

Morphological typology, North East India, and Mainland South East Asia

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North East India lies at the crossroads of South and Mainland South East Asia. Typologically, the majority of well-established North East Indian languages (excluding, for example, more recent Tai migrants) are highly agglutinating. But they don't seem to have always been. In the case of the Tani languages, a compact subgroup of Tibeto-Burman languages spoken from the central Eastern Himalaya to the Brahmaputra Valley, a highly agglutinating set of modern languages seem to reconstruct to an isolating ancestor with several characteristically Mainland South East Asian features. Modern-day lexical compounds seem to reconstruct to class term constructions, incorporated nominals seem to reconstruct to generic nominals and external possession constructions, and an expansive predicate word, replete with a vast array of derivational formatives, seems to reconstruct to a fairly ordinary serial verb construction. If such reconstructions are tenable, they would tend to align Tani and other North East Indian languages typologically with Mainland South East Asian languages in early history. The question is, what does this mean? Was there a contact corridor that helped maintain this common typology, which was later disrupted? Was North East India in part populated by migrants from Mainland South East Asia (in early times, and more recently), who brought this typology together with their languages? Or is this simply a historical manifestation of creole typology, with no implied relationship to the languages of Mainland South East Asia?