Interphylla Flow in Southeast Asia

Paul K. Benedict

Welcome to the field of Southeast Asian linguistics! This welcome comes with a warning: Southeast Asia is the Bosnia of historical linguistics, with a lovely landscape strewn with land mines! Those of us who have long lingered here have stepped on a few, with resultant errors (self-corrected) or booboos (corrected by others). 'Look-alikes' (look less and less alike the more we know about them) abound, as in Malay beras and Wr. Tibetan 'bras for 'rice', as do also unlikely-appearing cognate sets such as Thai pu 'grandfather' and Japanese o:i 'nephew' (Benedict 1990: 1909-200). The general brevity of roots, in part the result of interphylla flow (below), plays a prominent role here; P-Tai *ʔa (tone *A) 'aunt (fa's y. sis.)' (Li 1977:243) and the like readily give rise to all sorts of phonological and/or semantic mischief. One might even formulate here a Law of Historical Linguistics, viz the number of linguistic errors perpetrated is inversely proportional to the median length of the roots involved. Comparative Kadai linguistics (Benedict 1988) is not for the faint of heart!

Southeast Asian linguistics is also the home of a pair of linguistic believe-it-or-not's. One of these, vocalic transfer (VT) (Benedict 1979), involves the transfer, at times in a complex manner, of V-1 in a root to the following syllable in the process of monosyllabification, e.g. Proto-Austro-Tai (PAT) *aku 'I > / kaw/ as well as /ku./ forms in Tai (below). The speaker has been told on more than one occasion by fellow comparativists working in other areas that this is "impossible", furnishing him with an excellent excuse for having missed it for many years! The (1) other one of the pair, calculated to raise still louder cries of "impossible", was missed far longer and he has berated himself for having overlooked the basic factor involved here, viz. a men's language, still maintained as such in the Mayrinax dialect of Atayal, reflected also in the Sediq branch of the Atayalic group, affording a date for this feature at least as early as the Proto-Atayalic date of 1,600 BP (Li 1983). Further investigation, both of Austronesian and the mainland Kadai and Hmong branches of Austro-Tai, has shown that this feature must be assigned to the earliest level of Austro-Tai, before the first Austro-Kadai vs. Hmong-Mien (=Miao-Yao) split (Benedict 1990: 1), as shown by the occasional subplanting of regular forms by non-canonical forms (nonc's) of men's language type, all detailed in the splendid study by Li (cit. supra). The key early (PAT) date is supplied by PAT *(m)pqa 'thigh', which regularly yielded the monosyllabic P-Kadai *qa (variable tone) and is represented in Austronesian by the doublet: *(m)pqa~*paqi, the latter derived from a men's lang. *-qi substituted for the final syllable: *-qa; Hmong-Mien, on the other hand, has *paay = *paai (tone *A), from *paʔaʔi <*pqa-qi, with the *-qi suffixed, the ? + ? yielding /zero/, as is often the case in SEA (Benedict 1972: fn. 339 to p. 123).

Additionally, all three language phyla represented in SEA have been reconstructed (not without doubting Thomases here and there!) with suprasegmental systems of other than simple stress type (Benedict 1991; see below). This makes for difficulty, especially for those of us reared to recognize
only /light/ vs. /heavy/ and the like, especially when faced with the interplay of one system with another, as outlined below.

Three contrasting language phyla are represented in Southeast Asia:

Sino-Tibetan: monosyllabic; tones (*A = falling, *B = rising); vocalic length (/short/ more common); OV; prefixing and suffixing.

Mon-Khmer: mono-/typically) sesqui-syllabic [Matisoff’s term: SYL-1 with zero stress and vocalism of /schwa/ type]; phonation types (/plain/ vs. /glottal-creaky/); vocalic length (/long/ more common); VO; prefixing and infixing.

Austro-Tai: mono-/typically) di-/tri-syllabic; pitch-accent (HIGH vs. LOW); vocalic length lacking; VO; prefixing, infixing and suffixing.

