

Pan-dialectal databases: Mlabri, an oral Mon-Khmer language

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Scholars doing comparative research on Austroasiatic are restrained by the limited access to reliable knowledge about several of the oral languages and dialects that belong to Austroasiatic. Even in the best cases, i.e. when one has satisfactory access to extensive word lists or to speech data from one or more varieties of such a language, other varieties of the same language may differ so significantly that one cannot claim to have access to a representative sample or to a vocabulary that reflects the language in its totality. In my paper I shall be referring to three languages spoken in the northern part of Mainland Southeast Asia which are all classified as belonging to the so-called Khmuic branch of Austroasiatic. Khmu proper is the only such language with a really large number of speakers.

The Tin language has split into two dialect clusters, Prai and Mal, which differ so much lexically that they are not mutually understandable, although the total area in which Tin is spoken, is fairly small (in Thailand one finds villages next to each other with Prai and Mal speakers).

Scholars think of Tin as one entity, both for purposes of language classification and when searching for cognates across Austroasiatic, and that makes sense since Prai and Mal are grammatically similar and share some early sound-shifts that together distinguish Tin from other Khmuic languages. Still, for those doing first-hand research on Tin it is two different things to work on Prai or to work on Mal, and in fact Prai and Mal have been approached separately by different scholars or missionaries. For all the reasons I have mentioned there is no such thing as a Tin dictionary, not even in the making. When and if dictionaries become available one may expect each such volume or file to cover either Prai or Mal (and probably just one subdialect of each). Thus, even future comparativists may have to search through different sources before it is warranted to make statements about the survival of an etymon in Tin.

The research situation of Tin is strikingly different from that of Khmu, as demonstrated by Suwilai Premsrirat's impressive thesaurus work on Khmu. The picture that emerges from recent study of Tin is that there has been a strange splitting-up within Tin so that much of the most central vocabulary (for example the word for first person singular) differs between Prai and Mal. Unlike Tin, Khmu is spoken over a vast area, with phonologically distinct dialects. Still I do

not get the impression (from consulting Ajarn Suwilai's Thesaurus) that Khmu exhibits such a massive heterogeneity in its core vocabulary across dialects as Tin does.

Now to Mlabri. Mlabri (the so-called "Phi Tong Luang"-language spoken on both sides of the northern border between Thailand and Laos) looks as if it may be a sister language of Tin which branched off some centuries before Tin itself split up. I have quite recently checked the provenance of a statistically selected sample of Mlabri words. It demonstrates that although the number of cognates shared with Tin is not impressive there is no other known language with a similar degree of cognacy with Mlabri. This supports an earlier finding: that Mlabri and Tin exhibit systematic phonological correspondences which suggest a scenario of near identity between the Tinic layer in Mlabri and Pre-Tin (the common ancestor of Prai and Mal as reconstructed by David Filbeck). Unlike Tin, Mlabri is phonologically and morphologically conservative, which makes it look deceptively similar to Khmu and dissimilar to modern Tin. Actually, Mlabri retains both phonological and morphological features that can be reconstructed for Ancient Tin, so it is imperative to consider these two languages jointly in future comparative work.

There are three known varieties of Mlabri. One variety is spoken by a tiny group in Laos (their language used to be referred to as "Yumbri"), another was formerly spoken by two families in Thailand, and a third is still spoken by a few hundred people in Thailand. The three varieties differ characteristically in sentence intonation but have the same structural make-up so that they might count as subvarieties of one dialect. Still, as in the case of Tin, the varieties of Mlabri differ in lexicon, to the extent that sentences consisting of everyday vocabulary may not be understood if addressed to speakers of another variety. I can illustrate this with some randomly chosen examples [Fig. 1].

Still, the Mlabri case is different from that of Tin. It is often so that a word that is actively used in one variety is understood by mature or old speakers of other varieties, but it may then be more or less stigmatized (a typical response to such an undesirable word is that "it is very difficult to say so you had better not say it!"). This means that lexical differences are to a considerable extent a matter of recent disuse of formerly shared vocabulary. It could happen easily in cases of former near-synonymy; in other cases such loss of vocabulary has been balanced by borrowing from neighbouring languages.

