Toward a linguistic ethnography of the Wa people

— An ethnolinguistic analysis of the terminology for certain domestic animals —

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1 Introduction

The majority of the Wa people, who are Mon-Khmer speakers living in the south-western part of the Yunnan province of China, the eastern Shan state of Burma, and Northern Thailand (see Figure 1), did not possess a writing tradition until the 19th century (Yamada 2009, 2014).

Whereas there do exist some fragmentary reports recorded by surrounding polities, such as the Chinese dynasties, the Tai Basin Polities, and Christian Missionaries, the entire culture and society of the Wa people are difficult to discern from such historical materials. In such cases, language is an attractive data source by which to study the culture of a people lacking a writing tradition. We can also hope to obtain useful information about their history and cultural contact among various groups by comparing the structure and combinations of words in certain semantic fields.

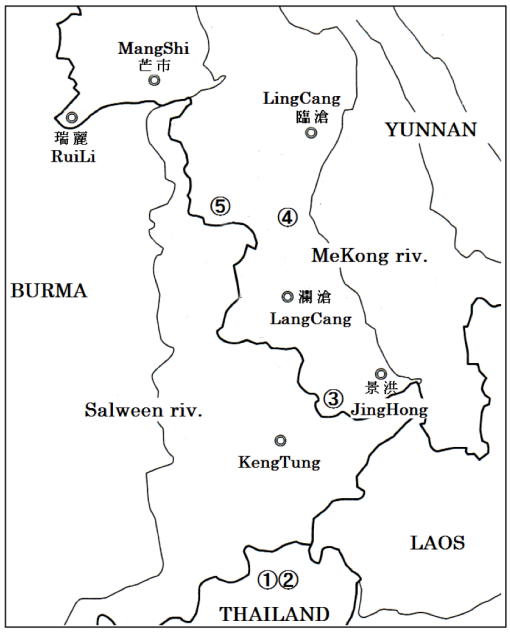

Figure 1: Distribution of the Wa people

The aim of this paper is to focus on the language of the Wa people in this manner, illustrating how this method may be applied. The paper hereby demonstrates how an ethnolinguistic analysis of the terms for certain animals might reflect the relevant speakers' conceptualization of those animals[1].

According to Akishinonomiya (2000), the red jungle fowl was possibly domesticated by people living in mainland South-East Asia. Historical and ethnological materials recorded by Chinese scholars show that the culture of the Wa people paid close attention to domestic animals, especially the chicken (Yamada 2007). In this paper, the concept of domestic animals will be analyzed based on linguistic data collected during field research from the following two perspectives:

[1]This work was partly supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Numbers JP17200015, JP15H05154, JP16K16828.

(1) an ethnolinguistic analysis in the case of the Wa people

(2) a comparative analysis among ethnic groups of Northern Thailand

2 About the Wa people

In this paper, the term 'Wa' is used as a trans-ethnic term to include the Wa nationality and the Bulang nationality of China[2] . Linguistically, it is roughly equivalent to the speakers of Waic in the Palaungic branch of the Mon-Khmer language family (see Figure 2).

