

A Study of Malimasa Phonology: Synchronic Analysis and Diachronic Hypothesis

Malimasa is a Tibeto-Burman language spoken in Tacheng Town, Weixi County, Yunnan Province. It has about 2000 speakers whose ancestors are assumed to have migrated from Muli County, Sichuan Province. In *A Brief Introduction to Naxi Language* (He and Jiang 1985), Malimasa was briefly mentioned and classified as a variety of Yongningba dialect of Naxi. This article focuses on Malimasa in three aspects: The first section, based on fieldwork on Malimasa in 2011 and 2012, proposes a phonemic analysis which differs greatly from that in He and Jiang (1985). The second section tries to trace some historical sound change happened in Malimasa with Proto-Naish (Jacques and Michaud 2011) and Proto-Naxi (Li 2013) as references. The third section discusses the contribution that Malimasa offers to the reconstruction of Proto-Naish.

A synchronic analysis of Malimasa phonology reveals its phonological features as follows:

- (1) Malimasa contrasts prenasalized obstruents and voiced obstruents. This contrast is relatively marginal comparing with AS Naxi (Michailovsky and Michaud 2006) and Baoshan Naxi (Li 2012) which have numerous examples for each pair of prenasalized / voiced obstruents.
- (2) Malimasa contrasts apical stops and retroflex stops. Minimal pairs can be found only before the vowel /o/.
- (3) Malimasa has 9 nasalized finals whose distributions are relatively restricted, usually after velar initials, except in some loan words.
- (4) Malimasa has a diphthong [ei] that should be analyzed as a distinct final, which is rare in other Naish languages.
- (5) Malimasa has a word-tone system instead of a syllable-tone system. Both monosyllabic words and multisyllabic words have the same four tonal classes. There are also tone sandhi when monosyllabic words combine to form phrases.

Some diachronical sound change happened in Malimasa can be deduced:

- (1) Prenasalized obstruents in Malimasa are remnants of the change *NC > C. There is also an ongoing change NC > N affecting prenasalized obstruents survived from *NC > C change.
- (2) The diphthong [ei] is newly emerged.

(3) Like Lijiang Naxi, Malimasa has a retroflex vowel [ɤ̣]. However, [ɤ̣] in Malimasa is evolved from high, back vowels in the proto-language after retroflex initials. Therefore, the distribution of [ɤ̣] in Malimasa is totally different from that in Lijiang.

The Malimasa data make an important contribution to reconstruction of Proto-Naish in the following aspects:

(1) Malimasa provides us further evidence for the initial cluster *Kr- as Jacques and Michaud (2011) have proposed. For example, “gallbladder” is [tɕi52], and “foot” is [tɕhi21].

(2) Malimasa data support two more initial clusters: *Cd- and *Cl-. Examples for the former are [lɤ52] “to get” (cf. Lijiang[du33], Yongning[ɖu33]), and [o21] “to see” (cf. Lijiang [do21], Yongning [do13]). Examples for the latter are [xe52] “trousers” (cf. Lijiang[le33], Yongning[ɕi11]), and [xø21] “the distance from the fingertip of one hand to another when spreading two arms” (cf. Lijiang[ly21], Yongning[ɕi13]).

(3) Malimasa has sporadic initial alternations distinguishing verbs and nouns from same roots, suggesting a suffix changing nouns to verbs in the proto-language. Examples are: [ba45] “flower”/[wa52] “to blossom”, [ba24] “broom”/[wa24] “to sweep”, and [zo21] “skin”/[ɕɤ24] “to skin”.

[word count: 496]

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