Karenic as a Branch of Tibeto-Burman: More Evidence from Proto-Karen

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Abstract

According to the provisional STEDT Family Tree, Karenic is a branch of Tibeto-Burman (Matisoff, 2003). Weidert, a Tibeto-Burman specialist, also states quite explicitly in his monograph, *Tibeto-Burman Tonology* (1987), that Karenic is a branch of Tibeto-Burman. To support the above view, 341 Proto-Karen forms reconstructed by the author based on fresh field data (two varieties of Northern Karen, four of Central Karen and four of Southern Karen) were compared with the Proto-Tibeto-Burman roots reconstructed by Benedict (1972) and/or Matisoff (2003). A summary of the findings, 14 important aspects with regard to the retentions and sound changes from Proto-Tibeto-Burman to Proto-Karen, is given.

1. Introduction

Karenic is a distinct cluster of languages (Van Driem, 2001) or a branch of Tibeto-Burman (Matisoff 1991, 2003; Bradley, 1997) of the Sino-Tibetan language family. Karenic languages are spoken in the border area of Thailand and Myanmar, a long strip of land from the north to the south. Some Christian Sgaw Karen have migrated to the Andaman Islands and also to the United States of America, Europe and Australia due to the wars with the Burmese. In Myanmar, there are at least sixteen groups of the Karen: Pa-O, Lahta, Kayan, Bwe, Geko, Geba, Brek, Kayah, Yinbaw, Yintale, Manumanaw, Paku, Sgaw, Wewaw, Zayein and Pwo (Ethnologue, 2009). Only two groups, i.e. Pwo and Sgaw, permanently live in the northern and western areas of Thailand and most of them are Thai citizens. The total Karen population scattered in fifteen provinces is about 500,000. Those who live on the highlands still use their native languages (Pwo and Sgaw) in everyday life. The ones who live or work in towns and cities are unable to speak their own languages very well anymore or have shifted to the languages spoken by the majority of the areas. The Sgaw living in Thailand prefer to be called /pɣa³³ kə³³ ɲɔ³³/ meaning 'human being', not "Kariang", "Karang" nor "Yang" which they think of as having a bad connotation. Pwo people call themselves "Phlong" or "Phlow" meaning 'human being'. A large number of Karen refugees are to be found in many refugee camps situated near the Thailand-Myanmar border area, such as those in the provinces of Tak, Mae Hong Son, Ratchaburi and so on. Besides the Sgaw and

Pwo, four more groups have been recorded: Pa-O, Kayah, Kayan and Kayaw. Most of the Pa-O in Thailand are factory labourers in Central Thailand. The Kayah practise dry-field cultivation in Mae Hong Son province, while the Kayan and Kayaw are part of the tourism business of the North. A rough and vague estimate of the total population of the Karen ethnic groups in Myanmar, Thailand, Europe, America and Australia is between 6-12 million (Manson, 2009).

Due to Manson's contribution, a brief overview of Karen linguistic studies from the past to the present, covering about two centuries (1799-2010), can be made. The older works seem to focus on five aspects: language survey and usage, handbook and primer, vocabulary and comparative vocabulary, dictionary and thesaurus, and grammar book and grammatical sketch. From 1946 onwards, more modern linguistic-orientated papers, research monographs, M.A. theses, Ph.D. dissertations and so forth on various linguistic aspects, i.e. phonetics, phonology, morphology and syntax, discourse analysis, and comparative and historical study have appeared. The research works both published and unpublished on Karen linguistics from 1799-2010 are to be found in the Bibliography of Karen Linguistics by Manson (2010).

The aim of this paper is to contribute more evidence to help support the opinion that Karenic is a branch of Tibeto-Burman.