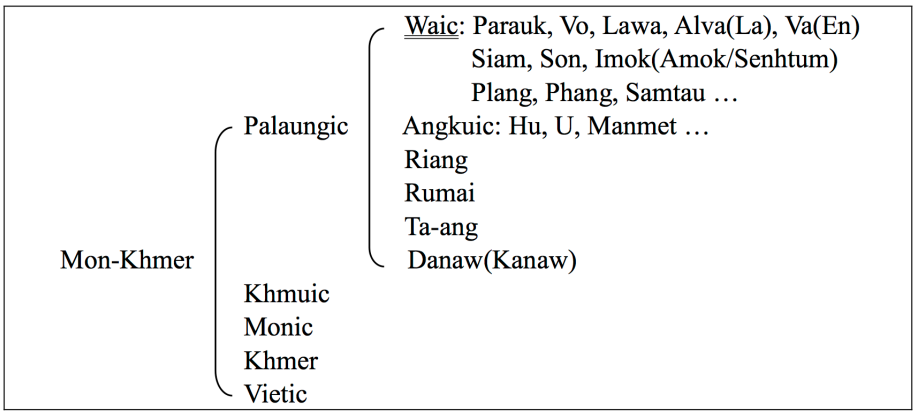

Figure2: Mon-Khmer language family

3 Analysis of the Wa terminology for certain domestic animals

As mentioned above, the data presented here were collected during field research. Basic information about the data is given in Table 1[3], and the research area is that covered by the map in Figure 1. In the sub-sections to follow, the terminology for certain domestic animals is analyzed in terms of gender distinctions, the domestic vs. wild dichotomy, and resource control[4].

3.1 Gender opposition (1): Forms indicating male animals

The forms indicating male animals reflect species of animals either preceded or followed by an element indicating 'male', as in Table 2, in which the elements indicating maleness are shown in bold.

The data in Table 2 can be summarized in terms of two points:

(1) The terminology for 'chicken' and other animals is not equivalent in the given languages. The Parauk form indicating 'rooster' (*sime?*) is also used for human beings, and other languages of the Wa people have special forms for 'rooster'.

[2]On the other hand, the term Wa can be used to refer only to the Wa nationality in a narrow sense.

[3]Phonological transcription is used; tonal contrast is indicated in a broad sense by numbering and underlining of syllables.

[4]The discussion in this section is partly based on that of Shintani and Yamada (2010).

Table1: Data information

Label	Autonym	Nationality (Country)	Research area (Map reference)
Manpek	*man^{33}pek^{35}*	Lua (Thailand)	Chiangrai province (①)
Kontoi	*kon^{33}toi^{35}*		Chiangrai province (②)
Plang	*plaŋ^{55}*	Bulang (China)	XiShuangBanNa, Yunnan province (③)
Alva	*al^{33}vaʔ^{35}*		ShuangJiang county, Yunnan province (④)
Parauk	par<u>au</u>k	Wa (China)	CangYuan county, Yunnan province (⑤)

Table2: Forms indicating male animals

	rooster	male pig	bull
Manpek	*ʔia^{33}**cok^{12}***	—	—
	—	*lek^{33}**hmiŋ^{35}***	*a^{33}moi^{33}**hmiŋ^{35}***
	—	—	—
Kontoi	*ʔial^{33}**cok** ^{12}*	—	—
	—	—	—
	—	*lek^{33}**hŋan^{35}***	*a^{33}moi^{33}**hŋan** ^{35}*
Plang	*ʔeh^{33}**cuk^{33}***	—	—
	—	*lik^{33}**hmiŋ^{35}***	*kɤ^{33}boi^{33}**hmiŋ^{35}***
	—	—	—
Alva	***khut^{33}**ʔial^{51}*	—	—
	—	—	—
	—	***hŋan^{33}**liak^{11}*	***hŋan^{33}**hmoi^{51}*
Parauk	*ʔia**sim<u>e</u>ʔ***	—	—
	—	*l<u>i</u>k**mhaiŋ***	*mɔ<u>i</u>**mhaiŋ***
	—	*l<u>i</u>k**ŋha***	*mɔ<u>i</u>**ŋha***

(2) Two elements, namely *hmiŋ* / *mhaiŋ* and *hŋan* / *ŋha*, indicate ‘male pig’ and ‘bull’, respectively, in the languages of the Wa people. The former is original to the languages of the Wa people, while the latter is likely to be a borrowed element from the Tai languages (e.g. *ŋaan*^{55}: TaiLue). Parauk, which contains complete contrasts in this regard, uses the latter element to refer to ‘one specialized in mating’.

3.2 Gender opposition (2): Forms indicating female animals

The forms indicating female animals also reflect species of animals either preceded or followed by an element indicating ‘female’, as in Table 3, in which the elements indicating femaleness are shown in bold.