There is reason to assume that the lexical cleavages reflect a deliberate polarization among clan-like subgroups, each with its own ethnolect, as it were. At closer inspection, the picture is complicated by additional dichotomies of

male contra female usage and of current contra obsolescent usage. In fieldwork one is likely to retrieve only non-stigmatized words belonging to the core vocabulary of the clan one is studying. We must conclude that no hitherto available word list for the Mlabri language is in any sense representative of the language as a whole. On the contrary, each word list is skewed by the recent cleavage into clan jargons, and it will be sensitive to the way male or female speakers were addressed by the field worker. As with Tin, this is a serious drawback if, for example, the resulting word list is to be used for comparative purposes.

Altogether, the Mlabri scenario is of a sociolinguistic nature, and it is obviously advantageous to combine information about the three varieties in one thesaurus-type lexicon. That is what I have been working on lately. With an absolute minimum of sophistication in data processing (so far) I am establishing a fairly extensive raw-data base covering all three varieties of Mlabri. It covers all the lexical items I know of, and phonological variants of words are cross-referenced to each other, of course. There is a consistent indication of the provenance of each form, and for lexical items exhibiting polysemy and ranges of meaning each single gloss is likewise indexed as being appropriate for this or that variety or for two or all three varieties. Whenever my field notes suffice, a gloss is documented by phrasal and sentential examples with explicit provenance. This makes it possible to make statements about the syntactic behaviour of each lexical item in its various meanings, and to see to what extent the usage is general or specific to one or another variety of Mlabri.

The constant challenge when working with such a language as Mlabri is to retrieve data which the field linguist understands properly. The speakers are typically unsophisticated when it comes to communication on a meta-level, and one very easily gets the meanings of words wrong from the start. It is deceptive that many Mlabri speakers can converse in a kind of Northern Thai, a highlander lingua franca, which they pronounce without word tones but otherwise seem to speak quite fluently. In fact their vocabulary in that language is often limited to what is needed in basic communication with villagers, and it happens that a word is used with a meaning that is at variance with its established meaning in Northern Thai. Another factor that complicates bilingual fieldwork is that the Mlabri may misinterpret words in Thai or Northern Thai because they do not react to tonal contrasts as being relevant at the lexical level (Mlabri has phrasal intonation).

If the communicative setting is meaningless to the Mlabri there may be total havoc. I have a copy of a tape on which the field worker asked an interpreter, a student from Chiangmai, to elicit the Mlabri way of asking the question: 'Who is

he?’. The interpreter translated it into Northern Thai and said it aloud with the intention of having the Mlabri speaker give his version in Mlabri. This particular interrogative sentence in Northern Thai is composed of a segmental string *pen khay* plus a distinctive tone on each syllable. If it is perceived without distinctive tone it becomes ambiguous over two readings: it could mean ‘Who is he?’, or ‘He is ill’. In communicating with the Mlabri I have found it is almost impossible to ask a person to formulate a question, especially if it has no referent; a normal Mlabri speaker invariably comes up with an answer to the question instead. In that particular instance the Mlabri interpreted the phoneme string *pen khay* in the only sensible way, namely as a statement about somebody being ill. The communication failure was clearly not detected during the recording.

Over the last several years I have recorded a large amount of connected speech in the form of dialogues between Mlabri kinspeople or in the form of mythological or other narratives. My Thesaurus will increasingly include data from that material but the bulk of the phrasal data still reflects my own interactions with speakers ever since 1982. Since the translation of each piece of data is a hypothesis based on the narrative context or on the communicative situation in which it was retrieved, there is a constant need for revising the lexical information in the Thesaurus file along with the processing of new linguistic input. It has happened more often than I like to think about that I have had to discard my first understanding of a lexical item or of some idiomatic expression as being seriously skewed or downright wrong. At other times, it emerged that there was an intriguing pattern of polysemy. As a result, I have come to feel a strong scepticism toward word lists based on brief encounters using questionnaires.

I shall speak very little about notational issues. Because I wanted the material to be very easy to export from one type of format to another, or from one text editor to another, I chose a romanization which exhibits one-to-one correspondence with a phonemic IPA-notation [Fig. 2]. Although some consonant phonemes are represented as digraphs, that does not cause any ambiguity since syllable boundaries are indicated throughout the material.

