The Meso-Cordilleran Group
of Philippine Languages

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1. Introduction

In “The Alta languages of the Philippines” (1991), Dr. Lawrence A. Reid clarified the relationships of various Cordilleran languages of northern Luzon. The two Alta languages, Northern Alta (AltN) and Southern Alta (AltS), are spoken by groups of Negritos in Nueva Ecija, Bulacan and Aurora Provinces. The two languages are not mutually intelligible, and they appear to be only distantly related to each other. Together, their closest affiliation is with the Central and Southern Cordilleran languages, rather than with other languages with which they are in more intimate contact today, such as Casiguran Dumagat, Umiray Dumaget and Tagalog.

The Central Cordilleran (CC) and Southern Cordilleran (SC) languages of northern Luzon are descended from a common parent, Proto-South Central Cordilleran (PSCC), a language coordinate with the Alta languages. Together, Alta and PSCC are descended from Proto-Meso Cordilleran (PMC), itself a branch of Cordilleran coordinate with Ilokano, Arta and the Northern Cordilleran subgroup (Reid 1989). Figure 1 diagrams these relationships. Thus, non-borrowed language characteristics shared by Alta and a SCC language may be assigned to the level of PMC, and those not found in Alta but shared by CC and SC may be attributed to PSCC.

Reid presented compelling phonological, morphological and lexical evidence for this classification. Offered here is additional lexical evidence for PMC and PSCC. Further phonological, morphological and semantic innovations that are shared among these languages will be dealt with elsewhere.

2. Proto-Meso-Cordilleran

Reid (1991) reconstructed a limited number of items assignable to PMC as exclusively shared by Alta and PSCC:

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1 Most of the data used in this paper were collected in the field during the years 1962–64, 1966–68, 1977, 1981, 1989, 1999 and 2001. Additional data are taken from Headland and Headland (1974), Lambrecht (1978), McFarland (1977), Reid (1971, 1976), Scott (1957), Tharp and Natividad (1976), Vanoverbergh (1933, 1956, 1972), and Yap (1977). Additional data on the languages of eastern Luzon, on Arta and on Alta were generously provided by Dr. Thomas Headland and by Dr. Laurie Reid.

2 An item which is widespread within a language and/or is reported in the literature is referred to simply as Ibl, KnkS, etc. Otherwise its distribution is indicated by the municipality or barangay where it occurs (in parentheses). For an explanation of regional variation within CC and SC languages see Himes 1989, 1994, 1996 and 1998.
Three of these reconstructions can be raised to higher levels. *tik[nd]ag should be raised to the level of Proto-Cordilleran (PC), since reflexes are found in Northern Cordilleran languages: Isneg taʔnag, Itawis tvarng, Kasiguranin natknag, and Eastern Luzon Agta mata:kdig, tikdeg ‘to fall.’ Since Arta has sibu ‘to blow’, the item *siʔbuk should also be raised to PC, unless of course Arta borrowed the item from AltN or Ilongot. The reconstruction *paːgiw can be raised to an even higher level, since reflexes of it are found in the Ayta languages Mag-anchi and Mag-indi of the Sambalic family, paːgaw, poːgaw, ‘chest.’

Further additions to the vocabulary of PMC include the following:

*ʔaʔi  KnkN ʔiyaʔi, AltN yay ‘to bring’
*ʔ[ai]nuka  Bon, KnkN, KnkS ʔanoka, noka, Ifg ʔanuka, ʔaʔa, Kla ʔanuka, nuʔa, AltN ʔinuʔa ‘what-you-may-call-it’
*ʔugʔan  Bon, KnkN ʔogʔan ‘small cooking jar,’ Kla ʔugán, AltS ʔogˈʔin ‘cooking pot,’ Kln manʔugán ‘to cook’
*bitkiN  Bon (Guinaang) bitkiŋ ‘the lower part of one’s shin,’ Bon, KnkN, Kla, Ilt bitkin, Blw bitʔin, Png, Ilt bitkiŋ, AltN bitkiŋ, AltS bitkiŋ, bitteŋ ‘calf (of the leg)’
*(g)abud  KnkN ʔabod, AltS gebud ‘sand.’ Cf. Bon ʔobod, Ifg ʔubud ‘sand’

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**Figure 1.** Internal relationships of the Cordilleran languages
3. Alta

