

On VO vs. OV in Southeast Asia

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It has now become conventional wisdom in Southeast Asian linguistics that Proto-Sino-Tibetan is to be reconstructed as verb-final, as reflected in Tibeto-Burman, with the Chinese VO word order secondary, e.g. at the recent International Conference on Sino-Tibetan Languages and Linguistics XXVI in Osaka, both Matisoff and LaPolla presented papers to this effect. The explanations for this vary from scholar to scholar; the writer has emphasized an apparent substratum factor inasmuch as both blocs of Sino-Tibetan that present VO, viz. Chinese and Karen, lie on the east, where they overlie Austro-Tai (Austronesian/Kadai/Hmong-Mien), with the same VO feature. In any event, the historical picture conventionally drawn in Southeast Asia has a basic distinction between a monosyllabic Sino-Tibetan of OV type and a sesquisyllabic (Matisoff's term) Mon-Khmer of VO type, shared by Kadai and Hmong-Mien as well as by Chamic and Malay.

Another bit of conventional wisdom has the Munda languages of India shifting from VO to OV under Indospheric (Matisoff's term) influence, with PAA to be reconstructed as VO. In a recent paper on "Rhythm and vocalic drift in Munda and Mon-Khmer" (LTBA 16.1:1-44), Patricia Donegan presents the following table of contrasts between Munda, representing the Indian linguistic area, and Mon-Khmer, representing the Southeast Asian area:

	<i>MUNDA</i>	<i>MON-KHMER</i>
Phrase accent:	Falling (initial)	Rising (final)
Word order:	Dependent-Head (SOV, AN, postpositions) Variable	Head-Dependent (SVO, NA, prepositions) Rigid
Syntax:	Case, Verb agreement	Analytic
Word Canon:	Trochaic, Dactylic	Iambic, Monosyllabic
Morphology:	Agglutinative, Suffixing, Polysynthetic	Fusional, Prefixing or Isolating
Timing:	Isomorphic	Isoaccentual
Syllable Canon:	(C)V(C)	(C)V or (C)(C)V(C)(C)
Consonantism:	Stable, Geminate clusters	Shifting, Tonogenetic, Non-geminate clusters
Tone/Register:	Level tone (Korku only)	Contour tones, Register
Vocalism:	Stable, Monophthongal, Harmonic	Shifting, Diphthongal, Reductive

Clearly, Sino-Tibetan fits neatly in the Mon-Khmer = Southeast Asian column, with one major exception: the word order! The mechanism invoked by Donegan to explain the Munda shift: a single change from rising to falling accent, is hardly applicable to a monosyllabic language such as Sino-Tibetan although even here prefixed disyllabic words typically had rising accent with schwa in SYLLABLE-I, conforming to the Mon-Khmer sesquisyllabic pattern with vocalic reduction in SYLLABLE-I. Can it be that the conventional wisdom about Sino-Tibetan is wrong, after all, and that it was the Tibeto-Burman bloc that shifted the word order, paralleling the Munda shift but without the attendant features? The geography is similar in the two phyla (Sino-Tibetan, Austro-Asiatic): west vs. east, but a special Indospheric influence can hardly be invoked here. The writer hastens to add that he continues to favor the OV order for Proto-Sino-Tibetan but wants to point out that this line of reconstruction for Proto-Sino-Tibetan creates a problem of sorts for the areal linguist. Donegan (cit. supra, fn. 2 to p. 3) notes that the order of object and verb is among the first to change in the word order category and cites here Finnish and Khamtic parallels, but not the Sino-Tibetan.

REFERENCES

- Donegan, Patricia. 1993. "Rhythm and vocalic drift in Munda and Mon-Khmer". *Linguistics of the Tibeto-Burman Area* 16.1:1-44.
- LaPolla, Randy. 1994. "On the change to verb-medial word order in Proto-Chinese: evidence from Tibeto-Burman." In Kitamura Hajime, Nishida Tatsuo, and Nagano Yasushiko, eds., *Current Issues in Sino-Tibetan Linguistics*, pp.98-104. Osaka: Organizing Committee of the 26th International Conference on Sino-Tibetan Languages and Linguistics.
- Matisoff, James A. 1994. "On departing from verb-final word order." In Kitamura Hajime, Nishida Tatsuo, and Nagano Yasushiko, eds., *Current Issues in Sino-Tibetan Linguistics*, pp.81-97. Osaka: Organizing Committee of the 26th International Conference on Sino-Tibetan Languages and Linguistics.