

Benedict's Sino-Tibetan:

A Rejection of Miller's Conspectus Inspection

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[Author's note]

This reply to Miller was originally supposed to appear in JAOS, the same journal in which Miller's piece itself was published. For a variety of reasons, this has turned out not to be possible. It is a shame to involve a new journal like LTBA in controversy so early in its existence. On the other hand, I feel it would be an even greater shame for the field of Sino-Tibetan linguistics to let Miller's attack on the Conspectus stand unchallenged.

JAM

In the Journal of the American Oriental Society 94.2 (1974) there appeared a piece of writing from the pen of Roy Andrew Miller that purported to be a review of Paul K. Benedict's book Sino-Tibetan: a Conspectus, which I had the joy and excitement of editing. Miller (henceforth usually RAM) peppered his "review" with German quotations, learned jokes, and other coquetties of style, heaping sarcasm upon Benedict's (and my) head. In the entire course of the long 15-page "review article" RAM did not say one single nice thing about the book, not even that it was printed on good quality paper.¹ The casual reader of RAM's prose comes away with the impression that Benedict and I must be some

kind of criminal halfwits for daring to foist so miserable a work upon the public.

Apparently Miller's goal was to demolish the Conspectus (henceforth STC) totally, so that it would be read only as a horrible example of the worst excesses in comparative-historical linguistics. Yet any real criticisms of STC that RAM might have are so buried under masses of malicious trivia that it is hard to ferret them out. Since RAM's "review" is more a work of polemical literature than a work of linguistic scholarship, it should really be discussed on at least three levels. First (psychological), what could have motivated a distinguished and highly respected scholar like RAM to write such a thing, anyway? Second (strategic), what rhetorical and dialectical devices does RAM use in his attempt to discredit the STC? Third (linguistic), what can one say about the validity of the theoretical and factual substantive issues which RAM manages to raise?

(Psychological) Miller is known in the profession for the savagery of his reviews. People still remember the hatchet-job he performed on Robbins Burling's monograph Proto-Lolo-Burmese, a work which did have flaws but which made several key contributions to the field which have led to productive lines of research by other scholars.² The bitterness of RAM's attack on the Conspectus has a rather different quality, however. What RAM is really responding to in the STC are the several politely phrased but unfavorable references to Miller's own articles on Tibeto-Burman which Benedict makes here and there in footnotes: p. 60, note 193 (re final stops in Maru); p. 69, note 217 (re RAM's Tibeto-Burman "ablaut"); p. 124, note 340 (re RAM's TB "infixes"); and p. 126, note 344 (ablaut again). Two of the articles in question, "The Tibeto-Burman ablaut system" (1956) and "The Tibeto-Burman infix system" (1958), are Miller's chief contributions to comparative TB studies. They are now museum-pieces, full of false etymologies and wrong inferences (see below). They have not led to "productive lines of research

for anybody. Benedict did not let those sleeping dogs lie; therefore he had to bear the full weight of RAM's vindictive wrath.

(Strategic) RAM's tricks of rhetoric merit careful study. One of his favorite techniques is this: (a) make some criticism of a particular point, no matter how trivial or obfuscatory that criticism may be; (b) claim that "tout se tient," and that the entire work stands or falls on the particular point in question; (c) beat the point elaborately to death; (d) claim that the whole book is thereby vitiated; (e) avoid having to go into too much detail by pleading lack of space -- "other points are too numerous to mention."

Let us take a closer look at these tricks:

Making the trivial look crucial.³ One of the many points on which Benedict changed his mind between 1940 and 1970 (see below) involved the precise phonetic interpretation to give to his high tense proto-vowels, PTB *ū and *ī. As recent phonological theory generally accepts, the paradigmatic contrast of [tense] vs. [lax] may have any of a number of basically equivalent surface phonetic interpretations for high vowels. See Figure 1.

FIGURE 1. Alternative phonetic interpretations of the [tense/lax] opposition for high vowels.

LAX	TENSE	CRITERIAL FEATURE ISOLATED FROM THE FEATURE-SYNDROME
[V]	[V:]	short vs. long [i]/[i:]; [u]/[u:]
[V [˘]]	[V ^ˆ]	lower vs. higher [ɪ]/[i]; [ʊ]/[u]
[V ^ʔ]	[V]	centralized vs. peripheral [ɪ>]/[i]; [u<]/[u]
[V _α]	[V _α G _α]	monophthongal vs. homorganically diphthongs [ɪ]/[iɪ]; [u]/[uw]

(G = w, y. "α" indicates that the glide agrees with the nuclear vowel in frontness/backness or labiality/palatality.)

[V]	[V _(ə) G]	monophthongal vs. heterorganically diphthongs (centralized falling diphthongs) [ɪ]/[əɪ]; [u]/[əw]
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In other words, *iy and *əy, *uw and *əw are little more than notational variants of each other. As every adept in the comparative method (see below) should know, reconstructed phonemes are merely formulae for correspondences, and to pretend that you can always specify with unique certitude the fine phonetic content of a proto-opposition is unrealistic. It makes very little difference to the proto-system of vocalic oppositions that Benedict reconstructs whether the tense high vowels are interpreted as homorganic or heterorganic diphthongs. Yet typically, RAM fixates on this minuscule point (p. 202), making the extraordinary claim that Benedict's notational change of mind is a "particularly massive internal contradiction" that "threatens to wipe out the entire system of reconstruction for Tibeto-Burman and Sino-Tibetan