

Word family: Inherited or created?

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It has long been recognised that many languages from distinct branches of the Trans-Himalayan (formerly Tibeto-Burman) language family possess verb couplets, in which an intransitive verb with a voiced onset alternates with a transitive verb with a voiceless onset (Jacques 2021; Bialek 2021). Despite the fact that for none of these languages a productive process could be identified, by which one stem could be shown to have derived from the other, there can be no doubt that the two members of a couplet are historically related to each other.

The lack of identifiable derivational processes raises the question of whether the members of such couplets can synchronically be counted as belonging to one word family? If it is not derivational processes that define word family, then what? This is an interesting question in the light of Old Tibetan data because the language makes use of both stems in its transitive inflections:

Source	Imperfective	Perfective	Passive	Resultative	Meaning
INTR $\check{V}gum \sim$ TR $\check{V}kum$	$y\check{g}ums$	$b\check{k}um$	$d\check{g}um$	$khums$	to kill
INTR $\check{V}gañ \sim$ TR $\check{V}kañ$	$y\check{g}eñs$	$b\check{k}añ$	$d\check{g}añ$	$khon$	to fill

The inherited stems are not only re-used in innovated inflectional paradigms, but themselves serve as roots for further derivatives:

1°	2°	Imperfective	Perfective	Passive	Resultative
TR $\check{V}tu$		$y\check{t}hu$	$b\check{t}us$	$b\check{t}u$	$thus$
INTR $\check{V}du$	\rightarrow INTR $\check{V}ydu$	$y\check{d}u$	$y\check{d}us$		
	\searrow TR $\check{V}sdu$	$s\check{d}ud$	$b\check{s}dus$	$b\check{s}du$	$s\check{d}us$

This has led to a complicated situation with first- (1°) and second-level (2°) verbal derivatives attested side-by-side in the language (Bialek 2020). Can we therefore speak of hierarchical structure of word families? Are the distinct levels of the ‘hierarchy’ synchronically available to the same derivational processes? If not, what are the constraints?

In search for answers to these and related questions, and taking the Old Tibetan data as a starting point, in my presentation I shall problematise the accepted definitions of ‘word family’, by pointing to the significance of phylogenetic evolution as a controlling factor in the language-internal development of cognates.

References

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