

On the Track of Austric: Part I. Introduction

La Vaughn H. HAYES

Abstract

Austric, the superstock which would aggroup the Austroasiatic and Austro-Tai languages of South East Asia, has been controversial since Wilhelm Schmidt first proposed it in 1906. In one of its more influential critiques, Paul K. Benedict advised in 1973 that the hypothesized grouping be abandoned due to absence of significant agreement in the core vocabulary. Since 1983, however, the writer has determined that such agreement does exist and in quantity commensurate to that asserted by Benedict to occur amongst the primary subgroups of his Austro-Tai stock.

In this paper, the first in a short series purporting to present the writer's new evidence for Austric, the crucially probatory problems for the proposed genetic relationship are discussed, some new aspects of Austroasiatic linguistic history are briefly introduced, and some of the lexical, phonological, and morphological evidence supporting the Austric hypothesis is presented.

On the basis of this discussion and presentation, it is found that Austroasiatic and Austro-Tai do share partial correspondence indicative of common origin, including agreement in the core vocabulary. Consequently, it is also concluded that these language stocks are genetically related and Schmidt's Austric hypothesis can at last be acknowledged as a valid concept for areal language classification.

1. Introduction.¹

1.1 Purpose and Objectives

This paper serves as the introduction to a serial study, "On the Track of Austric," the general purpose of which is presentation of new lexical evidence supporting the verification of the Austric hypothesis. The primary objective of this paper is to

¹ The bulk of the AA lexical data used in this study was collected in the field by members of the former Vietnam Branch of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, often under arduous and hazardous conditions. I would like to express my thanks and appreciation to them, as well as the other linguists and staff of this organization who have made that data available to armchair researchers such as I, for without their efforts, none of this would be possible.

introduce the reader to the hypothesis, briefly review past efforts to verify it, and discuss the probatory problems which must be overcome in any attempt to verify it.

The secondary objective of this paper is to make a contribution to setting the stage for reconstruction of the Austroasiatic (AA) and Austric proto-languages. This purpose will be served by introducing some important new aspects of AA linguistic history and presenting the proposed phonological and morphological systems of those proto-languages.

1.2 *The Austric Hypothesis*

In 1906, Wilhelm Schmidt established AA as a superfamily composed of the Munda, Khasi, Nicobar, and Mon–Khmer families.² The some 140 languages of this stock are located in eastern India, the Nicobar Islands, and throughout the Indochina peninsula.³ At the same time, he proposed the existence of an Austric superstock comprising AA and Austronesian (AN).⁴ The some 700 languages of the latter superfamily, known as Malayo–Polynesian until Schmidt renamed it in 1899, are found in a vast geographic area in insular South East Asia and most of Austronesia, with outliers on Madagascar, Malaysia, Vietnam, Hai Nan, and Taiwan. In support of his Austric grouping, Schmidt cited 215 lexical comparisons between AA and AN and highlighted certain congruences in their sound systems, methods of word formation, and grammatical structure.

Over the ensuing 86 years, Schmidt's far-reaching proposal has been periodically argued back and forth with largely inconclusive results. No one has been able thus far to adduce really convincing evidence that the Austric superstock does or does not exist. Only five of the more recent discussions of the hypothesis will be mentioned here.

In 1975, Saveros Pou and Philip N. Jenner sought to reopen the debate by focussing attention on a possible cognate relationship between MK and AN. They presented a variety of correspondences and listed 65 possible cognates, but felt it premature to voice any conclusions about the indications of their findings, the primary reason being an admitted lack of sufficient data permitting establishment of reliable sound correspondences.

Also in 1975, the results of Paul K. Benedict's examination of the Austric question were published as Appendix II, "Austro–Thai and Austroasiatic", to his book, *Austro–Thai: Language and Culture, with a Glossary of Roots*.⁵ Benedict demonstrated that AN and two language families of mainland South East Asia,

² Schmidt initially included Chamic, an AN subgroup in Vietnam.

³ Cf. Parkin 1991 for a recent listing of the AA languages.

⁴ Other abbreviations used in this paper are AJ (Austro–Japanese), AK (Austro–Kadai), D (Dempwolff), EAA (Eastern AA), FO (Formosan), L (Lopez), MK (Mon–Khmer), MUK (Muong Khen), PAA (Proto–AA), PAT (Proto–AT), PM (Proto–Mon), PMK (Proto–MK), PMN (Proto–Mnong), PMY (Proto–Miao–Yao), POC (Proto–Oceanic), PS (Proto–Semai), PW (Proto–Waic), VN (Vietnamese).

⁵ The appendix is a revised version of a paper which was presented at the First International Conference on AA Linguistics held at Honolulu, Hawaii, in January 1973 and published with other communications to the conference in *Austroasiatic Studies* in 1976.

Kadai and Miao-Yao, are genetically related and constitute the AT stock (he has since added Japanese-Ryukyuan, cf. Sec. 2.2.1). As a consequence, Austric—if it exists—would have to comprise AA and AT.