Lexical innovations shared exclusively by AltN and AltS are relatively few, indicating the remoteness of their relationship. Reid (1991:286) identified the following forms as similar enough to be shared cognates:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AltS</th>
<th>AltN</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>bitlay</td>
<td>bitlayin</td>
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<tr>
<td>dakol</td>
<td>daːʔiʔl</td>
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<tr>
<td>koyug</td>
<td>kuyug</td>
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<tr>
<td>mopnay</td>
<td>panay</td>
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<tr>
<td>muːŋnul</td>
<td>muːŋnul</td>
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<tr>
<td>minaybut</td>
<td>?iːbut</td>
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<tr>
<td>?obbudin</td>
<td>budin</td>
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<tr>
<td>lutit</td>
<td>lutit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dalam</td>
<td>dalam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pulād</td>
<td>poːlid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>laːnis</td>
<td>laːnis</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Three of these items, also, can be raised to the level of PC, since they have cognates in the Northern Cordilleran group of languages. Isneg has baʔlāy ‘carry on the shoulder.’ The item meaning ‘flood’ has cognates in Ibanag nadakːal and in Itawis dumakːal. And Paranan and Kasiguranin have meːbut, mineːbut ‘lost, to lose.’

Two items may be added to the list of shared Alta vocabulary:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AltS</th>
<th>AltN</th>
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<tr>
<td>?iʔe</td>
<td>?iʔe, ?iʔen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mudůŋŋ</td>
<td>mudůŋŋ</td>
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</table>

4. Proto-South-Central Cordilleran

A substantial number of items have been reconstructed for the CC and for the SC languages (Reid 1974, 1979, Himes 1988, 1989, 1990, 1994, 1998). Figures 2 and 3 show the internal relationships of these two subgroups.
There is a large body of lexemes that appear to be shared exclusively by CC and SC languages. Many of these items are cognate because they were innovated at the PSCC level and are retained in the daughter languages. Others are undoubtedly local innovations in one of the two major branches that spread into the other. Apparent cognates occurring only in contiguous communities—especially in Nuclear Central Cordilleran and Nuclear Southern Cordilleran—are particularly suspect.

4.1. Relatively secure lexical innovations

Lexical items that have a wide distribution in both CC and SC languages are assigned to the level of PSCC with confidence. These include lexemes which occur in both branches of the family in non-contiguous areas.\(^3\)

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\(^3\) Reconstructions that were originally suggested by Reid are marked with (R).
Kla *agubba, Itg *agubi ‘short, low’

Bon *agom ‘to be gathered in preparation for going to listen for bird omens, of a men’s ward,’ KnkN *agom ‘to gather together,’ Itt *aguman ‘a gathering of men for decision making’

Bon *alibujit ‘pitch black,’ Png kalibujitan ‘dark’

KnkN *anduk:kiy, Ifg *andukke, *is:andu:oy, Png *andukiy, Itt *anèo:kiy, Kar *anèo:kiy, Itt *anèuki ‘long (object)’

KnkS *anamolok, namolok, *animolok, Blw (*a fly’s eggs,’ KnkN, KnkS, Isi *anomolok, Itt *animolok (obs.) young of the wild pig’ (R)

Bon *as?op, Bon, Ibl *as:op, Ifg *nih?up, Itt *as?asup, Ibl *as:op, Kln *ahup, *ihup ‘near’

Kla *ibukan, Kln (Kehang) *manbuk ‘to stab’

KnkN, KnkS *id ‘to/at (marker of distance),’ Png *id ‘to/at (marker, both near and far)’


KnkN, KnkS *igis ‘belly, intestines,’ Png *igis ‘belly,’ Ibl, Kar *i:gi, Kln *i:gi, Itt *igit ‘belly, intestines’


Bon *imis, KnkN, KnkS *imis, Kla *omos, Isi *omos, *omat, Png *amis, Ibl *amis, *imis, Kar *a:mid, Kln *imih, *emeh ‘to bathe’

KnkS, Kln *ib:qi, Itg *ib:qi, Isi *ibboy ‘to throw away’

Itg, Kln *ugip, Png *ugip, Ibl *o:gi, Itt *ugip ‘to sleep’

Bon *yogtan, KnkN *agantan, yogtan, KnkS *yogtan, Png *yogtan ‘younger sibling’


Bon (Maliugcon) *bala:ok, Bon (Dallikan), KnkN *ba:ok, Png *bala:uk ‘ladle, spatula’

KnkN (Luba), Kla (Masadiit) *bant:ilid, Kla *bati:led, Itt *bilisilid ‘mountain’

