

Numerals and Classifiers in Modern Karenic Languages and Proto-Karen

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ABSTRACT

A word list of 2,000 items was devised after a brief survey of the Karen languages spoken in Thailand. The data on Pa-O, Kayan-Kayah-Kayaw and Pwo-Sgaw, representing northern Karen (NK), central Karen (CK) and southern Karen (SK), respectively, was collected at many locations by the author between March 2009 and May 2011. A tentative reconstruction of Proto-Karen phonology was made to aid in the reconstruction of Proto-Karen numerals and classifiers. Available documents on the numeral systems of Karenic languages and the other Tibeto-Burman languages were also consulted to support the author's interpretation.

The research results indicate that the numeral systems of NK and SK are decimal while those of CK (except Kayan) are more complex owing to the use of mixed systems, e.g. **so**³³ **swa**⁵⁵ (3x2) 'six' (base-3 system), **lwi**³³ **swa**⁵⁵ (4x2) 'eight' (base-4 system), etc. as in Kayah. Also, there is harmony of the vowel in the word meaning 'one' and the following classifier, e.g. **ta**¹¹ **ba**¹¹ 'a piece of flat object', **to**¹¹ **bo**¹¹ 'a piece of long object', **to**¹¹ **plo**¹¹ 'a lump of..., a ball of...' and so forth. This finding suggests that CK numerals and classifiers cannot be separately studied.

The numeral system of Proto-Karen is decimal. The etyma of PK numerals 'one' to 'ten' including 'hundred' and 'thousand' are given. The use of classifiers reflects their world view, i.e. SHAPE is more important than SIZE.