) vs. phạt (4) but phịếţ elsewhere.
2. ‘paddy’ nịg (Hồng Quang) vs. tạ (1, 2, 6); rạ (3, 4, 5); gạ (7-9).
3. ‘right’ fạ (Hồng Quang) vs. fa (1-6, 8, 9); va (7).
4. ‘high’ vẹn (Hồng Quang) vs. vẹn (1-8) vs. phẹn (9).
5. ‘house’ gẹn (Hồng Quang) vs. gẹn (2-9) vs. gẹn (1, Suiqing)

More data need to be examined before the homelands of the Viet Sui can be determined exactly. But it appears that the kind spoken in Hồng Quang is like that spoken at Jiujian and Hengfeng in Sandu County. As far as is known, Sui is found only in three counties of Guizhou Province: Sandu, Libo, and Duyun, and one county of Guangxi Province, Rongshui.

6. Bolyu and Bagan

There are also two Mon-Khmer languages that lie on the language corridor. They are Bolyu and a newly discovered language called Bagan. A detailed study of Bagan by Li Jinfang will appear later. We give here a cursory sketch of it. The Bolyu live in Longlin Various Nationalities Autonomous County 隆林各民族自治县 in extreme western Guangxi, population is about 800, cf. Edmonson and Gregerson to appear. Some Bolyu are said to live in Yunnan Province as well. Bolyu has six tones and SVO typology in regard to word order. Its phonological and lexical properties are outline in Edmonson 1994.

The Bagan number nearly 3000 and are found in the mountainous areas of southern Guangnan 广南 and northern Xichou 西畴 Counties in the southeastern part of Yunnan Province. The Bagan live in the following seven villages: 老猫龙 Laowalông [pə5 tung13], 新猫龙 Xinwalông [pə5 tung13], 九平 Jiuping [pə5 tsian31], 石北坡 Shiubeipo [pə5 ce12], 新寨 Xinzhai [li5 lian13], 马龙 Manlông [pə5 yu31] and 那拉 Nala. The Bagan and the Han Chinese live together in Jiuping, Xinzhai, and Nala; the other four villages are exclusively inhabited by Bagan. The Bagan call themselves [pə5 kan35] in their own language, the surrounding Han call them Hualo or 花族 Huazui ‘colorful people’ because the Bugan women wear colorful traditional dresses made from sewing together triangular swathes of printed cloth. The Bagan do not consider themselves to be natives of Guangnan and Xichou but came here before the Han, the Miao/Hmong, and the Yao. Some Bagan people say their ancestors originated from Jiangxi, Sichuan, and Guizhou Provinces and have lived in Guangnan and Xichou for 10 or more generations. The Bagan celebrate their own New Year’s festival in April of the Chinese Lunar Calendar. During the festival days they sing native or Han songs, and dance together to music of the pə5, a kind of Bagan instrument made of bamboo and calabashes. Nowadays only a few old people are able to sing their native songs. The Bagan male clothing is the same as the Han’s, females are accustomed to wearing long black skirts, colorful dresses, and headwraps. The Bagan used to marry only within their own ethnic group, but