In his approach to the Austric problem, Benedict (1975:464f.) attempted to answer this basic question:

In addition to the congruency in over-all configuration, which might be ascribed to areal factors, do Austro-Thai and Austroasiatic share a common corpus of roots from the core vocabulary, sufficient to justify a conclusion that these two super stocks are genetically related, or are the lexical agreements that exist of a lesser order, to be explained in terms of borrowing/substratum or the like?

The answer he found was that such a corpus does not exist and that such lexical agreements as do occur are to be explained by a relationship in which an unrelated AA linguistic stratum had been superimposed on an AT substratum. Benedict recommended in conclusion that the Austric hypothesis be abandoned.

In 1976, H.L. Shorto defended the Austric hypothesis, citing 52 of some 200 AA/AN lexical comparisons collected, and noting that three fifths of this total correlate to Benedict's AT reconstructions.⁶ He admonished Benedict for undervaluing the hypothesis' strength and understating the extent of the AA/AN core vocabulary agreement, but hesitated to reproach him due to the slow progress of AA historico-comparative studies and general inaccessibility of the AA lexical data. Shorto concluded that he could not accept Benedict's inference that AA and AN, the AT group most likely to have provided the proposed substratum, are genetically unrelated or follow him in discarding the Austric hypothesis.

In 1977, Gérard Diffloth also took issue with many of Benedict's conclusions about the AA/AT relationship. He rejected certain proto-phonemes set up by Benedict for AA and one of its families, proposed others in their stead, and showed that the typological differences between PAT and EAA, which the AT substratum would most likely have influenced due to geographic reasons, are much greater than Benedict had claimed. He argued that if his proposals are correct, then the evidence would actually contradict the hypothesis that a substratumized AT group had ever existed, and the question of an AA/AT genetic relationship would remain completely open. Diffloth also asserted that the possibility of a direct, but very ancient historical grouping cannot be dismissed until our knowledge of AA has been greatly expanded.

More recently (1989), Diffloth has again raised the question of the placement of AA and expressed annoyance at Benedict's dismissal of the Austric hypothesis without any precise appraisal of Schmidt's 215 potential cognates, noting that Pou, Jenner, and Shorto had introduced in the above referenced articles dozens of new possible cognates. He commented that while Benedict seemed to be looking for a case where the majority of the "basic" words had not been replaced or semantically

⁶ I would like to thank Helen Cordell of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, for providing me in February 1990 a copy of Shorto's paper. Benedict's response to this paper has not been available to me.

altered, those words are subject to change and replacement in many sociolinguistic situations and cultural contexts. Diffloth also concluded that "Benedict may detest it, but the Austriac hypothesis is still very much alive."

In essence, these discussions with their diametrically opposed conclusions represented little more than another inconclusive round in a debate that has now lasted nearly nine decades. But the general impression they made was discouragingly pessimistic. The very few correspondences discerned by Benedict in the core vocabulary increased immensely the gravity of his doubts about the reality of Austriac. And while Shorto's and Diffloth's findings did much to counterbalance Benedict's skepticism, their assessment that a genetic linkage is still possible also presaged a continuing wait of many years, if not decades, before the Austriac question could be finally and conclusively settled.

1.3 New Evidence for Austriac: A Serendipitous Discovery

After reading the papers of Pou and Jenner, Benedict, and Diffloth in 1977 and 1978, I for one was not encouraged to delve further into the matter or even acquire Benedict's book. However, when I finally bought this volume in 1983 to familiarize myself with the AT stock, I was pleasantly astonished to perceive in it a totally unexpected abundance of lexical matchings between Benedict's AT reconstructions and AA etyma in the Vietnamese etymological files I had been compiling off and on since 1975. Within a few days, I had some 200 sets of possible cognates jotted down, and it was rapidly becoming clear that Benedict had missed something in his evaluation of the Austriac hypothesis. Even more amazing was the burgeoning impression that his AT reconstructions might embody not only the means to uncovering the missing lexical proof of the Austriac superstock's existence, but might also provide the heuristic key needed to unlock the enigmatic past of AA itself.

What began then as a serendipitous discovery has since become a nine-year long, off-and-on again trek on the track of Austriac, which thus far can be divided into three phases. During the first, progress was extremely slow, but with the aid of Benedict's AT reconstructions and a variety of heuristic techniques, small breakthroughs were repeatedly made, with the result that my comparative lexicon increased to some 400 sets of possible AA/AT cognates. A study using them all was written in late 1983, but never finalized because other events led in me in an opposite direction.⁷

The second phase began in late 1988 when the first draft of this paper was begun.⁸ During its preparation, the general outline of the PAA and Proto-Austriac

⁷ It is unlikely that I would have continued this research, had not a bizarre twist of fate turned me back to it. After going into business in early 1984, time for my linguistic interests had waned to nothing long before person(s) unknown placed plastic explosive underneath our business van on March 9, 1987. My survival of this incident, which left me partially disabled, was so close to being a miracle as to make me wonder for what purpose my life had been spared. Thus far, I have found none better than this research, and its resumption and continuation have helped me survive and overcome a most difficult time.

⁸ This paper was completed in March 1990, revised in May 1991, and completely rewritten in August 1992. My thanks to the Mon-Khmer Studies editorial staff and especially David Thomas