Wolfenden's Non-Pronominal a-Prefix In Tibeto-Burman: Two Arguments From Southern Chin And Some Proposed Semantic Correlates.

F.K. Lehman
University of Illinois, Urbana

0. The intent of this paper is to take a new look at a classical problem in comparative Tibeto-Burman linguistics. The purposes are both descriptive and historical: descriptive in the first instance, because the evidence from ŋMen Chin suggests very forcefully how we should treat a certain kind of a-prefix on nouns and derived nominal in a synchronic grammar; historical, because it is possible to suggest from the descriptive treatment in Southern Chin and from some comparative evidence a reconstruction in Tibeto-Burman of a particular grammatical process that has come down to several modern T-B languages, including some that seem, on Wolfenden's theory of nominal prefixes not to have the non-pronominal one. I think this double problem or purpose is proper for a paper in the tradition of synoptic Tibeto-Burman linguistics.

0.1 The facts I am going to deal with concern what Wolfenden (1929) has called the non-pronominal a-prefix on derived nominals. I shall start out by briefly recapitulating the highlights of Wolfenden's ideas and observations on the matter, since, as far as I can make out, in so far as there can be said to-day to be any on-going concern with the comparative treatment of this phenomenon in comparative T-B linguistics, no important revision or replacement for Wolfenden's treatment has been seriously advanced. For instance, Benedict's revised Conspectus (1972: section 28) does no more than state Wolfenden's attempted distinction between 3rd-person pronominal a- and a non-pronominal a- on derived nominals and then suggest that ultimately even the so-called non-pronominal a- is after all derived from proto-T-B a for the 3rd-person pronoun, and furthermore identical in derivation with Classical Tibetan h- before certain stops and affricates. He claims further than the difference between the two Tibetan prefixes a- (Wolfenden's ʔa, non-pronominal, and a-, pronominal) is a matter of stress, the ʔa (as opposed to [ə]=a-) being the stressed form used in front of many kinship-relational words, e.g., Burmese ʔapha/ʔaphei, father, ʔaphou:, grandfather. Other than this, which amounts less to a rejection of Wolfenden's hypothesis than a claim that even more deeply the two formatives are the same, we are, certainly from the standpoint of serious morpho-syntactic analysis, hardly farther along than where Wolfenden left us.

In fact I shall try to show that Benedict's revision of Wolfenden's thesis is correct. Moreover, such pre-transformational, structuralist grammars as have become available since Wolfenden's treatise on languages exhibiting the so-called non-pronominal a-,

e.g., Burmese (Okell 1969, Cornyn 1944), seem to content themselves with listing this prefix as a formative on certain classes of nouns, generally derived or relational in character and not speculating upon its deeper lexical or syntactic relationships, whilst for example our most recent work on ĝMen Chin (Jordan 1969), a language in which the pronominal a- and the so-called non-pronominal a- are clearly distinct, confuses them hopelessly. I think, then, I am justified in starting with an overview of Wolfenden's treatment and then proceeding to an analysis of the Southern Chin data, taking off from that to the more general comparative viewpoint by way of some aspects of the use of the so-called non-pronominal a- in Burmese.

1. Wolfenden begins the relevant part of his monograph at page 69, section 60, with a discussion of the Tibetan (Classical) substantives. Here he proposes to deal with the so-called non-pronominal a-prefix on certain substantives, i.e.,"...the prefix ʔa-, the relatives of which in other languages are traced for Kachin in section 64, for the Bodo and Naga languages in section 103, for the Kuki-Chin group in sections 185-6, and for Burmese in section 216." The kind of argument advanced by Wolfenden for considering this to be some kind of non-pronominal prefix is not altogether persuasive. Within Tibetan he claims to reconstruct a third person singular pronominal background for what is often treated or transcribed from the written Tibetan as a̲-, the a-chung, and he feels forced to think of what is often transcribed as ʔa- from the Tibetan, so-called preglottalized a-, as a quite separate element from the former. He takes this course for at least two reasons.

First, he has trouble finding plausible means for assigning his internally reconstructed semantic interpretation of the a- prefix as a third person (subject) marker to the orthographically distinguishable ʔa- prefix. Moreover, as a prefix, the former is perhaps more usually represented on verb bases than on nominal ones, and it is this fact that enables Wolfenden to make his pronominal interpretation, while the latter, ʔa-, is prefixed only to nouns, and this chiefly of certain classes such as kinship terms.

Second, starting from the last mentioned observation, one might, as various workers have suggested, interpret the ʔa- prefix as a third person possessive, except that Wolfenden feels that there are strong arguments against this view. For instance (pp. 100 ff.) very different third person possessive prefixes appear before these words in such actual possessive expressions as those for "his mother" and the like. And when the true possessive is first person, it is often, in Bodo and Naga, followed by the invariant a-prefix. This again might be thought inconclusive, since it is always possible to suppose that the ʔa- here represents a frozen prefixation that was, in an earlier stage of the language, not invariably attached to the base but was subsequently replaced in its productive function as a personal possessive by other forms. Wolfenden, however, appears to feel that he cannot take

this line. In the first place, he appears to find no reason to make this internal reconstruction, partly for reasons of apparent phonological distinctiveness between ʔa- and å-.[1] In the second place, he feels that comparative considerations within T-B support the position he in fact takes.