The only serious problem in the notation of Mlabri is presented by presyllables or “minor syllables” which head the so-called “sesquisyllabic” wordforms. For main entries I have chosen forms with no vowel in the minor syllable whenever a pronunciation with a syllabic consonant is possible, but I stick to a low level of abstraction and write the vowel that occurs obligatorily if the minor syllable ends in a glide or in a voiceless consonant. To choose a vowel symbol in such cases is sometimes tricky since the realization of minor syllables is not uniform across Mlabri. Very often it is so that a word may be pronounced in three or

more ways: without any audible vowel in the minor syllable, with a schwa-like vowel, or with some other vowel of more distinct quality (generally a high vowel). If there is a vowel different from schwa in the minor syllable it tends to be harmonized with the following main syllable: rounded vowel before rounded vowel, front before front, etc., but that is not always the case, and some speakers have idiosyncratic preferences for one or another vowel quality in minor syllables. This variability is a characteristic feature of the language, and I have tried to capture it by entering variant forms with cross-referencing but some simplification has been necessary in order to avoid total chaos.

As I have said repeatedly, I have so far avoided sophisticated editors or data processing tools because I wanted my raw files to be as close to an ASCII-format as possible. Eventually, of course, the whole material must be made available in a format which is compatible with that of other current thesaurus projects, but so far I have chosen the policy to wait and see. The raw file can – already in its present form – be subjected to extraction of ordered lexicon files of one or another kind, for example for the study of selected word fields or for the study of lexical data of a particular phonological structure. Above all, it is my goal to extract and edit more or less compact Mlabri dictionaries from the raw file. I can illustrate how an arbitrarily chosen section of the raw data looks in comparison with the same entries in a compact dictionary drawn from the raw file [Fig. 3 and Fig. 4].

For comparative purposes it is mandatory to have a word list going from English to Mlabri. As a minimum it might be just a key to the use of a more comprehensive Mlabri-English dictionary. I have only provisional and grossly incomplete keys of that kind so far.

At the moment I have one very compact Mlabri-English dictionary available in a draft edition (for my own use). That has already proved enormously useful for me as a tool in the analysis of narrative texts exactly because it conflates all three varieties of Mlabri. It is often the case that such a text contains lexical items which have not been recorded from daily use in the same variety of Mlabri, and it is then quite often the case that the word is in general use in another variety of Mlabri, with more or less completely the same meaning.

One of my ultimate goals is to extract an etymological dictionary from the files, when I have managed to enter such information to a sufficient degree. I can so far supply etymological information to maybe half of the total vocabulary, which is not impressive. It sometimes seems premature to solve problems of detail since the genetic affiliations of Mlabri still pose challenging questions.

My ultra-compact version of the Mlabri-English dictionary does not include any etymological information, not even a labelling of modern loanwords. I still tend to look at comparative research on vocabulary as something quite different from the task of providing a reliable tool for the understanding and analysis of texts, but eventually, of course, etymological information can be incorporated in a definitive dictionary.

Another type of elaboration is the inclusion of extensive cross-referencing between synonyms or near-synonyms. There is a wealth of such cross-referencing in the raw file but it has been made very inconsistently and would need thorough reworking. Still, already in its provisional form this cross-referencing between synonyms opens possibilities of studying word fields across all varieties of Mlabri, with identification of the clan provenance of a word form and – if it is relevant – with indication of gender differences or age-related differences in the Mlabri speakers' lexical preferences. Several lexical items form word pairs of which one member is a male word, the other a female word, but this is true only within each variety; in a different variety of Mlabri there may be a quite different word pair with the same meaning and with a male-female polarization, or the two clan-specific word pairs may share one member or another. With more knowledge about all this, Mlabri seems to have an interesting potential for the study of gender-dependent lexical usage.

