

PATTERNS OF BABY LANGUAGE IN BWE KAREN

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Scattered amongst my Bwe Karen¹ material collected many years ago are a number of expressions described by my informant as 'baby language'. Material of this kind often escapes attention in formal grammars and dictionaries, and may at first sight seem to offer little of value to philologists, and yet it is not unknown for such linguistic by-paths to conserve forms that have disappeared elsewhere.²

Since the items on my list have come together by accident, so to speak, in the course of research with a quite different purpose in mind, there must inevitably be many gaps. As might be anticipated, the great majority of the items are nominal, and refer in the main to members of the infant's immediate family circle, to food and drink, simple articles of clothing, and to domestic animals. The only verbal form in the material is the word for 'sit'; it seems likely that a more comprehensive list would include terms for other everyday actions. Among the nominal forms, the occurrence of a word for 'moon' is, perhaps, surprising, and I regret not having pursued this further with my informant at the time. Are there words for other natural phenomena such as 'sun', 'rain', 'thunder', etc., or is there some special reason why 'moon' is introduced so early into the vocabulary of Karen babies? (Via a well-known lullaby or nursery tale perhaps?)

The items collected are here first arranged and examined with reference to similarities of phonetic pattern, and subsequently with reference to their relationship to the language of adults. The transcription used is that of the International Phonetic Association and is, as such, largely self-explanatory. It is pointed out, however, that *b̥* and *d̥* represent 'pre-glottalised' plosives as contrasted with *b* and *d*, which represent the more familiar plain voiced plosives. There are also preglottalised glides, *ʔy* and *ʔw*. Bwe Karen has three tones, high, mid and low, which are here represented by the raised numerals, ¹, ², and ³ respectively.

Phonetic Patterns

Syllable structure is, as might be expected, of the (C)V type only. It is to be noted, however, that in Bwe Karen this is not characteristic of just baby language as such, as in some other languages, but of adult language as well.

The following phonetic patterns are found:-

¹ By 'Bwe [bwɛ¹] Karen' is here meant the Karen local dialect spoken in the Mehbyu area, which includes the village from which my informant came.

² Editor's note: The etymological editor's notes found below are a confirmation of the validity of that observation.

(a) Straightforward reduplicated disyllables.

e.g. ye ¹ ye ¹	'older brother or sister' ³
phi ¹ phi ¹	'grandmother'
phu ¹ phu ¹	'grandfather'
ne ² ne ²	'buffalo'
ga ¹ ga ¹	'duck'
pi ¹ pi ¹	'fish'
θe ² θe ²	'fruit'
do ¹ do ¹	'upper garment'
ko ² ko ²	'shoes'
na ¹ na ¹	'to sit' ⁴

(b) Reduplicated disyllables with tonal differentiation. This tonal differentiation is a characteristic feature of word- and sentence-building in the adult language.⁵

e.g. mo ¹ mo ²	'mother'
pa ¹ pa ²	'father'
to ¹ to ²	'aunt'
di ¹ di ²	'uncle'
ɽ ¹ ɽ ²	'milk; water; sweet'
ko ¹ ko ²	'rice-cake'
ɽyu ¹ ɽyu ²	'pig'

(c) Non-reduplicated disyllables, with tonal differentiation.

e.g. ku ¹ ri ²	'puppy'
ma ¹ mu ²	'cooked rice'

³ Cf. Proto-Lolo-Burmese *ɽwyik 'elder sibling'.

⁴ Cf. Written Burmese nâ, Lahu nâ 'perch, alight'; Sun's Trung nwa³¹ na⁵³ 'rest', Nujiang Trung nwa³¹ na⁵³ 'rest'.

⁵ Henderson, E.J.A. 1960. Tone and Intonation in Western Bwe Karen. Fiftieth Anniversary Publication of the Burma Research Society. Vol. I.

It may or may not be characteristic that tonal differentiation in the disyllables recorded is always of the high-mid type. In adult language, tonal differentiation as a word-building device is frequently of this type, but may also be low-high etc.

(d) Trisyllables, with reduplication of two adjacent syllables, usually the first two, and with or without tonal differentiation.

e.g. nɛ ¹ nɛ ¹ u ²	'milk'
or nɛ ¹ nɛ ² u ¹	
tɛ ¹ tɛ ² u ¹	'mother's milk; breast'
na ² na ¹ o ²	'dog' ⁶
ɬa ¹ ɬa ¹ pho ²	'bird'
ʔyu ¹ ʔyu ² pho ²	'piglet'
bɛ ¹ hɛ ¹ hɛ ¹	'goat'
gɔ ³ gɔ ¹ u ²	'cock'
pɪ ¹ pɪ ¹ pho ²	'fish'
ɕi ² kwa ¹ kwa ²	'frog'
kɔ ¹ kɔ ² ɪ ¹	'baby'
ma ³ ma ³ mo ¹	'moon'

(e) Trisyllables without reduplication.

e.g. na ² mɪ ¹ yo ³	'cat'
ku ¹ ri ² pho ²	'puppy'

