Problems and Progress in Lolo-Burmese: Quo Vadimus?*

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1. Introduction. The Lolo-Burmese languages form one of the 7 or 8 primary divisions of the Tibeto-Burman (TB) family.[1] It is also (in my admittedly prejudiced opinion) one of the most pleasant subgroups of TB to work with. Modern, copious, and reliable data exist for well over a dozen Loloish languages/dialects. For much of this new material we have first-rate Chinese scholars to thank. Much additional data has been collected by Japanese, European, and American scholars who have done recent fieldwork in Burma or Thailand.[2] Besides, Lolo-Burmanists are fortunate in having the testimony of Written Burmese (WB) as a guide and check for their work on the Loloish side.[3]

Many of the Loloish languages that are now best-known (Lahu, Lisu, Akha, Sani, Ahi) are quite close to each other on the genetic tree, with a very high percentage of cognacy in basic vocabulary.[4] Others are more remotely related to these (the Bisu-Pyen-Phunoi group; the Nasu-Lu-ch'üan group; the Moso-Nakhi group). These latter languages are in many ways more conservative phonologically than those of the "Lahoid" group. At any rate the "distances" among the various subparts of the Loloish family are great enough to provide considerable time-depth for reconstruction and the recovery of many archaic features at the Common Loloish stage, while at the same time being small enough so that there is no shortage of cognates common to all crannies of the family.

Besides the sheer volume of data available to work with, the data itself is uncommonly challenging and interesting. The rich consonantism of the Proto-TB (PTB) syllable has left ample traces in the modern Loloish languages, though the contrastive functions once performed by syllable-initial consonant clusters and syllable-final stops, nasals, and other consonants have had to be translated into drastically different phonetic terms, and assumed by different parts of the syllable.[5] When one compares the complex structure of the PTB syllable,

$$(P_1)(P_2)\ C_i\ (G)\ V\ (\cdot)\ (C_f)\ (s),$$

where P = prefix, C_i = root-initial consonant, G = glide

(-w-, -y-, -r-, -l-), V = vowel, · = vowel length, C_f = final consonant, and s = suffixial -s),
and compares it to the structure of a Loloish language like Lahu, where syllables have the canonical shape (C_1) V T [T = tone], one's first impression is that the proto-syllable has decayed or degenerated beyond redemption. Yet the breakdown of the old prefixial system has led to a multiplication of paradigmatically opposed entities in the C_1 slot; the glides, before disappearing, have differentially affected the position of articulation of the root-initial consonant and have caused a proliferation of new vocalic contrasts; final consonants have affected the preceding vowel's quality before departing the scene; and perturbations in the consonantal system of the old syllable have triggered the birth of elaborate tone-systems in the Loloish daughter languages. Thus, although the syllable canon of the typical Loloish language is simple in the extreme, the inventory of contrastive elements in the various syllable-positions tends to be highly complex[6]: a language like Sani is typical, with 43 initial consonants, 19 vowels (on the surface phonetic level, at any rate), and 5 tones.

The Loloish languages are very inventive phonologically. They have tried everything -- back vs. front velar stops, retroflex affricates, syllabic nasals and spirants, labial and lateral affricates, voiceless laterals and nasals, front rounded vowels, back unrounded vowels, central superhigh buzzing vowels, laryngealized vowels, nasalized vowels -- you name it![7]

The mapping of the original PTB phonological segments onto the modern Loloish syllable is intricate. To take a few random examples, the Lahu vowel ɔ may descend from PLB *uw or *aŋ or *iy. The Lahu consonant c may descend from *ts, *ʔts, *tš, *ʔtš, *ky, or *ʔky. Conversely, one and the same proto-phoneme may have multiple modern descendants. Thus, *a becomes Lahu o if it had been followed by *-m or *-p; but *a > Lh. e if it had been followed by *-n or *-t; if the following consonant was *-ŋ, *a > Lh. ɔ [see above]; but if *-k followed, *a remained a!

As is always the case in any language family, some daughter languages are more useful than others in reconstructing any given feature of the proto-language. Lahu is excellent for distinguishing etyma that had the old nasal prefix, *N-; but, alas, it is totally useless for

distinguishing *s from *š. For this latter task, Lisu and Akha are invaluable -- though neither one gives us any help in reconstructing the nasal prefix. As might be expected, Written Burmese is enormously important for reconstructing the PLB proto-form. Yet there are many cases where WB cannot do things that the humble Loloish tongues do with ease. Thus WB has suffered a merger of *s and *z (they both appear as s), while almost all the Loloish languages distinguish them faithfully: e.g. *s > Lh. š, but *z > Lh. y.

