Interrogative pronouns in isolating languages

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Foregrounded conclusion

Wh-words show up as part of basic vocabulary on the Swadesh 100-word list (who, what), 200-word list (who, what, when, where, how), and the new Leipzig-Jakarta 100-word list (who, what). But basic ≠ stable (Ratliff & Holst 2005), so care should be used when using these words to build a case for historical relationship.

The instability of Wh-words in languages of the Hmong-Mien language family of Southeast Asia will be used to represent Wh-words in languages of the isolating type more generally.

Observations about Hmong-Mien

1) Variety in interrogative pronouns abounds. Cognates do not line up across languages even for 'who' and 'what', supposedly the two most basic interrogatives.

2) Most interrogatives (with the exception of 'which') are compounds.

3) Compounding is the most common word formation process in these isolating languages. This feature is correlated with the instability of interrogatives because it allows for the frequent formation of new interrogatives on the model of "which + X" (or "what + X"), where X may vary.

Outline of talk

1) Cross-linguistic "correspondences" (or lack thereof), and the limits of reconstruct-ability

2) The source of cross-linguistic instability: variation within individual languages, and the nature of the compounded elements

3) More problems with universal assumptions about interrogatives

4) Interrogatives in other isolating languages

5) Concluding thoughts about the relationship between the notions "basic" and "stable"

Flower

Hmongic		Mienic	
Qo Xiong	pei2	Mien	pjaŋ2
Hmu	paŋ2	Mun	faŋ2
Hmong	pa2	Biao Min	buŋ2
A-Hmø	venʌ	Zao Min	pjaŋ2
Bunu	pen2		
Jiongnai	pen2		
Pa-Hng	pɛ2		
Ho Nte	phun2		

Which

Hmongic		Mienic	
Qo Xiong	tɕi1	Mien	haːi5
Hmu	tei6	Mun	ʔdiː6
Hmong	tɯ6	Biao Min	ha5
A-Hmø	naB tsiB	Zao Min	ba
Bunu	tau6		
Jiongnai	hna3		
Pa-Hng	ti6		
Ho Nte	pa4		

Which

Hmongic		Mienic	
Qo Xiong	tɕi1	Mien	haːi5
Hmu	tei6	Mun	ʔdiː6
Hmong	tɯ6	Biao Min	ha5
A-Hmø	naB tsiB	Zao Min	ba
Bunu	tau6		
Jiongnai	hna3		
Pa-Hng	ti6		
Ho Nte	pa4		

The oldest interrogative

This is the only interrogative that can be reconstructed for Proto-Hmong-Mien (c. 500 BCE):

*du̯eiH 'which'

Attested in Eastern Hmongic, Western Hmongic, Pa Hng, Mun. Could this word have been borrowed? The conservative languages Qo Xiong and Jiongnai do not have it nor do most Mienic languages, so this is possible, although no source has been identified (the Chinese distributive pronoun 孰 'who, which' *shú* < dzyuwk < *[d]uk would give a different tone).

Which

Hmongic		Mienic	
Qo Xiong	tɕi1	Mien	haːi5
Hmu	tei6	Mun	ʔdiː6
Hmong	tɯ6	Biao Min	ha5
A-Hmø	naB tsiB	Zao Min	ba
Bunu	tau6		
Jiongnai	hna3		
Pa-Hng	ti6		
Ho Nte	pa4		

Proto-Mienic 'which': *[hl]ai^C

- similar to 哪 Xiang /lai^{41}/, Gan /lai^{213}/ 'which'(?)

- similar to Proto-Lolo-Burmese *lay 'substance question particle' (Matisoff 2003:488)

Which

Hmongic		Mienic	
Qo Xiong	tɕi1	Mien	haːi5
Hmu	tei6	Mun	ʔdiː6
Hmong	tɯ6	Biao Min	ha5
Hmø	naB tsiB	Zao Min	ba
Bunu	tau6		
Jiongnai	hna3		
Pa-Hng	ti6		
Ho Nte	pa4		

What

Hmongic		Mienic	
Qo Xiong	qɔ1 ŋaŋ1	Mien	haːi5 jiuŋ6
			haːi5 ɲuŋ6
Hmu	qei2 ɕi3	Mun	gin2 thjaːŋ4
Hmong	da1 tʃi5	Biao Min	di5 dəi2
A-Hmø	tsiB tsiB	Zao Min	si ni
Bunu	pu1 ɕi3'		
Jiongnai	laŋ1 ða5		
	nei4 ʐã2		
Pa-Hng	qa1 jɔ7		
Ho Nte	tsha5 na1		
	ha5 na1		

What

Hmongic	Mienic
Qo Xiong qɔ1 ŋaŋ1	Mien haːi5 jiuŋ6 haːi5 ɲuŋ6
Hmu qei2 ɕi3	Mun gin2 thjaːŋ4
Hmong da1 tʃi5	Biao Min di5 dəi2
A-Hmø tsiB tsiB	Zao Min si ni
Bunu pu1 ɕi3'	
Jiongnai laŋ1 ða5 nei4 ʐã2	
Pa-Hng qa1 jɔ7	
Ho Nte tsha5 na1 ha5 na1	

Proto-Hmongic 'what': *tsjɨ^{B}

- similar to Bahnaric and Palaungic
(Mon-Khmer) Sre /chi/ 'it, which', /nchi/
'what, which'; Palaung /se/ 'what'
(Shorto 2006, #46)

What

Hmongic		Mienic	
Qo Xiong	prefix + ? (qɔ1 ŋaŋ1)	Mien	which + kind clf
			which + thing
Hmu	? + what	Mun	? + ?
Hmong	? + what	Biao Min	? + what
A-Hmø	what + what	Zao Min	? + ?
Bunu	prefix + what (pu1 ɕi3')		
Jiongnai	general clf + ?; ? + ?		
Pa-Hng	prefix? + ?		
Ho Nte	? + ?		

