A reexamination of initial prenasalized stops as an areal feature of mainland Southeast Asia

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In Henderson's seminal 1965 article on the Southeast Asian linguistic area (based on 59 languages taken from a large area, including not only mainland Southeast Asia but also languages on the periphery, up to, and including, New Guinea) prenasalization is listed as an areal phonological feature. If, in order to be indicative of language convergence, areal features should not be unmarked features commonly encountered, it is worth noting that in Maddieson's 1984 analysis of the phonemic inventories of 317 languages, only 19 languages have initial prenasalized stops. However, prenasalized stops may not be as localized—or as unusual—as these early studies suggest. How well does prenasalization hold up as a feature of the mainland Southeast Asian type in 2012?

For this conference, I propose to review more recent sources of data on the Mon-Khmer, Tai-Kadai, Tibeto-Burman, Sinitic, Hmong-Mien, and Chamic languages of Southeast Asia. I will attempt to identify the boundaries of the area within which prenasalized stops are common and beyond which they are rarely, if at all, encountered. It appears that the initial prenasalized stop area is large, and includes Tibeto-Burman languages to the west, southern China to the north, and parts of insular Southeast Asia and Papua New Guinea to the east and south. Nonetheless, mainland Southeast Asia forms the core of the area.

Prenasalized stops have occasioned much debate among phonologists: are they N.C, NC, ^{N}C, or N^{C}—and how is their status determined for each language? Since language descriptions vary greatly with respect to phonetic detail and extent of phonological analysis, I will not be able to address this question fully. But prenasalized stops are worth examining against a typology of possible historical sources, about which we may be able to say more. Word-initial NCs arise in one of three ways: (1) as the fusion of the residue of an old initial syllable or an old prefix and the initial C of the root, (2) as the product of "voicing enhancement" in a voiced C, in which a lowered velum allows voicing to be maintained during the articulatory closure of a voiced stop, or (3) as a post-stopped N. It should be possible to link each type of development to patterns in the phonemic inventory, unless time and subsequent developments have obscured these patterns. For example, if NCs developed as a product of voicing enhancement fairly recently, we would expect to find a voiceless, voiceless aspirated, and prenasalized voiced series of stops, and no simple voiced series.

A related set of questions is whether or not mainland Southeast Asian prenasalization commonly arises from one historical source more than from another, how this may be linked to patterns in the phonemic inventories of Southeast Asian languages, and how this may distinguish Southeast Asia from the other parts of the world in which NCs are found, such as Africa and Mesoamerica. For example, the 19 NC languages of Maddieson's study all have prenasalized voiced stops; not one of the 19 shows a contrast between prenasalized voiced and prenasalized voiceless stops. But Matisoff (2003:121ff) reports that a number of Tibeto-Burman languages, especially those in the Kamarupan and Qiangic groups, contrast prenasalized voiceless and prenasalized voiced stops. I have also been forced to reconstruct both series for Proto-Hmong-Mien, given the pattern of tonal reflexes. It may be that richness of prenasalized stop contrasts is peculiar to Southeast Asian phonemic inventories because here the most common source for the N element is an old initial syllable or an old prefix, and the complex may still retain features of each of its members.

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