

Word Families in Tai: A Preliminary Account

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1 Introduction

More than sixty years ago, in an important contribution to Chinese linguistics, the eminent Sinologist and orientalist Bernhard Karlgren made an insightful statement on research methodologies in this field, which is worth quoting:

Before Sinitic comparative linguistics can be safely tackled there remains a great task to be solved in each of the language groups concerned. In Chinese the words must be sorted and grouped according to genetic affinity, and the same must be done in T'ai and in Tibeto-Burman. Then, but only then, we can start comparing the word groups of these three great branches and hope for reliable results.

(Karlgren 1933: 9)

Four decades later, in 1978, James Matisoff called for an 'organic approach' to linguistic comparison. Focusing on body-part terms in Tibeto-Burman languages, Matisoff has successfully demonstrated that 'variational semantics', the task of which is to identify 'allofams' (i.e. word families), holds the key to the reconstruction of Tibeto-Burman and other SE Asian languages. In a recent article he has reemphasised the significance of this approach: 'Any given etymon is bound to show some morphophonemic variation, even at proto-level, thus *historical reconstruction in SEA must be done in terms of 'word families', rather than of monolithic invariant roots*' (1992: 46, emphasis added).

Word families are, in traditional historical linguistic terminology, etymologically related variants of the same proto-morpheme in a given language. Also referred to as doublets,¹ these are 'groups of forms which bear a non-fortuitous phonological and semantic relationship to each other' (Matisoff 1978: 18). In other words, word families are variant forms that are partially related to each other phonologically and semantically, very much like English *spl-* or *sn-* words.

If one looks at any good dictionary of a Sino-Tibetan language, one is struck by the large number of word families, which can somehow be sorted into certain *semantically definable groups*. *Especially intriguing is a morphological process*, i.e. the alternation of tones, which makes Sino-Tibetan languages distinct from Indo-European languages. To cite an example from Lahu: *lâ* 'to come', *la* 'cisative verb-particle', and *lâ* 'benefactive verb-particle' (Matisoff 1978: 22-23). Here we have a case of exact semantic/phonological parallelism of allofamy within a single language, an uncommon occurrence. More often, different initial consonants and finals are involved. The task becomes even more demanding if one compares such allofams across several related languages. A good example is the body-part term 'belly' in Sino-Tibetan, which exhibits a range of allofams, cf. Chinese **piðk*, Limbu *sapok* 'belly', Ao Naga *tepok*, Magari *mi-Tuk*, Garo *ok*, Lahu *ṣ-fī-qō*, Jingphaw *pù-hpam*, Tamlu *hwum*. What holds these into a family is the semantics

¹ As often in the Indo-European tradition. For a discussion of this topic, see Hoenigswald 1983:167-71.

and the labial element /p m f w/, which went missing in Garo (Matisoff 1978: 124-127).

The purpose of this paper is to present some evidence of word families in Tai. As this is an immense topic, we shall limit ourselves to only a few frequently-encountered word families within the semantic fields of 'stem/handle', 'to be wet/moist', 'to cover/conceal', 'to bend/crooked', 'to fall/topple/collapse', 'flat/sheet/board', 'to hold by hand', 'to detach/remove', 'sharp-pointed/pierce/stab', 'open/wide', 'to extinguish/dark', 'to make noise', 'to spread/enlarge/extend', 'to cut/slice/reap/break', 'to beat/hit/strike/punch', among others. The roots concerned have the initial consonants *k-, *p-, *l- and *s-, and finals *i/e/a/o, *-an/t, *-ak/ŋ, *-en, *-om/p, *-ok/ŋ, *-on/t and so on. The historical connections of these word families will be explored, and the recurrent patterns of such morphological alternations will be investigated. Much of the material set out below has been cited in reconstructed form in Li's (1977) *Handbook of Comparative Tai*, with data added from new sources, along with probable cognates which have recently been uncovered by the present writer. Reference is made to related languages when relevant. It is hoped that this preliminary discussion will stimulate further research on the topic and will furnish some useful data for both researchers in the Tai field and areal comparativists.

2 Some Word Families in Tai

Li (1977: 41) in discussing irregularities in tone correspondences in Tai has observed that there is some evidence that a morphological process was in force in Proto Tai which gives rise to tone doublets, as in the case of Siamese. Li further distinguishes two types: (i) those that have the same type of initials and vowels and (ii) those that have different types of initials. He cites a few examples from Siamese to illustrate his point. Some of his examples include *khaa*^{B2} 'price' and *khaa*^{C2} 'to trade'; *koŋ*^{A1} 'circle' and *koŋ*^{B1} 'to bend'; *cum*^{C1} 'to soak' and *chum*^{B2} 'to be wet, moist'; *pan*^{B1} 'to spin' and *phan*^{A2} 'to wind around, coil'.

There is a further type of tone alternation, i.e. free alternation of tones in a single dialect for specified lexical items, which was not discussed in Li and which has been presented elsewhere (Luo 1994). This can be briefly summarized as follows:

- A1—A2: Sanfang
- A1—B1: Dehong, Saek
- A1—C1: Saek
- B1—B2: Sanfang
- B1—C1: Dehong, Lungming, Wuming
- B2—C2: Dehong, Saek
- C1—C2: Dehong, Saek
- C1—B2: Lungming, Saek

We do not look in detail at this free variation here but cite them to show their existence in Tai, whether they are reflexes of the proto language or are recent developments in a particular dialect. We would like to point out that these examples are instances of free alternations and should not be treated generally. Nor shall we devote our attention to the alternation of voiceless and voiced tones between the non-Northern and the Northern languages, an important feature in Tai which is the subject of another paper (Luo 1994).

