

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

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I. PAUL K. BENEDICT - An Appreciation

First contact with Benedict (1967? '68?). Via Frank LeBar, whom I associate with his caged gibbon in Chiangmai. Sent him "Lahu and PLB" - got back the first of the many treasured manic letters I have received from Benedict, expressing great interest in my work, but noting that 'Shafer and I had gone over the same ground many years ago.' Our meetings on Wednesday afternoons in the West End Cafe, right next to Takome on Broadway, the takeout joint that my Columbia colleague Austerlitz and I always called Ta-ko-me, à la japonaise. Benedict would get wound up the minute I got there, as we went through the takeout line, not bothering to answer questions from the servers like 'broccoli or kale?' Indecipherable scrawls on napkins. Manic scribbles, crossed out and rewhorled before one's eyes. Sentences that never ended, broken off and sailing onto new tangents, pyrotechnics of ellipsis and apocope. Paroxysms of proto-forms, shards of syntax. Fighting to keep above water, finally getting some glimmers of what he was trying to tell me all at once. He was deep into 'Austro-Thai' at the time, reconstructing monstrous trisyllabic roots capacious enough to accommodate languages from Hawaiian to Ahom, Austronesian and Tai and Miao-Yao, meta-~~proto~~-forms. For months and years I had trouble deciding whether this was all incredibly brilliant or totally insane. He would announce he had solved, e.g. the RABBIT problem -*LETUKA. (I seem to remember irreverently suggesting a comparison between that particular PAT form and English 'lettuce.')

Sometimes Egerod would join us, fascinated and appalled, as I was.

P.S. Last nostalgic meeting at the West End in Jan. 1981.

PKB qua all-American, Yankee. Upstate New York, Benedict Arnold, etc. Difficulty in adjusting to any other culture or language. His visit with us in Kyoto in 1976 - managed to last for one night in our house. Insisted on taking him to the public baths, getting him to squat on the floor next to me and all the other guys from Hyakumanben, each under our color-coded red and blue spigots - he took it in good part, but did have trouble with the futon, the kotatsu-pit in the dining room, the teeny kitchen table, knee-high sink, and especially the benjo. The next day he made a beeline for the local Holiday Inn. Like a benevolent grandfather he smuggled our kids into the swimming pool every day for the remainder of his stay.

As far as foreign languages go, as PKB cheerfully has said many times, actually speaking them is just not his thing. He is barely comprehensible even in English, and would never have the patience to slow down his thoughts enough to put them painfully into another language. So the way in which he 'knows'

languages is very special and limited, but quite amazing. Kind of like the savants who can tell you what day of the week it will be on March 12, 2023. (Well, maybe that's not such a good analogy.)

Benedict's intellect. He is of course a genius, in the sense that certain faculties are hypertrophied to almost superhuman dimensions; in that he has a vast capacity for concentration and feverish periods of creative activity; in that he has supernormal memory capacity for linguistic forms; in that he has the knack of identifying critical pieces of data, and going from the specific to the general, drawing far-reaching inferences and implications from seemingly trivial bits of material; has limitless intellectual curiosity and is an omnivorous reader within his fields of interest. Reads and processes and remembers all the articles and MSS one sends him, usually returning pages of detailed comments.

Personality type. Definitely an obsessive-compulsive and hypomanic individual. I know he will forgive me this psychoanalysis, since he himself is so fond of pigeonholing people in these terms. Has often boasted that during his psychoanalytic practice he could diagnose somebody within the first 5 minutes. One wonders what PKB's poor patients' sessions were like - whether they could ever get a word in edgewise. Or whether as they were lying or sitting there spilling their guts out, PKB was stealthily opening a drawer and memorizing some word list, or worrying about the VOMIT problem.

His hypomania. Is mania always the 'mask for an underlying depression?' (PKB hates that idea.) I've known other supremely creative hypomanics, who spend their whole lives in revved up state, accomplishing huge amounts. They say Teddy Roosevelt was the same. Minimal sleep requirements - 3-5 hours a night. PKB says his best worktime is in the wee hours of the morning. The constant fear of boredom and the necessity to fill his time - a hummingbird with superhigh metabolism, having to flit from language to language, as from blossom to blossom. Time-eating compulsions, like reading the N.Y. Times every day from beginning to end. How many times at conferences, when everybody else was pooped at 3 A.M., PKB would still be rarin' to go, eager to carry on a conversation with ANYBODY, on ANY subject (Middle Vietnamese sibilants, politics, oracle bones, personal anecdotes) - 'But you can't go to bed! It isn't time, I won't be able to sleep, I've got nothing to read!' Sometimes poignant, the biological clock that can't wind down.

