

Sesquisyllabicity: the role of structural analysis in the study of linguistic diversity in Mainland Southeast Asia

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Mainland Southeast Asia (MSEA) has long been recognized as a linguistic area. In terms of linguistic diversity, it is an area with high phylogenetic diversity but very low structural diversity (Enfield 2011). With respect to phonology, structural traits often cited as common across language families include complex vowel systems, restricted set of final consonants, contrastive tones and registers, among others (Matisoff 2006; Comrie 2007; Enfield 2011). Despite the tremendous amount of fieldwork that has been carried out, the reality of these traits is still poorly understood. A pertinent example is sesquisyllabicity. The sesquisyllable, literally “one-and-a-half syllable”, is a prosodic word consisting of an unstressed “minor” syllable followed by a stressed “major” syllable (Matisoff 1973). Synchronically, sesquisyllables behave differently from their monosyllabic and disyllabic counterparts, cf. Kammu (Svantesson 1983). Diachronically, they are claimed to be an intermediate step in the monosyllabization of disyllables or compounds, cf. Tibeto-Burman (Matisoff 2006) and Chamic (Thurgood 199). However, it is unclear how such structure differs from disyllables and more crucially monosyllables, and how it comes to be a common feature in MSEA.

Taking sesquisyllabicity as a case study, this paper illustrates how a theoretically-informed structural analysis can advance our understanding of the linguistic diversity and convergence in MSEA. First, it shows that the phonological characterization of the sesquisyllable varies from one language to another. While they are a special type of disyllables in some languages, they belong to the class of monosyllables in others. The crucial theoretical constraints argued to underlie this diversity are the Sonority Sequencing Principle (Selkirk 1984; Clements 1990) and Minimal Sonority Distance (Vennemann 1972; Selkirk 1984). Second, this paper compares sesquisyllables to other types of prosodic words found in MSEA and to similar structure outside of the area. In contrast to our preconceived notion of sesquisyllables, languages that have sesquisyllables differ from other languages in terms of allowable onset clusters rather than the number of syllables within the word. It also argues that sesquisyllables are more similar to words consisting of non-canonical syllables in languages outside of MSEA than generally recognized. Last but not least, it explores the implication that the proposed structural analysis of sesquisyllables has for the convergence of MSEA toward similar word shape.

In conclusion, this paper attempts by means of examining a salient phonological features in MSEA to instantiate the importance of structural analysis in understanding the MSEA area. Without the theoretical insights and methodological rigor of structural linguistics, a true appreciation of its linguistic diversity remains elusive.