

Proto-Languages and Proto-Sprachgefühl

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In einem hochgewölbten engen gotischen Zimmer.  
Weidert unruhig auf seinem Sessel am Pulte.

Habe nun, ach! Phonologie,  
Angami, Khamngan, Gurung,  
Und leider auch "Rek-theorie"  
Durchaus studiert, mit heissem Bemühn.  
Da steh' ich nun, ich armer Tor,  
Und bin so klug als wie zuvor!

Note

This is a somewhat cut and edited version of the paper presented at the XIVth International Conference on Sino-Tibetan Languages and Linguistics, University of Florida (Gainesville), October 29-31, 1981. Since several footnotes were excised at the beginning of the paper, it will be noticed that the numbering of the notes jumps from 9 to 18. For this I beg the reader's indulgence - it seemed preferable to re-numbering all the rest of the 157 notes!

I would like to thank Paul K. Benedict, Nicholas C. Bodman, David Bradley, Axel Schüssler, and David Strecker for their valuable comments and criticisms, several of which have been incorporated into the notes and addenda.

JAM

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## 1.0 Background and Introduction

In LTBA 6.1 (1-38), there appeared an article by Alfons K. Weidert entitled "Stars, Moon, Spirits, and the Affricates of Angami Naga: a Reply to James A. Matisoff." What Weidert was replying to was the manuscript version of my paper "Stars, moon, and spirits: bright beings of the night in Sino-Tibetan," which I had shown him in Mysore, India, in December 1978.<sup>1</sup> At that time Weidert expressed, in what seemed a friendly and constructive way, several criticisms of particular points in the paper, and challenged the accuracy of certain Naga forms I had gleaned from the inadequate sources at my disposal. Since I respected Weidert's firsthand knowledge of the phonology and lexicon of many Kuki-Naga and Barish languages (based on some five years of fieldwork in NE India), I was pleased to have his comments, and took careful note of them. My paper was not published until late in 1980. In its printed version, Weidert is quoted repeatedly.<sup>2</sup> Although none of his comments affected the main line of my argument or my conclusions, I felt they were certainly worth including, and in fact strengthened my paper by 'keeping me honest.'<sup>3</sup>

Late in 1979 or early in 1980, while my article was still awaiting publication in Gengo Kenkyū, Weidert sent his 'Reply' to Graham Thurgood for publication in LTBA. It came as quite a surprise, to say the least. The 47 pages of this MS included the comments he had made verbally in India, but much else besides. Most striking, however, was its tone - bitter, dogmatic, condescending, humorless, and self-righteous.

As is well-known, I am a mild-mannered sort, loath to indulge in scholarly vituperation. Yet clearly Weidert's attack had to be published and responded to. Thurgood undertook to edit it and tone it down somewhat. In my judgment Graham's edited version (published in LTBA 6.1) is an extremely skillful and fair representation of Weidert's original - in fact it is a great improvement on the original, both typographically (with well laid-out charts and diagrams, liberal use of italic type to set off forms, etc.) and stylistically.<sup>4</sup>

The basic point of my original paper was that the labiodentals of the Kohima dialect of Angami Naga /pf pfh bv f mv/ reflected a \*velar-plus-labial combination at some earlier stage. Sometimes the labial element can be traced all the way back to PTB or even PST, but sometimes it is of quite recent 'secondary' origin.<sup>5</sup> After a preliminary study of several TB etyma where Angami has a labiodental reflex, a cognate relationship is proposed between Angami *thèmvě* 'star' and the Chinese word for 'moon' 月, reflecting a PST root \*s-ŋwa-t. The semantic interrelationships among ST words for MOON, STAR, and SPIRIT are explored in detail.

I submit that none of Weidert's criticisms seriously affect the main premises or conclusions of my paper.<sup>6</sup> On the contrary, in his zeal to demolish my views, he commits a variety of fallacies in reasoning and interpretation of the data, demonstrating in fact that he has little feeling for the art of historical reconstruction, or what one might call 'proto-Sprachgefühl.'

Of far more interest than the particular points in dispute between Weidert and myself, are the general issues of the theory and technique of historical reconstruction which emerge from the discussion. In what follows, we shall try to strike a balance between detailed examination of the data and due attention to these theoretical issues.

## 2.0 Formalization vs. Explanation: turtles all the way down

Not content with the wealth of data he has amassed on the tones and segmental phonology of Kuki-Naga and Barish languages, Weidert feels obliged to theorize about it all with the utmost mathematical rigor. He is concerned with the deepest and most abstruse metatheoretical issues,<sup>7</sup> and couches his descriptive and comparative statements in a forbiddingly formalistic and discursive way. He uses terminology like 'exclusively reflexive-metalinguistic sememe.'<sup>8</sup> His rules bristle with Greek letters, brackets, and ligatures:

"First name vocative constructions (obligatory):

$$|_{-a_{\epsilon}} \text{'}\Sigma_{\pi} |_{\sigma} + /_{\lambda} a/ \text{ (with enlarged } \sigma\text{-rule (4))}$$

$$|_{-\Sigma} \text{'}\Sigma | \xrightarrow{\sigma} /_{-\Sigma}/$$

in male first name constructions)

$$|_{-i_{\epsilon}} \text{'}\Sigma_{\pi} |_{\sigma} + /_{\lambda} \text{'}i/.^9$$

At first the casual reader might mistake this obscurantism for profundity. (Maybe there's something wrong with me if I don't understand this?) But it soon becomes apparent that Weidert is hard to understand not because what he's saying is so conceptually difficult or all that new and revolutionary, but rather because it is so confused.

I feel that much of Weidert's work, both synchronic and diachronic, displays a severe confusion between formalization and explanation, a fallacy which we might characterize by the dictum 'I have explained it because I have symbolized it.' He is constantly claiming to have 'explained' something when in reality he has only restated it in a fancy formalistic or formulaic way. Far from clarifying the original problem, this procedure tends only to obfuscate it, pushing the discussion into such abstract realms that a realistic responsibility to the actual linguistic data can finally be lost.

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