Understanding the historical development of a language by comparing it with related languages and dialects [1]

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Abstract: This paper discusses the use of comparative data when describing a particular language. That is, even though we might be describing one variety, we can gain insights into the development of that variety from comparisons with related varieties. The examples presented are from the Rawang and Dulong languages, two closely related Tibeto-Burman languages in Myanmar and China respectively. We see that comparison with Dulong data can help us to understand the development of the applicative benefactive in Rawang, and comparison with Rawang can help us understand the development of the verbal first person plural long vowels and nominal agentive marking long vowels in Dulong.

Keywords: Rawang; Dulong; vowel length; applicatives; benefactive construction; Tibeto-Burman

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[2] Pagination, footnote numbering, and abbreviations have been modified from the original. A list of abbreviations is given at the end. [-NS]

Related languages are languages from the same source language, or in other words, two extant related languages several thousand years ago were the same language, but part of the language's ethnic group later split off and moved to another place, and so the speakers were dispersed into two or more places. As language is constantly changing, and so even though the language they originally spoke was the same, over time, the language spoken in the different places went through different developments, and developed into two or more different dialects or independent languages. Because they come from the same origin, we can analyze and compare related languages to reconstruct the "mother" (proto-language) of the languages and also understand the development of the respective dialects or languages.

This article takes the Rawang language of Kachin State, Myanmar, as an example, comparing it with related languages to understand the development of Rawang itself. Rawang is a member of the Tibeto-Burman language family, with a close genetic relationship to the Dulong language of Yunnan Province, China. In certain aspects of phonology and grammar, Dulong is more conservative than Rawang; this means that in some respects, from the time of the proto-language until now, Dulong has undergone fewer changes than Rawang, and because of this we can use comparison with Dulong to help us understand Rawang's internal history and development. Here we will discuss the origin of the benefactive construction and the non-past tense marker in Rawang. In other respects, Rawang is more conservative than Dulong, so we will also use comparison with Rawang to help us understand Dulong's internal history and development. Here we will discuss the origin of vowel length in Dulong.

1. The Rawang benefactive construction

Rawang has a kind of benefactive construction, in which the suffix -*ā* appears at the end of the verb in the clause, and the clause includes an added beneficiary argument.[1] Please see examples (1) and (2):

(1) *pʰaʔkʰá   əl   nìmū, pʰaʔkʰá   dɔ̄-ā-ɔ̀.*
     tea   exist if   tea   ladle-BEN-TR.NPST
      'If there is tea, then ladle them out some tea.' (Courage: 29)[2]

(2) *əsə̀ŋ   kʰà   ɕún-ā-ò   nìgū,*
     person speech speak-BEN-TR.NPST   although

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[1] In Rawang, transitive and intransitive verbs are very clearly distinguished, so we can conclude that this benefactive construction can increase valency, in other words, intransitive verbs change into transitive verbs, and two-argument transitive verbs become three-argument transitive verbs. Because the added argument is a direct argument, and is a non-agent argument, this structure is an applicative construction; cf. LaPolla 2000a.

[2] In this article, all the data for Rawang is from the Mvtwang dialect, taken from lengthy, naturally-occurring texts. This is why each example sentence is cited with the name of the text and a line number or published page number.

tiʔ-gǔú=sə̀ŋ   wá-ɕì   nù
one-CLF=LOC   do-R/M   PS
'Although you can speak for others, don't show favoritism.' (Courage: 79-80)

When describing a language, we want to explain the origins of each construction as much as possible, but in researching the origin of the benefactive construction in Rawang, if we only look at data from Rawang, we won't find the historical origin of this construction and the suffix *-ā*.