Relation to adult language

Regarded from the point of view of their relationship to adult language, the expressions listed above may be re-classified under the following heads:-

(a) Directly derived, by reduplication of the corresponding adult term, or of a selected syllable of the corresponding adult term, with no tonal change:-

		Corresponding adult term
e.g. phi ¹ phi ¹	'grandmother'	phi ¹
phu ¹ phu ¹	'grandfather'	phu ¹

⁶ Cf. Fraser's Lisu a¹na⁵ 'dog' and Qu's Gyarong (Zhuókèjī k'ɛna 'dog'.

phu ¹ phu ¹	'grandfather'	phu ¹
ne ² ne ²	'buffalo'	bəne ²
θe ² θe ²	'fruit'	θe ²
do ¹ do ¹	'upper garment'	hi ² do ¹
kɔ ² kɔ ²	'shoes'	kha ² təkɔ ²
na ¹ na ¹	'sit'	ʃe ¹ na ¹
ɬi ² kwa ¹ kwa ²	'frog'	ɬi ² kwa ¹ kwa ² is the adult word for 'bull-frog', but is used by infants for frogs in general. The adult word for frogs in general is ɬi ² .

To this series one may also add ba¹ba¹pho² 'bird', which is to be compared with the adult form cu²ba¹pho².

(b) Directly derived, by reduplication of the corresponding adult term, or of one syllable of the corresponding adult term, but with tonal differentiation or (in one instance) by change of tone.

e.g.		Corresponding adult term
mo ¹ mo ²	'mother'	mo ²
pa ¹ pa ²	'father'	pa ²
di ¹ di ²	'uncle'	ki ²
to ¹ to ²	'aunt'	to ²
ko ¹ ko ²	'rice-cake'	təkɔ ²

(c) Indirectly derived from the corresponding adult term. Under this heading one may tentatively include ye¹ye¹ 'elder sibling', which is perhaps to be related to the adult form we¹.⁷

(d) Of onomatopoetic origin. Under this head we may probably include the following:-

ga ¹ ga ¹	'duck'	Contrast adult ɽ ¹ bɛ ¹ (from Burmese), or tho ² da ³ (where tho ² = 'fowl, bird').
gɔ ³ gɔ ¹ ɽ ²	'cock'	Contrast adult ʃɛ ¹ phe ¹
bɛ ¹ he ¹ he ¹	'goat'	Contrast adult pɛ ² kɽ ¹ le ² , but compare bɛ ¹ , the word for the cry of a goat.

⁷ This alternation fits perfectly with the Proto-Lolo-Burmese reconstruction *ʔwyik 'elder sibling'.

ku¹ri²(pho²) 'puppy' is clearly derived from the word ku¹ri², which, usually accompanied by snapping of the fingers, is used to call puppies. the element pho² in this word and in ba¹ba¹pho², ʔyu¹ʔyu²pho², etc. is a very common suffix meaning 'young, offspring'. It is also found in the (otherwise unrelated) adult form for 'puppy', chu²pho² (cp. chu² 'dog').

ʔyu¹ʔyu² 'pig' Contrast adult tho². This form, like the preceding one, is derived from the word used to call the animal in question. ʔyu¹ in adult language is used both to call pigs, and with the meaning 'to call pigs'. ʔyu¹ʔyu²pho² 'piglet' is, of course, merely the baby word for 'pig' with the suffix pho² added. (See under ku¹ri²pho² in preceding paragraph.)

The forms na²na¹o² and na²mɪ¹yo³ are not directly derived from the corresponding adult terms, which are chu² or thwi² and mi¹yəkɔ² respectively, but appear to be of partial onomatopoeic origin. The 'na' in both is perhaps to be related to the na² used in adult language as a rather formal title for women. na²mɪ¹yo³ might thus be translated as 'Madam Miaow'. The o² in na²na¹o² is probably from o², the call used to dogs in adult language, which is also used to mean 'to call a dog', and 'to bark'.

(e) Unrelated to any forms in the adult language, so far as can be discovered in the material to hand.

- e.g. nɛ¹nɛ¹v² 'milk' Contrast adult nu²chi¹ or nɛ¹nɛ²v¹
- v¹v² 'milk; water; sweet' Contrast adult nu²chi¹; chi¹; ʃi¹.
- tɛ¹tɛ²v¹ 'mother's milk; mother's breast' Contrast adult nu²chi¹; nu².
- ma¹mu² 'cooked rice' Contrast adult dɪ¹.
- ma³ma³mo¹ 'moon' Contrast adult lɛ¹.
- kɔ¹kɔ²ɪ¹ 'baby; new-born child' Contrast adult bu³dʒɛ¹pho².
- pɪ¹pɪ¹ 'fish' Contrast adult da³pho³.

The last syllable of the trisyllabic variant pɪ¹pɪ¹pho² is the diminutive suffix already referred to.

It occurs to me that it might one day be well worth while taking a serious professional look at the special language used by and to infants in the Southeast Asian area in general to discover whether any characteristic patterns emerge.