Table3: Forms indicating female animals

	hen	female pig	cow
Manpek	*ʔia*^{12}***kɤŋ*** ^{35}	*lek*^{33}***kɤŋ*** ^{35}	*a*^{33}*moi*^{33}***kɤŋ*** ^{35}
	ʔia^{33}***maʔ***^{12} ***maʔ***^{33}*ʔia*^{35}	*lek*^{33}***maʔ***^{12} ***maʔ***^{33}*lek*^{12}	*a*^{33}*moi*^{33}***maʔ***^{12} ***maʔ***^{33}*a*^{33}*moi*^{341}
Kontoi	—	—	—
	ʔial^{33}***maʔ***^{12} ***maʔ***^{33}*ʔial*^{35}	*lek*^{33}***maʔ***^{12} ***maʔ***^{33}*lek*^{12}	*a*^{33}*moi*^{33}***maʔ***^{12} ***maʔ***^{33}*a*^{33}*moi*^{341}
Plang	—	—	—
	ʔeh^{33}***maʔ***^{33} ***maʔ***^{33}*ʔeh*^{35}	*lik*^{33}***maʔ***^{33} ***maʔ***^{33}*lik*^{33}	*kɤ*^{33}*boi*^{33}***maʔ***^{12} ***maʔ***^{33}*kɤ*^{33}*boi*^{331}
Alva	—	—	—
	— ***nai***^{33}*ʔial*^{51}	— ***nai***^{33}*liak*^{11}	— ***nai***^{33}*hmoi*^{51}
Parauk	*ʔia**sian***	*li**ksian***	*mɔ**isian***
	*ʔia**mɛʔ***	*li**kmɛʔ***	*mɔ**imɛʔ***
	***mɛʔ**ʔia*	***mɛʔ**lik*	***mɛʔ**mɔi*

With regard to the above data, a number of features may be pointed out:

(1) The formation of compounds indicating female animals is equivalent across the given languages.

(2) Manpek and Parauk use the special elements *kɤŋ* and *sian*, respectively, to indicate that an animal has never laid or bred[5]. These elements are probably borrowed elements from the Tai languages (e.g. *xɤŋ*^{35}: TaiLue).

(3) The components *maʔ*^{12}, *maʔ*^{33}, *nai*^{33}, and *mɛʔ* are used to refer to animals which have laid or bred. These elements have solely the meaning of ‘mother’. The forms preceded by *maʔ*^{12}, *maʔ*^{33}, *nai*^{33}, and *mɛʔ* are identical to ‘mother of animals’. Moreover, these forms are used to refer to ‘parent of the animal’.

(4) In contrast to forms for female animals, a form meaning ‘father’ cannot be used to refer to a male animal or a parent of animals. It may be inferred that male animals are named in terms of gender, whereas female animals are named in terms of maternity[6].

[5]Parauk people in Yunnan prefer to use hens of this life stage for divination.

[6]The forms indicating ‘mother’ can be used as classifiers in the Wa languages.

3.3 Domestic vs. wild opposition

All the languages of the Wa people surveyed here indicate a distinction between domestic and wild animals. Parauk employs the typical contrast shown by the languages of the Wa people, as presented in Table 4, in which the contrast between domestic and wild is shown in bold.

Table4: Forms indicating domestic vs. wild for certain animals in Parauk

	Domestic	Wild 1	Wild 2
chicken	***ʔia***	***ʔia praiʔ***	—
pig	***lik***	(*lik praiʔ*)	***prɛh***
cattle	*mɔi*	—	
buffalo	*krak*	—	
cat	***miau***	(*miau praiʔ*)	***sua***

The following features may be pointed out with regard to this data on the domestic vs. wild dichotomy:

(1) The contrast between domestic and wild for chickens differs from that for pigs and cats. There is no form to refer to 'wild cattle' or 'wild buffalo' in Parauk.

