

The Southern-most Sinitic languages as part of Mainland Southeast Asia

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The concept of Mainland Southeast Asia (MSEA) as a linguistic area is well established (e.g. Bisang 2006; Enfield 2005, 2011). Most of these studies include data from the Sinitic languages – Mandarin in particular – for comparative purpose. The Sinitic languages are usually considered “fringe” members of the MSEA Linguistic Area, or not part of MSEA at all. This study aims at demonstrating that the Southern-most Sinitic languages are not necessarily more “fringe” in terms of their MSEA typological properties than, say, Burmese, and that areal studies of MSEA would be significantly enhanced by including data from a wider range of Sinitic and non-Sinitic languages spoken in Far Southern China (i.e., roughly areas south of the Yangtze Basin).

At the core of the MSEA Linguistic Area are languages like Lao, Thai and Vietnamese. These are some of the canonical MSEA languages, with typological features like having many lexical tones, no front rounded vowels, analytic morphology, strongly left-headed phrases, and SVO word order. On the other hand, languages like the Lolo-Burmese languages and the Sinitic languages are more on the fringe of the MSEA Linguistic Area, as they are spoken geographically close to the core, but they possess less typological features that are typical to MSEA. With the Sinitic languages, it is known that the Southern-most Sinitic languages (e.g. Pinghua, Yue, Hakka and Southern Min) have more MSEA-like typological features than other Sinitic languages to the north, e.g. having more lexical tones, most dialects not having front rounded vowels, having some postposed modifiers, having less OV constructions than other Sinitic languages to the north (e.g. Matisoff 2001, Chappell 2001). Most research that looks at the MSEA-ness of these Southern Sinitic languages takes a localised approach: they demonstrate that there are Kra-Dai, Hmong-Mien and/or Austroasiatic substrates in these non-Sinitic languages by comparing individual Sinitic languages with nearby non-Sinitic languages (see, e.g., Bauer 1996; Dai 2009). Some research takes a region-wide approach by comparing the typological features in a range of MSEA languages, often including data from some Sinitic languages (see, e.g., Comrie 2011 which looks at the typological “typicality” of the East and SEA languages). Nonetheless, studies like these in the West often suffer from the lack of data from Sinitic languages other than the better-known ones like Mandarin and Cantonese. This paper aims at comparing systematically the typological features in a wide range of Sinitic languages with those in other MSEA languages to the south. Results show that the southern-most Sinitic languages like Southern Pinghua, Yue and Hainan Min are comparable with other “fringe” MSEA languages like Burmese in terms of how much their typological profiles depart from those in the core of the MSEA linguistic area.

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