Variation and Change of Prenasalized Obstruents in Jiuhe Naxi

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Prenasalized obstruents are quite common in the world's languages since plosives and nasals have similar production modes (Ladefoged and Maddieson 1996). Naxi, a Tibeto-Burman language in southwest China, contrasts homorganic prenasalized voiced obstruents (hereafter NC) and plain voiced obstruents (hereafter C), such as /mb/-/b/, /nd/-/d/, /ŋg/-/g/, /ndz/-/dz/, /ɳɖʐ/-/ɖʐ/. These contrasts are preservation of contrasts in Proto-Naish, making Naxi different from other Naish languages such as Na and Laze (Michaud 2008, Jacques and Michaud 2011, Li 2013) in which Proto-Naish *NC has been denasalized and merged with plain voiced obstruents.

However, in the variety of Naxi in Lijiang and some adjacent towns and villages, an ongoing merging of the two sets of consonants can be witnessed. This is a change independent of the denasalization in Na and Laze since Lijiang is the centre of Naxi people and language, far away from the influence of other Naish languages. In Jiuhe, a town near Lijiang, this ongoing change manifests as variations, providing a window of observing the cause and mechanism of the change.

Since Jiuhe has a considerable number of Bai inhabitants, another important ethnic group in southwest China and possibly serves as a cause of sound change, three villages have been selected as fieldwork sites, namely Xianggeli (almost all Naxi), Guanshang (with a small proportion of Bai), and Nangaozhai (half of the population is Bai people). Altogether 60 native Naxi speakers from the three villages are included in the study.

Each speaker was asked to read 14 pairs of words which form minimal pairs of *NC-*C contrasts in Proto-Naish (Li 2013) and have regular reflexes in Jiuhe Naxi, and make judgements on whether the two words in each pair were homophones. Their pronunciations and homophone judgements show that two different changes are taking place in Jiuhe, one is *C>NC while the other is *NC>C. Both changes lead to merging of the two sets of consonants but along different directions.

In order to figure out factors conditioning the change, previous studies have related language performances to factors such as demographical factors, social class, ethnicity, neighbourhood, social network (Labov 2001). However, in a multilingual-contact context, the causes of language change must be determined through examination of individuals' language experience, that is, what languages he/she has ever spoken, with whom, in what proportion. Therefore, besides providing demographical data, all speakers were asked to recall their language experiences in detail, including what languages they spoke in each life stage (preschool stage, school stage, work stage, and family life) and with whom they spoke (Naxi with local Naxi people, Naxi with outside Naxi people, Naxi with local bilingual Bai people, other languages). Two contact indices, exposure to non-native Naxi spoken by Bai people (BN), and exposure to Naxi spoken by outside Naxi people (ON), have been generalized from the collected data.

Statistical results show that *NC>C is positively correlated with BN, *C>NC is negatively correlated with both BN and ON. The results illustrate that *C>NC is due to internal factors while *NC>C is the outcome of influence from Bai people because they speak with Naxi people with non-native Naxi which does not distinguish NC and C as a result of L1 interference.

Key words: Naxi; Naish languages; linguistic variation; language contact; language experience

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