

Morphophonemic writing in Daai Chin

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Daai Chin is a Tibeto-Burman language in the Chin Hills of western Burma, whose neighboring related languages use Roman alphabets.

Daai is largely a monosyllabic language with two tones, vowel length, and fairly complex initial-consonant clusters. It also has a complex system of morphophonemic changes that take place when noun, numeral, or verb compounding takes place (H. So-Hartmann, to appear). These changes include vowel shortening, tone change, resyllabification, assimilation, and consonant loss, as seen in the following example of morphophonemic changes:

ʔim	‘house’	+	ʔsi	‘floor’	---	ʔipsi	‘floor or house’
wè·	‘stay’	+	ʔti·	‘past’	---	wěk.ti·	‘stayed’
lí·	‘arrow’	+	pǒk	‘bundle’	---	lípǒk	‘gun’
pé:t	‘give’	+	ʔti·	‘past’	---	pěk.ti·	‘gave’
ŋnám	‘village’	+	ʔsò:ŋ	‘outside’	---	ŋnápso:ŋ	‘outside the village’

Example of morphophonemic changes

(1981). *Notes on Literacy*, 36.

At first glance, to an outsider, it would seem that such radical phonological changes would demand phonemic spelling. But new writers in Daai appeared to prefer writing the words morphophonemically, that is, they would write the parts of a compound as separate words and in their basic forms. Thus, /ʔi̯psì/ was being written *í·m ʔsi*, and /l i̯p ɔ̯k/ was being written *lí· p ɔ̯k*. And new readers were reading these forms with ease and with the proper changed pronunciation, even though /ʔi̯m/ and /ʔsi·/, and so forth are very normal Daai forms.

Further questioning revealed that sister languages also write morphophonemically. Also, crucially, in slow speech and singing the compounds are pronounced in their basic forms. So, although the morphophonemically changed forms are the norm for ordinary speech, the basic forms reappear in very slow speech. Writing is a slow speech activity, hence, the preference for writing in basic forms.

Tone, though phonemic, is not now being written, because the tone patterns differ widely from dialect to dialect, so tone markings for one dialect would hinder rather than help intelligibility. (In this and other papers, tone is written according to the dialect of the main language helper and writer.)

This picture is not complete, however, as there are some verb classes that defy some of the morphophonemic rules; some that add idiosyncratic rules, and some that do not revert to basic forms even in slow speech. But by taking the slow speech forms as the norm for writing, the forms that do not revert end up being written phonetically, not morphophonemically. So /w ɛ̯k.ti·/ is written *w ɛ̯k ti*, not *w ɛ̯ ʔti*, and /p ɛ̯k.ti·/ is written *p ɛ̯k ti*, not *p ɛ̯:t ʔti*. For an outsider, this of course requires extra memorization, but it is natural for a native speaker, as he is simply writing his very slow speech forms.

Daai Chin also has other departures from a strict phonemic orthography, but they are for practical rather than morphophonemic reasons.

Reference

So-Hartmann, Helga. (To appear.) *Morphophonological changes in Daai Chin*.