KnkS *bik?im, Blw *bu:, Ifg bo?a, Kla bok?a, boka, Ibl, Kar, Knk *bika ‘to dig,’ Bon *bika, Ibl, Kar, Kln *bika ‘to bury’


Bon *bigis ‘a fly’s eggs,’ KnkS *bigis ‘camote worm,’ KnkS, Ibl *bigis, Ifg, Kln *bigi, Png *bigis ‘worm’
*buliŋit*  Bon, KnkN, KnkS bolĩŋit, Ifg (Cababuyan), Kla bulĩŋot, Ibl ?ambilŋit, Kār ?onboliŋit, Kln ?ambilŋit ‘dark, black’

*daʔlag*  KnkN daʔag ‘to bring near,’ Ilt diyag, diag ‘near,’ Bon, Kla dalʔag, Ilt kadiyag ‘neighbor’ (Cf. Bon dalʔay ‘a working group’)

*dilςig*  Bon dilςig ‘to split small pieces off a log,’ Bon dolςig, Kln dalςig ‘to split’

*dikit*  Bon makiŋit, Ifg di:kit ‘girls’ beauty, prettiness,’ Png marikit ‘young woman.’ (Cf. Bon maggiŋit ‘young woman, unmarried woman’)

*diŋut*  Bon diŋot, Png maŋut ‘dirty’

*gatud*  Bon, KnkN ga:td ‘rooster’s tail feathers,’ Ifg katud, Ilt gαtud ‘back (of person)’

*gaya*  Kla gayagaya, Isa maggayha:ya, Kln magya ‘happy’ (Cf. Png gayaga ‘happy’)

*kalʔit*  Kla (Pinukpuk) nakait, Kln kilʔit ‘sour,’ Kln magkalʔit ‘bitter’

*kalab*  Bon, KnkN, KnkS, Ifg, Itg, Kla, Png kalab, KnkN kalʔab, kommaŋ, Isa ?eyay, Ibl, Kar, Kln kalab ‘to climb’

*kaʔyab*  KnkS kayʔab, Ilt kayab ‘to climb’

*kidim*  Bon, KnkN, KnkS, Ilt, Itg kidim, Ifg kodoŋ, Isa ?orom, Kln kedem ‘eyelash’ (Cf. Isneg kaddam ‘to close one’s eyes’)

*kilaŋ*  Bon, Itg kilay, KnkN kilaŋ, Ifg, Kla kolay, Ibl kilay ‘earthworm, intestinal worm,’ Kln keŋaŋ, kaŋaŋ ‘intestinal worm’

*kitiw*  Isi pαjiŋtɔŋ, Ibl paktiŋ ‘bamboo water container’

*ku:bu*  KnkN kobo ‘to fence in,’ Ifg ku:bu ‘house lot,’ Ilt ku:bu ‘space-under-house’

*ku[m]papʔiy*  Bon, KnkN kopapʔiy, kopkɔpapʔiy, Bon kɔpapʔiy, Ifg ʔɔppaŋ, Kla kappaŋpoy, kɔppaŋpoy, Png kumpaŋpoy ‘butterfly’

*kuʔku*  Bon kɔkʔo ‘to dig out a root,’ Kln, Ilt kuʔku ‘to dig’

*kVspag*  Bon kispag ‘to eat rice without a side dish,’ KnkN nakaspaŋ ‘left over,’ Bon mayospag, Kln maŋapag, kahpag ‘breakfast’

*labaw*  Kla labaw, Ibl davaw ‘to float’

*latug*  KnkN latog ‘to swell (of the eyes),’ Png latug ‘to swell’

*litiŋ*  Bon, KnkN litiŋ, Ifg lotog, Isi lotoŋ, Ibl, Kar ditŋ, Kln litŋ ‘straight’


*ŋi:diŋil*  Kla yiddol, Ibl, Kar giril ‘dull’

*ŋilu[d]*  KnkN yilil ‘badly done, ill-made,’ Blw, Ifg, Kla ŋilu, Kln (Ahin) nagi:lu, Kln (Kayapa) nagi:lu, Ilt ʔilil ‘dull’
shared developments from PSCC. The most likely candidates are the following:

**MESO-CORDILLERAN GROUP**

*pi:diŋ*  
Bon pi:diŋ 'length of rattan,' Ilt pidiŋ 'rope, to tie with a rope'

*pu(k?)nad*  
KnkN poknad, Kla pu:nad, Kln pu?nad 'to wipe'

