A Second Discussion of the Genetic Classification of the Kam-Tai Languages: A Reply to Benedict

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Which family do the Kam-Tai languages (Benedict's Kadai languages) belong to? In an earlier paper (Luo 1983) presented at the Fifteenth Annual International Conference on Sino-Tibetan Languages and Linguistics, I presented a view which contrasts with that of Benedict. In 1984, in a paper entitled "Identification of the Cognates Between Chinese and Dai" presented to the Linguistic Society of Beijing, I restated this viewpoint. This paper presents the points of contrast between my position and that of Benedict.¹

Problems of Basic Word Stock

Benedict and I agree that part of the word stock of the modern Kadai languages relates to the Indonesian [IN] and Austro-Tai [AT] languages, while another part of the word stock relates to the Sino-Tibetan [ST] languages. Benedict, however, labels only those words that are related to Indonesian as "basic," whereas all those words that are related to Sino-Tibetan he regards as "cultural borrowings," which were either borrowed from Chinese or which Chinese borrowed from Austro-Tai. From this, Benedict concludes that the Kam-Tai languages have a genetic link not with the Sino-Tibetan languages, but with the Indonesian stock.

Our concept of basic vocabulary is the same as that of Benedict. That is, the basic vocabulary is composed of the "nuclear" elements in a language. But, we disagree considerably on the specifics and on the extent of the basic word stock. The basic word stock is the most stable part of the lexicon, containing all the root words as its core and representing the most important things and activities, such as words for natural phenomena: mountain, water, wind, rain, fire, sun, moon, land; important animals and plants: ox (cow), horse, pig, chicken, bird, fish, tree, grass, flower, and others; parts of the body: head, chest, mouth, eye, lungs, hand, arm, foot, leg; important kinship terms: father, mother, son, daughter, and so forth; basic actions: eat, speak, see, fly, come, and so forth; basic adjectives: big,

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small, white, and others; pronouns and adverbs: I, you, he, she, and so forth; and the cardinal numbers.

The Kam-Tai [KT] and the Sino-Tibetan languages share many of the above basic words, which are not "cultural" words at all but rather are core vocabulary including words such as: wind, bird, crow, horse, ox, ride, lungs, meat, liverwort (葷), red (紅), salty (鹹), and so on. Even among the thirty pairs of correspondences which Benedict proposed as "real nuclear lexical elements" in his paper "Thai, Kadai and Indonesian: A New Alignment in Southeastern Asia" (1942), thirteen of these sets can be shown to be Sino-Tibetan [ST] through comparisons with Tibeto-Burman [TB], Miao-Yao [MY] languages, and Chinese words in ancient books.

'moon' KT *blüán IN *bulan
Ch. 皓 hao²/hsiao² 'moonlight'
(cf. Lei Pian <<類篇>>)  

'water' KT *nam IN *danum
Ch. 水 *shui²/*shun² *shsun² 'turbid, water without waves'
(cf. Shuo Wen <<説文>>, Guahg Yun <<康音>>)  

'fire' KT *vai IN *apuy
Ch. 火 *hakw²/*hui² 'fire' Amoy hue³, he³
(cf. Shuo Wen<<説文>>)  

'bird' KT *nok IN *manuk 'chicken, bird'
Ch. 鳥 *tiagw/*tieu- -*nieu Hakka (Chang Ding) tiau³
Barish (TB) *dau, Karen *tho
M. neu⁶, nor⁶ Y. nc⁸  

'head' KT *hrua IN *'ulu'-hulu
T. u² 53 (polite expression, term of respect)
M. fhu², hu³  

'lungs' KT *pot IN *pu'tuh 'heart'
Ch. 腸 *phjød/*phjwai
M. nt'su⁷, mpy⁵, mplur⁵  

'grandfather' KT *pu IN *ǝ(m)pi
Ch. 父 *bjo²/*bju 'father'

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2 The reconstruction of the pronunciation of Chinese characters is based on Li Fang-kuei. The form in front of the slanted line is Archaic Chinese, while the form following the slanted line is Ancient Chinese.
3 Cited in Zhang Yuansheng and Wang Wei (1980).
4 Cited in Zhang Yuansheng and Wang Wei (1980).
T. phu-bo Garo bu Lushei pu Kachin phu 'brother'

