

Hidden compounds and the importance of diachrony in synchronic description: The case of Khamniungan

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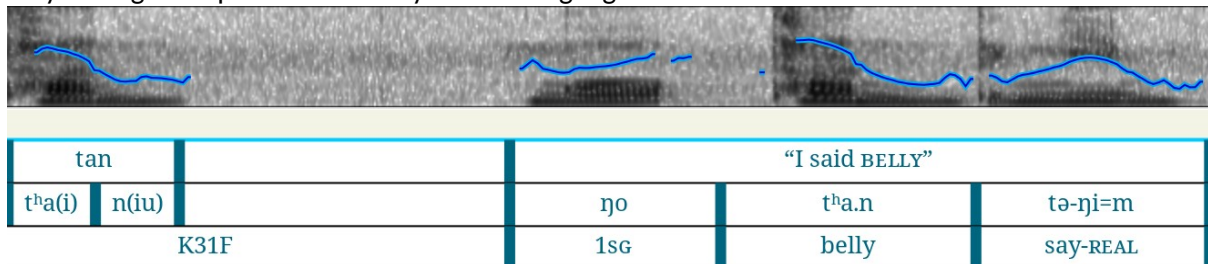
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Khamniungan (khia1236) is a linguistic subgroup within Sino-Tibetan with a number of speakers around 60,000 people (Census of India 2011). Within India, there are conventionally five subgroups within Khamniungan, each corresponding to a different “range”, and each having some characteristic linguistic features. As is typologically typical of Southeast Asian and Sino-Tibetan languages, the lexicon is largely derived from monosyllabic CV/CVC morphemes forming lexemes through compounding. Khamniungan has five phonemic tones, with duration as an important secondary feature.

One variety of Khamniungan, Wolam, shows greater phonological divergence compared to the others, with significant consonant loss and ongoing vowel mergers. It also shows a form of phonetic compounding which is largely opaque to its speakers, who identify such compounds as monomorphemic lexemes. These compounds are the focus of this paper.

In spite of the opacity of these compounds as such, they can be shown to be historically derived from compounds rather than monosyllabic morphemes, in large part to the features of the tone system, which maintains a relatively high functional load for the region.

While language-internal features give a good indication of compounding, for example abrupt changes in F0 and a greater duration (Figure 1), such compounds are sometimes only conclusively identifiable only through comparison to closely related language varieties.



Such a case is given in Table 1, presenting forms found in various Khamniungan varieties as well as Lainong and Ponyiu. In Wolam the term for BELLY is given as /t^han/. However, through comparison to related varieties, it can be seen to derive from *t^hai.niu, where *niu is a common part of compounds.

Wolam	Eastern	Patsho	Lainong	Ponyiu
t ^h an ⁴¹	t ^h ai.niu	t ^h ai ³³	t ^h i.niu	t ^h ɔŋ

Table 1: BELLY in Khamniungan, Lainong and Ponyiu

This paper presents a number of such compounds, with comparative data from other Khamniungan varieties along with closely related languages such as Lainong and Ponyiu spoken in Myanmar. The case will be made for synchronic descriptions to take into account diachronic perspectives. Specific examples are given showing how accurate description of the phonology and tone system are dependent on an understanding only achieved through cross-varietal comparison. Additional examples are found in the forms for gendered clan names, livestock terminology, and celestial events and bodies, all basic and common terms for which accurate tonal and phonemic transcription are important.

References

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