

Tibetan Evidence for Nungish Metathesis

Scott DeLancey
University of Oregon

LaPolla (1987), in a valuable etymological investigation of Nungish, identifies two clear cases (LEECH and DREAM) and two possible cases (BRAID and AXE) where Nungish has metathesized an earlier prefix + C.¹ Sun (1986:14) identifies four cases of metathesis in Nungish (and other languages), DREAM, FORGET, NAME, and PLOW. In this note I will present several more sets, involving comparisons between Nungish and Tibetan, which demonstrate a fairly prevalent process of metathesis in the development of Nungish. To the sets presented by LaPolla and Sun we can add four secure etymologies: BLADDER, TRIUMPH, ARROW, and DAUGHTER-IN-LAW. I will also discuss a few other sets where there is some reason to think we may be dealing with metathesis along with some other complicating processes.

Nomenclatural confusion is as great with respect to Nungish as for other parts of Tibeto-Burman. It is best, and consistent with the practice of previous scholars of the language (cf. Barnard 1934, Morse 1962, Morse and Morse 1966, Sun 1983, LaPolla) to refer to a "language", Nungish, consisting of a large number of "dialects" (Morse claims that there may be more than sixty). I will use the spellings Tarong and Anung² (LaPolla's "Dulong A" and "Dulong B"), Rawang (Barnard 1934, Morse 1962, 1965), and "Trung" (Lo 1945) which appears to be distinct from any of the above.³ This could as well be called a Nungish "branch", consisting of the Trung, etc. languages, but it appears from the published descriptions that the variation among the subdivisions of Nungish is on the order of that of the Tibetan or Jingpho "dialects", and markedly less than that among, say, the Kuki, the Burmish, or the Kiranti languages.

¹ This work was supported in part by National Science Foundation grant #BNS-8711370.

² These are the autonyms given in Sun 1982:220; the spelling "Tarong" is taken from Morse 1962. I have previously used "Trung" for "Tarong", and this spelling is also used in the English translation of Sun 1986. While I am reluctant to add further terminological confusion to the area, it seems that Lo's "Trung" is distinct from Tarong (see the following note), and it has prior claim on that spelling.

³ LaPolla (p. 1, fn.3) suggests identifying Rawang with Nujlang Anung and Lo's Trung with Tarong, but all four are distinct. Rawang stands apart from the other documented varieties in having lost all initial clusters except for stop + /w, y/. (In this and some other ways Rawang seems to have participated in some Burmish phonological tendencies that are not reflected in the more northerly forms of Nungish.) Lo's Trung shares with Anung and Rawang the third stop series which is absent in Tarong.

Preliminaries

Two of the etymologies suggested here depend on the dissimilatory development in Nungish of *dental + r clusters, exemplified by LaPolla with three sets. (Numbers in brackets represent LaPolla's set numbers. Sets given in full in this journal by LaPolla or Sun are abbreviated here):⁴

CUT/CHOP [169]: Tarong a-xrɿ́t, A. a-xrɿ́t, WT dra (pf. dras)

SIX [177]: Tarong kɿ́t, A. kɿ́t, WT drug; PTB *d-ruk ɿ *d-k-rok

SEW [178]: Tarong kɿ́p, A. khɿ́p, WT 'drub, PTB *d-rup = *drup

LaPolla notes that the *dr- > kr- shift also occurs in Burmese and Zaiwa, and that the k- form occurs in SIX in several other languages. (This presumably is the basis for the suggestion [Matisoff 1972 #35] that SIX be reconstructed with both *d- and *k- prefixes).

This correspondence is also discussed by Sun (1986:13-4), who presents six sets, four of which involve good Nungish comparisons.⁵ These are SIX and the following:

MULE: Tarong tɐ-kɿ́, A. tɐ-khɿ́, WT dre(1)⁶

BEDBUG: Tarong gré-šɿ́, A. gi-šɿ́, WT 'dre shig⁷, Jg. fǎ⁵⁵ kɿ́p⁵⁵. (cp. Monpa dʒě šɿ́k, with regular development of the initial cluster).

ASK: Tarong kɿ́, A. khɿ́, WT 'dri

To these sets we can add (see also TRIUMPH below):

RUB/WIPE: Tarong a-krét, A. a-krít, WT 'drud

⁴ Tarong and Anung forms follow Sun's transcriptions, except that I have used underlining to replace his short vowel diacritic, schwa for his /w/, and his tone letters are replaced by tone marks — /' / high level, /' / high falling, /' / low falling.

⁵ Sun's sixth set, DIG, includes a more dubious Nungish equation which we need not consider here.

⁶ dre, dreu, and drel all occur in WT.

⁷ The second element of the Nungish, Tibetan, and Monpa forms is clearly *s-rik 'louse'. The first element is analyzable only in Tibetan, where 'dre is 'demon, ghost'. The Jg. form is clearly related to WB /khrɿp/ 'lac-insect; cochineal' and Lahu /a-kɿ́/ 'lac', all reflecting a variant with final *p [cp. Matisoff 1972 #347]. The open-syllabled WT form might represent a folk etymology; alternatively the form 'bedbug' might have been borrowed into Nungish from Tibetan. A priori the first alternative seems more plausible.

