BOOK NOTICE: *THE HISTORICAL PHONOLOGY OF TIBETAN, BURMESE, AND CHINESE* (2019)
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Overview

In this historical linguistic treatise, Hill utilizes comparative linguistic data from Tibetan, Burmese, and Chinese—three related languages with ancient literary traditions—to summarize the historical phonological relationships among these languages with respect to their membership in the Trans-Himalayan (TH hereafter) language family (aka. Sino-Tibetan). With reference to key preceding research, and while acknowledging the periodic lack of "exceptionless phonological patterns", Hill concisely presents an assemblage of reconstructions of the phoneme systems and key sound changes from TH to later stages of TH branches to more recent stages of the languages. Thus, this work can serve as a reference for historical phonological investigation of those languages, TH as a whole, or neighboring contact languages outside the language family.

Structure and Presentation

The book contains four primary chapters: three on the languages in the book title (Tibetan, Burmese, and Chinese, the latter with a focus on Old Chinese), and one on the TH language family. The Table of Contents is provided at the end of this notice. The chapters on Tibetan and Burmese are concisely organized in parallel fashion, while the chapter on Chinese is much more extensive and is divided into many additional subsections. The latter provides much more detail about Old Chinese phonology (based largely on Baxter 1992 and Baxter and Sagart 2014 and with reference to Schuessler). It evaluates key data sources before presenting an overview of reconstructed Old Chinese phonemes and sound changes, proceeding subsection by subsection. The final chapter is organized by the reconstructed phonemes (i.e. initials, vowels, and codas) of TH, with evidence from the other languages of the book. The ability to read Tibetan, Burmese, or Chinese orthography is not necessary to read the book as romanization is consistently provided after all words in their original orthographies.

Content

The focus of the work is on sound changes and reconstructed phonemes based on comparative lexical and phonological data in the respective languages. This is not a cognate study or one that reconstructs etyma, though the book presents ideas that could further such an endeavor. Groupings of key topics are numbered throughout each chapter (e.g. the chapter on Tibetan covers §1 to §45), which facilitates cross-referencing, such as the summary lists of sound changes referring to specific subunits. Hill presents sound changes using terminology familiar to Indo-European historical linguists, such as the terms *Benedict's law* (Proto-Bodish *l^y > Old Tibetan ź in §15), *Nishida's conjecture* (Tibetan *dr-* corresponding to Burmese *khr-* in §215), and so on. The twenty-plus named hypotheses are listed in the Index Legum.

All of the sound changes are exemplified in chapters with data from both modern languages and proto-language forms presented in comparative lists and tables. The examples are further fully listed in the Appendix. This allows readers to make their own assessments of Hill's claims. Hill mentions places where reconstruction is difficult or uncertain, for example, the correspondence between Tibetan /l/ and Chinese *r. Beyond the expected Burmese, Tibetan, and Old Chinese lexical data sets, Hill contextualizes the historical linguistic directions and paths of sound changes with supplemental data from several Burmic and Chinese languages as well as neighboring languages and language groups such as Vietnamese, Tai-Kadai, and Hmong-Mien to address issues especially related to Old Chinese. All supporting comparative lexical data of all the languages in the book is organized by language in the Index Verborum.

Possible Uses

The target audience, primarily historical phonologists of TH, its branches, and their daughter languages, will be able to readily use this summary of previous key works and presentation of key assertions and comparative data as a reference in future studies. Moreover, they will be able to assess and debate the claims as the data is presented clearly and fully (e.g. the 30-page appendix beyond the numerous examples throughout the work). The summaries of previous works and numerous comments on past hypotheses of sound changes offer non-specialists sufficient information to gain familiarity with each language's historical phonological background.

Beyond specialists in this language family, as the work involves multiple languages not only in TH and languages with regional presence in both China and Greater Southeast Asia, this work will undoubtedly be a useful reference tool for comparative linguistics in the region. As much as Hill uses data from Vietic, Tai-Kadai, and Hmong-Mien to clarify Chinese historical reconstructions, the ideas herein can likewise inform historical linguistic work on languages outside TH. The Index Verborum provides convenient lists of, for example, early Chinese loanwords in non-TH languages. Shared regional, typological patterns, such as the reduction or loss of codas (e.g. TH *-r and *-l > Proto-Burmish Ø (§63) and TH *-j, *-l > Old Chinese *-j in (§200)), can also inform reconstructions of non-TH languages as well as potentially aid in identifying the timing of TH language loanwords in other languages.

Overall, the claims and data in the book are highly informative, and due to the clear and complete presentation, they will undoubtedly be utilized as well as tested and possibly challenged in the normal course of such work.

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