

Diversity, discontinuity and asymmetry in the typological restructuring of Mainland Southeast Asian languages.

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I take as the point of departure for this discussion the challenge mounted by Post (2011) to the broad characterisation of MSEA languages as falling into “Indospheric” and “Sinospheric” convergence areas by scholars such as Matisoff (1991), Bradley, LaPolla (2003) and others. Post makes the point that on the ground there are many local typological discrepancies with the Indosphere/Sinosphere dichotomy, and in various cases where it does seem to fit there may be little or no evidence for pre-historical dominant/subordinate population relationships implied by the model. Post proposes a mechanism of imitation of rhythmic prosodies, extending the insights of Donegan & Stampe (1983, 2004), but this account still falls within the scope of contact driven convergence models of explanation.

Close examination of Austroasiatic data reveals results that challenge a simple narrative of regional convergence, including various remarkable examples of restructuring that run strongly against otherwise apparently well established regional tendencies, including rhythmic prosodic tendencies.

Even within various individual Austroasiatic branches, even among close neighbours, one finds cases of languages restructuring towards extreme monosyllabism, diphthongal vocalism, simple onsets etc. and at the same time speakers of nearby languages creating disyllables, simplifying vowel inventories, forming new onsets and so forth (compare e.g. respectively Sedang and Bahnar/South Bahnaric). Also we see examples where neighbours are restructuring in broadly parallel ways (e.g. towards monosyllables), and yet at a micro level are doing so by utterly different paths (such as Laven and Nyaheun).

These kinds of contradictions are found across Austroasiatic. Even in Munda, where there would seem to be overwhelming areal pressure for stable disyllabism and trochaic rhythm, we find counter examples such as Gta’ evidencing a classically SEAsian typological shift.

Clearly there must be more than simple unconscious mimicry of rhythmic prosodies underlying the processes involved, or we would not observe such disparate local contradictions. Looking for social correlates, we can tentatively suggest that the most marked examples are found where speaker communities are in a subordinate or marginal relation to more dominant local groups, and consequently underlying processes driving language change may not be so unconscious.

References

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