

Watch Out for Number ONE: Jingpho ṇāi ‘1’ and ləṇāi ‘one’ (with some speculations about Jingpho number TWO)

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1. INNOVATIVE NATURE AND UNIQUENESS OF THE JINGPHO FORMS FOR ONE AND TWO

The Jingpho (Jg.) word **ləṇāi** ‘one’ has always had a special place in my heart, since it was the very first form I ever elicited in a Tibeto-Burman (TB) language, in the summer of 1963, when working with LaRaw Maran. The next word to emerge in that elicitation session was of course **ləkhōṇ** ‘two.’ Already these two forms led me to a couple of false assumptions: (a) that the prefix **lə-** was very common, especially with numerals; and (b) that the high-to-low falling tone, “51” (symbolized here as /[^]/) was likewise. Both assumptions were of course premature. **lə-** occurs with no other numerals; and “51” turned out to be by far the rarest of the Jg. tones, occurring mostly as a sandhi variant of the low tone “31”¹—though it does in fact occur with one other numeral, **džəkhū** ‘nine.’

More importantly, the Jg. words for ONE and TWO are completely isolated from the comparative point of view, with no known cognates elsewhere in Sino-Tibetan (ST).² See Table 1.

With respect to PTB, Jg. preserves the numeral prefixes fairly well. In FOUR, FIVE, and EIGHT, PTB ***b-** is reflected by Jg. **mə-**. Jg. SIX, SEVEN, NINE, and HUNDRED reflect PTB ***d-**, ***s-**, ***d-** or ***s-**, and ***l-**, respectively. The prefix of

¹Several morphophonemic subclasses of these “51” words may be distinguished: (a) verbs in the low tone (31) regularly acquire “51” when preceded by the high-toned negative prefix, syllabic **ṇ-**: **lù** ‘have’ > **ṇ lù** ‘not have’; (b) low-tone verbs sometimes change to “51” when they are preceded by a nominalizing or causativizing prefix (e.g., the syllabic nasal, or shwa, or consonant plus shwa): **tà** ‘build a house’ > **ṇ-tà** ‘a house’; **thòi** ‘be light’ > **əthòi** ‘illumination’; **tùm** ‘be squandered (as time)’ > **šətùm** ‘to squander (as time)’; (c) adverbial expressions derived by a prefix from 31 verbs sometimes acquire “51”: **nì** ‘be near’ > **əṇì nì šà** ‘nearly,’ **tèm** ‘be closely shut,’ **ətèm šà** ‘soberly’; (d) kinship terms in the 31 tone become 51 when used vocatively: **kəwà** ‘father’ > **wà** ‘O father!; hey, dad!’ (See Matisoff, 1974, pp. 159–160).

²In general the numerals ONE and TWO seem to have a special status in the world’s languages. Irregularities, allofamic variations, and suppletions are more readily tolerated here than with the higher numerals (e.g., English *one* & *an* & *only*; *two* & *twain* & *between* & *twin*; *one* <-> *first*; *two* <-> *second*).

THREE has been influenced by the **mə-** in FOUR and FIVE, so that THREE to FIVE show a “prefix run.”³

Table 1. *PTB and Jingpho Numerals*⁴

	<i>PROTO-TIBETO-BURMAN</i>	<i>JINGPHO</i>
ONE	*it; *k(y)at; g-t(y)ik ⁵	ləŋâi
TWO	*g-nis	ləkhôn
.....		
THREE	*g-sum	məsūm
FOUR	*b-ləy	məli
FIVE	*l-ŋa ~ *b-ŋa	məŋā
SIX	*d-ruk	krú?
SEVEN	*s-nis	sənīt
EIGHT	*b-r-gyat ~ *b-g-ryat	mətsát
NINE	*d-kəw ~ *s-kəw ~ *d-gaw	džəkhû
TEN	*gip; *ts(y)i(y) ~ *tsyay	ši
TWENTY	*m-kul	khūn
HUNDRED	*r-gya	lətsā

2. VARIANT FORMS OF JINGPHO ləŋâi ‘ONE’

(a) ləŋâi

The standard citation form of this numeral has a lateral prefix, occurring in such collocations as **məṣa ləŋâi** ‘one person,’ **ləŋâi mī** ‘one,’⁶ **ləŋâi ɲài** ‘some; a few; one now and then,’ **ləŋâi ɲài ṣà** ‘only some; only a few,’ **ləŋâi thè? ləŋâi** ‘one by one,’ **ləŋâi phāŋ ləŋâi** ‘one after another.’

Whence this lateral prefix, which occurs also with **ləkhôn** ‘two’? A plausible source is the well-attested PTB etymon ***lak**⁷ ‘hand,’ which appears in reduced form

³For a detailed discussion of this phenomenon in TB numeral systems see Matisoff (1995a, §§ 5.2–5.5).

⁴See Benedict (1972, pp. 93–95) and Matisoff (1995a, passim).

⁵Other roots for ONE reconstructed in Matisoff (1995a, sections 3.11–3.15) include: ***ka/*ko**; ***d/tay** ✕ ***d/tan**; ***tir** ✕ ***tur**; ***a**; ***k-IV(N)**, etc.

⁶For a discussion of this morpheme **mī** see §4, below.