2.1 The C-OM/UM Type

This is one of the most common types. There appear to be some variations in finals for certain groups, where -p or -n may occasionally occur.

2.1.1 Sibilant+um—'Wet, soak/immerse'

To begin with, Li's examples of 'wet, moist' cited above are in fact found across the Tai languages.² These mainly take sibilant initials.

Gloss	Tone	Thai	Lao	DH	WT	BT	LM	NG	Yay	FS
'to soak, dip into'	B1/C1	cum	cum	tsum	chum	chum	cam	chum	sum	cum
		B1	B1	B1	B1	B1	C1	C1	C1	B1
'wet, moist'	B2/C2	chum	sum	yam	chum	chum	—	chom	sum	cum
		B2	B2	A2	B2	B2		Ai/B1	C2	C2

There are tone fluctuations among dialects of the three branches. The first item, 'to soak, to dip into (sauces)', is represented with tone B1 in the SW and the Northern languages, with dialects in the Central area taking C1, including Yay. White Tai and Black Tai also have a form *cham* with tone C1, meaning 'to dip in sauce', distinguishing this from the form that takes tone B1, 'to soak'. Li notices that Siamese has a free variant with tone C1 (Li 1977: 166), which supplies a missing link with these languages.

The second item is not found in Lungming in our data. In Nung, it is glossed as an onomatopoeic word, 'the sound of an object being tossed into water' (Bé and Wilson 1982:43), which is probably a dialectal development. While most SW languages show B2 for this item, Dehong shows A2 and a final vowel /a/. The Northern languages stand alone in having tone C2.

The first item in this group appears to be related to the Chinese form (浸) *jìn*, which was reconstructed by Karlgren as *tsjəm* (1940: item 661m), and by Pulleyblank as *tsim^h* (1991: 158).

To this group we may add yet another item, 'damp, wet', for which there appear to be some variations in initials across the dialects cited.

Gloss	Tone	Lao	DH	WT	BT	LM	NG	Yay	FS
'damp'	A2	hum	yam	ham	tom	tom	tum	tum	tum
							B2		

Although the initials appear to present a bit of a problem, the tones are quite regular except in Nung, where tone B2 is found. Li proposes *d- for this item (1977: 105), commenting that the form is 'not found in the SW dialects' (1977: 107). It seems that an initial cluster of some sort is involved here, for which we propose *dr-.

Two words describing water-oriented situations may also be related to this group. These take a dental stop as their initials.

Gloss	Tone	Thai	DH	WT	BT	LM	NG	Yay	FS
'to boil, cook in water'	C1/B1	tom	tom	tum	tum	tom	tom	tum	tum
		C1	C1	C1	C1	C1	C1	B1	B1
'to flood over'	C1/B2	thua	thom	thôm	thôm	thuu	thum	tum	tum
		m C1	C1	C1	C1	m C1	C1	B2	B2

² Abbreviations: DH—Dehong; WT—White Tai; BT—Black Tai; LM—Lungming; NG—Nung; FS—Fengshan.

If we consider /u/ to be the primary vowel for the whole group, we seem to have an u-o alternation between the Northern and the non-Northern languages. Also the tones for these two items separate the Northern languages from the non-Northern languages, which seem to lend support to the bipartite division.

For 'dip into water' we should include a variant form, also with a sibilant initial, but with a different final -up.

Gloss	Tone	Thai	DH	WT	BT	LM	NG	Yay	FS
'to dip, to wet'	D2S	chup	tsup	chup	chup	yop	yup	yup	yup

This word has a causative meaning across the dialects cited.

There is still another word in Tai with the meaning 'to soak, to immerse'. The principal vowel for this item is a front /e/, without the final bilabial nasal -m.

Gloss	Tone	Thai	Lao	DH	WT	BT	LM	NG	Yay	FS
'to soak'	B2	cheɛ	sɛɛ	tse	che	che	cee	se	se	ɕe

This item may be related to Chinese (濕) *shì* 'wet'.

2.1.2 Sibilant+om/em—'Sharp-pointed/stab/wedge'

This group typically take sibilant initials s- and finals -om, -em, with some variants.

Gloss	Tone	Thai	Lao	DH	WT	BT	LM	NG	Yay	FS
'sharp-pointed'	C1/ A1	siam C1	siam C1	sem C1	sem C1	— C1	siim C1	θem C1	θam A1	θom A1
'to stab, spade'	A1/B 1/C2	siam A1	sia:m A1	sam A2	sam B1	siem A1	som C2	cham B1	θam C2	θam B1
'peak, top'	A1	cɔɔm	cɔɔm	tsɔm	chɔm	chɔm	coom	—	—	—
'splinter'	C1/2	sian C1	sian C1	sem C1 sen B2	sêm C1	siên C1	sim C1	θeen C2	sen C2	ɕeen C2

It can be seen that there are some tone alternations in the dialects cited. For 'sharp-pointed', the non-Northern languages show tone C1, as contrasted with tone A1 in the Northern languages. Lungming has an alternating form, *som*^{A2}, which is close to that of the Northern languages. Li has reconstructed tone C1 for this item, commenting that this form 'is not found in the Northern dialects' (Li 1977: 153), which can now be corrected.

Four tones are represented among our data for the second item, 'to stab', which seem to overlap between the three branches. Basically the Southwestern languages show the A tone, with the exception of White Tai. The Dehong form has A2, indicating a voiced initial. Certain languages in the Central area take C2, such as Lungming and Yay; White Tai, Nung and Fengshan have B1. The White Tai form has the meaning 'to sew on decoration to a dress, to adorn dress with decoration'.

The form for 'peak, top (of a mountain)' is not found in the Northern languages. For 'splinter', a voiceless-voiced alternation occurs between the non-