VESTIGES OF MORPHOLOGY IN SOME TIBETO-BURMAN LANGUAGES

Eugénie J.A. Henderson

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

The first point to be made is the distinction between what may be called prosodic and segmental morphology. It seems to me perfectly acceptable that prosodic features such as tone or stress should in themselves be found to operate as morphological devices in the language of any part of the world, and as a member of the so-called London School, I should be inclined to include under 'prosodic' morphology, morphological processes involving the alternation of subsegmental features such as voice or voicelessness, aspiration or absence of aspiration, etc. It seems, however, to be the general view of the majority of the Sino-Tibetan philologists that prosodic morphology must in some sense be regarded as secondary to or derived from what may be called segmental phonology, i.e. that the grammatical use of aspiration, for example, or of tone, is in all probability to be ascribed to the operation of earlier segmental formatives which they have supplanted. I wish to present here some of the vestigial morphological features of Tibeto-Burman languages I have worked with in this latter light, whilst reserving the right to wonder whether our apparent conviction of the primacy of segmental morphology does not derive to a very large degree from our own traditional Indo-European standpoint - a standpoint to some extent challenged by the learning experience of our own children, in whose acquisition of speech tonal features for example, are in the early stages as important as, perhaps **more** important than, segmental ones.

I propose to exclude from consideration such overt morphological
features as prefixes, or verbal particles which could be regarded as
morphological elements, in order to concentrate upon phonological fea-
tures which are an integral part of tonic syllables, and which appear
to show signs of having at one time been the expression of live mor-
phological processes. I shall be concerned therefore with

(1) initial consonants

(2) final consonants

(3) tone

1. VESTIGES OF MORPHOLOGY IN INITIAL CONSONANTS

The principal feature that springs to mind in this connection is the
well-known though rather limited use in languages like Burmese and Chin
of a contrast between unaspirated and aspirated initials to express
verbal relationships which may be loosely termed transitive/intransitive,
or sometimes causative/noncausative.

Examples from Burmese include such pairs as the following[1]:

(a) kwe: te *to break* (intr.)   hkwe: te *to break* (trans.)

(b) kya.te *to drop* (intr.)   hkya. te *to drop* (trans.)

(c) pwin. te *to open* (intr.)   hpwin. te *to open* (trans.)

(d) nou:te   *to be awake*   hnou: te *to awaken* (trans.)

Sometimes Burmese spelling shows a similar relationship between pairs
of words whose modern spoken form would not lead one to expect it,

e.g. you' te   *to be inferior*

      hyou' [ʃouᵒ] te *to put down*

In Tiddim Chin one finds a few similar pairs, e.g.

(e) ˌkia *to fall*   ˌxia *to drop* (tr.), *to fell*

(cp., perhaps, second Burmese example above)

(f) ‐ka:i *to be suspended*   ‐xa:i *to hang* (trans.)

(g) ‐ka:k *to dilate* (intr.)   ‐xa:k *to open wide* (trans.)

(h) ‐tu:k *to roll* (intr.)   ‐xu:k *to roll* (trans.)

(j.) ˌpu:k *to fall* (intr.)   ˌphu:k *to fell*

(k) ˌka:ŋ *to rise, raise*   ˌxa:ŋ *to lift*
          oneself

Notice the unexpected relationship in (h) between t and x, not the
expected th, which in this language is generally accepted as a reflex
of earlier *s.

When I had the opportunity to work with a Lushai informant, I was
not, unfortunately, looking for such forms. A somewhat cursory exam-
ination of Lorrain's dictionary did not produce any likely examples
but R.B. Jones has drawn my attention to at least one pair of such
forms: tliak[2] *to break* (intr.) and thliak[2] *to break* (tr.), which sug-

gests that others may exist.

Wolfenden[2] and Stern[3] cite further forms for Sizang, another Northern Chin dialect:

(1) ki:em *to grow less*   khi:em *to decrease, make less*

(m) kɔm   *to assemble, come together* khɔm   *to collect, bring together*

(n) ka:i *to pull, be suspended*   kha:i *to hang up* (trans.)

