

TIBETO-BURMAN TONOGENETICS*

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O. INTRODUCTION

The field of Tibeto-Burman tonogenetics is a very young one, and it might seem premature to attempt a survey of its achievements. It will appear very quickly that the present essay does not aim at drawing conclusions. Rather it is conceived as a portfolio of case histories which can be drawn upon as a source of new hypotheses to be applied to the many languages and language groups of the Tibeto-Burman family which have not yet been touched by linguists. Thus the arrangement will be typological. I will examine successively three types of diachronic processes through which tones are created or multiplied. In each section I will bring in a number of examples from Tibeto-Burman languages to illustrate the process considered. I will make no attempt at covering all the available material, but I will rather choose some typical and some rare cases in order to give an overview of the research which is currently undertaken in the field of Tibeto-Burman tonogenetics.

It is barely possible now to appreciate what is typical of the family. The field simply does not compare with Indo-European or Chinese. In this essay I will try to bring out similarities of evolutionary processes in different languages in an attempt to throw into relief characteristic features of the family as compared to other linguistic groups, and more particularly as compared to the other Southeast Asian languages. Thus I will systematically emphasize similarities over differences. In the present state of Tibeto-Burman studies, seemingly anomalous phenomena are difficult to appraise. Is the divergent evolution noted in a particular language a genuine exception? Or is it rather the mark of an inadequate description where a superior generalization has been missed? The time when we can fit all special cases into the broad lines of evolution of the family has not come. It should be clear that generalizations at this stage have to be tentative, and should be regarded mainly as hypotheses to be checked.

This essay is oriented toward the typology of language change, not toward reconstruction. Although a number of authors in the

past few years have concerned themselves with tonal problems in the Tibeto-Burman languages, the attention given to the historical process of the birth of tones itself has developed only quite recently. Even works dealing with historical reconstruction have often refrained from offering general explanations for the list of changes that they posit between the modern forms and the reconstructed ancestor.

There is some reason for such an attitude. The data on modern tonal systems has been very meager until recently. Uncertainty about the modern tonal systems precluded confidence in the reconstructed forms, and dissuaded writers from attempting to justify them by positing general principles of development, on the grounds that, in the present state of our knowledge, this would have been mere speculation.

Another type of difficulty stems from the very nature of these languages. Tibeto-Burman languages, unlike other Southeast Asian languages, show traces of a very complex morphology in the proto-language. The modern languages have all simplified this old morphology to such an extent that many of them presently have invariable lexical items, to which affixes of recent origin are attached. While a few processes of the proto morphology, such as the formation of causatives, are more or less understood, many more are impossible to discover. Prefixes and suffixes, which left their most visible trace in Written Tibetan, lost their independence from the root, and their meaning faded away. Many doublets must have resulted from this erosion: how can we know which ones a language kept or dropped? The extent of morphological variation of the root in verbal conjugation is evidenced by Written Tibetan, where it is already a barely productive remnant. In many modern languages the verb root is invariable: which stem was generalized to the whole conjugation?

In my view, these difficulties are obstacles to the reconstruction of individual lexical items as much as to the understanding of the broad lines of evolution. Generalizations are not only the last step of a careful reconstruction, they are also a test against which to check individual reconstructions during

the analysis. Fortunately, in spite of the uncertainties involved, a number of scholars have proposed hypotheses to explain the evolution of tonal systems in Tibeto-Burman. The general principles which have been proposed and the most frequently attested evolutionary processes will be the subject of the present essay.

1. TONOGENETIC EFFECT OF INITIALS

The tonogenetic process most often and most clearly attested in Southeast Asian languages is the birth or the multiplication of tonal contrasts due to a transphonologization of distinctive features previously attached to initial consonants. The most comprehensive exposition of this process is Haudricourt's 1961 article: "Bipartition et tripartition des systèmes de tons dans quelques langues d'Extrême-Orient."¹ The only Tibeto-Burman languages included in Haudricourt's article are Karen. I will first explain what is known of the Karen tonal developments. Then I will show that similar processes are found in Loloish and Bodish.

1.1. Karen² Initial Mutation

1.110 Haudricourt (1961) treats only open or nasal syllables. For a more complete exposé of his ideas on Karen one has to look back to his articles of 1946 and 1953. The most important contributions to the study of Karen tonogenetics in the following years have been: Luce (1959), used by Haudricourt (1961), Jones (1961), completed by Jones (1971), Henderson (1961 and 1973), Burling (1969), Jones (1975), and Haudricourt (1975).

Neither Jones (1961) nor Burling (1969) uses Haudricourt's reconstruction, or even discusses it. This is unfortunate since a number of problems raised by these authors had been solved in advance by Haudricourt's hypothesis. I will develop only two examples of it: the restrictions on cooccurrence of modern initials and tones, and the cases where tonal correspondences between