

Stable roots in Sino-Tibetan/Tibeto-Burman

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Now that a considerable corpus of ST/TB roots has been reconstructed, the time has come to try classifying them along various dimensions. Taking a cue from similar research by Martha Ratliff in Hmong-Mien, I have tried sorting PST/PTB roots according to their “stability”. The most stable roots are attested in virtually all subgroups of the family, including such divergent languages as Tujia and Sulong, on the fringes of TB. At the other extreme are roots which have so far been discovered only in a single subgroup. Most etyma lie somewhere in between.

It is revealing to classify the most stable roots by semantic area, although there is wide divergence in stability even within a single semantic area. For example, **s-hywəy* BLOOD is a super-stable body-part root with no significant competitors, but SKIN has at least 6 well-attested roots scattered around the family.

This study presupposes that cognate identifications are correct, which is not always easy to determine by simple eyeballing, especially in the case of obscure and poorly documented languages.

Several interesting questions arise from this study:

- Is there a direct connection between diachronic stability and “basicness” of vocabulary, as glottochronological theory holds?
- Are there etymologically stable concepts that are particularly characteristic of East/SE Asian languages, but not of other linguistic areas?
- Should we downgrade a root’s stability quotient if it has undergone significant semantic changes in various subgroups, even though its phonological cognacy is not in doubt?
- Are there any etyma so characteristic of TB that they constitute a litmus test for membership in the family?

With these questions in mind, I venture to list the Top Ten and Top Twenty most stable roots in ST/TB.