2. Brief sketch of Proto-Karen phonology

The previous reconstructions of Proto-Karen (PK), Haudricourt (1946, 1953), Jones (1961), Burling (1969), Benedict (1972, 1979, 1983) and so on, have mostly been based on the available documented materials in various forms, e.g. language learning materials, dictionaries, personal field notes and so on. The same materials, more or less, have been used for drawing suitable cognates in modern Karenic languages for the PK reconstructions which have been proposed from 1946 to the present. In the recent studies of PK, e.g. Bennett (1992), Solnit (2001, 2013), Shintani (2003) and Manson (2009, 2011), the analysts' personal field notes have been added. This method is good when the old materials are regarded to be the written record of the conservative pronunciation of the past that is assumed to be closer to the proto-language, provided that the transcription done by untrained field workers and non-native language teachers has been accurate or good enough. On the other hand, we have to accept the fact that the data on pronunciation even though collected by well-trained linguists has undergone various kinds of language variation and change due to language and cultural contact. It is doubtful whether the two types of data are comparable. Being aware of the problems mentioned above, for my reconstruction of the Proto-Karen phonology and lexicon

presented in this paper, I deliberately used only fresh data collected by myself from 2009-2011. However, I skimmed through all the available written materials that I could get hold of before devising a word list consisting of 2,000 items with Thai and English glosses. This word list was used as a guideline for data elicited when interviewing my language consultants during my fieldwork in the North and West of Thailand. The elicited data obtained from ten Karen languages and/or their varieties was transcribed using IPA symbols. The minute and unnecessary phonetic differences were eliminated for the sake of a generalisation of the consonant, vowel and tone systems in each Karenic language variety before searching for cognates. For example, the high tones, mid tones and low tones were specified as 55, 33 and 11, respectively, no matter what the detailed phonetic characteristics of these three tones were. As for the contour tones, the more common ones are the falling tones, i.e. 53 or 31. Only a few of the Karen varieties, for example, the variety of Northern Pwo spoken at Ban Dong Dam in Li district of Lamphun province has a rising tone (35) which is rather uncommon. Therefore, the minimisation of phonetic differences was not difficult to achieve.

Even though Karenic languages have been classified with different criteria by different linguists, in selecting the Karenic languages to be used as the representatives of each branch, I adopted Kauffman's geographically based classification. I do not think that a definite subgrouping can be done with certainty until many more Karenic languages spoken in Myanmar have been carefully studied. In my study, two varieties of Pa-O (Northern Pa-O and Southern Pa-O) were chosen to represent Northern Karen (NK); Kayan, E.Kayah, W.Bwe (Henderson's Blimaw) and Kayaw for Central Karen (CK); two varieties of Sgaw (Northern Sgaw and Southern Sgaw) and two varieties of Pwo (Northern Pwo and Southern Pwo) for Southern Karen (SK). For comparative purposes, only the obvious cognates found in the three major branches (NK, CK, SK) or in, at least, two branches (NK and CK, NK and SK, CK and SK) were used. In following this method, most of the items obtained from my language consultants during the interviews had to be eliminated. The correspondence patterns of the onsets (initial consonants), rhymes (vowels and vowels+final consonants) and tones were analysed, and then, the PK phonology and protoforms (341 items) were reconstructed. The following are the onsets, rhymes and tones in Proto-Karen.

Onsets

Category I (High series):	*Vl. aspirated stops	*ph	*th	*ch	*kh
	*Vl. nasals	*hm(m̥)	*hn(n̥)	*hɲ(ɲ̥)	*hŋ(ŋ̥)
	*Vl. fricatives		*s		*h

	*Vl. approximants	*hw(w̥)	*hl(l̥)		
	*Vl. rhotic	*hr(r̥)			

Category II (Mid series):	*Vl. unaspirated stop	*p	*t	*c	*k	
	*Glottal and glottalised stops	*ʔb(ɓ)	*ʔd(ɗ)			*ʔ
	*Glottalised nasal		*ʔn			
	*Glottalised approximants	*ʔw	*ʔl	*ʔj		

Category III (Low series):	*Vd. Stops	*b*	*d	*ɟ	*g
	*Vd. Nasals	*m	*n	*ɲ	*ŋ
	*Vd. Approximants	*w	*l	*j	
	*Vd. Rhotic		*r		

