

Discussion note: reply to James A. Matisoff's "A key etymology"

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In *LTBA* 15.1 (1992:139-143) 'A key etymology', James A. Matisoff investigated the etymology of Thai *kuncee*, Malay *kuntji* 'lock ~ key'. After stating that there is no plausible Austronesian etymology for the Malay word, that the source of Thai *kuncee* and Malay *kuntji* is not to be traced to Chinese, and that a reasonable etymology cannot be found in Sanskrit/Pali or in Khmer either (pp. 139-140), he proposed for these two words a Romance origin in the word-family of Lat. *cūnēus* 'wedge', *cūnēāre* 'secure with wedges'. In his view, an extra-Asiatic etymology is indicated by the "'technological' semantic content of these words" (p. 140). According to him, the terms were introduced by the crews of Portuguese ships in the 16th and 17th centuries. The Portuguese word for 'key', however, is *chave*, which obviously will not do as a source for the Malay and Thai words, as Matisoff acknowledges: he offers no solution, but observes (p. 142) that "it would be interesting to find out about the ethnic mix of the crews of Portuguese vessels in the 16th century".

The semantic chasm between the notions of 'wedge' and 'key ~ lock' can be bridged, according to Matisoff, by the consideration that "one common type [of key, L. S.] must have been a long, triangular, wedge-shaped bar or pin, to be inserted into a homologously shaped groove of a lock. *A key is in fact a subtype of WEDGE (...)*" (p. 140. Italics mine).

Matisoff's observation that the "'technological' semantic content of these words" indicates an extra-Asiatic origin is surprising: although, as noted by Needham (1965: 236) "there have not been even the barest beginnings of a history of the locksmith's art in Asia", enough is known to indicate that Chinese locks and keys were in use as early as Zhou times (*ibid.*, p. 238), and that there existed "a singular community of patterns between locks and keys throughout the old world" (*ibid.*, p. 243). In particular, a certain early type of curved keys, called by Needham *anchor keys* or *T-keys*, seems to have been known both in Rome and in Zhou China (*ibid.*, p. 238).

The case for a 16th-17th century Romance origin also seems dubious. Matisoff does not cite one single instance of a Romance word of the family of *cūnēus*, *cūnēāre* having the meaning 'key' or 'lock'. The closest semantically are in Rumanian and in Sardinian, where meanings revolving around 'to close up, lock up, block up' and 'peg on a plough' are found. But these semantic extensions from 'wedge/secure with wedges' to 'lock up, etc.' arose more likely from uses as 'to block up with wedges, as a door' than because keys had the shape of, or were thought of as, wedges.

Furthermore, none of the Romance words cited by Matisoff provides a good phonetic fit with the Malay and Thai forms. Even under the somewhat strained assumption that the crews of Portuguese ships sailing to southeast Asia in the 16th and 17th centuries included a strong Rumanian or Sardinian contingent, we are still left without a specific word that might provide a semantically and phonetically convincing source for the Thai and Malay forms.

And in fact a reasonable etymology can be found in Asia: Skt. *kuñcikā*, Pali *kuñcikā* 'key', Lahnda *kūnjī* 'chain and hook over a staple', South Panjabi *kuñjī* 'key', Oriya *kuñci*, Gujarati *kūcī*, etc. (Turner 1962, #3225). That Malay *kuntji* - together with its Western Austronesian cognates (Toba Batak *hutsi* 'key', Javanese *kunci* 'key') - is an Indic loanword was pointed out by O. Dempwolff (1934:102). The words most likely entered south-east Asia from Java, spreading westward into Sumatra, the Malay peninsula, and ultimately into Thailand, although a separate loan from Indic into Thai is also conceivable.

Pokorny (1948-1959: 589) lists Skt. *kuñcika* 'key' under PIE **keu-k-* 'to bend'. Likewise, Buck (1949:#7.23 and 7.24, paragraph 5) refers the Skt. word to an Indic root **kuñc-* 'make crooked'. Both authors imply curvature was a characteristic of early keys, a view which may derive some support from some of the illustrations produced by Needham (figs. 485a and 489).

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