

Voiceless Sonorant Initials in Hmong-Mien Sino-Tibetan Correspondences¹

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Voiceless sonorant initials (ʎ-, ɱ-, ɳ-, etc.) must be reconstructed for Proto-Hmong-Mien (PHmM), since there are a number of native etyma which have voiceless sonorant reflexes in the daughter languages and which have tones which are correlated with ancient voiceless initial consonants (belonging to the "upper register" tonal categories).² The following are merely representative of this group:³

bamboo	PHmM	*ʎo 3 (215/206) <i>hlov</i>
big, grow	PHmM	*ʎu 1 (287/225) <i>hlob</i>
tooth	PHmM	*ɱjpin 3 (32.2/7) <i>hniav</i>
to hear, feel	PHmM	*ɳom 3 (212.1/193) <i>hnov</i>
cooked rice	PHmM	*ɳa:ŋ 5 (260/101) <i>hno</i>

Preglottalized sonorant initials (ʎl-, ɱm-, ɳn-, etc.) must also be reconstructed for the protolanguage, and words with these initials also have reflexes with upper register tones. In the absence of voiceless sonorant reflexes in the modern languages, these sets can often still be distinguished on the basis of languages such as Mun which have undergone a secondary tone split based on aspiration. In these languages, the *ʎC- set will pattern with the unaspirated initials and the *ɳC- set will pattern with the aspirated initials:

pain, hurt	PHmM	*ʎmɔn 1 (7/195) <i>mob</i>	>
		Mun mun 1a	
animal fat	PM	*ɳmei 1 (8.1/37)	>
		Mun mei 1b	
		(where *unaspirated initial > 1a, *aspirated initial > 1b)	

However, not all words of this type are native Hmong-Mien. This paper is a consideration of voiceless sonorant initial etyma which have clear correspondences with etyma in Sino-Tibetan languages. My working assumption is that almost all of these words have been borrowed by Hmong-Mien speakers from Tibeto-Burman languages and from Chinese, some at a very early date. This research is part of my on-going work on a reconstruction of Proto-Hmong-Mien which attempts to separate

the huge body of loanwords from the native material, in order to arrive at a clearer picture of the native HmM sound system and lexicon. This work will reveal features of the donor languages and will contribute to an understanding of the nature of early contact (Ratliff 1998). And it is clear that only after sorting the data in this way will it be possible to address the question of the wider genetic affiliation of the HmM languages.

1. Tibeto-Burman correspondences

A very old group of such borrowings come from Tibeto-Burman. One would think, because of their antiquity, that these borrowings would be hard to discern and hard to explain. However, due to the better preservation of morphology on this side of the family, the identification and analysis of these loans is much more straightforward than the identification and analysis of the loans from Chinese, to which I will turn in the second half of this paper. All of these words seem to involve a correspondence between the TB *s- prefix and voiceless sonorants in HmM. According to Benedict, “[p]refixed *s- is the work-horse of the TB/Karen prefixial apparatus, generally directive/causative/intensive with verbal roots and playing the role of ‘animal prefix’ or ‘body-part prefix’ (< *śa ‘animal, flesh’) with nominal roots but appearing frequently elsewhere.” (Benedict 1987b: 44).

Benedict (1987a) identified a group of Tibeto-Burman loans in Hmong-Mien, some of which fall into clear semantic sets. He attempted to give a cultural explanation for these: the numerals (four through ten), kin terms (daughter-in-law, son-in-law), and heavenly bodies (sun, moon). The sun and moon words demonstrate a clear connection between TB *s-C- and HmM *C-:

- | | |
|---------------|---|
| 1. moon/month | PHmM * _l a 5 (215/92) <i>hli</i>
TB *(s-)(g-)la 'moon/month' |
| 2. sun/day | PHmM * _ɲ wɔ:i 1 (224/188) <i>hnub</i>
TB *nəy 'sun'; *s-nəy 'day' |

I have found one more equally old correspondence which fits into this semantic and phonological set:

3. dark/night PHmM * η wəŋ 5 (20/140) *hmo*
 TB *s-mu-ŋ 'cloudy, dark'
 cf. Burmese hmuŋ 'very dark' (Benedict
 1972:78); OC *muŋ 'darkened'

Next, three verb correspondences seem to reflect the reconstructed verbal meaning "directive/causative/ intensive" for the *s- prefix:

4. to slice PHmM * λ æk 7 (215/91) *hlais*⁴
 TB *s-lep 'to slice'
5. to extend tongue PHmM * η ja 3/5 (not in WM) *hlev*
 TB *s-lyə:w 'to lick'
6. to sniff at PHmM * η ŋjə:m 5 (32.2/135) *hnia*
 TB *s-nam (tr.)/*m-nam (intr.) 'to smell'

All three are transitive verbs, and 'to extend tongue' and 'to sniff at' both seem particularly "directive" and "intensive" ('to smell' is a different word in HmM, which means more generally 'to perceive passively with any of the senses'). To this group, we may also add a noun in HmM which derives from a "directive" TB verb:

7. track, footprint PHmM * η ŋju:n 3 (32.2/247) *hneev*
 TB *s-naŋ 'to follow; with'
 *mə-naŋ 'companion'
 cf. Lai ne?-hnaŋ 'footprint'
 (Kenneth Van Bik, p.c.)

Note the phonological correspondence between 'to sniff at' and 'track'. The root initial in TB in both cases is a coronal nasal, but both may be prefixed within that family with either *s- or *m-. What seems to have happened is that HmM borrowed a doubly prefixed form in each case. I had thought to explain the coronal nasals that appear in West Hmongic reflexes as the natural development of *mj-, but they may actually preserve the TB root initial. In this light, Wang and Mao's reconstruction of * η ŋj- for initial correspondence 32.2 may be closer to the mark.

The following word has two or three source candidates in TB considering the meaning for the Mien word η ou 3 given in Lombard 1968: 'heart; mind; center of personality;

(physiologically conceived) the canal running from the mouth through the throat and intestines to the anus'. The body-part prefix *s- would have been involved here.

8. intestines; PHmM **ŋ*₁au 3 (404/153) *hnyuv*
 heart, mind TB *s-niŋ 'heart and mind'
 TB *g/n-yaŋ (STEDT #2117) 'large intestine'
 (or possibly TB *s-nuk 'brain', OC *nuu? ~ naaw? 'brain')

There seems to be a complex of bodypart terms and intellectual/emotional properties that cluster in the same way in the two families, with similar phonological realizations. It will be very difficult to disentangle them. Wang and Mao's reconstruction does not include a final nasal, which nonetheless does appear in six of the twenty-three Hmongic dialects in their data, providing an even better fit with the TB forms.

Finally, the following four words also seem to show a connection to TB of the same type, although it is not possible to compare protolanguages at the highest level here as in the cases above,³ and there are competing source possibilities in two cases.

9. bridge PHm **l*₁p 1 (215/168)
 TB *s-lay, s-leŋ 'bridge, ladder' (STEDT #3582)
10. put forth White Hmong *l*₁a 3 *hlav*, Xuyong
 leaves, *l*₁aŋ 5, Shimen *l*₁au 3
 shoots;
 germinate TB *(s-)la(p) 'leaf'
 OC *lap 'leaf'

This may also be from 秀 OC *s-hlus (1095a) *xiù* 'come into flower'.

11. spirit, ghost PM **m*₁wje:n 3 (44/42)
 Old Tibetan **sman*
 'female spirit' (Coblin 1987:167)