ABSTRACT

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Austroasiatic and Sino-Tibetan: convergence or contact? A speculative history of 'noun class' affixes

Austroasiatic and many branches of Sino-Tibetan have a common word structure where the root is preceded by a C- prefix, the 'sequisyllabic' form. C- prefixes can have semantic correlates although not consistently across languages. In some cases the prefix may disappear, be moved or be substituted, while the root remains static. The C- prefix can be incorporated into the stem, and a new prefix added, leading to complex initial clusters. Unlike true noun-class languages elsewhere in the world, no number-marking is implied, nor is there any trace of concord with adjectives or pronouns. These similarities are rather perplexing, as few historical linguists consider these two phyla to be related. Globally, such systems are extremely rare, and for them to exist in direct geographical proximity is unlikely if they arose independently. However, clear examples of common lexemes of any time-depth are few, and these are often shared with other regional phyla such as Daic and Hmong-Mien.

The paper will describe the structural features of Austroasiatic and Sino-Tibetan that appear to be convergent and suggest how they might have arisen. It will argue that such features are transitional in terms of the evolution of true noun-classes and present a typological parallel with the Kainji languages in West Africa. It will examine possible borrowing scenarios and suggest that these can be detected, but are inadequate to explain the diachronic morphology. The paper will suggest the origins of this pattern lie in a period when the region was far more phyletically diverse and where an original CV.CVCV pattern characterised languages of the region. Data will be cited from new fieldwork with the isolates and underdescribed languages of Arunachal Pradesh, especially Miji, Koro and Hruso.