

The Tujia Lexicon and Language Contact

(Abstract)

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Tujia is a Tibeto-Burman language which is distributed in western Hunan Province in South Central China. Continuous contact with the Chinese language over long periods of time has led to significant changes in its internal structure. This paper explores the effects of prolonged language contact through the analysis of Chinese loans within the Southern Tujia lexicon.

Chinese loans abound in Southern Tujia, with many being basic vocabulary items within the core of the lexicon. Such loans encompass all types of semantic domains, some of the concepts being expressed are ones that are new to the Tujia language itself, but most of them already have Tujia equivalents, which have gradually been replaced after the assimilation of Chinese loans. The following are some of the profound effects of Chinese loans on the Tujia lexicon:

1. The existence of multiple levels in the lexicon, whereby the same concept is expressed in many different ways. Sometimes the Chinese loan co-exists with the Tujia word, in other instances different loan forms co-exist. Such loans, which are synonymous and yet heteromorphous, either belong to different chronological periods or originate from different Chinese vernaculars, thus indicating the gradual and deepening influence of contact with the Chinese language.
2. In terms of word usage, Chinese loans may combine with other elements according to the rules governing native Tujia words, thus constituting virtually inseparable elements within the Tujia language. For words in common use, however, native words have largely been replaced by Chinese loans: this is especially so for the names of local flora and fauna. This indicates that during the process of language shift, replacement of commonly used words occurs much more rapidly than words which are less frequently used.
3. With regard to the formation of neologisms, the combination of Chinese loans with native Tujia words has led to the creation of many new words. In particular, there is a very peculiar method of word formation, which makes use of the structure of Chinese words together with phonetic association. When no morphemes with the required meaning exist in Tujia, a Tujia morpheme is chosen which is semantically unrelated but which is phonetically related to the Chinese word: the resulting combination is a compound word with no logical semantic connection. Therefore, although Tujia morphemes are used to create such words, the resulting compounds would be completely incomprehensible if the phonetic association with the corresponding Chinese words were not understood.