However, if we look at data from the northern Dulongjiang Dulong dialect, we will discover that this dialect also has a kind of benefactive construction, yet its form is different from that of Rawang: the main marker in the construction is not the suffix *-ā*, but rather the independent word *ɔ̄*:[1]

(3) *ə̌gɔ̀   tɛ̌   àŋ   ɕūŋ   rī   **ɔ̄-ŋ***
     1SG   AGT   3SG   wood   carry   **BEN**-1SG
     I carry wood for him. (LaPolla 2003a:678)

(4) *àŋ   gwā=sā   sə̌-təī   **ɔ̄***
     3SG   wear=NMLZ   CAUS-big   **BEN**
     '(S/he) makes it (the clothes) bigger for him/her to wear.' (lit. 'makes it big for his/her wearing') (LaPolla 2003a:678)

The form of the markers in the Rawang and Dulong benefactive constructions are different, and at first glance, there is no apparent correspondence, as if there is no relationship between these two constructions, but by examining data from the central Dulongjiang Dulong dialect, we find that that dialect also has a benefactive construction, which is quite similar to that in the northern dialect, with the only difference being in the form of the marker, which in the central dialect is mainly *wa* :

(5) *ɹoʔ   nə̌-dʑɔ̄l   **wā-ŋ***
     clothes   NF[2]-wash   **BEN**-1SG
     'He washes clothes for me.'

It is key that under some circumstances, *wā* can become *ɔ̄* (see example (6)), and thus we can determine that the *ɔ̄* in the northern dialect's benefactive construction quite possibly came from *wā*.

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[1] In Dulong, the main verb of a benefactive construction is transitive. In Rawang, both transitive and intransitive verbs can be used.

[2] The so-called "NF" (non-first person agent) marker is used when there is a speech act participant mentioned in the clause but the speaker is not the agent.

(6) ɹoʔ   dzɔ̄l   ɔ̄-ʔ
     clothes wash   **BEN**-3SG
      'He washes clothes for him.'

Moreover, the verb *wā ~ wà* 'make/do' in northern Dulong will also become *ɔ̀* under some circumstances:

(7) ǎjà   tāŋbɔ̄ŋ   ɔ̄ŋɕɛt   tɛ̌   ɕǔ   ɔ̀ː,   ɔ̄ŋtsì   tɛ̌   ɕǔ   ɔ̀ː.
     that corn   grounds INS   also **make:1PL** flour INS   also **make:1PL**
      '(For making wine) we (can) use (roughly) ground corn, or we can use flour.' (LaPolla 2001:4)

From research in typology and grammaticalization, we know that benefactive constructions usually develop out of verbs such as 'give', 'make/do', or 'get', when they are added to a main verb in a serial verb construction. We also know of other Tibeto-Burman languages where benefactive constructions developed out of verbs like 'give', 'make/do', and 'get'. From this we can surmise that *wā* and *ɔ̄* in the Dulong benefactive construction was originally the verb *wā ~ wà* 'make/do', which appeared after the main verb to convey a benefactive meaning, and that afterwards, it slowly grammaticalized into a fixed benefactive construction. Even though *wā* and *ɔ̄* in the benefactive construction are not the main verb, they are still independent words, with the exact same form as the verb 'make/do'. From this, it can be seen that the vestiges of the grammaticalization process are still clear, or in other words, that the level of grammaticalization is not that high, and the time of grammaticalization has not been that long.

After looking at the Dulong data, we now return to look at Rawang. Rawang also has a verb *wà ~ wā* 'make/do', but it does not change into *ɔ̄*, which means the form of the current Rawang benefactive construction marker should be *wā*, if the Rawang and Dulong benefactive constructions have the same or equivalent origins, that is, if they both come from *wà ~ wā* 'make/do'. However, the Rawang data shows that Rawang does not use *wā* as a benefactive construction marker, it only uses the suffix *-ā*. We know that in the course of grammaticalization, the autonomy of a sign will gradually fade away, and its semantic and phonological weight will also gradually diminish, and during that time, we find greater cohesion and fixation in the course of grammaticalization (Lehmann 1985:305-309). From this we can surmise that the benefactive suffix *-ā* in Rawang quite possibly has the same origin as the *wā* and *ɔ̄* in the Dulong benefactive construction: the verb 'make/do' appearing in a serial verb construction, which then slowly developed into a fixed benefactive construction, and at the same time its semantic and phonological weight also gradually began to diminish, and its level of cohesion and fixation also gradually increased, which is why this form gradually changed from *wā* into *ā*, and from an independent word into a suffix. From this, it can be seen that the Dulong and Rawang structures should have the same origin, with the differences being due to the higher degree of grammaticalization in the Rawang benefactive construction.

