

The causatives in Sun Hongkai’s Anong: language death and rapid restructuring

Graham Thurgood

California State University Chico

Introduction. The Anong people, numbering approximately 6500, mainly live in Fugong County in the Nujiang Lisu Autonomous Prefecture of Yunnan Province (roughly 98.7°E and 27.1°N) on the tablelands on both sides of the Nujiang River. To the west is Myanmar, where the closely-related Rawang live; to the north is the Tibetan Autonomous Region.

Anong, an autonym, is a Tibeto-Burman language closely-related both to Trung [*tʂrùŋ*] (Chinese exonym: Dulong; population c. 6000 (LaPolla 2000:282-283)) and to Rawang, with the details of higher-level relationships remaining to be sorted out. The Anong people live surrounded by Lisu, Chinese, and Bai speakers. In fact, the majority of the Anong people no longer speak Anong, most having shifted either to Lisu or Chinese, with a few having shifted to Bai. Ethnic Anong who still speak Anong are now found primarily in the villages, such as Muguja, Kashi, Muleng, Lagagong, Aniqia, and Lahaigong, which belong to the Muguja Township of Shangpa Town in Fugong County.

Causatives. Anong causatives are one of many linguistic subsystems that have been totally restructured in the last forty years. The data that Sun Hongkai recorded forty years ago retains the older, largely inherited, and quite familiar Tibeto-Burman system, which marks most causative forms by prefixing *su*⁵⁵- (or *ci*³¹- before palatals) to the basic root. The newer contemporary system, recorded in 1999, is much messier: the older, easily-segmentable prefix + root combinations have undergone considerable assimilation, with the former prefixes fusing with the initial of the root; this has resulted in a system in which the simplex forms (i.e., non-causative forms) are distinguished from the causative forms by differences in the root-initial consonants.

While the basic outlines of these phonetic changes have been known to Tibeto-Burmanists for some time (e.g., Matisoff 1972; Thurgood 1977, 1981; and so on), some of the phonetic details are nonetheless of interest. In a recent paper, Sun (1999a:355-356) notes that in 1983, the Anong used by an older speaker (70 years old) marked causatives with both the inherited Proto-Tibeto-Burman (PTB) prefix and with transparently-related changes in the verb roots—thus, the older system had been augmented by subsequent assimilation. However, doing additional fieldwork in 1999, just sixteen years later, Sun’s reports (1999a:355-356)

that the causative system used by his new language assistant did not include many of the forms used by the 1983 language assistant. He states that, while some speakers claimed to recognize the older forms, others did not; some suggested that the system had undergone simplification. Table 1 exemplifies one of the differences between the oldest, most conservative speakers and others.

Table 1 shows the unprefixed forms in the first column; the second column shows the causative forms used by the older speakers, and the third column shows the causative forms of the middle-aged speakers. The phonetic correspondences are straightforward: in the causatives, the older voiced obstruents have become voiceless aspirated obstruents and the older nasals (sonorants) have become voiceless.

Table 1: Anong causatives (older speakers vs. middle-aged speakers)

verb	causatives (older speakers)	causatives (middle-aged speakers)	gloss
<i>dzuŋ</i> ⁵⁵	<i>ci</i> ³¹ <i>dzuŋ</i> ⁵⁵	<i>ɕtɕuŋ</i> ⁵⁵ > <i>tɕ</i> ^h <i>uŋ</i> ⁵⁵	be broken
<i>ni</i> ⁵⁵	<i>ci</i> ³¹ <i>ni</i> ⁵⁵	<i>ŋi</i> ⁵⁵	know
<i>ga</i> ⁵⁵	<i>su</i> ⁵⁵ <i>ga</i> ⁵⁵	<i>k</i> ^h <i>a</i> ⁵⁵	be broken
<i>ba</i> ⁵⁵ <i>a</i> ³¹	<i>su</i> ³¹ <i>ba</i> ⁵⁵ <i>a</i> ³¹	<i>p</i> ^h <i>a</i> ⁵⁵ <i>a</i> ³¹	be white

Source: Sun (1999b:195); transcription slightly modified)

The phonetics of the form *ɕtɕuŋ*⁵⁵ ‘be broken’, with its prefix fused to the onset of the root are, to my knowledge, unattested elsewhere, although hardly unexpected. In Anong *ɕtɕuŋ*⁵⁵-like forms have developed into voiceless aspirated onsets; in other Tibeto-Burman languages they have instead sometimes become voiceless unaspirated. Still none of this is particularly unexpected even if the Anong phonetic record is somewhat richer than is typical for this sort of change.