Who

Hmongic		Mienic	
Qo Xiong	tɕi3 le1	Mien	haːi5 tau2
Hmu	tɛ4 ɕi3	Mun	ʔa2 baːn1
Hmong	lɛŋ2 tɯ6	Biao Min	--
A-Hmø	ðaɴB tsiB	Zao Min	si ni men
Bunu	ti6 ɕi3'		
Jiongnai	hna5		
Pa-Hng	ti6 lɦɛ2		
Ho Nte (She)	pe1		

Who

Hmongic		Mienic	
Qo Xiong	which + human clf	Mien	which + human clf
Hmu	animate clf + what	Mun	? + ?
Hmong	human clf + which	Biao Min	--
A-Hmø	animate clf + what	Zao Min	what + ?
Bunu	? + what		
Jiongnai	which		
Pa-Hng	which + human clf		
Ho Nte (She)	who		

Where

Hmongic	Mienic
Qo Xiong ta3 ʨi3	Mien haːi5 dau1
Hmu haŋ3 tei6	Mun ʔbo6 ʔdiː6
Hmong qhɔ3 tɯ6	Biao Min --
A-Hmø ʨuA ðuB	Zao Min ba buŋ ba naŋ
Bunu khi3 tau6	
Jiongnai kwa5 θjeu3	
Pa-Hng ti6 ȵa1	
Ho Nte (She) pa4 ti1, pa4 tat8, pa4 hɔ6	

Where

Hmongic		Mienic	
Qo Xiong	? + which	Mien	which + land/ground
Hmu	place + which	Mun	? + which
Hmong	place + which	Biao Min	--
A-Hmø	? + ?	Zao Min	which + ?
Bunu	place + which		
Jiongnai	? + ?		
Pa-Hng	which + ?		
Ho Nte (She)	which + ?		

Variation within individual languages

- White Hmong
  - who
    - $l\varepsilon^2$ tw^6 [person clf + which]
    - tu^7 tw^6 [animate clf + which]
    - tu^7 $da^1tʃi^5$ [animate clf + what]
  - when
    - $thau^8$ tw^6 [time + which]
    - lu^1 cai^2 tw^6 [period of time + which]

Borrowability and stability

1) Borrowability

Possibly borrowed (or lent?): the 3 reconstructable terms PHM 'which', PM 'which', and PH 'what' and the pa/ba forms for 'which' in two HM languages spoken in Guangdong province. Most clearly, Chinese 為 *wèi* in compounds for 'why' (e.g., White Hmong /$\underline{vi}^8$ li^5 ca^7/).

2) Stability

With the qualified exception of 'which', these words are clearly not stable. Due to the fact that the majority are compounds and can be created anew by combining with classifiers (a semi-open class) or prefixes, they do not correspond across the family, and are not uniquely represented by simple forms within individual languages.

Problems in determining equivalency for comparative purposes

1) An interrogative may be equivalent to more than one interrogative in the language of comparison

> Jiongnai, Hm-nai, Pa-hng, Hmø: one interrogative is used for both 'which' and 'who' (see discussion of identity between 'what' and 'who' in Idiatov 2007)

2) An interrogative may be equivalent to more than one type of pronoun in the language of comparison

> In all HM languages, interrogative = indefinite (194 WALS languages indefinite pronouns based on, or identical to, interrogatives: "lack of information")

Other isolating languages with "transparent" interrogative compounds

- Pidgins and creoles
  - "The most striking characteristic of question words in a number of creole languages is their analytical character." (Muysken & Smith 1990:884)
  - E.g. 18th c. Sranan (Bruyn 1993, cited in Cysouw 2004) all [hu- + X] "extreme transparency"
- West African languages
  - Suffixed 'which' in Ewe (-ka) and Fon (-tɛ)
- Sinitic and Southeast Asian languages
  - non-standard varieties of Chinese
  - Kam-Tai

Sinitic

Which   18/18 compounds

      [interrogative particle + general classifier]

What   15/18 compounds

      [what + interrogative particle]

Who   13/18 compounds

      [interrogative particle + general classifier]

Where   14/18 compounds

How   15/18 compounds

–Hànyǔ Fāngyán Cíhuì [Chinese dialect glossary]

Kam-Tai

Which	10/12 compounds
What	10/12 compounds
Who	5/12 compounds (yet at least 4 different roots)
Where	11/12 compounds
How	12/12 compounds

–Languages and Cultures of the Kam-Tai (Zhuang-Dong) Group: A word list

Another basic wordlist

• The 200-word CALMSEA list (Culturally Appropriate Lexicostatistical Model for Southeast Asia, Matisoff 1978) contains no Wh-words.

• Western-type adpositions are also not on the list; the idea of the "grammatical appropriateness" of a word class for comparative study in a particular area is invoked.

• "In any list tailor-made for SEA, polymorphemic words must be handled (and scored) with special care." (136-137)

Basic ≠ Stable

The stability of a particular etymon is independent of its "basic-ness" — the need speakers have to express it. The stability of a particular **content word** is an idiosyncratic characteristic of a family, and as such is very useful in determining genetic relationships.

	[-basic, -stable]	butterfly, joke, thumb
	[-basic, +stable]	silver, 100, liquor, taro
	[+basic, -stable]	mountain, head, give
↳	[+basic, +stable]	flower, die, hair, fire

Basic ≠ Stable

On the other hand, the stability of a particular **function word** can usually be predicted from other characteristics of the language type. In isolating languages—with serial constructions, extensive use of compounding, and relatively transparent one-to-one form/meaning relationships—interrogative pronouns prove to be highly variable and unstable, and thus of little help in determining historical relationship.

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