(2) There are two forms referring to 'wild boar' and 'wild cat'. However, the first form, [animal + *praiʔ* (forest)], does not yield real compounds, as it may be separated by other elements, such as *mɛʔ* or siaŋ (as in *ʔia mɛʔ* + *praiʔ* 'hen in the forest' or *ʔia siaŋ* + *praiʔ* 'hen in the forest'). Thus, the Wild 1 forms for pig and cat in Table 4 probably indicate 'one in the forest' or even 'stray one'[7].

(3) The form for wild fowl is not clearly distinguished. Wild 1 forms, which consist of [animal + *praiʔ* (forest)], have a broader meaning, ranging from 'one in the forest' to 'jungle fowl.'

(4) The distance between the terms for a domestic chicken and a jungle fowl is smaller than that between the terms for a pig and a cat.

3.4 Resource control

People specializing in animal neutering in order to control the numbers of animals as resources have been observed in the communities of both the Wa and TaiLue people. Table 5 presents the forms meaning 'to be neutered' and the possibility of neutering in relation to species and gender.

cf. *ʔia tiʔ mu* (chicken, one, CLASSIFIER) 'one chicken'
ʔia tiʔ mɛʔ (chicken, one, CLASSIFIER) 'one mother chicken with children'

[7]Parauk has another form for Wild 1, namely *ʔia tiak*, which also indicates 'one in the forest'.

Table5: Forms indicating neutering in relation to species and gender

		chickens		pigs		cattle	
		♂	♀	♂	♀	♂	♀
TaiLue		*tɔn*^{55}	—	*tɔn*^{55}	*tɔn*^{55}	*tɔn*^{55}	—
Manpek		*tɔn*^{341}	—	*tɔn*^{341}	*tɔn*^{341}	*tɔn*^{341}	—
Kontoi		*tɔn*^{341}	—	*tɔn*^{341}	*tɔn*^{341}	*tɔn*^{341}	?
Plang	lowlands	*tɔn*^{35}	—	*tɔn*^{35}	*tɔn*^{35}	*tɔn*^{35}	—
	highlands	*sɛh*^{35}	—	*sɛh*^{35}	*sɛh*^{35}	*sɛh*^{35}	?
Alva		*chɛ*^{51}	—	*chɛ*^{51}	*chɛ*^{51}	*chɛ*^{51}	—
Parauk		*sɛh*	—	*sɛh*	*sɛh*	*sɛh*	—

From the above data, two features emerge:

(1) There are two forms meaning ‘to neuter’: *tɔn* and *sɛh/chɛ*. The former is evidently borrowed from the Tai languages. The latter is probably an original form. The boundary between the two forms appears to be in XiShuangBanNa, Yunnan, where the TaiLue culture is dominant in the lowlands.
(2) Apart from the Plang languages, which use the Tai language form for ‘to neuter’, we can also recognize that the system to refer to neutering in the languages of the Wa people in Yunnan coincides with that of TaiLue language.

3.5 Summary

This sub-section summarizes the findings of the above analysis of the forms referring to certain domestic animals in the terminology of the Wa people in terms of gender, the domestic vs. wild opposition, and neutering. The main findings of this study are as follows:

Gender: The terminology for ‘rooster’ (male chicken) is not equivalent to that for other animals. Two elements indicating ‘maleness’ were found for pigs and cattle. One is likely to be a loan word from the Tai languages. On the other hand, the composition of compounds indicating ‘hen’ (female chicken) is equivalent to that of compounds indicating ‘female pig’ and ‘cow’ (female cattle). Two elements were found indicating ‘female’ in Manpek and Parauk. One is also likely to be a loan word from the Tai languages, and the other has the sole meaning of ‘mother’. In comparison with forms for female animals, the form meaning ‘father’ cannot be used to refer to male animals. It may be inferred that male animals are named in terms of gender, whereas female animals are named in terms of maternity.

