The language corridor: New evidence from Vietnam

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1. Introduction

It is widely accepted that many Tai and Kadai groups currently settled in SE Asia once lived in southern China.¹ Historians East and West, modern and ancient have reported this movement. Indeed, as Terrien de Lacouperie (1887:14) said:

The majority of the population of Indo-China is made up of ethnical elements which were formerly settled in China proper. The ethnology of the peninsula cannot be understood separately from the Chinese formation, and the intricacies of one help pretty often to make intelligible the complication of the other.

Moreover, it is generally believed that this movement has primarily taken a southern and western directional vector. But, by simply announcing this statement I have done little to enlighten the extraordinarily complex issue of the ethnic, topographic, and geographic given that have helped to condition and shape the interaction, intersettlement, and interfusion of Han and non-Han groups in peopling of the territory south of the Yangtze River.

In this paper I will attempt to demonstrate how linguistic analysis might be employed to examine these issues. However let me say that my aims here are modest. I will strive for no comprehensive account of the migrations into SE Asia, but instead I will look at one geographic area, namely the Vietnam-China Borderlands. I would note though that this particular area I feel is one of the most informative, because the borderlands area is a place where one can find a profusion of small linguistic groups displaced from their homelands often by great distances. In some cases these small groups may be found no where else. In short I contend the Borderlands area resembles a freeze-frame, stopping the action of an epic motion picture of travelers encamped at various locations on their journeys when the tighter

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border controls of modern times abruptly broke upon them. Moreover, by using the linguistic lens to view this still life we are able to determine in many cases where these travelers have come from and where they are going, for in regard to movements of peoples in the last 250-400 years there is very much a beaten path syndrome in the sense described by Morrison in his Functions and dynamics of migration, 1977. That is why Li Jinfang and I in 1996 suggested that there exists a language corridor, a special pathway leading from Guizhou and northern Guangxi Province into northern Vietnam.

How may we describe this pathway? It is a general route of travel out of harm’s way that runs a course along the Guizhou-Guangxi border westward into Yunnan Province. From there it turns south and terminates in Vietnam in Hà Giang, Lào Cai, and Lai Châu Province and in Laos in Phongsaly Province. In this paper I will explore reason for the language corridor and speak about some of the Kadai groups that have taken that corridor.

In the following I will be considering the linguistic situation of four immigrant groups in Vietnam and their forbearers in China, the Kam of Vietnam or Đông, the Sui of Vietnam or Thùy, the Bouyei immigrants to Vietnam (the Giây), and the Red and White Gelao of Vietnam or Cơ Lao. As I will outline below, the Kam, Sui, and Gelao appear to be the last vestiges of free migration with perhaps some push from the harsh economic setting of their former homeland in China. The Giây, by contrast, appear to have partaken in a mass migration phenomenon so that today they have a population in Vietnam of about 40,000.

2. Viet Kam, a dying language

Kam is a Kam-Sui language in the Kadai Branch whose speakers are primarily found in Guizhou Province, China. They are thought to have come to Vietnam in small numbers about 150 years ago and are found today in only one village, Đồng Mộc, of Tuyên Quang Province. It has been general unknown to non-Vietnamese scholars until recently that Kam is spoken outside of China and few if any purely linguistic publications exist on the Kam of Vietnam. However, brief ethnographic notes and a short word list are found in Nguyễn Khắc Tùng (1975:306-316) and there is a brief description of the cultural practices of the Kam in Các dân tộc ở người ở Việt Nam (các tinh phía Bắc) (1975:287-290).

There are today not more than a very few who can still speak this language. Local authorities helped us to find what we believe to be the best speaker of Kam in Vietnam, Mr. Thạch Kim Động or in Chinese Shi Jindong. Mr. Động learned the language from his mother, the now 96 year old Ngô Thị Thăng, who had also taught him much about Kam culture and history. He has reported to us that in his village
there are about 35 people who would claim to be Kam. Among them, though, only the family of the matriarch Ngô Thị Thăng can still speak the language and Mr. Đổng is said to speak the best, now that his mother has grown deaf in her old age.

2.1 Viet Kam tones

Kam is one of the languages of Asia that has carried the process of tone splitting to an extensive degree. Mr. Đổng speaks a kind of Kam that has not split its tones as fully as most kinds. It is the usual assumption that the Kam-Sui languages, like the Tai languages in general, had five proto tones, now conventionally designed A, B, C, DL, and DS, cf. Li 1965, 1977. From the five tones then arose ten by a sound change known as tone bipartition, as it has been called in Haudricourt 1961. It was usually the case that forms with original voiced consonant initials developed low tones, whereas those with original voiceless consonant initials developed high tones, cf. Liang Min 1984, Wang 1984, and Edmondson and Yang 1988. We can represent these changes as in:

![Figure 1. Tonal bipartition into HIGH and LOW reflexes](image1)

![Figure 2. Tripartition into HIGH, LOW, RISING tones](image2)
Kam, however, belongs to a select group of area languages that have undergone tripartition through a second historically distinct tonal bipartition. Whenever the original consonant initials possessed aspiration (voiceless friction, as it is called by Gedney 1972), rising tones were the result. The process is illustrated in Figure 2.

The above scenario eventually led to nine tones in open syllables and six in closed syllables. The tripartition of tones is attested in four of the six generally recognized varieties of Kam with bipartition in the other two, the latter being found in extreme southeast Guizhou at Liping Shuikou (designated area 5 in the unpublished but comprehensive dialectological report Dongyu Diaocha Baogao 1957) and in Rongshui County of Guangxi Province, area 6, on the very southern edge of Kam speaking territory.

We found that Viet Kam clearly reflects at least six tones, which would constitute bipartition. However to complicate the picture, some tendencies were also observed possibly reflecting additional developing tones in Mr. Đông’s speech. Specifically, those vocabulary items with aspirated stop or voiceless friction initials typically had a higher onset than vocabulary with plain voiceless stop initials. While this effect may be only phonetic and not a contrastive feature of the language, it may reflect “work in progress” of a familiar tonal sort in this linguistic area, i.e. emerging tripartition.

The organization of Viet Kam tones as developments from proto categories may be represented as in Figure 3:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>DL</th>
<th>DS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[44]</td>
<td>[53]</td>
<td>[24]</td>
<td>[34]</td>
<td>[55]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[212]</td>
<td>[33]</td>
<td>[52]</td>
<td>[31]</td>
<td>[32]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3. Viet Kam tone categories

We have constructed plots of representative forms with these tones from our tape recordings.

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2We note that the DL tones mirror the pitch trajectories of the C tones and DS tones mirror the trajectory of the A tones.

3We follow here the Gedney tradition for representing proto tone categories A, B, C, DL (ong), and DS(hort) even though it results in some tone number reorderings, nor for Viet Kam are the four term vertical categories well suited, rather a simple two term system (reflecting original voiced vs. original voiceless initials) suffices.