*pu:sut*  
KnkN po:sot 'to take up, grab,' Kln pu:shut 'to hold'

*pu:wik*  

*sa?piy*  

*sakluŋ*  
Blw ha?luy, Ifg hakløy, Isi se?uy, Ibl sakdøy, Kln hakluŋ 'ladle'

*sidil*  
Bon sidil, KnkN, KnkS sidi, masdi, Blw s:dal, Ifg hodol, mahdol, Kla sodol, Ibl sièil, Ibl, Kar masèil, Kln hidil, mahdil 'thick'

*si?lik*  
Bon sili?ık, Kln ḥi?lek, Ilt ṣani?yik 'to sniff'

*su?ni*  
KnkN sun?i 'extraneous body driven in any part of the body, splinter, etc.,' Ilt tu?mi 'thorn'

*ta:bu*  
Bon, KnkN, Ibl ta:bo, Ifg, Ilt ta:bu 'belly'

*ta[i]byiŋ*  
Kla tabyoy 'pond,' Ibl tibiyiŋ 'lake'

*tamil*  
Bon, KnkN, KnkS, Blw, Ifg, Kla (Manabo), Ibl, Kar, Kln tamil, Ilt tamiŋ 'cheek'

*tapiw*  
Bon ?a\¬a\¬atappi\¬w, KnkN ?ata\¬pi\¬w, ?at\¬ata\¬pi\¬w, Ifg ?ata\¬paw 'low,' Bon, KnkN, KnkS, Png ?ata\¬pi\¬w, Blw ?atta\¬paw, Ifg ?atappo, Kla ?atappaw, Ibl ?ata\¬pi\¬w, Kln ne\¬e\¬pew, na?ta\¬pi\¬w 'shallow'

*t[ii]ŋiy*  
Bon (Mainit), KnkN (Fidelisan) tiŋiy, Bon, KnkN tiŋiy, Isi (Bambang) siŋoy, Ibl, Kln tiŋiy, Ibl tiŋiy, Kar tiŋiy 'frog (esp. large frog)'

*tiŋiy*  
Bon tiŋi\¬yan 'ant,' KnkN tiŋi\¬yan 'a kind of small black ant,' Kla tyyoy, Ibl ?atto\¬iŋ, tṭtiŋiy, ?atii\¬tiŋiy, Kln tiŋi\¬tiŋiy 'ant'

*tunuŋ*  
Blw tonuy, Ilt tunuy 'cold'

*tuwiŋ*  
Bon to\¬ti\¬ŋ, Kla, Kln tu\¬wi\¬ŋ, Kar ti\¬wi\¬ŋ, tu\¬wi\¬ŋ 'worm'

*ya:pit*  
Bon, KnkN, KnkS, Blw, Ifg, Kla, Isi, Ilt ya\¬piti, Kar ja\¬phi\¬t 'thin (object)'

4.2. Shared lexical innovations, with a possibility of borrowing

Among those items occurring with more limited distribution some may well be shared developments from PSCC. The most likely candidates are the following:

*?ala:giŋ*  
KnkS ?ala:giŋ, Png alagiy, Kln ?algiy 'to stand'

*?ilwaŋ*  

*?itiŋ*  
Bon ɸitiŋ ‘to mature,’ KnkN ɸitiŋ ‘adult,’ Ifg ɬototŋ ‘to be full grown’

*ʔiːmuk
Bon, Ibl ʔɛmok, Isi ʔɛmuʔ, Kln ʔɛmuk ‘mosquito’

*bəɡiːlat
Bon, KnkN, bəɡiːlat, Blw bəɡiːlat, Ibl bəɡidat, Kar bəɡiːlat, Kln bəɡiːlat ‘lightning’

*baːlal
Bon (Bontoc Ili), KnkN bəːlal ‘to go out,’ Bon (Bontoc Ili) bomalaʔan nan ʔagiw, KnkN balaʔan di ʔagiw, Ibl badaːlan, bidəːlan, Kln balaːlan ‘east’

*baŋul
Bon baŋul ‘kind of animal or bird (arch.),’ KnkN, KnkS baŋo, Ibl, Kar baŋol ‘wild pig,’ Ifg baŋul ‘boar (wild or domestic)’

*bilig
Bon, KnkN bilig ‘slug,’ Ifg (Hapaw) beːog, Ibl, Kln bilig ‘earthworm’

*buʔlu
Bon bobʔolo, KnkS bolbolʔo, boboʔo, Ibl boʔboʔdo, Kln buʔbuʔlu ‘butterfly’