LaPolla, on the basis of comparison with reconstructed PTB forms, identifies the Nungish (and other) velars as secondary. Sun, while noting that the matter is far from clear, seems to suggest on the basis of the wide distribution of the velar forms (in Monpa, Jingpho, Lolo-Burmese, Mishmi, and other languages, as well as Nungish) that the WT dental form may be secondary.⁸

My interpretation below of the KICK and TRIUMPH sets below as involving metathesis of *rd followed by *dr- > kr- can stand only if LaPolla's interpretation is correct, since these show Nungish kr- from clearly secondary *dr clusters. The argument from PTB forms is somewhat precarious, since the relevance of SIX is unclear, and the TB reconstructions in the STC rely heavily on precisely the WT forms whose provenience is in question. However, there is a strong distributional argument in favor of LaPolla's interpretation: WT has, along with its dental + r clusters, velar + r clusters in great abundance, while Nungish has only kr-, but no tr-. Thus these sets contrast with LaPolla's [173] VILLAGE and [174] FEAR, where Nungish kr- corresponds to WT kr- or gr-, and we must assume that the two onset types have merged in Nungish. This, of course, requires that we posit a similar merger in the other languages cited by Sun; whether this indicates a particular genetic relationship among them or requires some other explanation remains to be elucidated.

Sets showing metathesis

The sets (including those proposed by LaPolla and Sun) showing metathesis are arranged according to category of prefix and initial. (Monpa and Taruang forms are from Sun et. al., Taraon from Anon. n.d.)

1) Metathesis of liquid prefix and stop initial:

BLADDER: Tarong tśí klân, A. tśhí klân, WT lgang-pa

TRIUMPH: Tarong kráʔ, A. khráʔ, WT rdug 'conquer, vanquish'

This is perfectly regular, given the *dr > kr change discussed above.

⁸ Cp. Sun 1983. There is scattered evidence for sporadic shifts in a number of languages. One revealing set is ELBOW: Tarong /úr krú mú/, A. /k'ur-mú/, Taraon /la: kra:p/. WT /gru-mo/gre-mo/dre-bo/. The WT variants suggest that *dr > gr may have sporadically occurred in Tibetan as well. This fits with Sun's evidence, where for some etyma different dialects of Tibetan disagreed on the place of the cluster.

KICK: Tarong tə-kláʔ; WT rdog 'any action with the foot; footstep; stride, pace', rdeg(s)-pa 'beat, strike, smite; push, thrust, knock, kick', Garo ga-tək 'kick'; Tangkhul Naga kəkəthək 'id' [cp. Matisoff 1972 #14]

PUSH: Tarong də-ɡlɔʔ, Monpa A tók thôʔ, WT rdegɔ

These last two sets are both dubious, but are included because they partially support one another. The implied shift of PN *kr > kl is irregular (but cp. the same irregular shift of liquid in DREAM), as is the disagreement in voicing of the initial in KICK.⁹

STALK (n.): Rawang kəlaŋ, Tarong kə-láŋ, A. kə-lâŋ, WT rkang 'foot, leg; lower part; stem, stalk, esp. leaf-stalk' (Jäschke); PTB *kuŋ

The semantics of this set are not perfect, since it appears that 'foot' rather than 'stalk' might be the primary sense of the WT form. However, the STC *kuŋ (359) 'stem', based entirely on non-Tibetan forms, suggests that the 'stem, stalk' sense may be original, in which case the metathesis explanation allows the Nungish forms to be linked with the *kuŋ root. There are also phonological problems. The equation requires an irregular shift of *kr > *kl (the opposite of the shift required for THROAT below). This may be explicable; STC cites Jg. lə-kùŋ 'branch, limb' as belonging to this set, giving evidence for the correct prefix. More troublesome is the unnecessary epenthesis, breaking up an allowable initial cluster; the epenthesis is completely irregular in Rawang, which regularly loses medial liquids. (Cp. also Taraon mə:ləŋ 'stalk', supporting the possibility of a distinct *laŋ root which could be reflected in the Nungish forms).

THROAT: Tarong, A. tši-xrǎʔ, WT lkog-ma 'gullet', cp. Taruang šə tə gro ('gullet')

The correspondence of Nungish medial -r- to earlier *-l- is irregular (and exactly the opposite of the irregular shift in the previous sets). The (necessarily subsequent) spirantization of the velar before -r- is regular (LaPolla p. 21; LaPolla suggests xr- from original clusters, but not from *prefix + r.) There is a WT form gre-bu 'throat' which could correspond

⁹ If the Jingpho form /lə-hkàt/ 'kick (as a horse)' is related to this set, then it provides evidence for a pre-PN *-l- prefix, rather than the *-r- implied by the WT form (cp. the identical pattern in STALK), as well as for a voiceless root initial. However, the mismatch of the rimes makes this problematic.

here without metathesis, but the rime correspondence is then irregular; -ʔ with high tone is the regular Nungish reflex of *-k.