Consonant clusters

*Cw-	*phw	*thw	*chw	*khw	*sw	*hnw	*hrw		
	*pw	*cw	*kw	*ʔbw	*ʔdw	*ʔnw			
	*mw	*dw	*gw	*ŋw					
*Cl-	*phl	*khl	*sl	*pl	*kl	*ʔbl	*bl	*gl	*ml
*Cr-	*phr	*thr	*chr	*khr	*sr	*pr	*tr	*br	*gr
*Crw-	*khrw								
*Cj	*chj	*pj	*kj	*ŋj	*rj				

It is noticeable that the reconstructed onsets or initials are quite complex with a large number of voiceless sonorants, glottalised sonorants and consonant clusters. This is due to the fact that some of the onsets derive from the reductions of the Proto-Tibeto-Burman (PTB) prefixes, infixes or the preceding part of compounds, in order to become monosyllabic words with tones (Matisoff, 1973), which has been a process of tonal evolution and tonal development in Southeast Asian languages. Having more solid data on Central Karen languages in the future, perhaps, in some cases, consonant clusters could be reduced and replaced by a reconstruction of sesquisyllabic words. The following are some of the examples of the reductions mentioned above:

PTB *g/b/m-la-y > **PK** *bla^B *'arrow'*

PTB *s-hywəy, *s-hwiy > **PK** *swi^B *'blood'*

PTB *b-r-gyat ≍ *b-g-ryat > **PK** *grɔt^D 'eight'

PTB *b-wa > **PK** *ʔbwa^A *'white'*

PTB *b-rey > **PK** *bre^A *'buy'*

PTB *s-hwiy > **PK** *swi^B *'blood'*

Rhymes

Two types of rhyme were reconstructed, i.e. *-V and *-VC; and among *-C are: *-m, *-n, *-ŋ, *-N (unable to identify which of the three nasals), *-j, *-w, (*-p), *-t, *-k, *-ʔ

Based on my own field data and the data drawn from Henderson (1997), 56 rhymes were reconstructed. They can be divided into four types, as follows:

Type I :   *-i   *-e *-ɛ *-ɨ   *-ə   *-a *u *-o *-ɔ

Type II :   *-im *-in *iŋ *-eŋ *-eN *-ɛm *-ɛn *-ɛŋ *-ɛN *-ɨm *ɨn *-ɨŋ *-ɨN
        *-əm *-əŋ *-əN *-am *-aŋ *-aN *-un *-uŋ *-uN *-om *-oŋ *-ɔŋ *-ɔN

Type III :   *-ej   *-ɛj   *-aj   *-aw   *-ow

Type IV :   *-iʔ   *-it   *-ik   *-eʔ   *-ek   *-ɛʔ   *-əʔ   *-aʔ   *-at   *-uʔ   *uk   *-oʔ
        *-ot   *-ok   *-ɔʔ   *-ɔt

Among the 56 PK rhymes listed above, the rhymes having the *a vowel were reconstructed with more confidence due to the neat patterns of correspondences.

Tones

Three tones, i.e. *A, *B and *D were reconstructed. The *A and *B tones occur in non-checked syllables while the *D tone occurs in checked syllables.

The correspondences of the onsets, rhymes as well as the ones of tones in modern Karenic languages can be found in Luangthongkum (2014).

3. Karenic as a PTB branch

It has widely been accepted that Karenic is a branch of Tibeto-Burman. Weidert, a Tibeto-Burman specialist, states this quite explicitly in his monograph Tibeto-Burman tonology (1987). He provides a long list of both the present-day Karen roots and the reconstructed PK ones from many sources and compares them with the cognates, or in some cases lookalike words, found in the other branches of Tibeto-Burman laying emphasis on the TB languages spoken in areas distant from where the Karen live, to avoid cases of contact relationship. About 168 etyma are given in the monograph, the details of which are to be found on pages 334-367 of the monograph.

Haudricourt (1946, translated by Matisoff, ms.) points out numerous similarities between Karen and Burmese lexical items (pp.31-32). These items seem to be items of basic vocabulary which are "the very core of the language" (p.31). The following are the Proto-Karen and Burmese cognates listed in Haudricourt (1946).

