

On the Apparent Labio-velar Nasals of Kam*

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In historical linguistics, certain commonplace sound changes can be presumed to happen in only one direction, usually for readily apparent phonetic reasons. Palatalization of consonants is an obvious example: it is easy to understand why a front vowel or semivowel should pull a non-palatal consonant towards a palatal point of articulation, but it is hard to imagine why a palatal consonant would ever factor itself out into, e.g. a velar stop plus a palatal semivowel. Again, a medial liquid often turns into a medial palatal semivowel, but we would be skeptical of a proposed sound change *pj- > pl-. Vowels seems to be less subject to this sort of directionality, but nasalization might be an instance: we expect that nasalized vowels will arise from the influence of neighboring nasal consonants, and not the other way around.

It is not necessary to insist on these being exceptionless rules; instances of 'wrong' directionality probably exist for many ordinarily directional changes. But we can presume these changes to go in only one direction, unless proven to do otherwise in a specific instance.

The change of labiovelar consonants into labials is another example of a sound change for which we would require strong evidence before admitting a development in the opposite direction. The Southeast Asian area provides instances of the expected directionality, although labiovelars do not seem to play as important a role in any Southeast Asian linguistic group as they do in Indo-European. Matisoff 1980 discusses many examples in Tibeto-Burman; the Kadai languages Kam, Then and some Sui dialects also show instances¹:

Table 1

	KamRJ	SuiSJ/SP	Then	SuiSLN	Saek	Siamese
leg	pa ¹	pa ¹	paa ¹	qa ¹	kwa ¹	khaa ¹
sell	pe ¹	pe ¹	pee ¹	qe ¹	kwaay ¹	khaai ¹
horn	pa:u ¹	pau ¹	paau ¹	qau ¹	-	khaui ¹
dove	pəu ²	pǎu ²	peu ²	qǎu ²	-	khaui ¹

* The first version of this paper was produced in December 1983 and submitted to LTBA. Shortly afterwards Paul Benedict, to whom I had also sent a copy, responded with a page of comments. I wrote a response to Benedict's comments in Fall 1984. The present paper incorporates some very minor revisions and corrections; it is followed by Benedict's original comments, then by my response to the comments (points 1 and 2), and a recent addendum (point 3).

¹ Kam (Rongjiang dialect, the standard) from Liang 1980; Then and Sui (SJ/SP Jungchiang and Pyo dialects, SLN Li-Ngam dialect) from Li 1965; Sui (SD Sandong) also from Zhang 1980. Tone numbers are by historical category, according to Chinese practice, with 3/3'/4 corresponding to Li's C and 5/5'/6 to Li's B. In KamLS (note 2) I/II is added to reflexes of tone D (checked syllables) to distinguish reflexes with long and short vowels respectively.

In these cases, most of Kadai agrees in showing a velar or uvular, followed by a less well-preserved rounded element. There are three roots with an opposite correspondence, namely with a Kam velar consonant plus rounded (semi)vowel corresponding to labials elsewhere in Kadai:

Table 2

	KamRJ	SuisLN	Siamese
dog	ɲwa ¹	ma ¹	maa ¹
pig	ɲu ¹	mu ⁵	muu ¹
flea	ɲwat ⁷	mat ⁷	mat ⁷

Are we to follow our sense of directionality here, and reconstruct Kadai *labiovelar nasals? For a phenomenon that is otherwise less than usual in the family, it is odd that for these three roots the shift from labiovelar to labial should have been universal excepting only Kam--especially when in other roots (Table 1) Kam is among the languages showing the shift. The opposite development *m* > *ɲ*^w, counter to the usual directionality, seems equally unlikely.

Benedict (1975, 128) agrees in suspecting these Kam *ɲw*- of being secondary developments, but offers no explanation for their presence. I would like to suggest one based on evidence from Lakkia and from Kam dialects different from the one cited above².

Lakkia is unique in Kadai (or nearly so, as will be seen) in that it preserves evidence of the source of the voiceless and glottalized nasal initials reconstructible for proto-Kadai, and preserved as such in Sui; e.g.

Table 3

	Lakkia	SuisD ³	proto-Tai initial (Li 1977)
bear	kūui ¹	ʔmi ¹	*hm
river	tsiē ¹	ʔnja ¹	- (cf. Buyi <i>ne¹, ni¹</i>) ⁴
rat	kīiu ³	ʔo ³	*hn

The indication is that the nasals in these roots were originally ordinary (voiced) nasals that were devoiced or glottalized by a preceding

²Lakkia data was recorded with a native-speaker consultant, Mr. Su Defu, at the Central Institute of Nationalities, Beijing, in Fall 1982. The particular words I cite here are also found, with only minor graphic differences, in Mao et al. 1982 and in Haudricourt 1967 (citing Anonymous 1959). The additional Kam dialects are (1) that of Longsheng, Guangxi, from Li 1982; (2) that of Sanjiang, Guangxi, from notes made by me during a short visit to the Guangxi Institute of Nationalities, Nanning. I apologize to readers for using the latter data, which is sketchily recorded and incompletely analyzed, but I am confident in the phonetic accuracy of the forms I cite, especially concerning the segmental phonetics, which is what is at issue here. My research at the Central Institute of Nationalities and the Guangxi Institute of Nationalities was made possible by a fellowship from the Committee on Scholarly Communication with the People's Republic of China; the aid of all three of these institutions is gratefully acknowledged.

voiceless consonant, that consonant having survived in Kadai only as the initial of the Lakkia reflex. This line of explanation then indicates that the Kadai *voiceless/preglottalized nasals were originally *medial*, not initial.

The Lakkia forms for 'dog', 'pig', 'flea' are $khw\check{3}^1$, $kh\check{u}^1$, $khw\check{o}t^1$ respectively, with the rounded vowel and glide reflecting the labiality of the lost * m . The development is not $\eta^w- > m-$, but $K(V)m- > \eta^w-$; the labial didn't sprout a velar, the velar was there all along. The KamsJ and KamLS forms are virtually identical to the Lakkia, minus the nasalization:

Table 4

	Lakkia	KamsJ	KamLS
dog	$khw\check{3}^1$	$khwa^{24}$	$k'wa^{11}$
pig	$kh\check{u}^1$	khu^{53}	$k'wu^{51}$
flea	$khw\check{o}t^7$	$khwat^{44}$	$k'wat^{711}$

Having disposed of the problem of directionality, we are confronted with a second problem: why only these three roots? Not only are these the only apparent labiovelar nasals in KamRJ, but they seem to be the only pre-nasal stops preserved in KamsJ; cf. the following KamsJ forms, all relating to voiceless or preglottalized nasals elsewhere in Kadai (tones omitted): na 'face', na 'thick', no 'rat', $pi\check{a}u$ 'urine', ne 'weep', pa 'river'. Perhaps further work in Kam dialectology will uncover additional examples of the 'dog/pig/flea' phenomenon, or else provide an explanation of its rarity.

Semantic links may have played a role: pigs and dogs are associated, as medium-sized domestic animals, and fleas are intimately associated with dogs. It is conceivable that these three words, linked by real-world relations semantically and by chance phonologically (the presence of * $kh-m-$), could have exerted a pull on each other during their phonological evolution. It would be as if the English word *arithmetic* were to lose its initial $a-$ from habitual occurrence in the expression *reading, 'riting and 'rithmetic*.

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