

The Sino-Tibetan origins of the Middle Chinese voicing alternation

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January 17, 2018

Abstract: Among the traces of morphology that remain in Middle Chinese, one of the clearest one is the transitivity-related voicing alternation (Chou 1962: 79-80, Downer 1973, Sagart 2003), exemplified by verbs such as 敗 **pæjH** ‘defeat’ and 敗 **bæjH** ‘be defeated’. Consensus does not yet exist on the proto-Trans-Himalayan origins of this alternation (Handel 2012): according to the view of some scholars (for instance Mei 2012) the intransitive voiced verb is the base form, and the transitive one is its causative (with a sibilant causative prefix devoicing the initial), while other scholars (Sagart & Baxter 2012) argue that this alternation is unrelated to the causative prefix, and that the base form is the transitive verb instead.

In this paper, drawing on data from more conservative and morphologically complex languages of the family such as Gyalrongic (in particular Jacques 2015a, Lai 2016, Gong 2017), Jinghpo and Tibetan, I show that the first view is untenable, but that the second view must be slightly revised: the voicing alternation in Old Chinese reflects the merger of the ancient anticausative derivation (which appears as prenasalization in Gyalrongic, and may be related to the autobenefactive/spontaneous prefix, see Jacques 2015b) and the passive ***ŋa-** derivation (Jacques & Chen 2007, Jacques 2012), the latter explaining cases like 現 **yenH** ‘to appear’ which make no sense as anticausatives.

Following on Jacques (2016), this paper suggests that the apparently rudimentary state of Old Chinese morphology is in fact an illusion due to the massive phonological mergers that took place, and obscured the nature of morphological alternations.

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