Selected Aspects of Northern Mao (Bambassi-Diddesa) Phonology

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Northern Mao, also known by the toponyms Bambassi and Diddesa, is one of the least documented Omotic languages (Bender 2000: 180). An Omotic language of the Mao subclass of the Afroasiatic phylum (Bender 1985; 2000; 2003; Hayward 2000), Northern Mao is spoken by an estimated 5,000 speakers (Siebert et al. 1993) living in and around Asosa, Bambassi and Diddesa towns in western Ethiopia (Siebert et al. 1994: 9; Bender 2003). To date, the available Northern Mao data include short wordlists of a few hundred words (Bender 1985, 1990, 2000, 2003; Fleming 1986; Grottanelli 1940; Siebert et al. 1993), a three-page phonological sketch (Wedekind and Wedekind 1993) and a set of morphological paradigms (Bender 2003).

This paper details results of research currently being undertaken in the Bambassi, Diddesa and Asosa areas of Ethiopia. First, the paper provides a complete inventory of the contrastive consonant and vocalic phones. While Wedekind and Wedekind (1993: 11-13) have provided a brief sketch of various aspects of Northern Mao phonology, there is substantial disagreement among scholars as to the inventory of contrastive phones. Wedekind and Wedekind report 23 consonants, while Bender (2000: 182) lists 24 with significant differences. Bender posits a set of voiced plosives, whereas Wedekind and Wedekind suggest these are in an allophonic relationship with the voiceless series. Wedekind and Wedekind report the existence of an alveolar implosive / retroflex, as well as a voiced alveo-palatal affricate and a palatal nasal, all of which Bender notes as lacking in his data. There is a minor discrepancy between the vocalic inventories reported by these scholars as well.

The examination of the consonants includes the class of sibilants in Northern Mao. Hayward (1988: 292) reconstructs no less than nine sibilants for Proto-Omotic in initial position, and suggests that there may have been even more, given the more complex inventory of Gimira-Benchnon. Data from the Mao languages have not been considered in this reconstruction. Of particular interest is the voiced alveo-palatal affricate, not reconstructed for Proto-Omotic because it usually evidences an allophonic relationship synchronically within Omotic, as is the case of ʒ [dʒ] in Koyra (Hayward 1988: 273). In the case of Northern Mao, Wedekind and Wedekind (1993: 11) list the dʒ as a contrastive phone and provide no hint of allophonic relationship with other phones. In addition to an establishment of the inventory of the sibilants in Northern Mao, this paper provides evidence on the extent to which Northern Mao participates in the sibilant harmony phenomenon. Hayward (1988: 275) suggests that sibilant harmony must be reconstructed for Proto-Omotic since it is so widespread throughout the family. It has not been made clear from Wedekind and Wedekind’s very brief phonological description of Northern Mao whether sibilant harmony plays a role in the language or whether Northern Mao will help to shed light on the reconstructable phenomena in Proto-Omotic.

Finally, the paper details the inventory of tonal melodies relative to the syllable shape and number of syllables of wordforms. Wedekind and Wedekind (1993: 12) report the existence of two distinctive pitch levels: High and Low (with an allotonic Mid). Four tonal melodies are reported for two syllable words but discussion is lacking as to tonal melodies on words of more than two syllables. A quick perusal of their Northern Mao wordlist shows a number of three syllable words with additional tonal melodies, though it is not clear what the underlying status of these melodies may be. This paper will detail all the surface and underlying tonal melodies, identify tonal processes and examine the underlying status (or status) of Wedekinds’ allotonic midtone.
References
Bender, M. Lionel. 2003. *Omotic lexicon and phonology*. (Published by author.)