Gloss	Proto-Karen	Modern Burmese
'bitter'	*kha'	khâ
'blood'	*swi	θwêi
'day'	*ni	nei'
'die'	*si	khwêi
'dog'	*thwi'	θei
'ear'	*na	nâ
'elephant'	*chaN	hsɪN
'fire'	*hme	mî
'moon'	*hla	la'
'mouth'	*hnoT	hnouʔ
'nose'	*hna	hna
'tail'	*mê'	myî
'ten'	*chi	hsɛ
'three'	*söN	θôuN
'tiger'	*khe	câ
'tooth'	*swa	θwâ
'two'	*hni	hnɪʔ
'whole'	*hlöN	ʔəlôuN

To support the view that Karenic is a branch of Tibeto-Burman, I compared my reconstructed PK roots with the PTB roots reconstructed by Matisoff (2003) and/or Benedict (1972) which can be accessed from the STEDT database. My findings with regard to the retentions and some interesting patterns of sound changes, altogether 14 aspects, from PTB to PK are illustrated below.

(1) *Retention of the PTB low central vowel *a *in PK*

PTB *g/m/b-la-y > PK *ʔbla^B 'arrow'

PTB *g-p^{w}a, *r-p^{w}a, *r-wa > PK *hwa^B 'bamboo'

PTB *ka > PK *kha^B 'bitter'

PTB *s-ka ≍ *m-ka-y > PK *ka^B 'chin, jaw'

PTB *ra > PK *bra^A 'person, people'

PTB *ma-t > PK *ma^B 'lost, disappear'

PTB *r/g-na, *s-na > PK *na^B 'ear'

PTB *tsa-t, *tsa > PK *cha^A 'ill'

PTB *m-twa > PK *tha^A 'handspan'

PTB *r/g-na > PK *hna^B 'listen to'

PTB *pa > PK * pha^A 'male, father'

PTB *s/g-la > PK *ʔla^A 'moon, month'

PTB *tsa > PK *sa^B 'salt'

PTB *b-wa > PK *ʔbwa^A 'white'

PTB *r-gya > PK *g-rja^A 'hundred'   PTB *ŋya > PK *hɲa^B 'flesh, meat'

PTB *pwa, *wa > PK *gwa^A 'husband'

(2) Retention of the PTB final nasals *-m *-n *-ŋ in PK

PTB *d-wam > PK *tham^A 'bear (animal)'   PTB *mi:n > PK *min^A 'name'

PTB *ʔam > PK *ʔam^B 'drink'   PTB *s-min > PK *hmin^A 'ripe, cooked'

PTB *r/s-maŋ > PK *maŋ^B 'dream'   PTB *dzyim > PK *chɨm^A 'salty, sweet'

PTB *r-kaŋ > PK *khaŋ^B 'leg'   PTB *m-nam > PK *(h)nɨm^A 'smell'

PTB *kaŋ > PK *gaŋ^A 'spider'   PTB *r-luŋ > PK *loŋ^B 'stone, rock'

PTB *g-laŋ > PK *hlaŋ^A/B 'hawk, vulture'   PTB *s-toŋ > PK *g-thɔN^A 'thousand'

PTB *m-sin > PK *swɨn^B 'liver'   PTB *g-sum > PK *səm^A 'three'

PTB *s-luŋ > PK *hloŋ^B 'maggot'   PTB *s-ni (:) ŋ > PK *hneŋ^B 'year'

Note: *-N means that the place of articulation of the *final nasal* of the reconstructed form cannot be definitely identified.

(3) PTB *voiced onsets > PK *voiceless or *glottalised onsets

PTB *d-wam > PK *tham 'bear (animal)'   PTB *d-yuk > PK *t-khroʔ^D 'sambha deer'

PTB *dow > PK *tho^B 'bird'   PTB *dzyim > PK *chim^A 'salty, sweet'

PTB *mi > PK *hmɨ^B 'female, woman'   PTB *b-wa > PK *ʔbwa^A 'white'

PTB *mey > PK *hme^B 'fire'   PTB *ga:p > PK *khaʔ^D 'shoot (v.)'

