

## In what sense is Mlabri a West Khmuic language?

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### ABSTRACT

Mlabri, the language of (former) hunter-gatherers (the so-called “Phi Tong Luang”) in Thailand-Laos, is generally classified as belonging to the Khmuic branch of Mon-Khmer (Austro-Asiatic). Mlabri has unmistakable lexical affinities to Khmuic languages. In terms of phonological regularities in cognate words there is a conspicuous agreement with Tin (Mal and Prai). There are also affinities to Khmu, and one might suggest that Khmu, Tin and Mlabri form a Western sub-branch of Khmuic (as against more remote Khmuic such as Khabit and Ksing Mul).

The words shared by Khmu and Mlabri against Tin are often loanwords (entering Mlabri from Khmu). If, on the contrary, one looks at the set of words that agree specifically with Filbeck’s reconstruction (1978) of Pre-Tin it makes sense to posit a Tinic level common to Mlabri and Tin. Both Khmu and Mlabri are, however, phonologically and morphologically more conservative than Tin. Mlabri thus contributes to the reconstruction of Pre-Tin.

In terms of derivational morphology Mlabri is more similar to Khmu than to modern Tin. Mlabri has *prefixation*, *infixation* and *reduplication* much like Khmu, but apparently with a much smaller repertory of productive affixes in Mlabri and with a somewhat different set of phonological rules operating in affixation. Tin is very poor in transparent morphology compared to Mlabri and especially to Khmu. It seems (Rischel 2003) that a lot of fossilization and simplification has taken place in Tin. Prefixes, and presyllables in general, which must have existed in Proto-Tinic, have either been assimilated to the initial consonant of the main syllable and then mostly lost entirely in Tin, or different presyllables have merged into the same form (all unlike Mlabri).

Mlabri syntax, on the other hand, exhibits several non-Mon-Khmer-like characteristics such as:

- (i) deviating word-order: possessor before possessum, mostly with a linking particle (which incidentally is reminiscent of Chinese); indirect before direct object, mostly with (the same) linking particle; size-adjectives (stative verbs) sometimes before the noun
- (ii) specific word-classes: possessive pronouns derived from a pronoun + the linker  $\delta\iota$ ; a definite article
- (iii) a final question particle (which incidentally looks Burmic).

One can define a number of challenges which have to be faced in the comparative study of Mlabri. Some of these will be addressed directly in the paper:

- (1) What kinds of affinities does Mlabri show to Khmuic languages? If Mlabri is an offshot from a Tinic subbranch of (West) Khmuic (i.e. as sister language of Tin, as suggested by Rischel 1989), why is only a minority of the lexicon demonstrably “Tinic” in the sense that the words are shared by Mlabri and Tin in particular? What is the relationship of Mlabri to Khmu? Are Mlabri and Khmu typologically more similar than Mlabri and Tin only because Tin has changed so radically over time, whereas both Khmu and Mlabri are “conservative”?
- (2) If Mlabri is a “mixed” language (as JR has claimed in a 2003-paper) what then is the history behind the M-K words that are *not* found in Tin? Which words of the Mlabri vocabulary are likely to go back to the time before Mlabri branched off from Tin and from Khmuic in general? To what extent are those old words at all of Mon-Khmer origin?

(3) What do early words in Mlabri – and possibly also Mlabri myths – tell us about a possible former village culture (beside or before the foraging culture)? Can the comparative study of Mlabri vocabulary support the assumption of some anthropologists that the Mlabri people represents a case of “cultural reversal”?

(4) Which of the unidentified words in Mlabri are, on the contrary, likely to be later loanwords or innovations belonging to the time after Mlabri split company with Tin?

(5) Why are there apparently very few Hmong words in Mlabri although some Tai loanwords look as if they entered Mlabri via a language such as Hmong?

(6) Which words in the total vocabulary are loanwords from Tai languages? Which of these words stem from Lao, Lue, Kammueang or Central Thai?

(7) By what routes have such Tai words entered Mlabri (e.g. via bilingualism, or via the use of a pidgin in barter trade with mountain villagers)? What chronological layers are there (from “Ancient Thai” words up to recent loans)?

(8) Where do the strikingly non-M-K features of Mlabri syntax come from? Were they “originally” in the language or are they secondary?