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MSEA convergence phenomena in a diachronic perspective (6th to 18th century AD)

Christian Bauer  
Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin  
christian.bauer@staff.hu-berlin.de

Over the past decade research into the syntax and phonology of the medieval varieties of Mon, Khmer and Thai has shown that many, if not most, parameters defining MSEA as a ‘Linguistic Area’ can no longer be sustained, unless this claim is restricted to the last two centuries or so.

In other words, the emergence of MSEA as a linguistic area appears to be a recent phenomenon, ignoring one and a half millenia of copious documented linguistic history (beginning with Mon, Khmer, Cham, Burmese, Central [Siamese] and Northern [Lanna] Thai [in chronological order of alphabetization]). It is felt that a combination of scholars’ backgrounds in their academic discipline as well as political conformism and self-censorship may have lead to this bias. Counter-arguments against the use of such data frequently voiced include questions as to elite literacy as well as ‘Indian’ influence. Yet, no proof has ever been offered. Indications are that literacy may have been widespread and non-elite, and di-glossic practice a phenomenon confined to Old Khmer.

Recent archaeological finds have also extended the geographical spread of Mon language use during historical times, making it, in fact, the most wide-spread language in MSEA.

The discussion will include arguments why in MSEA phonology notions such as »Tonbund« are spurious as, for instance, lexically distinctive register distinctions (phonation types) in Mon have been shown to date to the 1550s and does not explain why modern Mon dialects shift their vowel systems at the expense of registral distinctions, on the model we know already from modern Khmer. Nor do such explanatory models explain why Thai had remained a three-tone language right up the 16th c. AD. On the other hand, collapse in the voicing distinctions in that time-frame in two geographically contiguous but genetically unrelated languages warrants explanation.

In syntax counter-evidence is presented of a number of other defining criteria, such as ‘classifier’ constructions — ubiquitous in typological literature — and personal pronouns.

Most typological studies adduce data from modern Thai, presumably because of convenient access to massive data and easy control by available native speakers. Yet, it tends to be forgotten that modern Thai is essentially an historical creole (up to 70% of its lexicon being non-native and the syntax largely Khmer- and Mon-based) and as such of no significance to typological comparisons.

Typological and areal studies of MSEA languages as currently practised are, in my view, largely meaningless, if not futile, unless conducted in a diachronic perspective.