LaPolla (p. 38) suggests metathesis as the origin of blaat¹ 'braid', in order to link it with PLB *bat 'wind around'. The additional evidence presented here for the regularity of metathesis of original *liquid + stop sequences adds to the plausibility of his suggestion.

2) Liquid prefix and sonorant initial:

PLOW: Tarong, A. mrâ, WT rmo

DREAM [82]: Tarong mláŋ, A. mláŋ, WT rmang, PTB *r-maŋ

NAME: Tarong àŋ-brěŋ, Anung aŋ-brěŋ, PL(-B) *ʔ-m(y)iŋ¹, PTB *r-miŋ (83) / *s-braŋ

The NAME etymology is dependent upon a dissimilatory change of nasal to obstruent following metathesis. This is not a regular shift in Nungish, as evidenced by PLOW. LaPolla (p. 8) notes several cases where prefix *m- is reflected in Nungish as p-, but a cluster resulting from metathesis should behave as a cluster rather than prefix + initial. However, Sun's suggestion of an etymology involving metathesis here is worth consideration, as it has the potentially advantageous consequence of eliminating the extra NAME root postulated on the basis of the Nungish evidence in STC (p. 31, n. 99, with Lepcha bryaŋ as the only non-Nungish attestation of PTB *bryaŋ). It also suggests an explanation for the y medial reflected in some but not all LB forms, if we can assume parallel metathesis in PLB giving *mr iŋ, with *mr > my in some languages and > m in others.

3) Nasal prefix

ARROW: Tarong, A. də-má, WT mda, PTB *m-da

LaPolla treats this as a case of "prefix pre-emption", i.e. as *mda > *ma, with the də- prefix then presumably new. But the metathesis interpretation is more economical, requiring only epenthesis to break up

the resulting **dm* cluster; this is entirely plausible, as this cluster does not occur in Nungish.¹⁰

DAUGHTER-IN-LAW: Tarong *də-má*, A. *nə-má*, WT *mna-ma*

The A. form for DAUGHTER-IN-LAW shows that the dissimilatory denasalization in Tarong postdates the breakup of Proto-Nungish. This means that the epenthesis reflected in both languages is also post PN, since the motivation for the shift of **n* to **d* is lost once the cluster is broken up. This in turn means that the apparent disagreement between this form and ARROW regarding the development of **dm* actually reflects chronologically distinct changes: Pre-Proto-Nungish **dma* ARROW dissimilates to **tma*, with epenthesis giving both attested forms, while PPN **nma* DAUGHTER-IN-LAW undergoes the same epenthesis in Anung, but in the development of Tarong first dissimilates to **dma*.

4) *Stop prefix and stop initial*

LIKE/LOVE: Tarong *də-géŋ*, WT *gdung*, Jg. *dawŋ*

NEPHEW: Rawang *pədu hpè*, Tarong *pə-dú* ('br. son'), A. *bə-dû*, WT *dbon-po* 'grandson, nephew', Lahu *dù* 'descendant' < **m-du* [cp. STC #259]

Neither of these sets is as well supported as some of those discussed previously, but both are plausible.

¹⁰ I can find no clear independent evidence for the development of **dm* in Nungish (Tarong and Anung /*má má*/ 'soldier', equivalent to WT /*dmag mi*/, is clearly a late loan), but Benedict suggests that Rawang /*htə-mi*/ 'fire', and thus Tarong /*tə-mi*/, derive from **d-m*. [STC p. 115], in which case the proposed development here is regular.

References

- Anon. n.d. *A Dictionary of the Taron Language for the Use of Officers in the North-East Frontier Agency Administration*. Shillong: Research Dept., N.E.F.A.
- Barnard, J.T.O. 1934. *A Handbook of the Rawang Dialect of the Nung Language*. Rangoon.
- Benedict, Paul. 1972. *Sino-Tibetan: A Conspectus*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Jäschke, H.A. 1881. *A Tibetan-English Dictionary*. London: Routledge.
- LaPolla, Randy. 1987. Dulong and Proto-Tibeto-Burman. *LTBA* 10.1:1-43.
- Morse, Robert. 1962. *Hierarchical Levels in Rawang Phonology*. MA Thesis, Indiana University.
- . 1965. Syntactic frames for the Rvwang (Rawang) verb. *Lingua* 15:338-69.
- , and Betty Morse. 1966. Oral tradition and Rawang migration routes. pp. 195-204 in *Essays Offered to G. H. Luce*, vol. I. (*Artibus Asiae Supplementum* 23).
- Sun, Hongkai. 1982. Dulong-yu Jianzhi [*Outline Grammar of the Dulong Language*]. Beijing: Minzu Chubanshe.
- . 1983. Liu Jiang Liuyu-de Minzu Yuyan ji chi Xishu Fenlei [*Minority Languages of the 'Six River Valleys' and their respective classifications*]. *Minzu Xuebao*, 1983.3.
- . 1986. Notes on Tibeto-Burman consonant clusters. *LTBA* 9.1:1-21.
- , et. al. 1980. *Menba, Luoba, Dengren-de Yuyan* [*The Languages of the Monpa, Lhoba, and Deng Peoples*]. Beijing: Minzu Chubanshe.