To round this paper off I wish to mention that Mlabri is traditionally a hunter-gatherer language. Most people expect such languages to be rich in terminology relating to edible things and to phenomena of the ambient nature in general, but it is interesting that a similar richness can be found in categories of verbs denoting action, motion or posture. I shall illustrate this very briefly by presenting one semantic field: that of manipulating a surface by cutting. Mlabri has several words for that, especially if we lump the three varieties: A, B and C together, as I think is perfectly warranted [Fig. 5]. In order to show that the expressive potential of Mlabri is not all that different from that of a quite different language spoken in a far-away society of similar traditional organization and subsistence culture, I have extracted a similar list of words from the available dictionaries of West Greenlandic Eskimo [Fig. 6].

It is conspicuous that we find vocabularies of 'cutting' of almost the same size in both cases, namely some twenty-odd different lexical items (25 in Mlabri). Although the two languages are typologically as different as they can possibly be, they behave similarly in terms of lexical-semantic differentiation and synonymy.

I have not studied how the richness of cutting-terms in Mlabri compares with village-bound Mon-Khmer languages, but I hope the illustration is thought-provoking in itself and may help to dispel the myth that so-called primitive cultures have languages with small vocabularies. What is characteristic is, on the contrary, that lexical items often encode more specific meanings than they do in languages of so-called developed cultures. In such languages we expect to find one or a few generalized verbs of ‘cutting’, and the specific way a cut is performed is then expressed by factoring out the semantic components of the action and distributing them over the syntactic parts of a complex verb phrase (this is illustrated by my rather clumsy translations of the lists of verbs).

In a contrastive comparison with Thai or English the ground-level categories in Mlabri often appear to be hyponymic. The semantic field of cutting illustrates this for verbs. The same is true of some semantic fields encoded by nouns. Thai and English have generic terms for ‘monkey’ and ‘snake’, for example; in Mlabri there are no corresponding terms. Being more or less bilingual the Mlabri speakers are perfectly aware that monkeys and snakes form natural classes from the perspective of the Thai language though they may be in doubt about the inclusiveness of these classes, but when they speak their own language there is nothing to suggest a specific relatedness between cobras and pythons. It is the other way round with phenomena which are less essential to survival in the traditional culture. There has then been a lesser need for fine-grained lexical differentiation within the semantic field in question. An example is colour terms. A bilingual Mlabri distinguishes between many more colours when he speaks Thai than when he speaks Mlabri.

Maybe the most challenging task when working on the vocabulary of a language such as Mlabri is to do justice to its expressive potential by capturing the richness of terminology in some semantic fields as against the paucity in others. That is not easy, and it is particularly difficult to grasp fine shades of meaning. I often end up listing several lexical items with virtually identical meanings but I do not at all feel convinced of true synonymy except in cases where there are alternative expressions used by different groups: be it different clans, different age-groups or women contra men.

Handout

Examples of everyday lexicon differing over A, B and/or C-Mlabri (note the apparent randomness in clan-language polarization and in the use of borrowed versus indigenous words):

- 'bathe': **tha.lèèw** {A} vs. **im** {BC}
- 'come': **leh** {ABC} = **pruk** {B} (*allegedly male language only*)
- 'day' **taal** {A} = **ta.wen** {BC}
- 'dog': **brany** {A} = **chòòq** {(A)BC} (*obsolete in A*)
- 'return home': **(gün) wäl** {AB} = **mii** {C}
- 'rise; move uphill': **khün** {A} = **glèh** {BC}
- 'soft' **òòn** {A} = **biäac** {BC}
- 'speak': **täny** {AC} = **glaaq** {B}
- 'throw': **dor** {A} = **kim** {B} = **thim** {C}
- 'water': **wèek** {AC} = **jrääk** {B}
- 'wife': **miëë** {A} = **hmaay** (*sic!*) {BC}

There is variation in many lexical items, sometimes due to repeated borrowing, otherwise mostly in presyllables, e.g.

- 'policeman': **kam.nuät** = **tam.nuät** {B}
- 'teenage girl': **gët.gòt** = **güt.gòt** = **got.gòt** = **gut.gòt** {A}

From a systemic point of view, however, Mlabri is extremely uniform. – Phonological differences that exhibit regularity are few:

An alternation [a:] > [u:] is found in a few lexical items, e.g.

