

Siamese jaai Revisited

or

;Ay, Madre!: A Case Study in Multiple Etymological Possibilities

James A. Matisoff

In an interesting paper originally presented at the Third Sino-Tibetan Conference at Cornell in 1970, Li Fang-kuei discussed the aberrant initial consonant of the Siamese kinship term *jaai* 'maternal grandmother'.¹

Before returning to this phonological problem, let us remind ourselves that the Tai languages, like Chinese² but unlike English,³ have four

¹ Li (1971).

² The four Chinese terms are all marked "colloquial" or "dialectal" in Wu et al. (1979), though they are all extremely current, especially as address terms:

爷爷 yé.ye 奶奶 nǎi.nai 公公 gōng.gong 婆婆 lǎo.lao

FF

FM

MF

MM

However, in more formal style, the Chinese reference terms for grandparents are asymmetrically weighted toward the male side, with the names for mother's parents being derived from the "unmarked" terms for father's parents:

zu-fu 祖父 (paternal) grandfather,

zu-mu 祖母 (paternal) grandmother', but

wai-zu-fu 外祖父 'maternal grandfather' and

wai-zu-mu 外祖母 'maternal grandmother' (*wai*, literally 'outside', is a morpheme used in names of relatives of one's mother, sister, or daughters, as in *wai-sun* 'child of one's daughter, grandchild by one's daughter').

Chinese also has a set of four unanalyzable morphemes for the four possible types of siblings (male vs. female, older vs. younger than ego), as in Mandarin *ge* 哥 'older brother', *di* 弟 'younger brother', *jie* 姐 'older sister', *mei* 妹 'younger sister'. Siamese, on the other hand, makes the primary distinction on the basis of relative age (*phui* 'elder sibling' vs. *nōŋ* 'younger sibling'), with sex differentiation being equally "marked" for both males and females (that is, the opposition is equipollent):

phui-chaai 'elder brother' / *nōŋ-chaai* 'younger brother'

phui-sǎaw 'elder sister' / *nōŋ-sǎaw* 'younger sister'

³ English must resort to arbitrary repartitions to distinguish a child's two sets of grandparents. These naturally differ from household to household. Sometimes proper names are used to disambiguate the same kin appellation (Grandpa Eddie vs. Grandpa Joe); sometimes different diminutive versions of the

separate unanalyzable monosyllabic terms for the four grandparents, as in Siamese:

Father's Side		Mother's Side	
<i>pùu</i>	<i>jâa</i>	<i>taa</i>	<i>jaai</i>
B1	B2	A1	A2
father's	father's	mother's	mother's
father	mother	father	mother
FF	FM	MF	FF

These four words co-occur in this order in the Siamese elaborate expression *pùu-jâa-taa-jaai* 'ancestors; one's grandparents collectively', as well as in the Lao equivalent *puu njaa taa naai*.

In *A Handbook of Comparative Tai*, Professor Li includes the etymon for 'mother's mother' under the category of words with Proto-Tai **j*- "for convenience of reference," since that is the initial of Siamese *jaai*, though he believes the actual Proto-Tai initial to have been **n*- (1977: 178-181). This nasal is reflected directly in all of the Southwest Tai languages except Siamese: Lao⁴ *naai*, Shan *nai*, Lue *nai*, White Tai *nai*, Black Tai *naai*. Since Siamese is alone in having a *j*- in this word, Li feels it is Siamese that has innovated.

The situation is made more complex by the forms in the Central and Northern Tai groups, which are unanimous in having the dental stop *t*- in their words for 'mother's mother':

[Central Tai]	Nung and Tay <i>tai</i> A1, Tho <i>taai</i> B1, Tianbao <i>taai</i> A1, Longzhou <i>taai</i> A1;
[Northern Tai]	Wu-ming <i>tai</i> A1, Dioi <i>tai</i> B1, Xi-lin and Ling-yun <i>taai</i> B1, Bo-ai <i>taai</i> B1.

Thus, if this root is indeed to be reconstructed with Proto-Tai **n*-, there are two problems to deal with:

same kin term are used for the same-sex grandparents on the two sides of the family (Granny vs. Gammer; Gramps vs. Granddad). If the household is bi-ethnic, the grandparents on each side may be designated by kin-terms in different languages, as is the case with my own children's names for their grandparents (Grandpa vs. Zeyde, Grandma vs. Bobi).

⁴ Editors' note: There appears to be a discrepancy between Li's citation of the Lao form (page 180, example 14) and current, spoken Lao. Old Lao for maternal grandmother is *ñaai*, and grandparents collectively are *puuñaai taañaai*. Current Lao for maternal grandmother is *mee thaw*, *mee tuu*, or *mee ñaai*.

(a) Why does Siamese have *j-* instead of *n-*?

(b) Why do Central and Northern Tai have *t-* instead of *n-*?

