

Tone Change in Duoxu, Lizu, and Ersu

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Duoxu, Lizu, and Ersu are three closely related Tibeto-Burman (TB) languages. They are spoken in Sichuan, China, and generally held to be a close-knit cluster (Sūn 1983, 2001; Yu 2012; Chirkova 2014). Whereas the close similarity of the three languages is commonly accepted, the genetic position of the Duoxu-Lizu-Ersu cluster within the TB language family is disputed. For instance, Nishida (1973, 1976) sees a close link between Duoxu and Lolo-Burmese (LB) languages, whereas other scholars (e.g. Sūn 2001; Jacques & Michaud 2011; Yu 2012) link these languages to Qiangic and Naish. The differences in these hypotheses are arguably due to the fact that they are based on a selection of languages within the Duoxu-Lizu-Ersu cluster. Systematic comparative work on the three languages was until recently impossible, for the simple reason that synchronic Duoxu data was unavailable.

This paper aims to contribute recently collected first-hand Duoxu data to the ongoing comparative analyses of the three languages. It first presents detailed data on the phonological system of Duoxu, with a special emphasis on its tonal system with four contrastive tones. Taking advantage of solid reconstructions of Proto-Lolo-Burmese (e.g. Matisoff 1972, 2003; Bradley 1979), with which Duoxu shares a number of etyma, the paper then compares Duoxu lexical data to PLB reconstructed vocabulary. It is demonstrated that, on the basis of the newly collected material, regular PLB correspondences for the tones (including an identifiable reflex of *T3), initials, and finals can be worked out. The development of tones in Duoxu is further discussed with reference to the diachronic tonal developments described for a number of LB languages, which, similar to Duoxu, are in close contact with Mandarin Chinese (Yang 2010, 2011; Pelkey 2011). The reduced number of synchronic Duoxu tones is argued to be due to the loss of harsh phonation, leading to the merger *T2 and *TL. Other notable developments in Duoxu include splits in Tones *1 and *2, essentially conditioned by *glottal stop-, *s-, and *C- prefixation.

The second part of the presentation examines the relationship between the tonal systems of Duoxu, Lizu, and Ersu. Assuming that the more complex tone system (Duoxu) is more conservative, it is argued that the reduction of the number of tones in Lizu and Ersu (two tones in each language) is likely due to contact influence of register-tone languages (most importantly, the regional dominant language Tibetan) with a basic opposition between two tones (Low and High).

The presentation concludes with implications of the new findings on our understanding of (1) the history of Duoxu, Lizu, and Ersu, (2) their relationship with the neighboring languages, and (3) the dynamics of sound change in a multi-lingual setting in which Duoxu, Lizu, and Ersu are spoken.

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