

VIETNAMUONG LABIALS AGAIN

by

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Milton E. Barker has shown (*Van-hoa Nguyet-san* 12.491-500, 1963) clearly that at an earlier stage Vietnamese had an initial *p-* and that Proto-Vietnamuong had seven distinctive labial initials; there is no need to argue the question whether *mb-* was a unit or a cluster. Barker remarks (491) "The reasons why it [*p-*] has become voiced in Vietnamese while remaining voiceless in Mường are not clear." I think that if we modify the detail of Barker's reconstruction, we not only reach a more adequate expression of the antecedent shapes and systems; we gain an insight into these "reasons" in so far as linguistic reconstruction ever leads us to causality in a fruitful sense.

Barker quotes Bloomfield: "A reconstructed form is a formula that tells us which identities or systematic correspondences of phonemes appear in a set of related languages; moreover, since these identities and correspondences reflect features that were already present in the parent language, the reconstructed form is also a kind of phonemic diagram of the ancestral form." He might equally have cited passages to this effect from Meillet which have become famous.

We can, of course, regard *ph : m : mb : b : w : v : p* simply as a set of formulas. Nevertheless, because, at the very least, Barker attaches to them the characteristic "labial", it is clear that he is taking to heart the implications of the second part of Bloomfield's statement. I agree entirely with this line of reasoning; indeed, I would insist on pushing it further.

Let us inspect the distinctive features that are stated for Vietnamese and Mường, and see where they lead:

M		VN		*features	
ph	voiceless	ph	voiceless	1	voiceless
	spirant		spirant		spirant
	labio-dental		labio-dental		labio-dental
m	nasal	m	nasal	2	nasal

	bilabial		bilabial		bilabial
	[voiced]		[voiced]		[voiced]
b	voiced	m	nasal	3	[voiced]
	stop		bilabial		stop
	bilabial		[voiced]		nasal
					bilabial
b	voiced	v	voiced	4	voiced
	stop		spirant		
	bilabial		labio-dental		
v	vocalic	v	voiced	5	?
	consonantal		spirant		
	bilabial		labio-dental		
p	voiceless	v	voiced	6	?
	stop		spirant		
	bilabial		labio-dental		
p	voiceless	b	voiced	7	
	stop		stop		stop
	bilabial		bilabial		bilabial

Thus we see that *ph (or *f), *m, *mb are obvious from the start. The last correspondence is clear except for the voicing; but if we follow Barker and favor the Mường reflex, we may plausibly fit this *p in with his assumption for *b in the fourth correspondence. Again, if we follow Barker in favoring Mường for the fifth correspondence, we arrive not implausibly at *w. But Barker's implied reconstruction of features for the sixth correspondence, where he posits *v, is supported neither by the features of the descendant forms nor by the inner logic of the systems at any stage. This flaw is, I feel, directly related to Barker's failure to illuminate the voicing which VN seems to have carried into the seventh correspondence. Indeed, as matters stand, we are left with a further unmotivated devoicing and "hardening" on the part of M in the sixth correspondence, which remains unexplained.

Taking the features which seem to give obvious matches, and positing other segment bundles to dovetail with them, we might hypothesize the following for the proto and then inspect the consequences.

	1	7	4	6	5	2	3
labio-dental	+						
(strident)							
bilabial							
(mellow)		+	+	+	+	+	+

interrupted	—	+	+	—	(—)		+
voiced	—	—	+	—	+	[+]	[+]
nasal						+	+
vocalic					(—)		

Giving plausible phonetic names to the numbers, we might write, respectively, [f] or [ph], [p], [b], [φ], [β] or [w], [m], [mb].

If that is so, the development in VN would then be (a) [m] and [mb] merge as [m] (by loss of + interrupted); and (b) [b] and [β] merge as [β] (likewise by loss of + interrupted). Then [β] is free to move to [v] (+ strident) to oppose “ph”. This leaves an array

ph	φ	p	
v			m

We then need only suppose that all unopposed labials underwent voicing. Alternatively, and perhaps better, we may posit that [β] at first remained [β], thus giving

ph	φ	p	
	β		m

Then we posit a rule whereby all mellow (weak) labials voice; once this is in effect “ph” and [β] adjust to eliminate the redundancy of [+ strident] and [— interrupted].

On the other hand, the development in M is: (a) [b] and [mb] merge as [b] (by loss of + nasal); (b) [β] (which now seems necessary for correspondence 5) becomes vocalic [w]. Then we have

	ph	φ	p	
w			b	m

The end product of this (perhaps in multiple stages) is that all non-nasal labial consonants become + interrupted. Perhaps even the merger of [b] and [mb] participated in this.

These features and steps, I submit, account plausibly for all developments as systematic interdependent phenomena. In that sense, we may claim to understand “why” the voicing in VN and M is at variance.