Asia-Pacific Linguistics

REVIEW OF JUSTIN WATKINS (2013): DICTIONARY OF WA (2 VOLS) WITH TRANSLATIONS INTO ENGLISH, BURMESE AND CHINESE. LEIDEN, BRILL. ISBN: 9789004255777. VOL 1: XVI, 590 PP; VOL. 2: VIII, 598 PP.

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This handsome two volume dictionary is the culmination of a more-than-decade long project (see: www.humancomp.org/wadict/), often involving a substantial team of collaborators (named in the Acknowledgements xv-xvi), and supported by funding from the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council and support by the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London. Additionally, approval was obtained from officials of the United Wa State Party at Pang Kham.

Good dictionaries are often decade or multi-decade long projects, and there is a history of Austroasiatic compilations dragging on for years before (or without) being published. Thus, while some of us were perhaps unreasonably impatient to see this one appear, we cannot complain about the outcome. Watkins, his collaborators, and Brill, fully deserve our congratulations for delivering this 1187+vxi page reference work on the lexicon of one of the largest and most vital Austroasiatic languages, having around a million speakers. This writer was fortunate to be present at the launch of the dictionary at the British Ambassador's Residence in Yangon at the end of May 2014, and can vouch for the sincere appreciation that has already been expressed for this contribution to SEAsian lexicography.

In terms of extent of content, the dictionary has around 12,000 headwords and 7,000 example sentences. The corpus data come principally from an attempt at an exhaustive aggregation of texts, such as Bible Wa, publications produced in the PRC (including dictionaries and vernacular texts) and what vernacular materials could be collected in Myanmar. All sources were digitised, and a tremendous effort of work went into producing the dictionary, including keyboarding, optical character recognition and manual correction, checking and editing. This was a thoroughly modern project that required multidisciplinary input and cooperation, such as various language specialists, computer scientists/programmers, linguists, and members of the speaker community.

One particular challenge in the production of the dictionary is that the Wa community is very diverse; the population is large and distributed over complex physical and political terrain. Due to these complications there have been several Roman orthographies developed and used. On the Myanmar side this began with the Wa Bible in the 1930s; this has enjoyed wide usage but has some shortcomings, so various subsequent revisions were devised and have been used. On the China side an official orthography was devised in the 1950s; it is structurally largely consistent with pinyin, plus some digraphs and other innovations to reflect peculiarities of Wa phonology.

Given the above, the problem of aggregating diverse texts and unifying the materials into a coherent reference is a tremendous achievement, and very useful for outsiders struggling to use Wa language sources. Entries are generally structured as follows:

- Headword in official Wa State orthography
- Head word in PRC orthography
- Headword in IPA (broad transcription)
- Part of speech
- Usage label
- Translation into Burmese, Chinese, English
- Cross-references

Moreover, many entries have examples of usage in context, and some have etymological information (e.g. source of loans identified). An image of a fairly simple entry is provided below:

Some entries are quite long and take up more than a column in the two-column layout, although on average there are about a dozen per page. This writer does find the printed appearance somewhat difficult to deal with; it can be exhausting on the eyes dealing with the rapidly changing scripts, with two, three, or four in a single short line as one runs one's eye through the entries. Consequently I do find it convenient to use the dictionary in conjunction with the interactive online tools available at the project website.

In addition to the main entries, other useful reference information is included. There are some 60 pages of appendices at the end of Volume 2. This includes information on pronouns, personal names, place names, punctuation, numbers, spelling conversion tables and a bibliography. The latter is especially notable for the extensive listing of Chinese language and PRC published resources with listings in characters, pinyin and translation, making it a fabulous resource not just for Wa studies but also Austroasiatic linguistics. Within the field many scholars have worked very much within national traditions, so this provides ready access to much Chinese scholarship.

Finally, regarding the pricing and access, many of my academic colleagues regularly wince at the price of hardback books, and at €299,00/US$389.00 for the pair of these, I don't expect many sales to individuals. But the economics of book production and sales are such that I doubt that Brill will make a penny on these. At the same time, the project website, the informal sharing of online/electronic data, and the access to e-book versions via subscribing libraries means that in practice, individual scholars/researchers can access the content. Also, Watkins (p.xvi) foreshadows an inexpensive edition for distribution among the Wa, a development that will be keenly welcomed in due course.