PTB *ba:r > PK *phɔ^A 'flower'   PTB *gwa-n > PK *chwɛŋ^A 'wear

          (shoulder bag)'

PTB *lap > PK *hla^B 'leaf'   PTB *dzo:p > PK *cwiK^D 'suck'

PTB *r-na > PK *hna^B 'listen to'   PTB *g-nis > PK *k-hnej^A 'two'

PTB *r-wa > PK *hwa^B 'bamboo'   PTB *g-laŋ > PK *hlaŋ^A/B 'hawk'

PTB *dwəy > PK *ʔdej^B 'egg'   PTB *d-ləy > PK *klej^B 'crossbow'

Note: *-K means that the place of the articulation of the *final stop* of the reconstructed form cannot be definitely identified.

(4) PTB prefix *s- followed by a stem with *voiced sonorant > PK *voiceless initials

PTB *s-min > PK *hmin^A 'ripe, cooked'   PTB *s-luŋ > PK *hloŋ^B 'maggot'

PTB *s-ley > PK *hli^B 'squirrel'   PTB *s-mwəy > PK *hmej^A 'sleep'

PTB *s-ni(:)ŋ > PK *hneŋ^B 'year'   PTB *s-lay > PK *hlaj^B 'lick'

(5) PTB *voiceless unaspirated stop initials > PK *voiceless aspirated stop initials

PTB *tak > PK *tha^B 'weave (cloth)'   PTB *kroy > PK *khlo^B 'snail'

PTB *r-kaŋ > PK *khaŋ^B 'leg'

PTB *pa > PK *pha^A 'male, father'

PTB *s-kew > PK *khwi^A 'nine'

PTB *d-kruk > PK *khrow^A 'six'

PTB *s-toŋ > PK *g-thɔN^A 'thousand'

PTB *krəw-t > PK *chrow^B 'wash (clothes)'

PTB *pwa:y > PK *phe^A 'bran, chaff'

(6) PTB voiced rhotic *-r > PK *- ∅

PTB *s(y)ar > PK *gra^B 'insect'

PTB *swa:r > PK *chja^B 'sour'

PTB *s-kar > PK *cha^B 'star'

(7) PTB *voiceless alveolar fricative *-s > PK *voiceless alveolar stop *-t

PTB *was > PK *kwat^D 'bee (Apis cerana)'

PTB *rus > PK *khrwit^D 'bone'

PTB *s-nis > PK *ʔnwet^D 'seven'

(8) PTB *voiceless stop finals have remained *voiceless stop or have become glottal stop *-ʔ in PK

PTB *nuk > PK *nok^D 'brain'

PTB *b-r-gyat ⤬ *b-g-ryat > PK *khr/grɔt^D 'eight'

PTB *smik ⤬ *s-myak > PK *mɛʔ^D 'eye, face'

PTB *l-tsyak > PK *thaʔ^D 'iron, needle'

PTB *m-sak > PK *saʔ^D 'itchy'

PTB *k-r-pwat > PK *s-waʔ^D 'land leech'

PTB *ʔap ⤬ *ga:p > PK *khaʔ^D 'shoot (v.)'

PTB *ma:k > PK *maʔ^D 'son-in-law'

PTB *dzo:p > PK *cwiK^D 'suck'

PTB *dyuk > PK *t-khroʔ^D 'sambha deer'

(9) PTB high back vowel *u > PK mid back vowel *o (vowel lowering)

PTB *nuk > PK *nok^D 'brain'

PTB *d-yuk > PK *t-khroʔ^D 'sambha deer'

PTB *ruŋ > PK *noŋ^A 'horn'

PTB *s-luŋ > PK *hloŋ^B 'maggot'

PTB *d-kruk > PK *khrow^A 'six'

PTB *b-ru:l > PK *row^B 'snake'

PTB *r-luŋ > PK *loŋ^B 'stone'

PTB *b-yuw > PK *jow^B 'mouse, rat'

(10) PTB off-gliding rhyme *-iy > PK monophthong *-i

PTB *s-hwiy > PK *swi^B 'blood'

PTB *kwiy > PK *thwi^B 'dog'

PTB *s/g-liy > PK *kli^A 'flea'