The developments themselves are fairly natural changes: the prefixal *su*³¹-losing its unstressed vowel, fusing with the following root, and then devoicing a root initial stop or nasal before dropping is widely attested. The fusion of the prefixal *ɕu*³¹-replacing the root initial lateral is not all that uncommon, nor is the complementary relationship between the prefixed unaspirated voiceless root initial and the subsequent aspirated voiceless root initial once the prefix has dropped. In fact, the changes themselves are so natural, it is not the changes that took place, but rather that the system was stable for so long. Thus, perhaps it is not the changes that require explanation, but instead it is the long-term stability.

Two things set the Anong data apart: a precise time frame and clear, richly-attested data. In Sun’s 1960 Anong descriptions the older system is largely intact, but in his recent 1999 work, a new, fully-restructured system has taken its place. Further, the data recorded between these two dates show intermediate stages, with the stages thus requiring a minimum of unattested extrapolation. Thus, the major unresolved questions revolve neither around the phonetic details nor the time frame, but focus on activation, that is, Why now? After all, the 1960 system is essentially the same system that dates back as far as Proto-Tibeto-Burman—at the very least some two thousand years and more than likely much older. What are the changes in the last forty years of Anong history that provided the impetus for restructuring?

The answers correlate with recent changes in the social setting. While the earlier structure of Anong of course places some constraints on the restructuring of the Anong causative, the primary are in the social setting. The most obvious indication of this comes from the comparison of Anong causatives with the causatives of closely-related Trung: Table 2 shows that the Trung (Dulong) causatives are strikingly similar to the older causatives attested in older Anong speakers, while the newer causatives used by middle-aged (and younger) speakers are now quite distinct.

Table 2: *Trung (Dulong) causatives vs. Anong causatives*

Trung (Dulong)		Anong			
verb	causative	verb	older causative	newer causative	
<i>lup</i> ⁵⁵	<i>tu</i> ³¹ <i>lup</i> ⁵⁵	<i>lim</i> ⁵⁵	<i>ci</i> ³¹ <i>lim</i> ⁵⁵	<i>cim</i> ⁵⁵	bury
<i>dum</i> ⁵⁵	<i>su</i> ⁵⁵ <i>dum</i> ⁵⁵	<i>dim</i> ⁵⁵	<i>ci</i> ³¹ <i>dim</i> ⁵⁵	<i>ctim</i> ⁵⁵ > <i>thim</i> ⁵⁵	collapse
<i>ɲu</i> ⁵³	<i>su</i> ³¹ <i>ɲu</i> ⁵³	<i>ɲu</i> ⁵⁵	<i>su</i> ³¹ <i>ɲu</i> ⁵⁵	<i>ɲu</i> ⁵⁵	cry

Source: Sun (1999b:194-195)

In short, although both languages were extremely similar just 40 years ago, while Trung has undergone only moderate change since then, Anong has completely restructured.

As for the causatives themselves, notice that the older Anong causatives, like the causatives of Trung, mark the causative by the prefix *su*⁵⁵- (or *ci*³¹- before *palatals*). The newer causatives, unlike in Trung, are essentially lexical—for those without a background in historical linguistics, the causative forms need to be learned one at a time, as in Lisu, a language most Anong speakers are more

fluent in than they are in Anong. Note, however, the similarity to Lisu only tells us a small part of the reason why the restructuring occurred as it did: first, Anong speakers fluent in Lisu had managed to keep both systems separate for quite some time before the restructuring of the Anong causatives began, and, second, the most that could have been adapted from Lisu is the principle of lexical suppletion for causatives—the forms themselves, of course, were not borrowed.

Speakers, numbers, and fluency. The apparent similarity between the population figures for Anong (c. 6500) and those for Trung (c. 6000) is deceptive: they reflect ethnic affiliation more than the number of speakers. In fact, it is here where one of the more striking differences between the Anong and Trung can be seen. Trung is still a viable language, used for a range of purposes, and with younger speakers. Anong is a language on the edge of extinction, under intense pressure from Lisu as a local language and from Chinese as a language of wider communication, with only 400 or so remaining Anong speakers, and of these, only roughly 12% are fluent.

In a 1999 paper, Sun (1999a:353-355) reports his survey of some 104 people from 25 households—roughly a quarter of all the Anong speakers, located in Mugujia village, the area where Anong is the most concentrated. The survey checked their fluency in Anong, in Lisu, and in Chinese, in terms of four levels of linguistic competence, here called Levels A, B, C, and D. These levels are described below, as they apply to Anong.

Level A—Fluent: Level A speakers are able to engage in everyday conversation as well as describe food production and daily living and are able to use over 3,000 basic items of vocabulary.

Level B—Semi-fluent: Level B speakers can engage in everyday conversation, but not very fluently and able to use around 1,000 basic words. Level B speakers are better in their second language than in Anong.

