CHAPTER 4

COMMENTS ON LINGUISTIC ARGUMENTS RELATING TO INSCRIPTION ONE

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I think I had better begin by summarizing briefly what is known about the early history and the prehistory of the Thai language. This account is intended to be comprehensible to non-linguists.

The language known as Thai or Central Thai or Siamese, the dialect of Central Thailand and now the standard language of the country, belongs to what is called the Tai language family. A convention has become widely accepted by which the spelling Thai is used for the language of Thailand, but the spelling Tai for the family.

By the term language family, linguists mean a group of languages which can be demonstrated to be divergent continuations of a single original language.

Spoken language is always undergoing change. As peoples become separated geographically, their languages may undergo different changes, to the point where after a sufficient passage of time two languages which were once the same may become so different as to be mutually unintelligible.

Changes may involve sounds, or grammar, or vocabulary. Linguists are blessed above students of other aspects of earlier culture in being able to utilize a wonderful general principle, that sound change is always regular; that is, if a sound change

takes place, it affects all occurrences of the sound or sounds involved. If the sound *b* changes to *p,* then all the words having the *b* sound will be affected. If the sound *k* changes to *s* before certain vowels but remains *k* elsewhere, then all occurrences of the sound *k* will be so affected. If subsequent changes in the vowels obscure this conditioning factor, then so much more work for the linguist to figure out what has happened.

The task of the historical linguist, when confronted with two or more languages that seem similar but show differences, is to figure out what sound changes have occurred in each of the languages to bring about the differences. Not until this has been accomplished can the two languages be regarded as genetically related. And he tries to figure out what sound system the original single language could have had, or must have had, to account for the sound systems of the later languages.

In all of this we are talking about spoken language. Some languages during the course of time acquire writing systems. Early written records, especially if they are dated, may be of great help in working out the history of a language. But writing systems do not always represent the sound systems accurately, and so written records must be used with care. So linguists depend primarily on data from spoken languages.

The assumed single parent language of a language family is called the proto-language of the group. Proto-Tai, the assumed single prehistoric original language of which all modern Tai languages and dialects are divergent continuations, has been pretty well reconstructed. We are certain of the tone system, and pretty much all of the consonant system. For the vowels, it is possible to do fairly well at reconstructing a vowel system for each of two main branches, a Northern and a Southern, but no one has yet been able to reconcile these two in a single proto-Tai vowel system.

Most linguists now believe that Proto-Tai was spoken far to the east, probably in southeastern China. As regards date, scholars believe that Proto-Tai was spoken by a single group of people about two thousand years ago, or less, mainly because

the degree of divergence seems to be about the same as in other language families whose history is better known.

Of course Proto-Tai did not spring up out of nothing. Other languages have been found in southeastern China and on the island of Hainan which seem to be related to Tai but cannot be fitted into the Tai family. Some day scholars will figure out exactly how these languages are related to each other and to Tai, and then, still utilizing the principle of regular sound change, reconstruct a still earlier proto-language for the larger group.

Proto-Tai had three tones. We are certain of this because only by reconstructing these three tones, and figuring out which word originally had which tone, are we able to account for what we find in each of the modern Tai languages and dialects.

By far the largest number of words had what is called the A tone, more than all the others combined. This appears to have been the normal, or, as linguists say, the unmarked tone. Two other smaller groups of words had what are called the B tone or the C tone. Just how these two other tones differed from each other and from the A tone we do not know. Some think it may have been a matter of voice quality rather than pitch as in modern tone languages. But we do not need to know what these tones sounded like. What we need, and have, is an understanding of the structure of the system.

There was also a fourth category, words ending in the consonants *p, t,* and *k*. These are said to have had the D tone, but actually these syllables were undifferentiated tonally, and so might better be called toneless.

As the Tai-speaking peoples separated and scattered over a wide area of southern China and Southeast Asia, each group made changes in its sound system, in the consonants and vowels, but strangely, the three-way tone system, plus the fourth toneless category, persisted everywhere for a long time, apparently many centuries. There may have been, and undoubtedly were, differences from place to place in the way each tone was pronounced, but the system remained structurally intact. Interestingly, other tonal language families in the Far East, for

example Chinese and Miao-Yao, also had tone systems like this during the same period.

But finally a convulsive change occurred in this tonal system, sweeping across all Tai languages and dialects and also languages and dialects of other families of tonal languages in the Far East and Southeast Asia, such as Chinese.

What happened everywhere was that each earlier tone split into two or more tones, depending upon the phonetic characteristics of the initial consonant of the syllable at the time. In many places what made the difference was voiced versus voiceless initial consonant, for example *b* vs. *p*. In other places other features came into play, for example a friction sound like *f* vs. a clean stop sound like *p*.

And then drastic changes also occurred in these initial consonants. In some places previously voiced sets of consonants became voiceless, or vice versa. In fact it was these consonant changes, after the tone splits, that brought about the new tone systems, because without these consonant changes there would have been merely two manners of pronouncing the original tone, automatically determined by the consonant.

For example, in Thai, earlier *hmaa* 'dog' and *maa* 'to come' both had the A tone, but differed in initial consonant. After the tonal splits, the word for 'dog' acquired what is today a rising tone, while 'to come' had what is now mid-level tone. But then the word for 'dog' lost its preaspiration, so that its initial *m* was no different from the initial *m* of 'to come,' and the two words now differed only in tone.

Many languages, after these changes, ended up with six-tone systems. Some, for example Central Thai, have five tones. After the changes, the fourth category of stopped or checked syllables developed tonal differentiation, as in Central Thai *màak* 'areca' vs. *mâak* 'much,' and *phàk* 'vegetable' vs. *phák* 'to rest.'

If every language and dialect had made exactly the same changes, we would be helpless to figure out what happened and what the previous sound system was; one could not prove that