- 'sky': **klaar** {AC} (C idiolectally: *klaal, klaay*) vs. **kliir** {B}
- 'mucous': **maar** {AC} vs. **müir** {B}
- 'wild banana': **qyaak** {A} vs. **qyüik** {BC}

An idiolectal shift from palatal > lateral final occurs in C-Mlabri (it is apparent already in Bernatzik's "Yumbri" data 1938):

- 'firewood': **uulh** {ABC} vs. **uuyh** {C}
- also cf. the example **klaar** above*

Fig. 1

Romanization of Mlabri versus rather broad IPA notation:

Syllable-initials (the prevocalic glottal is unmarked in romanization):

<i>ph</i> /ph/	<i>th</i> /th/	<i>ch</i> /ch/ [tʰ, ʧ, s]	<i>kh</i> /kh/
<i>p</i> /p/	<i>t</i> /t/	<i>c</i> /c/ [c, tʰ]	<i>k</i> /k/
<i>b</i> /b/	<i>d</i> /d/	<i>j</i> /j/ [dʒ]	<i>g</i> /g/
<i>qb</i> /b/	<i>qd</i> /d/		
<i>hm</i> /hm/	<i>hn</i> /hn/	<i>hny</i> /hɲ/	<i>hng</i> /hŋ/
<i>m</i> /m/	<i>n</i> /n/	<i>ny</i> /ɲ/	<i>ng</i> /ŋ/
	<i>hl</i> /hl/		
	<i>l</i> /l/		
	<i>r</i> /r/		
<i>hw</i> /hw/			plus: <i>h</i> /h/
<i>w</i> /w/		<i>y</i> /j/	

Syllable-finals (word-internal syllable boundary is marked):

<i>p</i> /p/	<i>t</i> /t/	<i>c</i> /c/	<i>k</i> /k/	plus: <i>q</i> /ʔ/
<i>m</i> /m/	<i>n</i> /n/	<i>ny</i> /ɲ/	<i>ng</i> /ŋ/	
	<i>lh</i> /lh/ [l ^h , l̥]			
	<i>l</i> /l/			
	(<i>rh</i> /rh/, [r ^h , r̥])			
	<i>r</i> /r/			
		<i>yh</i> /jh/ [j̥, ʒ̥]		plus: <i>h</i> /h/
<i>w</i> /w/		<i>y</i> /j/		

Vowels:

<i>i</i> /i/	<i>ĩ</i> /ɨ/	<i>u</i> /u/	<i>ii</i> /i:/	<i>ĩĩ</i> /ɨ:/	<i>uu</i> /u:/
<i>e</i> /e/	<i>ě</i> /ɛ/	<i>o</i> /o/	<i>ee</i> /e:/	<i>ěě</i> /ɛ:/	<i>oo</i> /o:/
<i>è</i> /ɛ/	<i>ä</i> /ʌ/	<i>ò</i> /ɔ/	<i>èè</i> /ɛ:/	<i>ää</i> /ʌ:/	<i>òò</i> /ɔ:/
	<i>a</i> /a/			<i>aa</i> /a:/	

Fig. 2

Raw Thesaurus file vs. “Mlabri Compact Dictionary”

(1) Thesaurus Raw File 2002:

kräp V <AC> (indirectly related to **gräp**) ¶ (1) (for an insect to) bite; sting (cf. **còk**) | chäny Kräp mlaq choq if the mosquito bites you it hurts <C> | muut Kräp mlaaq the mosquitos bite people <A> ¶ (2) bite with the front teeth (cf. **krèc**, **krwèc**, **kruh.krwah**) ¶ (2a) (for an animal to) bite to wound or kill | cë.but Kräp mlaaq the pig bit the man!, i.e.: the pig bit me! (exclaimed with the purpose of provoking pity and merriment) <A> # **bèèk Kräp mlaaq** bears bite people <A> ¶ (2b) bite so as to make a hole or tear something open # **ek cäny Kräp gwèh** use the teeth to tear something (e.g. a plastic bag) open <C> ¶ (3) (A:) cut ¶ (3a) cut with a cutting blade (cf. **kräp**, **krèc**, **kruh.krwah**, **krwèc**) # **kräp kul.muy cäny** shave one's upper lip <A> # **kräp kul.muy wëeng** shave one's chin <A> ¶ (3b) cut with a biting implement # **kräp gr.wèc** cut one's nails <A>

