

# **RUC AND OTHER MINOR VIETIC<sup>1</sup> LANGUAGES: LINGUISTIC STRANDS BETWEEN VIETNAMESE AND THE REST OF THE MON-KHMER LANGUAGE FAMILY**

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## **0. ABSTRACT**

This report examines the linguistic genetic connections between Vietnamese and the Mon-Khmer language family by looking at a little studied language, namely Ruc, that serves as an intermediate typological and historical link. Vietnamese has previously been considered a Mon-Khmer language based primarily on some shared basic vocabulary and a hypothesis for the genesis of tones in Vietnamese. This proposed genetic relationship, based on a relatively small amount of evidence, has been further blurred by the intense contact of Vietnamese with Chinese and the overall effect of the Southeast Asian linguistic areal phenomenon. This report is intended to build on previous work to help strengthen the contention that Vietnamese is a Mon-Khmer language, and while doing so, provide evidence of the earlier stages of Vietnamese when it was more like a typical modern Mon-Khmer language.

## **1. VIETNAMESE IN A RUC PERSPECTIVE**

Concrete linguistic evidence linking Vietnamese to the Mon-Khmer language family lies in the more than one dozen minor Vietic languages spoken by small groups along the Vietnam-Laos border in the Cordilleran/Truong Son mountain range. The evidence for that link is seen in the phonology, morphology, lexicon, and syntax of these Vietic languages which share linguistic traits of both Vietnamese and other Mon-Khmer languages. These linguistic traits often appear as gradations between Vietnamese and other Mon-Khmer languages and most likely represent intermediate historical stages in the process Vietnamese underwent to arrive at its present state, that is, tonal, monosyllabic, and lacking affixes, in contrast with most typical Mon-Khmer languages which are non-tonal, polysyllabic (though generally having at most two syllables per word), and which have derivational prefixes and infixes.

This report outlines those important linguistic features in the minor Vietic language called Ruc, spoken by about 190 people<sup>2</sup> in the rather isolated highlands of North-Central Vietnam. The isolation of these people has helped to preserve ancient linguistic features in Ruc which can be explained neither as innovations nor borrowings.<sup>3</sup> Though lexically and phonologically Ruc is most similar to Vietnamese, its syllable structure and morphology is more like typical Mon-Khmer languages. The Ruc four-way tone system is intermediate between the typical binary Mon-Khmer vocalic

register system and the Vietnamese six-tone system. The linguistic features of Ruc are important for providing solid evidence that Vietnamese is a Mon-Khmer language and how it is related to the rest of the Mon-Khmer language family. This report is divided into four sections: (1) this introduction, (2) previously explored evidence and issues, (3) the evidence in Ruc, and (4) a summary and conclusion. Section 3 provides the data that support the claim that Vietnamese is a Mon-Khmer language and highlights the data which show how Vietnamese has changed, with Ruc as a possible model.

## **2. PREVIOUSLY EXPLORED EVIDENCE AND ISSUES**

Over the past 150 years, researchers have made different claims regarding the genetic affiliation of Vietnamese; that Vietnamese was variously a Chinese language and/or a Sino-Tibetan language, a Tai language, or a Mon-Khmer language. At the beginning of this century, the two strongest opposing arguments were for Mon-Khmer and Thai as the most likely candidates. Blagden (1913) and Pryliski (1924) considered Vietnamese to be part of Mon-Khmer, though J.R. Logan first proposed the Mon-Annam language family in 1852 (Gage 1985). Thai, according to Maspero (1912), was the most likely candidate based on the presence of tones in Vietnamese, in contrast with the lack of tones in Mon-Khmer and based on some shared vocabulary. Though some basic Mon-Khmer vocabulary was recognized in Vietnamese, Wilhelm Schmidt, who created the term 'Austroasiatic' in 1906 (Reid 1994), was uncertain about the position of Vietnamese since Vietnamese lacks Mon-Khmer morphology. Maspero argued that the presence of tones in Vietnamese meant that it could not be Mon-Khmer and that Tai was the most likely candidate based on the Tai vocabulary he saw in Vietnamese. Moreover, Vietnamese has a huge amount of Chinese vocabulary and shares typological features with both Tai and Chinese. In many ways, Vietnamese is a true typological border language, one which shares characteristics with all the language groups around it, including Mon-Khmer, Tai-Kadai, and Chinese, and which is connected to them in a way that makes determining its source difficult (Alves 1996).