Domestic vs. wild: The contrast between domestic and wild for chickens differs from that for pigs and cats. The forms indicating ‘wild boar’ and ‘wild cat’ are simple words, while the forms indicating ‘wild fowl’ are not, probably merely indicating ‘one in the forest’ or even ‘stray one’. As a whole, the distance between the terms for domestic and wild fowl is less than that between the terms for pigs and cats.

Neutering: A form meaning ‘to be neutered’ was observed in Plang in Thailand. This form is evidently a loan word from the Tai languages. However, this does not mean

that the Wa people borrowed the skill of neutering, as there is an original form meaning ‘to be neutered’ in the Wa languages in Yunnan.

4 Comparative analysis

In this section, the case of Plang is compared to that of the languages spoken by other hill-tribes living in research area ① (see Figure 1), namely Akha, Lahu, and Lisu. These belong to the Tibeto-Burman language family spoken in China and Thailand.

4.1 Domestic vs. wild opposition

Table 6 shows a comparison between terms for domestic and wild chickens and pigs in Akha, Lahu, Lisu, Plang, and Thai (with numbers and H/M/L showing tonal contrasts).

Table6: Forms indicating domestic vs. wild animals

	chicken	wild fowl	pig	wild boar
Akha	*ja^{M}ci^{H}*	*ja^{M}ɲi^{L}*	*a^{L}ja^{L} / a^{L}za^{L}*	*ja^{L}phe^{L}*
Lahu	*ɣaʔ^{54}*	*hɛʔ^{45}-ɣaʔ^{54}* [wild - chicken]	*vaʔ^{21}*	*hɛʔ^{45}-vaʔ^{21}* [wild - pig]
Lisu	*a^{55}ja^{55}/ a^{55}ɣa^{55}*	*a^{55}ja^{55}-ko^{55} / a^{55}ɣa^{55}-ko^{55}* [chicken - wild]	*a^{55}v543^{21}*	*a^{55}vɛ^{21}-ti^{55}* [chicken - ?]
Plang	*ʔia^{35}*	*ʔia^{33}-phreʔ^{12}* [chicken - wild]	*lek^{12}*	*phrah^{55}*
Thai	*kai^{11}*	*kai^{11}-paa^{11}* [chicken - wild]	*muu^{35}*	*muu^{35}-paa^{11}* [pig - wild]

In addition to each word form, let us focus on a means of categorization. First, Akha, Lahu, and Lisu all belong to the Tibeto-Burman language family, but have different ways of categorizing domestic and wild animals. Lahu has a balanced vocabulary system, as does Thai, in which wild fowl and wild boar are denoted by *hɛʔ^{45}*, meaning ‘wild’. In Lisu and Plang, in contrast, which share the same categorization, the terms for wild fowl and wild boar are not formed in an equivalent manner. Akha is the most complex case, in that the forms for chicken vs. wild fowl and pig vs. wild boar cannot be analyzed further.

4.2 Rooster, male pig, and bull

Table 7, in which the elements indicating maleness are highlighted grey, shows a comparison of the terms for rooster, male pig, and bull in Lahu, Lisu, and Plang.

These languages have two different forms indicating maleness. In Lahu and Plang, the forms for male pig and bull are categorized as a group that differs from the form for rooster. Furthermore, in Lisu, rooster and bull fall into the same group, in contrast to male pig.

Table7: Forms indicating rooster, male pig, and bull

	rooster	male pig	bull
Lahu	ɣaʔ^{54}-ɔ^{21}fu^{33}qa^{33} [rooster - male1]	vaʔ^{21}-**ɔ^{21}pa^{11}** [pig - male2]	ɲu^{54}-**ɔ^{21}pa^{11}** [bull - male2]
Lisu	a^{55}ja^{55}-**pha^{21}** [rooster - male1]	a^{55}vɛ^{21}-pa^{55} [pig - male2]	a^{55}ɲi ^{21}-**pha^{21}** [bull - male1]
Plang	ʔia^{33}-cok^{12} [rooster - male1]	lek^{33}-**hmiŋ^{35}** [pig - male2]	a.moi^{33}-**hmiŋ^{35}** [bull - male2]

4.3 Developmental stages of hens

Table 8 shows about the terms denoting the developmental stages of hens in Lahu, Lisu, and Plang.

