

ON MON-KHMER, ITS KIN, AND PRINCIPLES

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I have no desire to impede the encouraging work that is moving our knowledge of comparative Austroasiatic ahead. For this reason the remarks which follow are offered with considerable circumspection and caution; they are not to detract from the real gains made.

However, some of the genetic claims recently made, while quite plausible and probably close to the truth, have been made on grounds which are flawed if not substantially improper. We know about the many criticisms which have been levelled at lexicostatistics;¹ yet for some time depths empirically reasonable convergence can be found by this method.² Nevertheless, lexicostatistics can never be a substitute for comparison proper.³ Nor can it precede true comparison,⁴ for it depends crucially on the latter. Of course, any lexicostatistics can be only as good as the prior comparative method (say, Meillet's) makes it. One can therefore never "approximate" by lexicostatistics and then "refine" later, e.g. by comparison.

There is, of course, an inherent weakness in looking at lexicon, which we all know, apart from the more theoretical issues raised in note 1. Still debate and fear of very ancient loans is not as rife in Austroasiatic⁵ scholarship as it is e.g. in Altaic;⁶ and dialect contamination is not so press-

a worry here as it is in Bantu⁷ and the classical
ance of Romance. But these factors must be
rely faced. In the absence of much characteriz-
word morphology, which has formed the backbone of
basis of Indo-European comparative study,⁸ we
d appreciate arguments from syntax, i.e. the
t of grammar. But to avoid the pitfalls of the
e (e.g. x precedes y, as in VOS/SOV or prefix-
n/suffixation) and of possible universals (e.g.
y two true *persons*, the "third" being either zero,
anaphora, or deictic) we must seek particularly
ved and idiosyncratic configurations--cranky rules
d these may be hard to find.⁹ We must also trace
r development, changes and motivation just as
iculously as we have done for phonological pheno-
a for over a century now.¹⁰

For the present we are thrown perforce largely
phonetics and lexicon. This imposes an even
ater obligation for care upon us. Finally, there
the traps of Sprachbund phenomena¹¹ which await
e.g. the tonal development of Tai, Chinese and
nam'ong.

Hence there is an important imprecision when
d D. Thomas says (SCAL 194) 'So this study is
force a lexico-statistical study, hence only
ative, yet it is submitted with the confidence
the main outlines of it will stand when phono-
cal comparisons can be made.' There is also a
ness and technical inconsistency in his state-
(194) that 'lexical and syntactic features are
easily erased.' They may just become harder
spot and recognize.

There is an important point on cognate deter-
tion (phonetic-morphological judgment) and

the meaning of numbers and percentages. Thomas and Headley (1970:401) have Pearic and Khmer with 'a higher cognate percentage... This is apparently due to heavy borrowing by Pearic from the more prestigious Khmer.' But then some word-pairs are not really cognate! Much sketchy data (403) may simply not be ripe yet for a statement; 'allowance for phonetic deviance' (409) is not correct comparative method.

We know that the surest and essential basis for subgrouping is that of *exclusively shared innovations of replacement or addition*. Therefore percentage numbers are not the true reason for associating Katu and Brôu (Brũ). Rather, we are impressed by the common phonology of (SCAL 198-202)

ear, hand, back, mother, tree, fruit, root,
fire, two, seven, enter, stand, swim, eat,
split, sew

and by the lexical choice of

tooth, skin, bone (or is this phonology?),
fat, husband, snake, earth, river, day (are
the last two conservations?), house, five,
six, eight, nine, green, right, dirty, smooth
laugh, smell, vomit, live, pull, dig (cf.
#100).

An inspection of Kuy (Thomas and Headley 1970:411f) gives results similar to those for Brôu.

The nature of genetic branching has been imperfectly appreciated. Ruth S. Wilson (SCAL 212) cites Cheon (1907) with Mường as a connecting link between Vietnamese and Mon-Khmer. This is seeming nonsense. Mường is simply conservative in some features. Wilson's final sentence (213) speaks of 'additional

ngth to the arguments.' But the properties
en of are entailed by definition.

The real reason that (Viet-) Mường seems related
he other branches is by virtue of its strong but
tered matches with the various branches. Consider
first hundred lexemes of Thomas and Headley (1970:
f.):

nose, eye, mouth (= Katu?), tongue (= Brâu?),
heart, intestines, liver, bone, skin (= Chrau?),
hand, foot, thigh, father, mother, child,
husband (?), dog, chicken, bird, to fly, fly,
mosquito, worm, fish, tree (?), leaf, fruit
(NB Skt. *ph(a)l-*), root, dehusked rice (?),
salt, water, river (cf. #49 worm), rain,
cloud (= Kuy, Brâu), sky (= Chrau), moon
(cf. #64 fruit), day, year, house (= Chrau).

ricourt was right; but there is still much work
d.