The regional scheme of homelands (see diagram: Southeast Asia: Language Stocks) includes a strange ‘Empty Quarter’ in the Southeast quadrant:

NW = Sino-Tibetan (ST) NE = Austro-Tai (AT)
SW = Mon-Khmer (MK) SE = [Empty Quarter]

Prehistorians, for good reasons, like to place homelands in riverine/coastal locations rather than on barren windswept uplands. In the case of ST, for example, a sheer distributional analysis, with the ancestral Chinese in the upper Yellow River drainage and the various Tibeto-Burman (TB) groups ranging all around the base of the vast Tibetan plateau as far west as Nepal and northern India, would place a homeland up on that plateau, with subsequent movements down into the surrounding lowlands. Bellwood, Solheim and other prehistorians of SEA to whom the speaker has offered that scenario have uniformly rejected it, however, and it now appears that the middle Yangtse drainage is the most likely ST homeland, with the first split between the Chinese, moving north into the Yellow River basin, and the Tibeto-Karen, moving generally to the west (TB) and the south (Karen). The AT homeland is also to be placed in the Yangtse drainage, to the east, it would appear, giving ample opportunity for mutual influence (see below). This leaves one excellent riverine location for a MK homeland, viz. the Salween basin, with one movement to the east, all the way to the China Sea (Vietnamese), another far to the south (Aslian), another to the northwest (Khasi) and an early pre-MK migration all the way to eastern India (Munda), thus tying in Austroasiatic (AA).

The ‘Empty Quarter’, taken from the Arabic Rub al-khali for the most desolate region of the great Arabian desert, remains a problem. It wasn’t really empty, for one thing, since there was an early kingdom in the lower Menam basin, visited by Chinese travelers. The Chinese historians recorded this but failed to record the language. One can only speculate here, with the most likely choices another AA/MK branch or fourth language stock.

The historical canvas presented to us has three phyla competing for space and influence in SEA over the past several millenia. Details remain to be worked out but it would seem that an Early High Culture (EHC), based on wet (lowland) rice cultivation, was created in the middle Yangtse valley by PAT-speakers, with the key generic RICE root: PAT *(m)hɔɣɔw represented in Hmong-Mien (HM) and Kadai (KD) as well as in AN (fn. 1) and Japanese-Ryukyuan (JR) (Benedict
1995: 431-2). The linguistic evidence, including the root for PLOW (ibid: 4-9), further indicates an AT source for Chinese rice cultivation (fn. 2), with Chinese dào (Archaic d'-) 'rice plant' a likely early loan from the PAT root (via *br- > d-, paralleling shift of common type in KD). This scenario has the ancestral Chinese moving north into the Yellow River drainage (Wei valley), supplementing their cultivation of rice with that of millet and, in time, benefitting from their location at the terminus of the main transasiatic trade route to develop an early civilization, thus gradually establishing hegemony throughout much of the region.

With the historical stage thus set, we are now in a position to examine interphyla flow throughout the region, the influences exerted by each of the three language stocks upon the others. At the very outset we are struck by the fact that the word order of Chinese was changed from the OV of PST (STists are in general agreement here) to the VO of PAT and PMK - this despite the early cultural ascendance of Chinese. For the speaker, at any rate, this strongly suggests that the PAT-speakers originally occupied the greater part of the middle Yangtze drainage, with the PST-speakers arriving as an early incursion from the westernmost parts of the area, in time creating a PAT substratum, which yielded the VO. This general line of explanation, often discredited elsewhere, also appears to be called for in an analysis now under way of the complex problem of early ST loanwords in HM (fn. 3)

Chinese was a loser, so to speak, in this word order matter but emerged as a big winner on the two key issues of syllabism and prosody. It was very much as if an imperial ukase had been issued: reduce to monosyllables and if this makes a big problem for you we have a nice tonal system to lend you (Chinese had added a third [-sandhi] tone.) Both mainland AT families went along, HM regularly through canonical reduction-on-the-right (CRR), an inherent AT pattern also seen in some Japanese derivatives (Benedict 1990) and on occasion in eastern Malayo-Polynesian (MP), while KD languages have achieved the same reduction on-the-left (CRL), this is probably to be attributed to (substratal?) influence of the sesquisyllabic MK. It appears that the 'culture loanwords' emanating from the Chinese center, notably the numerals along with assorted others (inc. horse, saddle and ride; silver, father, shaman/priest), each with tone 'attached', played a key role in this prosodic transformation while at the same time providing key historical evidence as to the nature and direction of the prosodic flow.