⁷See Benedict (1972, #86 and note 102).

in many Jg. nouns relating to the limbs (hands or feet), e.g., **lətáʔ** ‘hand,’ **ləkhrá** ‘right hand,’ **ləphàn** ‘palm,’ **ləphùm** ‘forearm,’ **ləkhôn** ‘bracelet’ (note 51 tone; < **khón** ‘wear bracelets’), **ləgō** ‘foot; leg,’ **ləphùt** ‘knee,’ **ləthîn** ‘heel,’ **ləkhrùʔ** ‘hoof,’ **lənū** ‘thumb; big toe’ (lit. ‘limb-mother’). The semantic connection would be via the practice of counting on the fingers.⁸

Once this prefix was firmly established with this numeral, it was eligible for *trans-semanticization*, so that in several common time-expressions **lə-** has come to mean ONE all by itself: **ləṇī** ‘one day,’ **lənáʔ** ‘one night,’ **ləṇīṇ** ‘one year,’ **ləphòt** ‘one morning.’⁹ The same morpheme is probably to be adduced in other quantified expressions like **ləlām** ‘a fathom,’ **lətsā** ‘one hundred,’¹⁰ **ləmùn** ‘ten thousand (one myriad),’ **ləmā**, **ləmā-ma**, **ləma-mi** ‘some; something; few.’ (In the Hkauri dialect of Jingpho, these expressions have **ṛə-** rather than **lə-**: **ṛaning** ‘one year,’ **ṛani** ‘one day,’ **ṛanaʔ** ‘one night’).

(b) ṇāi

This variant with preglottalized initial is supplied by Maran (ca. 1973, p. 870), though it is spelled simply as “**ṇgai**” in Hanson (1906, p. 513).¹¹ It appears in collocations like the following: **ṇāi mī** ‘one; a unit’ (e.g., **məṛāi ṇāi mī** ‘one person’), **ṇāi (mī) šà** ‘only one,’¹² **ṇāi ṇai** (note 31 tone in 2nd syllable) ‘someone [indef. pron.]’ (e.g., **məšà ṇāi ṇai dù sāi** ‘Someone has come.’)

⁸This “digital computational” practice is by no means confined to TB peoples (cf. English expressions like *on the one hand*, *on the other hand*). The PTB etymon for FIVE, the handlike numeral par excellence, is reconstructed with either of two prefixes, ***b-** or ***l-**. Perhaps Jingpho selected the non-lateral prefix here (**məṇā**) because of analogical pressure from FOUR. See Matisoff (1995a, § 4.14).

⁹Hanson (1906, p. 358) calls the prefix in these forms “a shortened form of **lāngai** ‘one.’”

¹⁰It seems possible that the liquid prefix set up for the PTB form for HUNDRED (***r-gya**) may itself derive ultimately from ***lak** ‘hand.’ Cf. the Hkauri forms with **r-** instead of **l-** (just below).

¹¹This form is lacking in Dai, Xu, Shau, & Nseng (1983), as are the variants with zero- and syllabic nasal initials cited in (c) and (d), below.

¹²This Jingpho morpheme ‘only’ seems clearly cognate to a Kamarupan root ***(t)sa** ‘one’ (Matisoff 1995a: § 3.152 and note 75).

(c) **âi**

Complete loss of initial consonant is a common enough phenomenon with TB functors, including high frequency items like numerals and pronouns,¹³ so it is not too surprising to find a vowel-initialled variant “**ʔâi** ‘one; same as **lǎngai**’” (Hanson 1906, p. 55; tone from Maran), as in **kəwá âi mī jò rīt** ‘Give me a bamboo.’

(d) **ń-ŋâi**

Finally, Hanson (1906, p. 498) cites a variant with syllabic nasal prefix: “**nngai** ‘one; same as **lǎngai**.’” The tones are supplied by Maran (ca. 1973, p. 842): **ń-ŋâi**.

Here we approach the main point of this paper. This prenasalized variant of the numeral ONE is homophonous (except for tone) with the **first person** singular agreement marker,¹⁴ used in sentences like the following: **ŋâi šá ñ-ŋâi** ‘I am eating’ (Hanson, 1906, p. 498); **ŋâi gò jòngmà rái ñ ŋâi** ‘I am a student’ (Dai, 1983, p. 624).

Already this is rather persuasive phonological evidence for the connection between ONE and FIRST PERSON in Jingpho. The fact that the first person agreement marker and an allofam of the numeral ONE are virtual homophones makes it highly likely that the same etymon is involved.

3. THE JINGPHO FIRST PERSON **ŋâi**

Just as the Jg. numeral ONE is highly distinctive in the context of TB/ST as a whole, so is the Jingpho independent first person pronoun **ŋâi** ‘I; me.’ While virtually all TB languages that have inherited this etymon reflect the simple vowel ***-a** (PTB ***ŋa**: Benedict, 1972, #406), Benedict is obliged to set up a separate root ***ŋai** (#285) largely to accommodate this Jg. form.¹⁵

I have recently become convinced that the ST/TB pronouns for all three persons have been suffixable by palatal and/or nasal elements at various times and places in the family,¹⁶ so that a palatal suffix is typical of the PST pronominal system in general:

¹³As random examples we may cite Lahu **â** (< **mâ**) ‘negative,’ **ā** (< **tā**) ‘durative particle,’ etc. See Matisoff (1973, p.38).

¹⁴Jingpho is a “pronominalized” or “head-marking” language, using morphemes in the VP to specify the person and number of the subject of the clause. Hanson, who provides no tonal indications, writes both the numeral and the agreement marker as “**nngai**.” Maran (**ñ-ŋâi**) and Dai (**n³¹ ŋai³³**) agree that the tones of the two syllables of the agreement marker are low and mid, in that order.

¹⁵See the discussion in Matisoff (1985, set #182).

¹⁶Though it must be admitted that the semantic increment provided by the “suffixal” elements is