Professor Li wisely resists the temptation to set up a special proto-entity to account for the irregular initial-correspondence in this single etymon: "It would evidently be an *ad hoc* reconstruction to dream up a Proto-Tai initial on the basis of one word, without support from parallel phenomena" (1971: 338). Instead, Li explains both of these irregularities in terms of *contaminations* from other members of the four-item set of grandparental terms:

[Contamination A]

Siamese *j-* in *jaai* 'mother's mother' is due to contamination with *jaa* 'father's mother';

[Contamination B]

The Central and Northern Tai forms with *t-* are due to contamination with *taa* A1 'maternal grandfather'. Thus, Bo-ai *taa taai* 'wife's parents, maternal grandparents' arose by intersyllabic assimilation from **taa naai*.

There is a highly satisfying symmetry in this explanation, since in each case the contamination is in the direction of the male member infecting the female one:

A.	FM	—>	MM	(i.e. F	—>	M)
B.	MF	—>	MM	(i.e. F	—>	M)

Professor Li concludes his article with the speculation that his Proto-Tai root **naai* 'mother's mother' might be related to⁵ the Chinese word 女_母 [GSR 359d; see Karlgren 1957] **n̥iər / n̥iei:* (also pronounced *nai*) 'mother' (no early textual examples, but so glossed in Guangya and Qie Yun). The Guang Yun defines the word as "what the people of Chu call 'mother'." Finally, and most interestingly, one of the recensions of the Qie Yun glosses the word as 夷人呼母 "what the Yi people call 'mother'" (Liu Fu 1937: 132).

Upon rereading "On Siamese *jaai*" just now, this last citation rang a bell. Even if we cannot determine the precise ethnicity of the Eastern barbarians that were referred to as "Yi" 夷 in the seventh century A. D.—certainly we cannot assume that they were necessarily "Lolo," in the modern sense of "Yi"—it is not impossible that it was some Tibeto-Burman group or another to which the label was attached. If this is so, it is now hard to

⁵ Or, as Li puts it with seemly caution, "may be compared with" the Chinese word. See my use of the term *comparabilia* (Matisoff 1976).

resist bringing Tibeto-Burman seriously in to our etymological discussion, in view of a newly reconstructed PTB root **(y)ay* 'mother; grandmother; maternal aunt'.

This root is reconstructed in Matisoff (1985: 38, item # 100) on the basis of forms both from Loloish and from other TB groups:

[Loloish] Lahu *e*, *ḁ-e* 'mother' [*-e* is the regular Lahu reflex of **-ay*], *a-e* [Red Lahu] '*id.*' (vocative) [*< *a-yay*], *ay-ma* [RL] 'earth mother, fertility goddess', Yellow Lahu *a-ye* 'mother'. (I believe that *ay-* is simply a fused form of *a-e < *a-yay*.) To these Lahu forms add Nasu (Gao Huanian 1958) *je* 33 'mother', all reflecting Proto-Loloish **yay* (Tone *3).

Solid cognates from Kamarupan languages (N.E. India) enable us to set this etymon up for Proto-Tibeto-Burman:

Abor-Miri *yai* 'grandmother', *yai-o* '*id.*', *yai-a* (voc.); Boro *ay* 'mother'; Tangkhul Naga *a:yi* 'grandmother; mother's brother's wife'.

We are now free to compare this PTB root **(y)ay* with the Chinese form *女 (nǚ)* 'mother' already cited by Li (Old Chinese **n̥jər* / Middle Chinese *n̥jəi*). For the sake of argument, let us posit a Proto-Sino-Tibetan etymon **n-(y)ay* or **ñay* that underlies both the TB and Chinese forms.⁶

Those (like Professor Li) who are inclined to believe in the genetic relationship between Tai and Chinese might now well accept the TB/Chinese etymology just offered, maintaining that both the TB and the Chinese forms are related to PTai **naai*.

The distinction between the palatal semivowel **j-* (= **y-*) and the palatal nasal **ñ* is a rather shaky one in Southwestern Tai languages. These two PT phonemes merge both in Siamese and Lao, though in different directions:

Proto-Tai	Siamese	Lao
<i>*j</i>	<i>j</i>	<i>ñ</i>
<i>*ñ</i>	<i>j</i>	<i>ñ</i>

Whether or not one accepts the hypothesis of a genetic relationship between Tai and Chinese, it is thus perhaps no longer necessary to have recourse to intra-Tai contamination from *jaa* 'father's mother' as an explana-

⁶ STC (*Sino-Tibetan Conspectus* p. 193; see Benedict 1972) identifies a word in the same phonetic series, 359c *𑜄𑜤𑜂𑜫* 'near', **ñjər/ñjəi*: as cognate to PTB **ney*, certainly in the same ballpark as **n-yay*.