That is, in such languages as Kachin and Burmese, where an a-prefix appears on at least certain classes of substantives, Wolfenden finds no basis for internally reconstructing these as ancient pronominal forms, since only very different looking forms ever appear in straightforward pronominal usage. On the other hand, in such languages as many Naga and Kuki-Chin ones, he finds both an a-prefix that he can plausibly interpret as a possessive third person pronominal and the use of a or a-derived forms as independently attested third person pronouns. Of course this argument, while suggestive, is not conclusive, since the earlier forms of these T-B languages might well have represented a period at or before which the a- as a productive pronoun inherited from common T-B had simply been replaced by competing forms except in specialized possessive uses. After all, Wolfenden uses a similar argument when he discusses the succession of consonantal subject and object prefixes in Tibetan itself. Indeed, given the observation that many Chin languages, like Burmese, characteristically use the a-prefix on such relational words as those for kin relations, it might have been supposed that the a-prefixes of the latter were, like those of the former, interpreted as possessive pronouns in origin. However, Wolfenden rejects this line of argument, motivated, one imagines, by the need to discover presumptive comparative evidence for his separation of the ʔa- and the å- within Tibetan. With such circularity of thought it is surprising that Wolfenden came as near the mark as I shall try to show he did come in this matter.

1.1 Let us begin by looking at Wolfenden's overview of the a-prefix on Kachin kinship words. The third person singular pronoun is ši-. Father is a-wà, mother a-nù, while the non-relational word, house, is ʰntà. "His father" is usually šíʔ (a²) kəwà, where it appears that the glottal stop after the pronoun is some sort of copy of that after the possessive postposition a²; the latter, unproblematicallly distinct from any of the possibly pronominal particles we are considering, is then optionally deleted in such expressions. "His (or her or its) mother" is šíʔ (a²) nù, and "his house," šíʔ ʰntà. In the first expression, we note that the a-prefix is replaced by kə-, but it remains possible to say šíʔawà, in which case apparently, the postposition -a² is obligatorily deleted. What this is held to show is the thoroughgoing difference between Kachin personal pronouns and the a- prefix. But since Wolfenden himself, quite properly, reconstructs another pronominal prefix, one that later replaces *ba- and its reflexes in Tibetan, k(a)-, the suppletive relation in Kachin between a- and ka in the case of the word for father casts doubt on his conclusion here.[2]

Wolfenden proceeds to consider certain facts about Lepcha in comparison with Kachin (p. 72), and here it turns out that for both, in strictly cognate instances, the a-prefix is employed in the derivation of adverbs, chiefly manner adverbs, from adjectives---which, of course, function syntactically as verbs in these languages. This is a crucial observation of which Wolfenden makes too little. In the first place, the use of the prefix to mark derived or deverbal substantives is widespread in T-B. In the second, comparative evidence, as we shall see, strongly suggests that these adverbs are at least underlyingly postpositional phrases whose constituent noun phrases are just these deverbal substantives. Thus the Kachin example: ateṅ, truly, from teṅ, to be true.

Thereupon he considers several cases where he claims that certain verb stems prefixed in Kachin by a- are adjectives, but here again Wolfenden goes wrong in not observing the verbal character of the adjectives. The prefixed forms are clearly reduced relative constructions. Thus, e.g.,

a-teṅ, spotted [i.e., something spotted] from teṅ, to be spotted

Wolfenden then (p. 72) makes the claim that, "this non-pronominal a- of Kachin has invaded the domain occupied in the Kuki-Chin area by the quite distinct pronominal element a-..." What he appears to mean is that, as I have pointed out above, in the Kuki-Chin languages an a-prefix is used in just these ways, but owing to the presence in these languages of a productive a- third person pronominal prefix for possessive expressions and as a marker of the subject on finite verb phrases, he feels compelled to interpret the Kuki-Chin expressions that parallel the above instanced Kachin ones as third person possessive constructions. Thus,

Kachin		Thado [Khoŋjai]	
a-k'a [the]	bitter, sour	a-k'a	[implicitly treated here as the bitterness of SOMETHING].

What has always bothered me about this line of argument, which Wolfenden pursues at length both here and throughout his work, is its inability to make an obvious generalization. Why is it that the T-B languages that use a- as an explicit third person pronominal marker are just the ones that insist upon forming all abstract relational nouns and most nouns based upon adjectives by means of the concretizing possessive, whereas just the languages not using a- as an overt pronoun can formulate these deverbal substantives in overtly abstract fashion? The attribution to languages of an apparent incapacity to express overtly abstract forms, which Wolfenden defends in several places, simply because it appears convenient to ignore apparent homonymy of prefixed markers, seems far fetched.

Wolfenden only compounds the difficulty when he proceeds to introduce the use in Mikir and certain Bodo and Naga languages, in the same context of substantives derived from adjectives, of yet another third person pronominal form with a Tibetan cognate.