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Miao-Yao Enigma: the Na-e Language

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Na-e was brought to the attention of scholars almost a century ago when Auguste Bonifacy (1905), a pioneer in the field of SEA linguistics, published a short word list on the language, along with a brief note (Note 1 to p. 307):

Bien qu'elle ait quelques mots communs avec le mǎn [Yao], c'est évidemment une langue à part, et nous avons été étonné de l'entendre parler dans le cercle de Bao-lac par une partie de ces indigènes qu'on désigne sous le nom de Kouy-Tcheou [Kweichow = Gwizhou Province, south-central China]. Le groupe dont il est question se nomme Nà-é dans sa langue, son costume est le même que celui des Nóng [=Nung, a Central Tai group]. Il paraît que la langue pà-teng ou Na-e est parlée par une groupe importante dans l'Est du Yunnan à Joung-nan-fou.

Contrary to the comment made by Bonifacy, the language is clearly Miao-Yao rather than truly a 'language apart' and appears to be closer to Miao than to Yao, both lexically and phonologically, notably in its lack of final stops. It has a generally 'eroded' look, without nasal + stop or other clusters, e.g. the initial *ql- cluster of P-Miao is replaced by ku- in kuà 'white', kuan 'black'. It does, however, have final -ŋ and even an occasional -n but they do not appear to be truly contrastive. At first glance one might dismiss it as 'just another Miao dialect' but on closer examination two features of the language appear. The first of these requires an explanation but hardly creates any serious problems; the second does present problems, including at least one major problem, as can be seen from the discussion below.

Probably the first feature about Na-e that might come to one's attention involves the considerable number of distinctive lexical items, making due allowance for the vagaries of Bonifacy's Vietnamese-influenced transcription (t' is palatal; ' marks close and \ marks open vowels; superscript numerals indicate tones, of uncertain value), e.g. t'o 'monkey'; mi³ 'claw' and pu³ 'tiger', a respectful term for this feared animal: 'honorable sir'; cf. à-pu³ 'grandfather', with parallels in Rawang (Nungish) and elsewhere in SEA. The most interesting of the lot is /yáng/ 'dog', related to Tàhua Yao [Miao; see Chang 1953] lyā and, even more interestingly, to the full form: /liang/, recorded for a 'Yao' [Northern Miao] language spoken in Northwest Hunan, central China, in the 18th century (Lombard-Salmon 1972). The palatalization here is typical of early loans from Chinese into Miao and these forms appear to fit into that category; cf. lân/lân (GSR-735-1) 'wolf', perhaps via 'wild dog'. Finally, for one item Na-e appears to have combined Yao and Miao roots (!): nun (<Yao via *ndun) bè (<Miao) 'pig', but note that only the latter (<Miao) element is retained in composition: kam hi bè = ka-hmi bè 'fat/grease' (note the vowel inconsistency).

Along with these distinctive lexical items, Na-e also offers some distinctive phonological features; cf. the following:

1. Na-e mu 'rain', with m- = P-Miao *n- ~ P-Yao *bl-; cf. mo 'leaf', with - = P-Miao *mbl- ~ P-Yao *n-. As can be seen, Na-e manages to tie these two roots together, so to speak, indicating that an initial of *(m)bl/r- type is to be reconstructed for PMY in each case. This all fits very well with the AT typologies that have been offered for the two roots (ATLC: 325; 383).

2. Na-e ku³ 'six' vs. t'a³ 'laugh': elsewhere the initials of these two roots are represented by a single reflex, with P-Miao having *tl-; the Na-e distinction provides a basis for reconstructing *tl- in 'laugh', as indicated by the AT etymology (see ATLC: 324-25) vs. *tr- (> *kr- > k-, with Yao parallel) in 'six', an early loan from a Tibeto-Burman source that had unvoiced initial consonants: PTB *d-ruk > *truk.

3. Na-e wa 'two', paralleling Tahua Yao [Miao - see above] va and, partially, Yaoling (Yao) vi, with Miao showing forms of /au~/o/ type and other) Yao having /i/. It is now evident that the PAT root is to be reconstructed as *drawasa (> PAN *ḍawasa ~ *ḍawasa > [Dyen's] *ḍawsa), a disyllabic root that yielded both N. Li trau and Laha sa as 'split cognates'. The source of the Na-e/Tahua Yao forms is now clear enough, with the Yaoling form serving as a bridge to the other Yao forms: *was[a] > *wai (regular dental *-i shift in MY) > *wi > *i, while the Miao forms look like products of partial reduplication, a favorite AT device in handling numerals: *drawa-wa[sal] > *waw[a] > *aw.

4. Na-e hmu 'bird', with *hm- = P-Miao/P-Yao *n-, reflecting PAT *mr revised from *ml; see ATLC: 234-35). The initial h-, with a parallel in Yao (Biao Min hno), probably represents an earlier *s-, for the ubiquitous Sino-Tibetan 'animal prefix' *s-, which apparently came into the MY family along with the numerals (above 'three' - see 'six', above) and certain calendrical and other loans ('sun/day', 'moon/month', 'year'). Na-e resembles Tahua Yao in both the 'dog' and 'two' items (above), despite some divergences at other points, and one would naturally wonder about the Tahua Yao form for 'bird' but, unfortunately, this was not included in Chang's paper.

The last of these cognate sets, for 'bird', creates a very special kind of problem since it implies that Na-e, perhaps together with other (and not yet recorded) languages, represents the earliest split from the parental MY stock. If this seems unacceptable, one must posit separate but parallel *m- > *n- splits in both Miao and Yao, with Na-e somehow retaining its distinctive /m/ reflex although within the Miao division. At the very least, it would appear, we must be viewed as the earliest split off the Miao branch of the family. We are in urgent need of more data on the language, which seems to have disappeared since the early recording by Bonifacy. For the present, until a modern Bonifacy makes his appearance, the language must remain an enigma, holding out great promise for Miao-Yao researchers of the future.

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