PKB's breadth of vision and imagination, his intellectual courage and daring. He's not one of those scholars who hesitates to publish something for 20 years because there might be something wrong with it (on second thought, the Conspectus did lie around for a long time in MS form!). It's this boldness in his intellectual personality that is hard for some linguists to accept. In Japan, e.g., one should never state one's opinions or conclusions too positively. It is proper style to end a presentation by fuzzing everything over and saying that 'in conclusion, further research is needed on this very interesting problem.' That simply is not Benedict's style.

Fecund in hypotheses - like Bill Labov, PKB throws out dozens of ideas, many of which must inevitably be offbase, but some of which are brilliant. Has no real ego investment in the DETAILS - this is impossible to understand for those scholars who have sought, e.g. to vitiate the entire Conspectus by finding real or imagined 'mistakes' in it.

The MEGALO mind. The philosopher Isaiah Berlin spoke of the hedgehogs and the foxes - those who like the big picture and those who are preoccupied with details. Some, like PKB, can change their scale of observation at will - do broad pans or closeups. His pervasive image of 'putting things together,' or 'fitting the pieces together,' like a jigsaw puzzle. His favorite boast for a new etymology is 'Fits perfectly!' An architectonic mind-set undoubtedly inherited from his architect father.

PKB's versatility and his 'amateur status' as a linguist. Tied up with his self-image as the Yankee gentleman farmer who doesn't have to do linguistics for a living. His second career, highly successful and lucrative, as a psychiatrist - what he has called his 'period of psychiatric divertissement' (1949-65, from age 37 to 54). Has the casualness of an amateur about publishing his papers -an astonishing number remain unpublished, especially those presented at the ST Conferences. He seems to feel they're 'published' once they're circulated to those in the field most directly concerned. His retreat from linguistics probably due to his pioneer position - after the collaboration with Shafer he had nobody to play with for a long time.

PKB as a teacher. He's not a teacher in the conventional sense - has never held a university position - but you can learn a lot from him. He's great at providing feedback, reams of written comments. Will read whatever you send him. But he can't lay out the elements of a problem orally ad lib. Jumps around, has no feel for interplay with his audience. Defensively fixates on a particular abstruse point, scrawls on the board and stands in front of what he's written.

His almost mystical belief in the palpable reality of his proto-constructs. He would not be surprised to find a stele inscribed in Proto-Austro-Tai.

Relationship to the work of others. Like everybody, prefers to find his own mistakes, and put in his own 'contras.' Loves to playfully pounce on my errors, and can sometimes be surprisingly gracious when one of his own is pointed out. Perhaps more galling is to admit that somebody else has proposed a valid new etymology that he hadn't thought of first. There's a period of initial resistance, as he tries to improve on the new proposal and somehow make it his own -- but if one sticks to his guns, PKB comes around eventually, and may even cite it later.

PKB's flexible dogmatism. If you convince him he's wrong about something, he'll change his mind, but then becomes equally sure that his new position is absolutely right.

PKB's literary style. Writes excellently well; shares the virtue of concision with Haudricourt (sigh!). Has a fine understated ironic wit. His letters - I'll always treasure them, and will probably publish them someday, or put them into a time capsule not to be opened before the 23rd c. They have got to be expurgated first. He's incapable of writing a letter without adding illegible pencilled scrawls in all the margins, as if to say, you think I have crammed everything possible onto this page, but you're wrong!

His comments - the most assiduous member of the ST Conference constituency (both in point of view of attendance - he's the only one to have attended all 16 of them) and the number of his comments on other participants' papers [see

BIBLIOGRAPHY]. Likes the concision of the 'Squib style' - ideal for our featured department in the journal LTBA - the Squib is the manic scribble in the margin writ large.

The curve of Benedict's career. Brilliant youthful period, first publications at age 27. Collaboration with Shafer on the Sino-Tibetan Linguistics project. (For a highly readable account of the STL project, see PKB's own memoir in LTBA 2.1, pp. 81-91.) After the long exclusively psychiatric interlude was over (1965), the steady outpouring of work that has earned him a special place among the diachronic linguists of the 20th century. (I can hear in my mind's ear the anguished cry, 'And who was so great in the 19th century anyway?')

