

The lexicalization of causative verbs in the Yi group¹

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ABSTRACT. This paper explores a lexicalization process in an array of Yi (\subseteq Tibeto-Burman) languages spoken in Southwest China. Almost every Yi language exhibits a set of minimal pairs, called simplex-complex pairs, of the following sort. The simplex member is an adjective or verb starting with a voiced consonant (e.g. ve^{33} ‘sway’). The complex member is derived from the former by devoicing the initial consonant and by augmenting its valency or adding causative meaning to it (e.g. fe^{33} ‘wave = cause to sway’). Previous authors have treated this kind of data as a blind process of sound change and were undecided on the type of linguistic change, i.e. whether it represents a kind of grammaticalization or lexicalization. With pan-Yi data and statistical figures it is demonstrated that the sound changes constitute a phonetically and semantically motivated process of lexicalization.

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to report and evaluate a remarkable process of lexicalization displayed in the lexicon of an array of Yi languages which are Tibeto-Burman languages spoken in Southwest China (see appendix for more spatial-genetic information). For a limited set of mainly monosyllabic verbs – between 5 and 50 depending on the language – it is possible to devoice the initial consonant and derive a causative verb. In Weining Neasu (one of the Yi languages surveyed), there is for example the verb ve^{33} meaning ‘sway’ being involved as the predicate of an intransitive clause (e.g. ‘the tree swayed by itself’). Its devoiced counterpart fe^{33} ‘wave = cause to sway’ appears as the predicate of a monotransitive clause (e.g. ‘He waved the

¹ Part of this research was supported by a Strategic Research Grant (Project No. 7001921) of City University of Hong Kong.