kräw V <A(+K)BC(+Y:150)> (cf. **kheet**, **ngòòm**) ¶ (1) with Object N: be afraid of something (in a static sense); fear | km.baac mèq Kräw kër fear rain and thunder <A> | kräw biik nyän krèc fear the bear because it bites | met Kräw kwär (our child) is not afraid of outsiders ¶ (2) with Verb/Clause Complement: worry that something may happen ¶ (2a) without Connective # **kräw mèq hot** fear that it will rain <A> | kräw mèq hot, hmòq pha.qyang I fear that it will rain so I put a plastic cover over the lean-to <A> ¶ (2b) with Connective | kräw i kul.kòl I am afraid to stumble (in the dense forest) <C> ¶ (3) (A also:) as Unmodified Verb ¶ (3a) feel lonely and insecure | hnguh dë.mòy oh Kräw I feel scared when I am alone <A> ¶ (3b) feel scared | kräw kò rèq jak they ran off because they were scared <A>

(2) “Compact Mlabri Dictionary” (draft, with IPA added), 2004:

kräp [krɔp] {AC} V (cf. gräp): (1) (for an insect to) bite; sting; (2) bite with the front teeth; (3) (A:) cut (with a tool)

kräw [krɔw] {PanMl} V: be afraid of something; worry that something may happen; feel scared

Fig. 3

Raw Thesaurus file vs. “Mlabri Compact Dictionary”

(1) Thesaurus Raw File 2002:

bëen I V (same etymon as **bëen II**) ¶ (1) acquire # **a bëen** have got it; have obtained it <AB> | oo, a bëen taw.lii that's great, now we have lamps! # **a bëen hmaay** married (said of a man) | lè.meet a bëen hmaay a married man # **a bëen lang** married (said of women) | mi-nying a bëen lang married woman # **chi bëen** want to have; desire <BC> | chi bëen, bëen (1st occ.) if you want it you can have it <C> | met chi bëen glang I don't want any husband ¶ (2) in: **chak bëen** don't like; cannot stand (that thing or that person)

bëen II Modal Verb (same etymon as **bëen I**) occurring Pre- or Postverbally with an explicit or implied verb so as to denote ability/potentiality (probably obsolescent in A) <ABC> (cf. **qdèy**) ¶ (1) (Preverbally:) there is or has been an opportunity of doing so-and-so # **chak bëen** there is no opportunity (for me) to do so-and-so | oh a chak bëen bong, chaw eeq I have not had a chance to eat, so I'm hungry ¶ (2) (Postverbally:) ¶ (2a) know how to; be able (**bëen** occurs in this meaning mostly if negated) # **a bëen** I know how to <A> # **chak bëen** cannot # **këet met bëen** turns out not to be able to # **ki.bò bëen** cannot (said to be obsolete language) <A> # **kò.bò bëen** cannot <C> | oh kò.bò bëen I'm not able to; I don't know how to <C> # **kò.bò èh bëen** one cannot catch it (the animal); it is not possible to hunt it <C> # **met bëen** cannot; not able to | èh met bëen cannot work any more; I'm exhausted | leh met bëen I cannot come # **mit bëen** cannot; not able to <A> ¶ (2b) (BC:) it is possible ¶ (2c) (BC:) it is all right; OK | chi bëen, bëen (2nd occ.) if you want it you can have it <C> # **a dò bëen** be allright # **ji.qdëe a dò bëen** anything whatsoever (will do) | bong ji.qdëe a dò bëen eats anything whatsoever

(2) “Compact Mlabri Dictionary” (draft, with IPA added), 2004:

bëen [bɤ:n] I {B} V: (1) acquire; (2) in: *chak bëen don't like; cannot stand (that thing; that person)*

bëen [bɤ:n] II {PanMl} Modal Verb: (1) (Preverbally) *there is or has been an opportunity of doing so-and-so*; (2) (Postverbally or with implicit Main Verb) *know how to; be able (bëen occurs in this meaning mostly if negated)*; (3) (Postverbally or with implicit Main Verb, only in BC:) *it is possible; it is all right; OK!*