2. The Rawang non-past tense marker

In Rawang, non-past, non-imperative, non-negative sentences all have the sentence-final clitic *ē*. In example (8), the non-past clitic appears after the copula:

(8) *ā-lɔ̀ŋ   rət   nī   dùŋ   rá-ŋ-à   pʰà   **í-ē***
     this-CLF   because.of   only   come:1SG   CIS-1SG-1/2PST   NMLZ   **be-NPST**
      'It may be the case that I have only come because of this.' (Just Chatting 2:8)

Looking only at Rawang data, it is impossible to tell the origin of the non-past marker. However, from a comparative study of Rawang and Dulong open-syllable words, we know that in open-syllable words, Rawang *e* corresponds to northern Dulong *ɛ*, and Rawang *i* corresponds to northern Dulong *i*, but Rawang *i* does not correspond to northern Dulong *ɛ*. Because of this, we know that the Rawang copula *í* and the northern Dulong copula *ɛ̄* are not cognates, but the Rawang non-past tense marker *ē* and the northern Dulong copula *ɛ̄* are quite possibly cognates (example (9) shows the northern Dulong copula). From research on grammaticalization, we know that copulas sometimes evolve into non-past tense markers (see Bybee, Perkins & Pagliuca 1994), and thus we can surmise that the original copula that Dulong and Rawang had in common has since been grammaticalized into a non-past marker in Rawang.

(9) *bǎnībǎnā ɔ̌dūŋ   dɔ̌,   [kā   guʔ   sɔ̄   gū]CS [dɔ̌gǐ]CC ɛ̄   tɕìwà.*
     livestock   middle   LOC   words   say   know.how   NMLZ   dog   **be**   HS
      'It is said that among the livestock the one that knew how to talk was the dog.' (LaPolla 2001:19)

3. Dulong long vowels

Above, we used Dulong data to help us understand the historical development of Rawang, but by the same token, in some matters we can use Rawang data to help us understand the historical development of Dulong. Here we will use the long vowels in Dulong as an example. Dulong words out of context do not manifest a distinction between long and short vowels, but when they appear in a clause, some vowels become long in order to express certain grammatical categories. For instance, in the northern and central Dulongjiang dialects of Dulong, if a clause has a first person plural participant, the vowel of the verb becomes long (examples are from the northern dialect; cf. Yang Jiangling 2000, LaPolla 2003a):

(10) *ɕùl   bɛ̌   lā   **zā:ŋ.***
      become.cool   LNK.after   only.then   put.in:1PL
      'Only after (the rice) is cool do we put in (the brewer's yeast).' (LaPolla 2001:4)

Moreover, in the central Dulongjiang dialect, one type of agent marking is to lengthen the vowel of the third person singular pronoun or nouns:

(11) *ə̀:ŋ   lǎ-lɔ́:.*
      3SG:A   OPT-search:3SG
      'Let him search.' (Yang Jiangling 2000:40)

The question we are interested in is how to explain the origin of the vowel length marking first person plural participants on the verb, and the agentive on third person pronouns in central Dulong. Agent-marking on first and second person singular pronouns may provide a clue. Agent-marking on first and second person singular pronouns is not done through vowel length, but rather by the suffix -*i* (the original form of the 1SG pronoun is *ŋà*):[1]

(12)　**ŋə̄i**　　ɕŭ　gə̀mtɕè　mə̌-sāŋ.
　　　1SG:AGT　also　well　　NEG-know:1SG
　　　'I don't understand very well either.' (Yuehan talks about house-building: 39)[2]

Next we will look at the situation in Rawang. In Rawang, the agent marking is not nearly as complex as in central Dulong; there is only one kind of marker, the single-vowel clitic =*i* added to the end of a pronoun or noun.[3] If the agentive is marked on a third person singular pronoun or another closed-syllable word, the vowel of that word becomes long (see example (13); the original form of the third person pronoun is *àŋ*). Moreover, when the 1PL clitic =*ì*, the transitive past tense clitic =*à*, or the transitive non-past clitic =*ò* is added to the verb or the tense and aspect particles, which follow the verb, the vowel of the verb or particle is lengthened. It is precisely this addition of a single-vowel clitic to the end of a closed-syllable word in a sentence that affects the intonation rhythm, and makes the vowel of the pronoun, verb, or particle become long:

