

Functions of ʔàʔ- (<TB pronominal prefix *ʔa-) in Dong Dam Pwo Karen

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Cognate forms of the morpheme that makes the topic of my presentation are ubiquitous across Tibeto-Burman languages. They typically exhibit a wide array of distinct but related functions. In his *Handbook of Proto-Tibetan Burman* (2003), Matisoff recognizes six “semantic functions” of proto Tibeto-Burman pronominal prefix *ʔa-, considered to be “outgrowths of one and the same proto-element”: 1. with kinship terms, in referential and vocative uses, 2. third person possessive, 3. verbal prefix showing agreement to a third person subject, 4. verb nominalizer, 5. aspectual (i.e. (in)transitivizing/ causativizing), 6. phonological “bulk-provider” with nouns.

Having mapped functions of cognates of TB *ʔa- in Karen languages described in the literature onto Matisoff’s classification, I proceeded on checking the availability of each of these functions in the variety of Pwo Karen spoken in Dong Dam village, Lamphun province (Northern Thailand). Findings are as follows:

- a. similarly to other Karen languages, functions 1. and 5. are not attested;
- b. pronominal functions (functions 2. and 3.) are restricted to the third person possessive use (see below (1)-(2));
- c. although functions 4. and 6. (provisory classified as non-pronominal functions) involve elements from different word classes (“adjectival verbs” and nouns, respectively), I argue that in Dong Dam Pwo Karen these two functions coalesce, since in both cases ʔàʔ- is used to convert conceptually dependent roots into free nouns (see below (3)).

Finally, I discuss whether pronominal and non-pronominal functions should be kept distinct, echoing Solnit’s argument that so is the case in Eastern Kayah Li (Solnit 1997). I argue that discourse-level restrictions on occurrence of ʔàʔ- in functions 4. (ʔàʔ-V) and 6. (ʔàʔ-N) are instrumental in answering this question. Although more naturalistic data are needed to confirm my analysis, occurrences of ʔàʔ-V and ʔàʔ-N seem to be restricted to definite contexts. Since this restriction can easily be explained by the fact that possessive modifiers usually involve a definite NP, I propose that Dong Dam Pwo Karen ʔàʔ- retains its pronominal status throughout its different uses.

- (1) *phái ʔàʔ-chái*
g.mother -shirt
'Grandmother's shirt' (*chái*: Pwo women traditional upper garment)

- (2) *phái ø-ʔeŋ phàʔla ʔa*
g.mother 3-eat betel a.lot
'Grandmother eats (i.e. chews) a lot of betel'

- (3) Speaker A *ʔàʔ-phlī ʔo phàʔlē*
-lid be.at where
Speaker B *ýéýōŋ | càʔ-thái ʔàʔ-séŋ jāuʔ*
broken 1-weave -new ASP
<Pointing at a fish basket>
'A: Where is (its/the) lid?
B: (It's) broken. I have already woven a new one'

References

Matisoff, James A. 2003. *Handbook of Proto-Tibeto-Burman: system and philosophy of Sino-Tibetan reconstruction*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Solnit, David. 1997. *Eastern Kayah Li: grammar, texts, glossary*. Hawai'i: University of Hawai'i Press.