For further analysis of this phenomenon, it is useful to employ the anthropological distinction between direct diffusion, e.g. the tones of a tonal system or the system itself, and stimulus diffusion, e.g. the 'idea' of making use of tones. Both have played a role in the tone flow in SEA from Chinese; see the chart on Interphyla Flow in Southeast Asia-Tone Flow. A three-tone system can be reconstructed for HM identical to that set up for Archaic Chinese (AC), with parallel splitting governed by initial voicing/unvoicing. In the case of the KD languages, the same circumstance holds for the Daic group: Tai, Kam-Sui, Lakkia, Shidong and Be (Hainan). This does not hold, however, for the Outlier group: Buyang, Laha, Pubiao (=Laqua), Hlai (=Li) (Hainan), Lachi (=Lati) and Gelao (=Kelao), which appear (now under study) to have derived their tones from varying combinations of direct and stimulus diffusion. Vietnamese, under direct Chinese domination, lost the
sesqui’s (initial syllables) of MK while directly borrowing the tonal system, with
the assignments: /plain/ > lst tone, /glottal/ > 2nd tone, final *-h > 3rd tone.
Bolyu (= Lai), a residual MK language uncovered by Liang Min in Guangxi
(Benedict 1990bis), has developed its tonal system entirely through stimulus
diffusion, making primary use of /plain/ vs. /creaky/, along with /plain unvoiced/
vs. /voiced/ vs. /aspirated/ initial, yielding a six tone system, as the Chinese
prototype, created on an entirely distinct basis! Other MK languages, including
Khm, parallel Chinese in developing tonal distinctions based on
voiced/unvoiced initials, with an original voicing distinction replaced by a tonal.
An outstanding example of stimulus diffusion is supplied by Hu and U, which
have developed tonal distinctions based on vocalic length: Hu: /short/ > HIGH
vs. /long/ > LOW, very much as if in reply to an imperial ukase (above), “Okay,
but we’ll do it our way!”

At times, as indicated in the Tone Flow chart, an intermediate
language/language group is indicated, e.g. both Tin (=MK) and Moklen (=MP),
the latter recorded by the speaker in southern Thailand in 1991, have developed
tones through stimulus diffusion from Thai. In the case of the Chamic (=MP)
languages, showing the same monosyllabizing/tonalizing trends seen elsewhere in
the general flow, the main intermediate, at any rate, surely was Vietnamese. An
early Chamic colony in Hainan, the Utsat (=Huici), one of three distinct groups
domiciled on that island along with the Chinese settlers (see Language Stocks
diagram), speak a tonal language (Tsai) that has developed one of its tones from
final *-h, paralleling the development in Vietnamese, indicating that the influence
of that language must be accorded a fairly early date of several centuries
(Benedict, 1984). At the present time Vietnamese has been found to play both a
monosyllabizing as well as tonalizing role in the Kiengiang and other Khmer
dialects spoken in the Mekong delta (Minh 1996), supplying further evidence for
this gemination of effects throughout SEA.

Vocalic length has undergone widespread loss/merging in SEA, often at
an early period, e.g. PST final *-aːŋ regularly yielded Wr. Tibetan (WT)-ag; AC
-oŋ (paralleling PST final *-a > -o), as in PST *(r-)ŋaːŋ ‘thick (fluid)’ > WT r-
ŋaː ‘pus’; AC noŋ (tone *A) ‘id.’, with the related Donor-to-P-Tai (DPT)
*ŋnoŋ (tone *A), *ŋnoŋ reflecting the prefix (*r- > h-), subsequently yielding
the loan to P-Tai (DPT) (tone *A) ‘pus’ (Li 1977: 114). It is unclear what
role, if any, was played here by AT, which lacks this length feature. It is ironic
that the KD languages, and to a far lesser degree the HM, have secondarily
developed vocalic length, here to be analyzed as geminate clustering. At times
this has been the product of borrowing, as in above example, but in most cases
has been brought about by VT (above), as in key secondary RICE root: P-
Austro-Kadai (PAK) (HK app. lacks eg.) *qasal: P-Paiwanic id.:Puyuma ?asal
‘hulled rice’; Paiwanic qasal ~ qasan ‘unhulled rice’; P-KD (Tai/Laha *saal (tone
*A) ‘hulled/cleaned rice’; (through VT) (Benedict 1995:435)

There is a sharp contrast in the affixation patterns of the three SEA
language stocks. ST lacks infixes (Lepcha has secondary -y- > *s-prefix; see
Benedict 1972:105) while MK lacks suffixes (at proto-level) and only AT makes
use of all three affixes, with at times sharp scholarly disputes as to which are
which at early (AN) levels (see below). In the case of AT, moreover, the syllabic
reduction in both KD and HM makes it difficult to establish specific affixes at