Fig. 4

Illustration of a semantic field:

‘cut/chop/split’-verbs (excluding words which basically mean ‘kill’, ‘end’, ‘destroy’, ‘break’, ‘tear’, ‘stab’ or ‘bite’ rather than ‘cut’):

Mlabri:

(a few items: *cək.cok*, *cik.crak*, *puh.poh* are derived by reduplication or compounding; the words *crak* and *poh* in themselves do not mean ‘to cut’)

bë.boh {A} cut in small pieces

bih {ACB} cut down; chop off; cut off crosswise; (C also:) slaughter

bläh {AC} split wood; cut into wood by swinging an axe or machete

brèng {B} cut an edge (on an implement) into shape

broq {AB} to cut oneself inadvertently

qbac {BC} cut with lengthwise movements (e.g. to shape the point of an arrow)

cah {AB} : (A:) cut wood lengthwise; (B:) slice; cut pieces off; (A:) slash to clear the ground

cë(ë)k {C} cut across with a knife or a pair of scissors (e.g. to cut the hair)

cək.cok {C} slice up (with a knife)

cik.crak {A} split something lengthwise with repeated cuts

cok {BC} cut across

chòdlh {AC} (A:) cut off; cut loose; slice; (C apparently:) gather (edible herbs in the forest) by cutting

chòdòy {B} cut off slices (e.g. of food so that people can taste it)

dèl {AB} fell (a tree); chop; cut down

geet {BC} cut; chop

glèy {B} cut with a machete; shape with repeated cuts; carve; chop up

gräp {A} cut off; cut in a "biting" manner, as with a pair of scissors

hr.lah {AC} cut (meat) up lengthwise for roasting; cut loose

koh {B} cut something in two parts

pak {AB} cut with an axe; clear an area by cutting

paat {ABC} cut up; slice; cut/carve something out of the skin; (4) (A:) (for a knife to) accidentally cut into ones skin

pëyh {AB} cut off; (B:) cut into shape; clear land by cutting with a machete

puh.poh {A} (also: *poh.poh*) cut in small pieces

raalh {B} cut; make perpendicular cuts in something

thet {A} (for a sharp implement to) cut transversally through something

Out of the 25 lexical entries above, 15 have (so far) been recorded in A-Mlabri, 15 in B-Mlabri, and only 10 in the more poorly attested C-Mlabri. There are 12 entries which so far are attested in only one variety.

Fig. 5

‘cut/chop/split’-verbs (excluding words which basically mean ‘kill’, ‘end’, ‘destroy’, ‘break’, ‘tear’, ‘stab’ or ‘bite’ rather than ‘cut’)

Greenlandic (Eskimo) for comparison:

(Some of the lexical entries below are etymologically related via derivation, but these relationships are for the most part old, dating back to Proto-Eskimo. It is true of all entries that they can be expanded by derivation, in some cases with lexicalized meanings. Thus the sample below is illustrative, not exhaustive.)

ikug- cut; hoe; peck

ilisser- cut into shape (with knife or scissors)

kiler- cut oneself (by accident)

kilit- cut into shreds; cut a slice off

kipi- cut through (transversally); disconnect; cut a piece off

kitser- cut into slices

pilag- flense (a sea animal)

qior- make cuts into

qiortar- cut into pieces; cut some parts off

qiperor- carve (in some material)

qullor- cut something into shreds; chop (wood, with an axe)

qupi- chop or cut in two parts

qusissiar- chop wood with an axe

qussar- split with a wedge; use a chisel

siig- tear; cut through lengthwise (overlap with the semantic field of tearing)

sipi- cut through; tear apart (overlap with the semantic field of tearing)

tisa- cut fish open; split a fish

ulima- cut with an axe; chop wood (*ulimaat* is (1) chopped firewood, (2) axe)

plus some verbs of cutting/flensing derived from nouns denoting the object or part affected by the cutting:

arfior- flense a whale (*arfeq* whale)

niaquer- cut the head off (a fish); behead (*niaqoq* head)

qaqerluer- cut the neck (of a fish) (*qaqerluk* the area under the lower jaw)

Fig. 6