The vertebrate palaeontologist's greatest satisfaction, I suppose, is to take something like the fragment of a femur and reconstruct from it an entire proto-animal from tip to tail. Similarly, the private pleasures of Lolo-Burmanists consist in taking little syllables like hí and showing how they come from *b-r-gyat 'eight'; or in comparing two variant forms in a daughter language that mean about the same thing and are similar to each other phonologically (say šɔ vs. sɛ 'tonsil') and deciding which one is the direct cognate of some form in a distantly related but more conservative language (say bsnyogs).[8]

Perhaps the most rewarding kind of experience is to discover a sound-correspondence that looks bizarre at first sight, but which proves to be entirely regular and supported by abundant examples. Thus a priori one would not think very highly of a putative cognate pair like WB lê and Lahu ŝ 'four'. Yet further investigation turns up strikingly confirmatory parallel examples like the following: 'heavy' WB lê / Lh. hŝ ; 'wind (n.)' WB le / Lh. mû-hɔ ; 'bow, sling' WB lê / Lh. hŝ-ma ; 'moon' WB la' / Lh. ha-pa ; 'grandchild' WB mrê (< Insc. Bs. mliy) / Lh. ɔ̀-hwē (<ɔ̀-hɔ̄-ē) ; 'boat' WB hle / Lh. hɔ-lò$^{?}$-qō ; 'tongue' WB hlya ~ hra / Lh. ha-tē [9]; WT hla 'god, image of a god' / WB hla' 'handsome, pretty' / Lh. ɔ̀-ha 'soul, image' ; 'penis' WT mǰe / Jinghpaw (Jg.) mənē / WB lî / Atsi n$^{?}$yì / Maru n$^{?}$yì / Maru n$^{?}$yǐ / Lh. nǐ .[10]

To continue our palaeontological metaphor, another almost painfully sweet delight for Lolo-Burmanists is to find in a modern daughter language a "living fossil" -- i.e. an isolated survival of a very archaic feature that had almost totally disappeared at a much earlier stage.[11] Thus the word for 'four' is reconstructed at the PTB level with prefixial b- on the basis of such extra-

-LB forms as WT bži and Jg. məlǐ. So far as is now known, the prefix survives nowhere in LB except in the Maru (Burmish branch) form bìt. Similarly, we set up a causative prefix *s- for TB on the basis of Tibetan, Jinghpaw, and other extra-LB evidence.[12] In all cases but one, this old prefix shows up in Burmese as aspiration of the initial consonant -- but in one form, sip 'put to sleep' (vs. ʔip 'sleep'), the original *s- survives due to an exceptionally favorable phonological environment. As a final example we may take the etymon 'lick'. This had been reconstructed [STC, No. 211] as *s-lyak ~ *m-lyak, with the nasally prefixed variant justified exclusively on the basis of extra-LB evidence: Tangkhul Naga məlek ~ mərek, Ao Naga məzak, Jg. mətáʔ. But recently discovered forms provide direct evidence for the prefix within Loloish itself: Akha myeu$_{\Delta}$, Bisu bɛ̀.[13]

Even though Lolo-Burmese is one of the relatively best-known branches of Tibeto-Burman, there still remains a huge amount of work to be done. Not only is there much unmined and undigested material remaining in already published sources, but new data are coming in all the time from fresh fieldwork. So abundant are the materials that "micro-linguistic" work is now possible,[14] detailed research into fine points and minutiae of reconstruction. It is at first discouraging to increase the power of magnification when doing comparative work: things which had appeared regular in their broad outlines are shown to have irregularities and exceptions. But as always, these difficulties are precisely the harbingers of future progress -- identifying something as a problem is in itself a contribution to that problem's solution.

The historical phonology of Loloish still presents many problems of detail in all three "areas of the syllable": initial consonants (including prefixes), rhymes, and tones. If that is true of phonology, how much greater is our area of ignorance in the domains of historical morphology and syntax! In the realm of pure lexicon, hundreds of new cognates are awaiting identification. As far as taxonomy goes, the internal relationships of the Loloish languages are still not completely clear,[15] let alone their external relationships to other TB groups like Nungish and Kachin.[16]

Lolo-Burmese studies are potentially important also from a broader theoretical point of view. Such general