On Jingpho ‘one’ and ‘two’

Paul K. Benedict
Ormond Beach, Florida

The first two numerals in Jingpho (Jg.), Ṽη뇌 ‘one’ and Ṽvably ‘two’ are Tibeto-Burman isolates. The l-, apparently from PTB *lak ‘arm/hand’, ties in with WT ɲa ‘five’ but the forms themselves have long puzzled the writer. It now appears that they represent derivatives of early terms for the little and ring fingers, as employed in counting, especially when the thumb is used, beginning with the little finger (‘one’), followed by the ring finger (‘two’):

Ṽη뇌 ‘one’ < ‘little [finger]’; cf. ɲai ‘baby; give birth’; cǎŋai ‘baby’; ʃǎŋai ‘give birth’; WB ɲai ‘small, little’; also ArCh ʄѥŋ/ʄѥi (GSR 873f) ‘young and weak’; 蓀 id. (873o) ‘fawn’, etymologically the same word; 児 snjέg/ʦjέ ʕ (873a) ‘child, son’ (with prefixed *s-), all from PST *ɲa(ː)y, with regular -jέg < *ay, -iŋ < *-ay (Benedict 1970: App.I).1

Ṽably ‘two’ < ‘ring [finger]’, from *-kwaŋ, with regular -o- < *-wa-, as in Sumgon ‘casting net’ < PTB *kwaŋ (STC #158); khon ‘wear (as bracelets)’< PTB *kwaŋ (STC #160); cf. WB kwàŋ ‘bend into a ring’, ‘a-kwàŋ ‘a circle, ring, loop’; also P-Kham *ɡwaŋ ‘circular; in a circle’, all from PTB *ɡwaŋ ~ *kwaŋ.

Speculatively, with an eye upon archaic pre-PST levels, the /ɲày/ perhaps arose as an *-i diminutive (‘little digit’), as contrasted with /ɲa/, the ‘big digit’ = ‘thumb’, the last of five digits to be counted and thus the source of /l-ɲa/ ‘five’. Additionally, the /ɲa/ can be viewed as a derivative (the opposable thumb that is branch-like when extended) of an areal /ɲa/ ‘fork, notch, branch’, as represented in PAT *tsaña ‘id.’ > P-Tai *(h)ɲa < *(s-)ɲa (regular /s/ < *ts) ‘fork, notch, branch’, (SW Tai: Lue ‘space between fingers’); Outlier Kadai *(h)ɲa < *(s-ɲa < *ts[ə]ɲa ‘(forkedly-ridden animal) = horse’, the source of the early Tai-Chinese calendrical ‘horse’: P-Tai *sanja (cf. above for phonology), ArCh Ṽ s-ɲo/ɲo < *s-ɲa. (cf. Fr. à califourchon).

Finally, and even more speculatively, this archaic /ɲa/ may be etymologically the same element as PST *ɲa ‘I/me’, the moi standing apart

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1 Cf. also the meagerly represented roots for ‘one’: *kə and *a (Matlsoff, 1995) with the similarly impoverished (with different distributions) roots for ‘child’: *kə and *a (see Benedict 1941).
like an opposable thumb from all the other personal pronouns, making for a Sino-Tibetan version of a literary Thai original: *The Ring and I*.2

REFERENCES


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2 With all due respect, I find these etymologies to be vastly less convincing than my own speculations on this subject (Matisoff 1994), where I interpreted ŋāi as deriving from the 1st person pronoun (Jg. ŋāi) [alluded to in Benedict’s last paragraph] and (less confidently) ńokhôŋ as deriving from a 2nd person address form. Chief among my objections to Benedict’s alternative is the fact that there is no evidence whatsoever that the Jingpho (or any other TB group) have ever associated the fourth finger with rings! [Ed.]