(13)　ɕìwànə̀ŋ əlat　[**à:ŋ=í**　　nū]　[əsə̀ŋ　wē-gú-ní=sə̀ŋ]
　　　God　　　　　3SG=AGT　TOP　person　that-CLF-DU-LOC
　　　'God let/had those two people…

　　　tʰiʔ-dùŋkʰū　ʃə-zūŋ　　dəzə́r　**yà:ŋ-à.**
　　　one-family　CAUS-create　CAUS　TMyrs[4]-TR.PST
　　　create a family.' (Creation Story §24: lines 6-7)

(14)　*Məgàmrérìí*　　　　*tʰétʰéwā*　　gəzà　**lá:ŋòē.**
　　　məgàm-ré-rì-í　　　*tʰé-tʰé-wā*　gəzà　*lə́ŋ-ò-ē*
　　　rich-person-PL-AGT　much-much-do　very　use-TR.NPST-NPST
　　　'The rich people (compared to others) give more.' (Marriage, line 18)

If we compare this to the situation in central Dulong, we can surmise that Dulong may have also originally had clitics giving rise to long vowels, and then the clitics faded away; after that, the formerly non-phonemic long vowels became the only marker. For example, the Rawang 3rd person pronoun *àŋ*, when the agent-marking clitic =*í* is added, becomes *à:ŋí*; it is possible that

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[1] Aside from these two modes of expression, in central Dulong, agentive marking can be placed after nouns or pronouns in the form of the particle *mǐ*. When *mǐ* is added, the vowel does not become long, so it cannot give us any clues about this phenomenon.

[2] See also the examples in Yang Jiangling 2004.

[3] In northern Dulong, there is also only one type of marking, but the form used is the clitic =*tɕ̌*.

[4] Rawang has four types of past tense: within a few hours, within today, within a few days, and more than a year ago; *yàŋ* is the time marker for more than a year ago.

the original situation in Dulong was similar (even now, first and second person pronouns are marked with the form *-i*), and that later the *-i* faded away, and the long vowel remained. The situation with 1st person plural marking on verbs is the same: on Rawang verbs, the 1PL marker is =*i*, which also lengthens the vowel of the closed syllable word before it, and in Dulong closed-syllable verbs, the 1PL marker is vowel length. It is possible that the original situation in Dulong was the same as in Rawang (even now, the 1PL marking on open-syllable verbs, besides vowel length, is the suffix *-i*), and later, *-i* disappeared, and the long vowels remained (Yang Jiangling 2000).[1]

4. Conclusion

Here we have only cited a few simple examples to illustrate how, when studying a particular language or dialect, even though our aim is to understand the development of that variety and is not specifically to reconstruct the proto-language, sometimes we can also use the historical comparative method to compare that language and related languages or dialects to get a deeper understanding of the language's historical development.

Abbreviations[2]

1/2PST 1st or 2nd person past	LOC locative
1PL first person plural	NEG negative
1SG first person singular	NF non-first person agent (used when there is a speech act participant mentioned in the clause but the speaker is not the agent.)
3SG third person singular	NMLZ nominalizer
AGT agentive	NPST non-past
BEN benefactive	OPT optative mood
CAUS causative	PS predicate sequence (non-final clause)
CIS cislocative, direction toward the center	R/M reflexive/middle voice
CLF classifier	TMyrs time marker for years distant
DU dual	TR.NPST transitive non-past
HS hearsay	TOP topic
INS instrumental	TR.PST transitive past
LNK clause linker	

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[1] The description here is necessarily simplified; please see Yang Jiangling (2000) for a more detailed explanation. Also, languages that are related to Rawang and Dulong have a cognate 1PL marker which is also *-i* (see Yang Jiangling 2000; LaPolla 2000b, 2003b), which is why we can be sure that the form *-i* is relatively ancient.

[2] Abbreviations have been modified from the original, both to translate Chinese terms into English, and to conform as much as possible to the Leipzig Glossing Rules while still maintaining some continuity with LaPolla's previous writings on Rawang and Dulong. [-NS]

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