'black' KT *ʔdám IN *'i(n)tam
Ch. 黑 (于棱切*jram/*jam 'dark black'5
(cf. Shuo Wen <<说文>>) 

'blind' KT *ʔbot IN *buta'
Ch.必見 (索结切) *mit/*miet 'cannot see' Amoy biaɪ⁷, bi⁸

'die' KT *tai IN *matay-apatay
Ch. 死 (徒交切) *dəi/*dài 'danger'⁶
(cf. Shuo Wen <<说文>>) 

'eat' KT *kin IN *kə'--*kə'an--*kə'i
Ch.囊 (九件切) *kjaŋ/*kjen 'eat'
(cf. Buo Ya <<博雅>>) 

'this' KT *ni IN *'ini
Hakka (Chang Ding) nã̄, tīⁿ Min nã⁵
T. ti Pumi di, uti M. nã Y. na:⁵

'I' KT *ku (term of respect) IN *aku
Ch. ㄐㄠ ku kwag/*kuo (kings use this term)

In addition to the above, we found numerous basic Kadai words with
ST but not Indonesian cognates, which are not discussed in the glossary of

Parts of the body and excrement

'leg' KT Thai kha¹, Dai xa¹, Zhuang ka¹, Kam-Sui pa¹,
Maonan ja¹, Gelao qua, Li ha¹
Ch. 骨头) *khragw/*khau 'a part of shin near the foot'
(cf. Ci Hai <<辞典>>) Min kha¹
T. khri 'seat' Nasi khu, Asi khi, Sani tsha
M. (Bunu) lau¹, Y. tsau⁵

'excrement' KT Thai, Dai kʰi³, Dai xī³, Zhuang hǎi⁴, Kam e⁴,
Mulao cē³, Gelao qo³, Sui qe⁴, Lakkia kweï⁴, Li ha:⁷
Ch. 屎 (式切) *sthjid/*sǐ⁵ excrement'

⁵ Cited in Zhang Yuansheng and Wang Wei (1980).
Natural phenomena, animals, and plants

'fog'    KT Thai, Dai mok², Zhuang mor:k², Gelao mpu, Kam mun², Sui mon¹, Maonan murn¹
        Ch. ฤ (ฤ) *mjəgw/*mjou 'fog' Amoy bọŋ², bọ²,
              (cf. Er Ya<<尔雅>>)
        T. smugs-pa, B. muik 'dark' Lepcha muk 'heavy fog',
              Bai muukə Lushei muk 'dark'

'pig'    KT Thai, Dai mu¹ Zhuang mou¹, Kam nu², Gelao mpa, Li pau⁴
        Ch. 猪 *pragi/*pa 'big pig, female pig'
        T. phag, Mikir phak, Chiang pa, Nasi bo, B. wak,
              Dulung wa?, Lushei vok
        M. mpa², pa⁵

'tree/wood' KT Thai, Dai, Maonan, Mulao, Sui mai⁴, Kam mət⁴, Zhuang fai⁴, Buyi vai⁴, Gelao tai, Lakkia tser², Li tshai¹
        Ch. 樹 (樹木) *bjed/*bjiwe 'wood'
              (cf. Shuo Wen <<说文>>)

Basic actions

'fly'    KT Thai, Dai, Zhuang, Buyi bin¹, Kam pen³, Sui vjan³,
         Maonan vin³, Mulao fən³, Lakkia pən², Li ben³
        Ch. 翼 *pjën/*phuon 'the appearance of flying'
              (cf. Guang Yin <<廣韻>>)
         Written Tibetan fipur, Spoken Tibetan phir, W. Burmese pyan, Spoken Burmese pjə, W. Bailang pyam, Lahu po,
         Jino pxe, Nasi mbi, Lisu be, Hani bjə, Yi vo, Bai fɤ

'separate' KT Thai, Dai pha⁵
         Ch. 分 *phuar/*phuə
         B. prə, Kachin bra 'scatter', Kanauri bra 'branch'
         M. pha⁵, Y. phi⁵

'change' KT Thai plen², Dai pen⁵, Zhuang, Buyi, Lakkia pɨn⁵,
       Kam pjin⁵, Sui, Mulao pjën², Maonan pjan⁵
       Ch. 交 *pjian/*pjiàn 'change'