



LINGUISTIC DISCOVERY

DARTMOUTH COLLEGE

Volume 12
Issue 1
2014

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doi: 10.1349/PS1.1537-0852.A.439

url: <http://journals.dartmouth.edu/cgi-bin/WebObjects/Journals.woa/1/xmlpage/1/article/439>

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ISSN 1537-0852

linguistic-discovery.dartmouth.edu

Problem Set: Sui Adjective Modifiers

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Sui is a Tai-Kadai language of southwest China with an elaborate system of adjective modifiers, including modifiers that rhyme with their base adjectives. The onsets of these rhyming modifiers show patterns which are not fully predictable, but they fall within a certain range of morphophonological possibilities.

(1) Determine what types of onsets are preferred when the modifier rhymes with the base adjective. Caution: Look for overall patterns, not a fully predictive rule. Asterisks (*) indicate forms that are unattested.

ɛa:t	‘agile’	ɛa:t tɛa:t	‘very agile’
ʔmɛj	‘selfish’	ʔmɛj tɛj	‘very selfish’
fa:ŋ	‘wide’	fa:ŋ lja:ŋ	‘very wide’
tom	‘dull’	tom ʔnom	‘very dull’
ᵐbu	‘bulging’	ᵐbu tɕʰu	‘very bulging’
lap	‘garrulous’	lap tap	‘very garrulous’
lap	‘garrulous’	*lap lap	‘very garrulous’
pjɛ:k	‘dirty’	pjɛ:k ljɛ:k	‘very dirty’
ᵐow	‘crude, rash’	ᵐow low	‘very crude/rash’
ᵐbja	‘blurry’	ᵐbja tɕa	‘very blurry’
va:ŋ	‘tall’	va:ŋ tɕa:ŋ	‘very tall’
fa:ŋ	‘wide’	fa:ŋ lja:ŋ	‘very wide’
xom	‘sour’	xom tom	‘very sour’
xom	‘sour’	xom ʔnom	‘very sour’
qɔn	‘short’	qɔn ʔnjɔn	‘very short’
mət	‘tight’	mət tɕət	‘very tight’
pən	‘stupid’	pən ʔnən	‘very stupid’
ʔbaj	‘crooked’	ʔbaj tɕaj	‘very crooked’
ləŋ	‘careless’	ləŋ təŋ	‘very careless’
ləŋ	‘careless’	*ləŋ ləŋ	‘very careless’
ləŋ	‘straight’	ləŋ tɕəŋ	‘very straight’

(2) Now adapt your answer in (1) to account for the following cases found in a small minority of the Sui data:

ʔnəm	‘dark/black’	ʔnəm fəm	‘very dark/black’
ʔnəm	‘dark/black’	*ʔnəm ʔnəm	‘very dark/black’
təoŋ	‘skinny’	təoŋ fjoŋ	‘very skinny’
təoŋ	‘skinny’	*təoŋ təoŋ	‘very skinny’
tɕəm	‘fierce’	tɕəm ɣəm	‘very fierce’
tɕəm	‘fierce’	*tɕəm tɕəm	‘very fierce’
tiw	‘dried up’	tiw fiw	‘very dried up’
tiw	‘dried up’	*tiw tiw	‘very dried up’

[Data from Stanford, James N. (2007). Sui adjective reduplication as poetic morpho-phonology. *Journal of East Asian Linguistics* 16(2):87-111.]

Suggested Answer:

(1) The onsets of the modifiers in data set (1) are all coronals, which is often considered to be a cross-linguistically unmarked place of articulation. Therefore, although the Sui lexicon varies in the specific choice of coronal for a given adjective modifier, there is a strong tendency for the onset of the adjective modifier to be unmarked (coronal). In addition, note that when the onset of the base adjective is a coronal itself, the onset of the modifier must change in manner of articulation, e.g., ləŋ təŋ (*ləŋ ləŋ). In this way, the onsets of the base and the modifier remain distinct, even though they are both coronals.

(2) The second data set looks further into what happens when a base adjective has a coronal onset. In both (1) and (2), the onset of the modifier must be changed so that it is distinct from the onset of the base adjective. For the examples in data set (1), this was accomplished by changing the place of articulation (ləŋ təŋ) in the onset of the modifier. But in the examples in data set (2), the onset of the modifier differs from the base onset in both place of articulation and manner of articulation (the modifier's onsets are fricatives here). These examples represent a small minority of the adjective modifiers in Sui, but they show that the coronal requirement for the modifier onset can sometimes be violated when the base onset is a coronal.