

A Further (Unexpurgated) Note on Karen Genital Flipflop

Paul K. Benedict

In a recent note in LTBA (Benedict 1979), edited and expurgated by James A. Matisoff, there was some discussion of the parallelism presented by the PST root *li(-n)^B 'penis' (→ 'vulva') and various SEA roots for 'tongue', with a concluding citation of Garo man-sre 'penis' = 'body-tongue'. Matisoff contributed a note (fn. 45) to the effect that only a clever linguist would have been impressed by this relationship yet it now appears that the speech of a culturally primitive tribe of Northern Brazil reflects a strikingly parallel association. Hixkaryana (Carib family), the first OVS language to have received a detailed description (Derbyshire 1979), shows obligatorily possessed kinship terms as well as body part words. The few exceptions in the latter group are of much interest: 'belly' (alternative term), 'breast (woman)', 'buttocks', 'heart', 'lung', 'tongue' and 'vagina' (probably for 'vulva'). Only for mony 'vagina' does the author add the descriptive '(non-possessed)', but the word for 'tongue' (dyuru) and the other exceptions are equally 'non-possessed'. The author, perhaps wisely, makes no attempt at an explanation. It does appear, however, that 'heart' and 'lung' are associated as a pair of internal organs, yet both 'bladder' and 'liver' are 'possessed'. Certainly 'breast (woman)' and 'vagina' constitute a pair as opposed to 'breast, chest' [male] and 'penis', both 'possessed', and 'buttocks' and 'belly' (alternative term) may fit here as well. Are the female parts among the Hixkaryana so readily available that they cannot be considered 'possessed'? And what in the world is 'tongue' doing in this group of 'non-possessed' body part words? If it were simply a 'penis' substitute, as in Garo man-sre (above), we might anticipate its being 'possessed', like all good male parts (in Hixkaryana). It seems that nothing short of a sociolinguistic study of this tribe will do; this note simply points to the parallelism with the SEA material.

Bibliography

- Benedict, Paul K. 1979. "Four forays in Karen linguistic history: IV. A note on Karen genital flipflop". *Linguistics of the Tibeto-Burman Area* 5.1:21-4.
- Derbyshire, Desmond C. 1979. *Hixkaryana*. *Lingua Descriptive Studies*, Vol. 1, Amsterdam. North Holland Publishing Company.