Scholars (Wolfenden[4], Pulleyblank[5]) have ascribed this feature to the loss of a former s-prefix, such as exists and has a similar function in written Tibetan. Compare, for example, Tibetan agyel, gyel *to fall,* sgyel *to throw down* with examples (b) and (e) above. As La Raw Maran and others[6] have shown Kachin still has a ša/ǰa prefix with a causative or transitive function in similar sets of words. It is pertinent to note, furthermore, that in spoken Tibetan the transitive/intransitive relationship is realized as one of absence or presence of aspiration, viz: [ky:gydu:] *he is boiling the water,* but [khy:gy:du:] *the water is boiling* (Sprigg)[7]. Pulleyblank has suggested that this feature might be "an important point from which to start in trying to establish the phonological isoglosses in Tibeto-Burman".[8]

Morphological or quasi-morphological alternation of voiced and voiceless initials is assumed by some scholars for Archaic Chinese, but as far as I am aware there is nothing in Archaic Chinese that corresponds to the s-prefix of Tibetan and Kachin, and the related alternation of aspirated and unaspirated initials in Chin and Burmese. This would therefore seem to be a genuinely Tibeto-Burman grammatical trait. It is possibly significant here that no trace of this trait has so far been reported for Karen. This would appear to support the current view that Karen is to be regarded as Sino-Tibetan but not as Tibeto-Burman (Luce)[9].

Closer examination of Karen might however show up suggestive initial consonant relationships of other kinds, which are clearly linked to tonal features and possibly also to long vanished grammatical formatives of some kind. In Bwe Karen, for instance, in addition to the not uncommon phonetic variation between voiced and voiceless initials, as in ci^2 and ji^3, both meaning *to knead,* one sometimes finds alternation between glottalised and non-glottalised initials, as for example $ɓɛ^1$ *to put, lay, keep,* and $bɛ^3$, with the same range of meanings; there is also $ɗa^2$ *to cut,* beside da^2 *to cut a foothold;* $ɓwɛ^1$ = *Bwe Karen,* and $bwɛ^2$ = *person,* and many more. One suspects a link too between $kɔ^1$, a prenominal prefix, and two preverbal formatives $gɔ^3$ and $khɔ^1$. $kɔ^1$ denotes future time, as in $kɔ^1mu^2nɛ^2$ *tonight,* $kɔ^1mo^1hɛ^2$ *this (coming) evening,* $kɔ^1məhɔ^2$ *tomorrow,* $kɔ^1dəhɔ^2$ *the day after tomorrow,* and also interrogatively $kɔ^1lɛ^3$ *when?* (of future time, as contrasted with $phɔ^1lɛ^3$ *when?*

of past time). The two preverbal formatives gɔ³ and khɔ¹, both refer-
ring to future time, are sometimes used interchangeably, but with gɔ³
indicating probability rather than certainty, e.g. khɔ¹ge¹phlɔ² *It will
(certainly) fall* as contrasted with gɔ³ge¹phlɔ² *It will (probably) fall*.
Much more work needs to be done on word-families of this kind. Is it
fanciful to seek some link here with the alternation of voiced and
voiceless initials proposed for Archaic Chinese words, sometimes in
free variation, sometimes with linked but systematically differentiated
meanings, together with the high and low tone registers associated
with them? Bwe Karen and its closest related dialect Geba are excep-
tional among Karen languages in preserving the ancient distinction
between voiced and voiceless stops, and in having a 3-tone system rather
than the 5- or 6-tone system common to the dialects which have lost the
old voice distinction. Bwe has voiceless unaspirated stops (p, t, k),
voiceless aspirated stops (ph, th, kh), plain voiced stops (b, d, g)
and voiced glottalised stops (ɓ, ɗ). The plain voiced stops are asso-
ciated with the two lower tones (mid and low); all the others, including
the glottalised stops, with the two higher tones (high and mid). One
might expect therefore that the cognates of pairs like ɗa² and da²,
ɓwɛ¹ and bwɛ², in other Karen dialects would show a difference in tone,
with or without an accompanying difference in initial. There is some
hint of this in the tonal variation among semantically linked sets of
words recorded by R.B. Jones for Palaychi.[10]

2. VESTIGES OF MORPHOLOGY IN FINAL CONSONANTS

The comparative rarity of forms showing the vestigial remains of the
old s-prefix system in Tibeto-Burman languages is perhaps confirmation
of Wolfenden's contention that prefixed forms in these languages are in
general older than suffixed forms. It is certainly true that, in the
Chin languages at least, alternations of final consonants, such as
might be supposed to derive from older suffixed elements, are very much
more numerous. These principally concern pronominal forms within the
verbal phrase and the shape of verb stems themselves. I have given
some account elsewhere of both of these characteristics as they occur
in Tiddim Chin[11], and so will only summarize them briefly here.

2.1. *PRONOMINAL INFLECTIONS*

In formal literary Chin there is commonly a pronominal prefix before
the verb and a phrase sentence final particle after it, e.g.
    (a) kă -pai ˎhi *I go* or *I went*
The negative particle ˎkei or the future particle ˎdi:ŋ may be inserted