¹Many of the criticisms made when lexicostatis-
was relatively in fashion had to do with tech-
l or procedural difficulties; e.g. problems of
loping a truly "culture-free" list, of over-
ng statistical poverty or irrelevance, of
sing between partial synonyms, of selecting
hological segmentation, of controlling direct
ent or ancestry to establish a yardstick, of
inating intimate borrowing, of selecting sources
tual or informant) for purity, of eliminating
side effects of standard languages, of balancing
the competing claims of accuracy/exhaustiveness
accomplishment/results. But these critical
rts rarely addressed the question of the rele-
ce of the lexicon, esp. a notion list, to the
al grammar. We know that language change must
expected in any part of the grammar; yet we know,
that human communication demands continuity,
that in principle semantic stability is also
we must expect. What then *is* lexical change,

and how is it best envisaged? What do we mean when we say lexical "replacement"? How is that not grammatical or syntactic? To what degree does this mean simply *phonetic* replacement, as opposed to evolution? What is the relation between loans, suppletion, synonymy, and resegmentation; i.e. how do we view the differences between the pairs *foot*/Albanian *këmbë* (from late Latin), *sit*/καθομαι, *head* French *tête* or *eat*/φάω, or *eat*/Spanish *comer*? Certainly not all these riddles are of equal weight, even if we knew the answers.

²For example, I have extensive lists from Albanian dialects (which it has never seemed worth the elaborate effort or printing space to prepare for publication) collected in the 1950's from carefully selected trustworthy speakers. These have a time depth ranging between 500 and perhaps 1000 years as judged by our rather full and accurate historical knowledge of the Balkans, of Italy, of the Byzantine period, etc. Our reconstructive power for Albanian is not at all as inferior as the standard literature would lead one to believe. Many of these enclaves have lived in wide dispersion and isolation useful for our purposes. The results of a lexicostatistical count of these accords well with our intuitive (imperfect though our knowledge is) view based on reconstruction and known history. That is to say, the subgrouping where significant is surely correct and even the time depth figures seem not too wide of the mark.

³It is only among anthropologists or archaeologists who are not linguists in any sense that such a hope has been entertained.

⁴There is a considerable discouraging linguistic literature which actually hoped to use lexicostatistics somehow as a heuristic towards making comparisons that would subsequently lead us to correct correspondences and historical derivations; or as a validation of difficult comparisons.

⁵But it must always be remembered that loans are not the only source of difficulty and error. Rather than the occasionally mentioned intrusion of chance factors such as tabu, more attention should be paid to stray fossilizations resulting from systematic alternations in morphology and phrasal syntax. I have in mind structures such as I have discussed in *Kivung* 2:3, 1969, 12-15; *Revue des études arméniennes* 3, 1966, 11-15; *Minos* 9, 1968, 198-204; *Papers from the 6th Regional Meeting, Chicago Linguistic Society* 1970, 482-8; *Baltistica* 8, 1972, 55-6; *Studies in*

of George L. Trager (1972), 233-7.

⁶ See my discussion, *Studies in General and Mental Linguistics* (Hattori Festschrift) 1970, 188-

⁷ On this and other Bantu problems I have worked in *IJAL* 36, 1970, 273-87.

⁸ And, paradoxically, which has then become a source of bewilderment and discord in Altaic and Uralic studies (where typology has been mistaken for correspondence, and where recalcitrant similarities have led to a loss of faith in basic principles of linguistic validity), and of stagnation in comparative typology (where word structures have been deceptively persistent and self-restoring).

⁹ In Indo-European, beside famous criteria of morphology ('to be' and athematic verbs; preterite-presents such as OE *wāt*; heteroclitics such as Lat. *iecur iecinoris* and the r-stem kin-terms; Uralic and especially ordinals such as 'first'; the etymology of *much* as an ā-stem; the cognates of the Sanskrit *ānāṃśa* to the Sanskrit root *āś-* 'reach'; the evidence in key word categories of zero-grade and ablaut), we have the specifics of Wackernagel's Law on clause-initial word order, the selection of the "augment" by verbs, the rule deleting *pro* on verbs and vocatives in main clauses, the behaviour of verbs of position with 'in' which I pointed out at the LSA Annual Meeting 1972.

¹⁰ See my papers *Voprosy Jazykoznanija* 1971 (1) 1-10; *From Soundstream to Discourse* (Papers from the Mid-America Linguistics Conference, Columbia, Missouri) 1972, 66-71; *Papers from the CLS Comparative Linguistics Festival* 1973, 229-51; *Varia, Eriu* 1973 (to appear); *Linguistic Inquiry* 4, 1973, 246-51.

¹¹ On these there are particularly rich parametric literatures centering on the Balkans (the classic case), the Baltic, India-Pakistan, Northwest Europe, Northwest coastal North America; and (with less focus) Northern Eurasia, the Near-to-Middle East, and Western Europe; apart from Southeast Asia. Some of what passes for comparison in Africa may well include a large ingredient of Sprachbund.

REFERENCES

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