THE PRESENT STATE OF PST/PTB RECONSTRUCTION:  
CAN WE EVEN WRITE A FABLE IN 
PROTO-LOLO-BURMESE?*

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How much can we really recover from the past history of languages? What do we mean when we claim to have “reconstructed a proto-language”?

In sober moments, all historical linguists have to admit that a “proto-language” is at best only a pale reflection of a real living language. Often all that can be salvaged is the proto-phonemic system, along with a collection of mostly unrelated individual lexical items. If we are lucky, and work in a family with anciently attested texts in several languages, we can also achieve some understanding of the proto-grammar, especially if the languages are rich in morphology. In these respects, Indo-Europeanists have been much better off than Sino-Tibetanists, to the point where the 19th century scholar August Schleicher once dared to compose a fable in Proto-Indo-European.¹

It would certainly be an act of aggravated chutzpah to undertake a similar enterprise for Proto-Sino-Tibetan, or even for Proto-Tibeto-Burman. But what about trying to compose a text in a younger proto-language, let us say the one for which the most detailed historical reconstruction has been accomplished, i.e. Proto-Lolo-Burmese (PLB), spoken only about 2000 years ago?²

Thinking this might be worth a try, I have chosen a Lahu fable recorded during my first fieldtrip to Chiangmai Province, Thailand, in 1965-66,³ a simple text of nine sentences containing about 60 different words. As a first approximation, I have “translated” the text into PLB morpheme by morpheme, as if the proto-language had exactly the same word order, construction types, and repertory of particles as modern Black Lahu. Most of these morphemes have already been reconstructed at the PLB level; several others are here

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¹ See Schleicher 1868. This text was “updated” more than a century later by W. Lehmann (1981).
² Also known as Burmese-Lolo, Yi-Burmese, Burmese-Yipho, etc.
³ I believe this fable may ultimately be traced back to Aesop. It had undoubtedly been transmitted to my group of Lahu by Christian missionaries.
etymologized for the first time; only a few remain etymologically obscure at the moment.

The end result is a text with reliably reconstructed (even if largely unpronounceable) morphemes, but with a grammatical structure that might be more accurately termed "pre-Lahu" rather than PLB. In order to attempt a serious syntactic reconstruction, the grammars of modern Loloish and Burmish languages would have to be systematically compared with what is known about Old Burmese grammar, a project which seems vastly premature at the present stage of research. An especially serious problem is posed by the rich systems of grammatical particles or functors displayed by all LB languages: although these correspond well conceptually from language to language, it is relatively rare to find cognate etyma filling the same conceptual slots across languages. Functors have developed from root morphemes by "grammaticalization", but this process seems to have operated independently in each language, so that it is impossible to figure out which was the "original" morpheme used for each grammatical function.

This said, it is still instructive to reconstruct what we can -- even if all we come up with is a string of putative PLB lexical items arranged according to modern Black Lahu grammar.

This paper is organized as follows. First comes the verbatim modern Lahu text, with interlinear glosses and a form-class designation provided for each morpheme on its first occurrence (§1), followed by a free English translation (§2). Then the vocabulary of the text is roughly arranged by part of speech, and as far as possible each morpheme is etymologized at the PLB level (§3), with special attention paid to new etymologies and words which remain obscure. These reconstructed morphemes are then strung together in modern Lahu word order to create a running text (§4). Finally, we point out the phonological and grammatical puzzles that remain for anyone who might wish to travel further along this road (§§5-6).

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4 A list of the abbreviations used for these form-classes is given at the end of the paper.
1.0 LAHU TEXT

dà-quo phè pi' ve gāi-phu-qā le á-ce
boast release able GEN cock and hawk

The Boastful Cock and the Hawk

1. të pə? thə, kho të kho ṣ-qho lo gāi të mə
one time TEMP coop one (coop) inside LOC chicken one (flock)
Num Clf Puniv N Num Clf Nspat Pn N Num Clf
cə ve yə.
be there NOM AFF
V Puniv Puf

2. gāi ᵇ-ve të mə ṣ-qho lo ṣ-phu-qā nə khe cə
that male (bird, etc.) two (animal)
DET N Num Clf
ve yə.

3. gāi-phu-qā të khe lə yə ṭe ni le-le kə ve
TOPIC 3p day every crow/call REL
Punf Npronom Clf Bn V Puniv
tə yən thə, kho ṣ-qhə lo tə tə? kə ve cə.
(time) above only climb QUOT
Clf Nspat Puniv V Puf

4. yə kə ve ṣ-khə lə chi qhe qə? ve yə:
word(s) this like say
N DET Next V

5. nə qhə lə r -ṣə -mu -ṣə-phə mə cə.
above great high AGT-NOM NEG
Npron Mpfx Vadj Mpfx Mpfx/Mp

6. qha-pə-ci thə? gə -ṣə-phə nə yə," tə
all ACC win/beat AGT-NOM thus
Next Pn V Mpfx/Mp Pquot
tə chi qhe kə chē ve yə.
PROG Vv

5 This word means ‘to be in a place; stay; dwell’ as a main verb. See JAM 1991:415-8.
7. mà ɡâ ve ɡâ? tê khe lê tê ni le-le yô
   tê-khê chi thâ? ɡâ kâ ve thâ? pa-to, ɔ-pi-tâ?
   words/speech get to hear CAUS thicket
   N vV V Pn N

   lo tû ca vâ? tâ ve yô.
   go and hide DUR
gO V Pv

8. tê ni qhe ɡâ?-phu-qâ chi yô kho ɔ-qhô lo qô?
   again/back
   tâu e le, qô? bû chê ve tê yân thâ,
   ABL/away SUSP cry (animal)
Pv Pn V

   “ṇà qhô ɡâ -pâ mà cô”, tê kû chê ve
   AGT-NOM

9. tê ni le-le ɔ-pi-tâ? lo vâ? chê tâ ve ɡâ? tê
   khe qô? tê? là le, ɡâ? ɔ-ve tê mô ɔ-qhô thâ?
   emerge CIS?
   N V Pv

   qô? kwân tâ ve yô.
   rule V

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6 This word means 'look for; search' as a main verb.
7 This verbal particle expressing 'cisative motion' or 'motion toward the center of deictic interest' is a derivative of the full verb là 'come'.