Level C—Limited: Level C speakers are only able to use daily greetings or a few everyday phrases and, thus, are unable to use Anong to express themselves adequately and completely. Their Anong frequently includes words from their second language. They only use a limited number of Anong vocabulary items, with much of the basic vocabulary missing. Their pronunciation of Anong is inaccurate. In contrast, they are very fluent in their second language.

Level D—Non-speakers: Level D respondents have essentially lost their mother tongue, although some can still understand a little, but they can no longer speak their mother tongue. In fact, some have completely lost their Anong.

Table 3 puts Sun's (1999a:353-355) numbers together. Examination of the Anong column shows some 62 individuals, roughly 60%, are still fluent in Anong (using the criteria above). However, Sun (1999a:354) writes, outside of Mugujia village, there are virtually no fluent Anong speakers left! Essentially, these 62 are the last fluent speakers. And, Sun found some 19 semi-fluent speakers in the Mugujia sample. Sun (1999a:254) notes that, although there are no fluent speakers left, semi-fluent speakers are still found outside of the Mugujia area, suggesting that there are roughly 280 of these outside of Mugujia. In sum, there were as of 1999 roughly 62 fluent Anong speakers and perhaps a little over three hundred semi-fluent speakers remaining.

TABLE 3. Anong fluency rates in Anong, Lisu, and Chinese

Proficiency	Anong		Lisu		Chinese	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
A. Fluent	62	59.6%	96	92.3%	13	12.5%
B. Semi-fluent	19	18.2%	8	7.7%	17	16.3%
C. Limited	14	13.4%	0	0.0%	19	18.3%
D. Non-speakers	7	8.8%	0	0.0%	55	52.6%

However, as Sun (1999a:353-355) observes, a closer look at the 62 fluent speakers of the 104 Anong speakers in Mugujia village shows how close the language is to being lost. As the next column indicates, of the 104 Anong surveyed (including the 62 fluent speakers), 96 of them—all but 8—are fluent in Lisu. All 8 of those not fluent in Lisu were elderly people who rarely went out. Thus, as Sun notes, even in the village where the highest concentration of Anong speakers was found, the proficiency and level in Lisu has already surpassed that of Anong. Further, as he notes, almost all the Anong, including most of the fluent speakers, can speak Lisu and most can speak it better than Anong.

The situation with Chinese, the final column, seems quite different. While Sun's numbers show some 30% of the Anong as fluent or semi-fluent in Chinese, it is typically a local dialect different from the Kunming dialect rather than Putonghua. Those who were fluent in Chinese were almost all middle-aged or younger and had lower secondary school level educations or higher and for the most part those who were semi-fluent frequently had either a primary school education or had at least attended school. As a consequence of this schooling, fluent and semi-fluent speakers of Chinese had more opportunities for interaction outside the village.

Usage patterns. The usage patterns correlate with the loss of frequency. Sun (1999a:354) writes that Mugujia village has both the highest concentration of Anong speakers and, not surprisingly, the highest usage of Anong. As Sun observed, in Mugujia village it was possible to hear conversations in Anong, although even here most people spoke in Lisu.

Outside of Mugujia village Anong usage falls off sharply. Although Anong speakers also live in other villages around Mugujia—Kashi, Muleng, Lagagong, Aniqia, and Lahaigon, in these areas the Anong often are less concentrated, living interspersed with concentrations of Lisu or with people of other nationalities. In these areas, Sun (1999a:354) notes, there are essentially no remaining Anong speakers who are fully fluent. In these areas, Sun (1999a:354) counted some 280 semi-fluent speakers, with most being elderly people in their 60s or 70s. Of the slightly younger speakers, Anong in their 50s or 60s, only a handful could still speak their mother tongue even at the semi-fluent level. Sun (1999a:354) attributes this to the lack of opportunity to use Anong in their daily lives; most, he notes, only used a few sentences and then only used these when speaking to the elderly. In these areas, Lisu was the language used for common communication.

Demographics, usage, and restricted access. As Sun suggests (1999a:354), not only is Anong with its relatively complicated phonological and grammatical systems difficult to learn, but the patterns of interaction severely restrict usage. The Anong have interacted with various ethnic groups in the Nujiang River area, but especially with the Lisu. In conversations, unless all individuals spoke Anong fluently, the common language would, of course, have been Lisu. In the case of intermarriage where an Anong had married someone from another group, the same pattern held: even though only one member of the family did not speak Anong, the common language was Lisu, with the non-Anong only very rarely learning some Anong. Sun (1999a:354) observed that even in the rare villages where the Anong were the majority, few non-Anong learned Anong.

Sun (1999a:354) illustrates the typical language in the case of intermarriage by describing the patterns of his Anong language assistant. His assistant was fluent in Anong, but his wife was Lisu. They had been married 30 years, but even after 30 years, she spoke only a little Anong and even that rarely. Lisu was the common language in the family: the three daughters and the son, like the mother, only understood a little Anong, and none could speak it. Occasionally, the father would use a little Anong at home, but they would still answer in Lisu.