*buːtug
Bon, KnkN boːtug, Ibl botbotog ‘pig’

*duntug
Bon, KnkN, KnkS dontog, Ifg, Kln duntug, Ibl, Kar ëntog ‘mountain, hill’

*gaːwa
Bon, KnkN gaːwa ‘middle, center,’ Bon ʔongaːwa, naŋgaːwa, Bon (Canoe) mingaːwa, Blw naŋgaːwa, məŋgaːwa, Ifg nʊŋgaːwa ‘noon,’ Bon, KnkN, KnkS, Kla gaːwan di labi, Blw gaːwən labi, Kla gaːwa, gawallabi, Isi gaːwa si lavi, Ibl ɡaːwa ni dabi, ɡaːwaːn, Kar ɡaːwɨn dawi, Kln gaːwan laːbi, gaːwan labbi ‘midnight’

*gitap
Bon gitap ‘to add extra covers,’ Ibl, Kar kitap, Kln gatap, gitap ‘blanket’ (Cf. KnkN gitap ‘skirt’)

*kaʔisiŋ
Bon, KnkN, KnkS, Ibl, Kar kaʔisiŋ, Kln kaʔisiŋ ‘co-parents-in-law’

*kaʔut
Bon kaʔut ‘to make a new pondfield,’ KnkN, KnkS ʔikaʔut, Ifg, Kla kaʔut, Ibl kaʔut, Kln kaʔut ‘to dig, to bury’

*liːyik
Bon liːyik, KnkN liːyik ‘flying ant,’ Ifg liːyok, Ibl, Kar diːyik, Kln liːyik ‘termite’

*luːbīg
Bon loːbīg ‘poor quality soft iron, as a blade, which will not hold a sharp edge,’ KnkN loːbīg, Kar ʔidoːgig ‘dull, blunt’

*piltan
Ifg poltan, Isi peːtan, Kar piltan, Kln piltan, paltan ‘rooster’ (Cf. Bon pilot ‘to copulate, of birds and chickens,’ KnkN minpil ‘to copulate,’ Ifg polet ‘sexual organ of male animals’)

*piːsiŋ
KnkN, KnkS, Ibl, Kar piːsiŋ, Ifg, Kln piːsiŋ ‘taro (esp. leaves and stems),’ Ibl piːsiŋ ‘taro plant, above the ground’) (R)

*sigid
Bon sigid ‘to waid, as for instructions,’ KnkN sigid ‘to wait long for,’ Ibl, Kar sikid, Kln higid, heged ‘to wait’
5. Conclusion

At some point in the past, perhaps thousands of years ago, a Cordilleran-speaking population separated from other speakers of this language geographically, socially, or both. This population’s language developed, in relative isolation from others, into Meso-Cordilleran. Speakers of MC eventually encountered groups of Negritos, possibly on the eastern and southern slopes of the Cordillera Central, who adopted the speech of their new neighbors. The interaction between the two groups must have been intense and intimate enough for the Negritos to have substituted MC for whatever language they previously spoke. Nevertheless, direct contact between the Negrito and non-Negrito speakers of MC ceased for whatever reasons (except perhaps between AltN and Ilt, a SC language), as indicated by the wide divergence between Alta and SCC languages today. Subsequently both AltN and AltS have been lexically influenced by quite a few other languages (Reid 1987).

The large number of linguistic innovations, including the lexical ones presented here, that can be assigned to the level of PSCC provides solid testimony to the long shared history of the speakers of the Central and Southern Cordilleran languages. Equally, the substantial number of doubtful items underscores the continuing contact of Cordilleran peoples subsequent to the splitting of the language into the two subgroups. That some of the reconstructions offered here will be raised to higher levels, and that many items will be added to this list, is not unexpected. Of particular interest is the ultimate understanding of the time depth of the split between Alta and PSCC, which will provide some idea of the demographic changes and geographical movements of Cordilleran peoples prior to the age of written records.
## Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AltN</td>
<td>Northern Alta</td>
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<tr>
<td>AltS</td>
<td>Southern Alta</td>
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<tr>
<td>Blw</td>
<td>Balangaw</td>
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<td>Bon</td>
<td>Bontok</td>
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<td>CC</td>
<td>Central Cordilleran</td>
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<tr>
<td>PC</td>
<td>Proto-Cordilleran</td>
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<td>PHF</td>
<td>Proto-Hesperonesian and Formosan</td>
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