Four Languages of the Vietnam-China Borderlands

Jerold A. Edmondson and Kenneth J. Gregerson
University of Texas at Arlington

1. *The Vietnam connection.* The peopling of SE Asia has displayed several long-term and persistent trends.¹ One of the most obvious of these has been the migration of language groups from southern China into Mainland SE Asia. This fact is undisputed. Uncertainty remains, however, as to questions of linguistic affiliation at greater time depth and as to the sources and routes of these migrations, cf. Edmondson and Li 1996. In pursuit of answers to such questions large and small languages throughout SE Asia have been discussed in the literature, e.g., Benedict 1975, Hudak 1991, 1995. The majority and minority groups in Thailand, for instance, have been investigated linguistically in great depth for several decades and much new material about the ethnicities within southern China is exemplified in earlier research by Li Fang Kuei and subsequently by other scholars in China, notably works appearing in the journal *Minzu Yuwen* [Minority Languages and Literatures]. What still remain obscure, however, are details on the linguistic groups that lie across borders whose antecedants are still to be found in southern China. A notable chapter in this regard is what one might call the *Vietnam Connection*, an area to which the current paper aims to make a modest contribution.

There is great overlap between the minority groups of Yunnan, Guangxi, Guizhou, and Sichuan Provinces and the stocks of northern Vietnam. Some are clearly recent immigrants; others may be autochthonous peoples of the borderlands areas. So for example, in the Chinese translation of *Các dân tộc ít người ở Việt Nam (các tỉnh phía Bắc)* 1978 it is noted that of the thirty-six languages of the northern-most part of Vietnam, fully 23 of them are also found in China often today living in locations at great distances from one another. One way that linguists
can contribute to an understanding of such borderlands
groups is to explore migratory patterns using
dialectological similarity between linguistic strains in
Vietnam and their brethren in China. The present paper
will treat of only four groups who have apparently come
to Vietnam in relatively recent times: (1) the Kam; (2)
the Sui; (3) the Pa-hng; and (4) the Giây.²

2. Kam. 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 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 NguyễnKhắc Tùng (1975:306-16) and there is a brief
description of the cultural practices of the Kam in Các
dân tộc ít người ở Việt Nam (các tỉnh phía bắc) (1975:287-
90).

Local authorities helped us to find what we believe
to be the best speaker of Kam in Vietnam, Mr. Thạch
Kim Đồng or in Chinese Shi Jindong 石金侗.³ Mr. Đồng
learned the language from his mother, the now 96 year
old Ngô Thị Thang (with family name Wu 吴), 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 Thang
can still speak the language and Mr. Đồng is said to
speak the best, now that his mother has grown deaf in
her old age.

2.1. Tones of Viet Kam. Kam is one of the
languages of Asia that has carried the process of tone
splitting to an extensive degree. Mr. Đồng 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:

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 1** Tonal bipartition into HIGH and LOW reflexes

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 2**: Tripartition into HIGH, LOW, RISING tones
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