PTB *r-miy > PK *rwi^B 'root'

PTB *bwiy > PK *wi^A 'bamboo rat'

(11) PTB off-gliding rhyme *-ey > PK monophthong *-e

PTB *b-rey > PK *bre^A 'buy'

PTB *mey > PK *hme^B 'fire'

PTB *rey > PK *re^B 'rattan'

PTB *d-key > PK *khe^A 'tiger'

PTB *r-ney-t > PK *ne^B 'get, obtain'

(12) PTB off-gliding rhymes *-ay and *-a:y > PK monophthong *-e

PTB *pwa:y > PK *phe^A 'bran, chaff'   PTB *s/m-lay > PK *ble^A 'tongue'

PTB *r-may > PK *me^B 'tail'

(13) PTB off-gliding rhyme *-əy > PK off-gliding rhyme *-ej(ey)

PTB *d-ləy > PK *klej^B 'crossbow'   PTB *b-ləy > PK *lej^A 'grandchild'

PTB *mləy > PK *khlej^A 'boat'   PTB *r/s-mwəy > PK *hmej^A 'lie down, sleep'

PTB *twəy ⪥ *dwəy > PK *ʔdej^B 'egg'   PTB *d-kəy > PK *d-khej^A 'barking deer'

PTB *nəy > PK *nej^A 'sun, day'

(14) PTB *prefix-stem and/or *-infix-stem > PK *CC-

PTB *g/b/m-la-y > PK *bla^B *'arrow'*   PTB *s-hywəy, *s-hwiy > PK *swi^B 'blood'

PTB *b-r-gyat ⪥ *b-g-ryat > PK *grɔt^D 'eight'   PTB *b-wa > PK *ʔbwa^A *'white'*

PTB *b-rey > PK *bre^A *'buy'*   PTB *s-hwiy > PK *swi^B *'blood'*

The following is a summary of the 14 aspects with examples mentioned above: (1) the retention of PTB *a in PK, (2) the retention of PTB *final nasals in PK, (3) the PTB *vd. C- > PK *vl. C- / *glottalised C-, (4) the PTB prefix *s- vd. sonorant > PK *vl. sonorant, (5) the PTB *vl. unaspirated stop > PK *vl. aspirated stop (onset), (6) the PTB *-r > PK *-∅, (7) the PTB *-s > PK *-t, (8) the PTB *final stops have remained or changed to *-ʔ in PK, (9) the PTB *u > PK *o, (10) the PTB *iy > PK *i, (11) the PTB *ey > PK *e, (12) the PTB *ay > PK *e and (13) the PTB *əy > PK *ej. It would be very interesting if we could find cognates and compare them at the proto level, such as Proto-Karen with Proto-Lolo(Yi)-Burmese-Naxi, Proto-Karen with Proto-Nungish-Luish, Proto-Karen with Proto-Baic and so forth. A comparison between Proto-Karen and Old Chinese focusing on the Karen innovations will also be interesting.

4. Discussion

The results of the comparision between Proto-Tibeto-Burman (PTB) and Proto-Karen (PK) cognates as illustrated above incline me to believe that it is correct to classify Karenic as a branch of Tibeto-Burman as stated by Matisoff (2003) and some of the other Tibeto-

Burman specialists. Genetic relationships can become less and less clear because languages are prone to variation and change caused by contact relationships among the languages used in the same areas. The Karen speaking people moved from their homeland to the areas where they now live in Myanmar and Thailand earlier than the other Tibeto-Burman ethnic groups. Moreover, they have been in contact with the Tai and the Mon for many hundred years. Therefore, it is not unusual that their languages should have slowly deviated from those spoken by their ancesters. A large number of Austroasiatic and Tai loanwords can be detected as shown in Luce (1959).

To help clearify our doubts, more information on Central Karen languages spoken in Myanmar is needed. With the official birth of the ASEAN Community in the year 2015, we do hope that academic co-operation and collaboration between specialists of Southeast Asian languages and linguists will be encouraged by the authorities of the ten nations, especially Myanmar and Thailand.

Acknowledgements

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