

Why nominal roots in proto-Tangkic never have final apical obstruents

Three striking features which characterise the inventory of consonant-final nominal roots in proto-Tangkic (Australian, non-Pama-Nyungan) are: (i) that all cluster-final roots end in a velar; (ii) that for nasal-final roots there are no laminals, yet we find three apical types; while (iii) for obstruent-finals, there are two laminals, yet no apicals. Within a broader project on the origins of the proto-Tangkic nominal system, I focus in this paper on feature (iii) – the absence of apical obstruent-final nominal roots. The essence of the account is that, in pre-proto-Tangkic, original root-final **t* and **t̚* became trilled *r*. By working through the details though, we find that the changes **t > r* and **t̚ > r* cannot have been entirely parallel.

The first hypothesis, then, is that word-medial **/t/* became *r*, via flapped *r*. Since all words were vowel-final, *t* survives only in word-initial position, or in the clusters */lt/* and */nt/*. Additionally, since **r+t* would also have become *r*, there arises a new synchronic rule */r+t/ > [r]* (inferred, for example by comparing *tic-* with *taric-* < *tar+t ic-*). We would also expect that because intervocalic *t* survives word-initially, later formations might reintroduce it to word medial position, but only at morpheme boundaries (e.g. *wa.iatunpu* < *wa.i a + tunpu*).

Evidence for this change of **t > r* is in fact not hard to come by. A good number of otherwise anomalous lexemes in the Tangkic languages turn up with *r* in the place of expected *t*. Moreover, the hypothesis explains a number of other facts too, including (i) why intervocalic *t*'s in the modern Tangkic languages indeed are almost exclusively found at what appear to be morpheme boundaries; (ii) why there are so many *r*-final roots compared to other types (yet no *t-* and *t̚*-finals); (iii) why the surface realisation of underlying */r+t/* might be 'unstable', as it is in modern Kayardild; and (iv) why, when the Tangkic absolutive marker appears, it turns up as *-a* after roots ending in *r*, despite being */-ta/* for all other non-velar-final roots.

The second change I propose is of **t̚ > r*, but in a more restricted, less straightforward manner than **t > r*. This change proceeds through a short series of analogical changes, in which paradigm levelling occurs after **t̚ > r /_obstruents*. Getting the facts right for roots ending in **t̚* also leads to the resolution of one small problem with **t > r*, and explains why *t̚*-final roots vanished even though word-medial **t̚* did not disappear more generally, for unlike *t*, the *t̚* of the modern Tangkic languages does occur freely in intervocalic, morpheme-medial positions.

I conclude by sketching out some programmatic research, which follows on from the observation made above regarding the proto-Tangkic absolutive marker. If we accept the hypothesis that **t > r*, then we can reconstruct this marker as having been **/-ta/* after all non-velar-final roots (and *-ka* after velars). Consequent upon this reconstruction is a series of predictions which almost single-handedly accounts for the remainder of the idiosyncrasies in the nominal root system, namely: (i) since apicals delete or force place assimilation of preceding non-apicals, and since few CCC clusters are permitted, *-ta* radically simplifies cluster-final roots which it attaches to, thus if there were any cluster-final roots in pre-proto-Tangkic, only velar finals (to which *-ka* attaches) should survive, and this is the case; (ii) under these phonotactic conditions we predict the survival of roots which end in single, non-apical obstruents, but we also predict that these root-final, non-apical segments should only turn up in non-absolutive forms, and again, this is what is found; (iii) because all nasals assimilate to an apical place of articulation before *-ta*, we would expect that an older inventory of nasal-final roots which once contained non-apicals should survive in an altered form, specifically as a rich set of apical nasal-final roots which nevertheless alternate with other places of articulation in non-absolutive forms, a prediction which is confirmed once again. Further details must be clarified by future research.