

138. Tea

Östen Dahl

This chapter differs from most of the chapters in the atlas in several ways, the focus being on the actual phonological shape of a lexical item expressing a particular concept – moreover, one that is definitely not part of the universal heritage of mankind but rather is connected to a specific agricultural product. What is shown on the map are the sources of the words for ‘tea’ in various languages in the world, illustrating in a somewhat peculiar way the spread of words together with material culture. In particular, the map shows the importance of long-distance contacts, such as the trade relations between European countries and East Asia, and is thus a healthy reminder of the fact that languages need not be geographically contiguous to influence each other. Also, in contrast to e.g. the patterns illustrated in the chapters on M–T and N–M pronouns (chapters 136–137), which presumably go far back in linguistic prehistory, the distribution of words for ‘tea’ depends on quite recent historical processes.

@	1. Words derived from Sinitic <i>cha</i>	109
@	2. Words derived from Min Nan Chinese <i>te55</i>	81
@	3. Others	40
	total	230

The tea plant (*Camellia sinensis*) grows in a vast area that stretches from Assam (India) in the west to the east coast of China and southwards into Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam. The use of the beverage made from the leaves is said to have originated in China and according to legend goes back to 2700 BCE. Tea spread first to Japan, around 800 CE. In the 17th century the use of tea became common in Europe.

Most words for ‘tea’ found in the world’s languages are ultimately of Chinese origin, but they differ significantly in their form due to their coming via different routes. The differences begin already on Chinese soil. Most Sinitic languages have a form similar to Mandarin *chá*, but Min Nan Chinese, spoken e.g. in Fujian and Taiwan, has instead forms like *te⁵⁵* (Chaozhou). The Dutch traders, who were the main importers of tea into Europe, happened to have their main contacts in Amoy (Xiamen) in Fujian. This is why they adopted the word for ‘tea’ as *thee*, and in this form it then spread to large parts of Europe. The influence from Amoy is also visible in many languages spoken in the former Dutch colonies, as in Malay/Indonesian and Javanese *teh*. However, the first European tea importers were not the Dutch but the Portuguese, in the 16th century; their trade route went via Macao rather than via Amoy, and consequently Portuguese uses *chá*, derived from Cantonese *cha*. Likewise, languages spoken in those countries in eastern Europe and Asia which got their tea overland rather than from the Dutch tend to use forms such as *chai*. In Standard English, the [e:] vowel changed into [i:] (although a form conventionally spelled *tay* is preserved in some dialects) by a general sound change, and this pronunciation is reflected in many languages that took over the word from English, e.g. Yoruba (Nigeria) *tii*, !Xóõ (Botswana) *tîi*, Cocopa (California and northern Mexico) *ti*.

In spite of the general tendency for words for ‘tea’ to be borrowed, a significant number of languages use native denominations, particularly within the area where the tea plant grows naturally. Beverages made by infusion from leaves of various plants are of course common in many places, and some languages may have extended the use of a word for these to the imported product. Conversely, words originally used for tea have been extended to other similar drinks, which creates some difficulty in consulting dictionaries, since it is not always clear if a word denotes specifically tea or some other beverage.

Many dictionaries, especially of languages spoken outside the major tea-consuming countries, do not list any word for 'tea'. It is in general impossible to determine whether this results from the dictionary being incomplete or from there being no word for 'tea' in the language. Probably the situation is often an intermediate one: tea is only marginal in the culture, and whenever there is need to refer to it, a word from the dominant language is used.