Comment on Matisoff's comparison between Greenberg and Benedict

Paul K. Benedict
Ormond Beach, Florida

In his recent discussion note "On megalocomparison" (*Language* 66:1.106-20, 1990), James A. Matisoff has described me as a "megalo-comparativist" and has compared (and contrasted) my methods with those pursued by Joseph H. Greenberg. He also reports that I favor a "jigsaw puzzle" approach as contrasted with Greenberg's obsession for "pigeonholing" (columbicubiculomania). I do indeed attempt to fit linguistic pieces together (see below) but I resolutely deny being a megalocomparativist. As I see it, Greenberg and I are simply playing different games and the contrast in our approaches reflects that basic difference.

I began in the A. L. Kroeber era at Berkeley as a "splitter" but before long adopted a "lumper" role. I had taken over as director of the Sino-Tibetan Philology project and had soon come face to face with an ugly fact: as Gertrude Stein might have put it, there was no there there! A veritable "black hole" existed at the very heart of the proposed language stock under investigation, with some widespread etyma for the numerals as well as for cultural items such as "charcoal", "horse", and "saddle" but nothing resembling a core vocabulary. The reigning Orientalists of that period placed almost exclusive emphasis on features such as monosyllabism, tones and isolating characteristics, with virtual neglect of lexical evidence, e.g. the great Henri Maspero classified Vietnamese as Tai-related (hence coming under Sino-Tibetan) despite the overwhelmingly Mon-Khmer nature of its lexicon. As a good anthropologist, however, I had been reared at Harvard on diffusionist doctrine and I had no trouble at all with the idea of pretty much anything in language, monosyllabism and tones included, diffusing here and there. In keeping with this line of thought, I soon lopped off from the Sino-Tibetan stock, as gently as possible, both Tai and Miao-Yao and carefully transferred Vietnamese to its ancestral Mon-Khmer. Kroeber, the administrator of the project and himself a pretty good anthropologist, approved of the truncation but the China lobby on the Berkeley campus was mortally offended, very much as if I had removed the Great Wall from the country.

The project survived despite the outcries of betrayal and I went on to do some "lumping", first of Tai (and Kadai) with Austronesian and later of Miao-Yao and (recently) Japanese with this duo, all under "Austro-Tai". I

have also remained a "splitter", however, quite unwilling to find any genetic relationship between Austronesian and Austroasiatic (Schmidt's old "Austric"). I continue to make the significant sharing of core vocabulary a litmus test for genetic relationship and I keep looking for precise fits in this area, the more complex the better (because so much the less likely to be the product of chance). Matisoff has labeled this as "proto-form stuffing" but it must be noted that the complexities often lie within one of the constituent families itself, e.g. Proto-Austronesian "I" is represented by the doublet *(ʔu-, ʔi-)aku ~ *(ʔi-)a(ŋ)kən, with *ʔu- and *ʔi- as pronominal markers and (ŋ) as variable nasal increment (highly characteristic of the family and also of the stock as a whole), with cognates (often "split") in the mainland families as well as in Japanese: P-Kadai *(ʔi-)aku, P-Miao-Yao *ʔyakou < *ʔi-aku ~ vaŋkon < *ʔu-aŋkən (regular shifts) and Proto-Japanese-Ryukyuan *anu ~ vanu ~ vaŋu < *(ʔu-)aŋku (regular shifts) (see Benedict 1990:214-16 for details). This pronominal set also serves to provide key evidence for the presence of the *ʔu- and *ʔi- markers at the earliest (Proto-Austro-Tai) level; it has its complexities, to be sure, but I can hardly see anyone attributing it to chance.

As pointed out by Matisoff (111), it is indeed curious that Greenberg abhors reconstruction yet "operates with the notion of COGNATES". I submit that Greenberg is badly misusing the word in this context and that it is pro-reconstruction macrocomparativists like me who operate with COGNATES whereas anti-reconstruction megalocomparativists like Greenberg operate rather with LOOKALIKES or COMPARABILIA (Matisoff), perhaps now in need of an abbreviation (LOOKA's? COMP's?). I further submit that if one doesn't "buy" any given product of a macrocomparativist, e.g. is not convinced that a proto-language such as Austro-Tai ever existed, he should not promote its author to the status of a megalocomparativist but simply think of him as having failed in this engagement. I play one game and am intrigued by the other but I do keep wondering whether that other game has any rules or whether a computerized robot might not be rather better at it all. But long live both games!

REFERENCES

Benedict, Paul K. 1990. *Japanese/Austro-Tai*. Linguistica Extranea, Studia 20. Ann Arbor: Karoma Publishers.

Matisoff, James A. 1990. "On megalocomparison." *Language* 66:1.106-20.