Productivity. If anything, his productivity has increased with age, or rather since retirement from active psychiatric practice. In particular, 1983 saw a veritable explosion, including a whole new book. (It is of more than passing interest to note that he is exactly the same age as President Reagan, who is also vigorous in a way that belies his years.) And yet PKB professes to be embarrassed that he has written so little in the course of his career - to the point where he asked the editors of this volume to arrange his lifetime bibliography by SUBJECT and not by YEAR. (Request denied - too confusing to posterity.)

A few contributions of PKB to East Asian linguistics:

SINO-TIBETAN. Proved the relationship between Chinese and Tibeto-Burman beyond the shadow of a doubt. Excluded Tai-Kadai and Miao-Yao (Hmong-Mien) from Sino-Tibetan, which although not universally accepted has at least led to more and more sophisticated discussions of the genetic interrelationships among the language families of the region.

Freed the field from its preoccupation with pseudo-issues, like irregularities in manner and voicing of initials (explicable by prefixes). Willingness to recognize semantic shifting in cognates (seems like a self-evident universal of language history, but not to this previously hyper-conservative field).

PKB did not leap to hasty conclusions about TB subgrouping, which is all to the good, in view of the still very spotty state of our knowledge.

His method of 'teleo-reconstruction' - had the Yankee practicality to recognize the '5 criterial languages for TB reconstruction.' As more and more data on hitherto unknown TB languages pour in, the basic correctness of his overall reconstructive scheme is confirmed.

His sympathy for the notion of word families, in TB as well as in Chinese. Prefers to rely by and large on Karlgren's reconstructions of the rhymes of OC, rather than on some of the many revisions of his work. PKB is now working with Paul Yang on a re-recension of Grammata Serica Recensa, not changing as much with respect to the rhymes (where previous revisionists had concentrated), as they do with respect to the syllable-initial - the prefixal dynamics -hoping to make Proto-Chinese look more like PTB.

AUSTRO-TAI. The whole idea is his. The field of AT studies contains but a single practitioner. (He has always loved somebody's reference to him as 'one

of the leading American Austro-Tai specialists.') I myself have grown increasingly skeptical over the years- in fact, my conclusion is that further study must be devoted to this most interesting problem.

One thing we can now be relieved about is that PKB has just abandoned his illogical spelling 'Austro-T-h-ai,' since the form without -h- is more general in scope, by convention. (Both spellings appear in free variation in this volume!)

Very recently Benedict has claimed to have discovered that Japanese too is but another sister language to Austro-Tai, so that the great "Austro-Japanese" stock now stands on 4 legs: Austronesian, Tai-Kadai, Miao-Yao, and Japanese.

Can this be the end of it, however? Like Alexander, PKB may finally have run out of worlds to conquer in East and SE Asia. He has been complaining in recent letters about "running out of languages."

SOUTHEAST ASIAN PREHISTORY. The brilliant SE Asian archaeologist, Chester F. Gorman, who died prematurely at age 44 in 1981 (and who had intended to submit a paper to this volume), realized the profound implications of PKB's 'AT hypothesis' as supporting evidence for his own impressively documented claims for the prehistorical cultural advancement of SE Asia. (See Matisoff, Languages of Mainland Southeast Asia, Ch. I.)

Particular points on which honest folk may disagree:

*** Did PST really have distinctive tone, and are all synchronically observable tonal systems in TB languages derivable from a single proto-tone system? [See Mazaudon's paper in this volume.]

*** Austro-Tai: does it fly? Must await evaluation by specialists in Austronesian and Miao-Yao, and more work on the Kadai branch of Tai-Kadai. Miao-Yao historical phonologists are still few and far between. Specialists in Austronesian are skeptical. This does not bother Benedict. -

*** Austro-Japanese: is this a meta-chimera? How can this hypothesis be tested?

*** Does Lahu ve 'copular nominalizer' really come from *wa-n, as Benedict insists, or its it rather from *way, as JAM has so clearly demonstrated? [See "God and the Sino-Tibetan copula," 1983.]

*** Karen: is it really to be split off from the rest of TB, like Hittite from the rest of Indo-European in Sturtevant's conception? [See Wheatley's paper in this volume.]

*** Proto-variation vs. proto form-stuffing. PKB is still something of a stuffer, although he shows signs of coming out of the variational closet, and has even (after much prodding) adopted the term 'allofam,' which, like 'morph,' he might soon claim to have coined himself.

The field of Oriental linguistics is immeasurably richer because of the life and work of Paul K. Benedict. May he continue to provide an inspiration for us all, till the proverbial age of 120!