Table8: The developmental stages of hens

	hen	hen that has laid	hen that has not laid
Lahu	ɣaʔ^{54}ɔ^{21}ma^{33}qu^{33}	ɣaʔ^{54}ma^{33}pə^{11}	ɣaʔ^{54}ma^{33}ha^{45}
Lisu	a^{55}ja^{55}ma^{33}		a^{55}ja^{55}ma^{33}lø^{33}
Plang	ʔia^{33}maʔ^{12}		ʔia^{33}kɤn^{35}

Hens are categorized based on their development stage. The composition of the word forms differs, but it is common to categorize hens on the basis of their egg-laying.

4.4 Verbs for egg-laying and giving birth

Table 9 shows the verbs for ‘to lay eggs’ and ‘to give birth’ in comparison to the noun ‘egg’ in Lahu, Lisu, and Plang. The forms indicating ‘egg’ are highlighted grey.

Table9: Verbs meaning ‘to lay eggs’ and ‘to give birth’

	egg	lay eggs	give birth
Lahu	ɣaʔ^{54} biu^{33}	**u^{33}ve^{33}**	pɔ^{33}ve^{33}
Lisu	ji^{55}**fu^{33}**/ a^{55}ja^{55}**fu^{33}**	**fu^{33}**	xo^{21}
Plang	**kə.tɔm^{35}**	**kə.tɔm^{35}**	kət^{35}

Two features are clear from the data in Table 9. First, all three languages distinguish between ‘to lay eggs’ and ‘to give birth’. Second, all verbs referring to egg laying are related to ‘egg’.

5 Conclusion

No language can exist without speakers. It is quite natural that a language reflects the social and cultural background of its speakers. We may therefore infer the way in which a certain community understands a natural or social phenomenon by analyzing the relevant language. A language, which cannot be intentionally fabricated, can encode an indivisible semantic field through the combination of meaningful elements. On this basis, one can hope to obtain useful information on the history or cultural contacts of given communities by comparing their languages. This method may be especially useful in cases of communities or cultures lacking a writing tradition. This paper demonstrates how an ethnolinguistic analysis of the terms for certain animals might reflect the relevant speakers' conceptualization of those animals. The present analysis of terms for various animals showed that indications of both gender distinctions and the domestic vs. wild dichotomy differ from one language to another and from one animal to another. The following conclusions may be drawn in this regard:

(1) Such differences may reflect different ways of thinking among speakers of the relevant languages

(2) Such differences may simultaneously reflect the language contact made by each group of speakers during past migrations

In terms of limitations of the present study, it should be noted that the analysis offered above was based on limited data and the work remains ongoing. Field research should be continued to increase the data set in terms of both quality and quantity.

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Summary

Language is an attractive data source by which to study the culture of a people lacking a writing tradition. We can also hope to obtain useful information about their history and cultural contact among various groups by comparing the structure and combinations of words in certain semantic fields. This paper demonstrates how an ethnolinguistic analysis of the terms for certain animals might reflect the relevant speakers' conceptualization of those animals from the following two perspectives: (1) An ethnolinguistic analysis in the case of the Wa people. (2) A comparative analysis among ethnic groups of Northern Thailand. The present analysis of terms for various animals showed that indications of both gender distinctions and the domestic vs. wild dichotomy differ from one language to another and from one animal to another. The following conclusions may be drawn in this regard: Such differences may reflect different ways of thinking among speakers of the relevant languages, and also may simultaneously reflect the language contact made by each group of speakers during past migrations.