In sum, Anong tends to be restricted to situations where all participants speak it fluently: the default language is virtually always going to be Lisu. Thus, only fluent Anong speakers tend to have access to Anong; those less fluent in Anong only have very restricted access to the language.

Conclusions and speculation. One mechanism involved in the loss of Anong is simple replacement, generally by Lisu, a development undoubtedly exasperated by limited usage and limited access to Anong. Anong forms that are used infrequently are more easily forgotten; Lisu forms that are used frequently are more readily retrieved. All Anong speakers, even the most fluent, probably show some evidence of simple replacement; Sun cites the example of one of his best language assistants substituting the Anong form for ‘very’ with its Lisu equivalent. With less frequent usage, replacement should go up; with less proficiency, replacement should go up.

Other more minor factors also come into play. Certainly, although more marginal, one factor is attitudinal. Sun (1999a) notes that many of the best educated Anong are relatively indifferent to the impending loss of Anong; they not only see this as the general trend but they also feel that there is little they can do about it in any case. It is worth noting that, while Anong is their first language, the language they are losing is neither their only language, nor their most useful language, nor even the language that they are most fluent in; almost all Anong speak Lisu better than Anong and use it for more purposes.

The shift to Lisu was well underway before the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949; in fact, it must have been well underway at the time of Barnard’s 1934 (1934:89) grammatical sketch and glossary of closely-related Rawang which lists as the Rawang term for Lisu the word Anung. However, it is only in the last 30 years or so that the decline in the numbers of speakers and the increasingly restrictive usage patterns have produced the massive restructuring of Anong, not just in its causatives, but in all its systems.

Thus, it is obvious that the changes are a response to language contact and subsequent changes in usage patterns, however, to say this is to point out a correlation rather than to explain anything. Nor is it much of an analysis to invoke ‘assimilation to Lisu’ as an explanation. Where Lisu differentiates causative and non-causatives, it is with suppletion. If so, what would Anong speakers be said to be assimilating from Lisu? Certainly not the specific words. Certainly not the process.

Robust explanations lie elsewhere. It is clear that the older generation of Anong speakers is the last generation to successfully learn Anong. The middle-aged and younger speakers have not done so. And, as already observed, this failure to learn Anong correlates with the rapid restructuring and with the increasingly restricted usage and access. In this sense, access to Anong has become too restricted to be successfully passed on; the middle-aged and the younger Anong do not seem to be learning it.

None of this seems controversial. However, none of this accounts—directly—for the rapid restructuring either. The key to understanding lies in the nature and direction of the restructuring. Our examination of the Anong causative restructuring reveal a series of changes that, although they occurred unusually rapidly, were quite natural. For instance, all of the following developments are fairly natural changes: a prefixal *su*³¹ losing its unstressed vowel, fusing with the following root, devoicing a root initial stop or nasal, and then dropping.

In fact, the changes look to be quite natural changes—the only thing requiring an explanation is the rapidity with which they took place. Thus, returning to a suggestion made earlier in this paper, these changes are so natural, it is necessary to explain not only why the changes have not occurred elsewhere, for instance, in the strikingly-similar Trung data, but also why they haven't occurred as rapidly.

The answer is that normal transmission rather undoes both phonetic and morphological changes in children and, at least, in part in adult learners. Young and old learners regularly 'repair' their own phonetically-motivated changes to make them conform to what they perceive as more desirable pronunciations. The repairs in morphology are a little more sophisticated but produce a similar result. Initially, the learner seems to simply acquire morphology as a series of individual tokens. Subsequent to learning tokens learners draw generalizations, often recognizing a pattern, and applying it—often overgeneralizing it. In this generalization some of the phonetically-motivated changes that occurred quite naturally at the token stage of acquisition are at least partially undone. In the case being discussed, if the learner recognizes that causatives are formed by placing the prefix before the basic root—that is, the learner connects the unprefix root with the prefixed root—recognition of the morphological pattern has a tendency to undo the phonetic effect of the prefix on the root initial: the causative is reanalyzed anew by each generation as a prefix plus the root. In Anong, however, the younger learners of Anong seem to have never gotten beyond the stage of learning individual tokens—largely because they lacked sufficient access to language. The connection between the basic root and the causative root was lost along with the constraints that connection imposed on phonetic and morphological restructuring. The fact that Lisu uses a lexical approach too may have played a minor role, but the major impetus to restructuring came from increasingly restricted access to the language—a restriction that made the morphological patterns too rare and thus too obscure to learn. In Trung, the morphology is still transparent to the learners. In Anong, the morphology is no longer transparent, letting phonetic tendencies operate more freely. The loss of sufficient access to the language—the loss of access—explains the rapidity of the changes over the last 40 years.

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