It has been only over the last few decades that Vietnamese has been more convincingly proven to be a Mon-Khmer language. The most important step towards establishing Vietnamese as a Mon-Khmer language was Haudricourt's hypothesis of tonogenesis (1954). Haudricourt hypothesized that the reason final fricatives and stops in Mon-Khmer languages correspond to specific tones in Vietnamese (as was noted originally by Maspero (Ibid.)) was that those tones had developed from those finals through stages of conditioned phonemic changes which eventually led to phonemic tonal distinctions, followed by subsequent splitting of height by changes in the voicing of initials.

<b>FINAL</b> <b>INITIAL</b>	<b>Open/ Sonorant</b>	<b>Stop</b>	<b>Fricative</b>
<b>Voiceless</b>	1- mid-level	3-high-rising	5-mid-rising
<b>Voiced</b>	2- low-falling	4-low-level	6-broken-rising

**Table 1: Correspondences between Mon-Khmer and Vietnamese**

Table 1 shows the now widely recognized correspondences between the voicing of the initials, shown on the left side, and the quality of the finals, seen along the top. The type of final, whether open or sonorant, stop, or fricative gave rise to a contrast in contour. According to Haudricourt, a three-way tone system was split to six by the voicing of the initial, voiceless initials causing a higher pitch and in voiced ones a lower pitch. Table 2 contains supporting examples for the each tone categories from three Mon-Khmer languages.<sup>4</sup>

<b>Gloss</b>	<b>Vietnamese</b>	<b>Pacoh</b>	<b>Stieng</b>	<b>Ruc</b>
to fly	baj <sup>1</sup>	par	par	pər <sup>1</sup>
Betel	təu <sup>2</sup>	--	mluu	plu <sup>2</sup>
to die	cət <sup>3</sup>	kucət	cət	kwɛt <sup>3</sup>
One	mot <sup>4</sup>	mɔːj	muaj	moc <sup>4</sup>
firewood	kuj <sup>5</sup>	ʔuːj <sup>h</sup>	--	kujh <sup>1</sup>
Nose	mu <sup>j</sup> <sup>6</sup>	mɔh	muh	mujh <sup>2</sup>

**Table 2: Examples of Haudricourt's hypothesis**

With the development of lexicostatistics during the 1960s, the relationship between Vietnamese and Mon-Khmer became more well-established. In 1970, David Thomas and Robert Headley used lexicostatistics to propose linguistic subgroups within Mon-Khmer. Vietnamese showed nearly the same distance from other branches of Mon-Khmer as other recognized Mon-Khmer languages, basically in the 20% to 25% range.

Gregerson and Thomas in 1974, and more thoroughly Huffman (1977), linked the concepts, namely, the tonogenesis hypothesis and the lexicostatistics method. Huffman (Ibid.) used a combination of Swadesh-list type cognates (though ultimately representing core Mon-Khmer cognates) along with the regular correspondences between Vietnamese tones and the initials and finals of over a dozen Mon-Khmer languages for purposes of comparison. About 75% of the forms showed regular correspondences between the various Mon-Khmer phonemes and their expected Vietnamese tonal counterparts.

Evidence that could bolster the claim that Vietnamese is a Mon-Khmer language would be another language that indisputably shares typological and genetic features with both Vietnamese and the Mon-Khmer language family. The following sections show the evidence--including phonological, morphological, lexical, and syntactic evidence--seen in such a language, namely Ruc.

### 3. LINGUISTIC EVIDENCE FROM RUC

The evidence proving Vietnamese to be a Mon-Khmer language as seen through the linguistic features in Ruc includes four levels--lexical, phonological, morphological, and syntactic--which are all discussed in the following subsections.

#### 3.1 Lexicon

The lexicon of Ruc gives clear witness to Ruc's status as a Vietic language since its basic vocabulary is claimed to consist of 50% of basic vocabulary shared with Vietnamese (Nguyen V.L. 1993).

Branch	Language	Percent
Vietic (50%)	Vietnamese	53%
	Muong	50%
	Poong	52%
Chut (95%)	May	92%
	Sach	98%
Katuic (35%)	Pakoh	37.5%
	Taoih	33%
	Bru	37.5%

**Table 3: Percentages of Ruc cognates in other Mon-Khmer languages**

These items also have fairly regular sound correspondences. Table 3 (based on Samarina 1989 (Nguyen V.L. 1993)) shows the percentages of shared cognates between Ruc and several other languages, including three different branches.

Ruc has 35% shared vocabulary with the Katuic branch of Mon-Khmer and 50% with Vietnamese, thus placing Ruc in between those two groups. Figure 1 shows this relationship graphically.