

THE MORPHOLOGICAL STRUCTURE OF THE AUSTROASIATIC LANGUAGES

By NILS M. HOLMER

The term 'Austroasiatic' I shall use here to cover the following groups of languages : (1) the so-called Sino-Tibetan languages (Chinese, Tibetan, Burmese, and Thai, along with minor groups of related languages, of which those are especially interesting which have been described as showing tendencies towards polysyllabicity : Kachin, Bodo, Naga, etc., in Assam and northern Burma, and further those which have been described as 'pronominalizing' : Kanawari (*kanauri*), Limbu, etc., in the Himalayas) ; (2) the languages of the Munda-Santali group in India and those of the Mon-Khmer group in Further India, which—although they have certain concrete points in common—yet are structurally rather heterogeneous¹ ; and (3) finally the languages of Austronesian stock (Indonesian, Melanesian-Micronesian, and Polynesian). It will probably strike anyone who is familiar with some or all of these groups to find such a language as Chinese, with its monosyllabic and uninflected words, ranged along with such a language as Fijian, which is a polysyllabic inflected language and one showing even a tendency towards incorporation (or 'polysynthesis' according to the Amerindian pattern). It is evident that such a classification is not one made on synchronic grounds. My purpose is to stress the importance of the historical aspect of the problem of linguistic structure.

As will be seen, I use 'morphological' in a wide sense here. We shall look into the structural relationship of these languages from the following different points of view : (1) with regard to the system of sounds ; (2) with regard to the form of the word stem ; and (3) with regard to inflexion. However, I shall not enter at all upon the syntactical structure, nor, of course, upon anything connected with semantics. All aspects will be dealt with historically as far as it is possible.

Phonology. What do the phonetic systems and their historical evolution have in common in all these languages ? Synchronically, they would not appear upon examination to present any typical traits whatsoever. If, however, one should attempt to trace the evolution of the sounds in the Austroasiatic languages, he might perhaps discern a few significant points. First of all, it is important to try to find the type of language within this heterogeneous complex which might be supposed to come closest to the earlier phases of the evolution. It is highly improbable, for instance, that any one of the monosyllabic languages represents an original state of things, since general trends in linguistic evolution usually entail that longer forms are more primitive, so that monosyllabicity undoubtedly

¹ cf. Heinz-Jürgen Pinnow's paper in this volume (5.6 (g)).

represents a final phase in the mechanical evolution. Along with the fact that the northern continental languages have become syllabically reduced goes the creation of a system of tone differentiation.

Among the languages which we may suppose not to have suffered any considerable reduction of syllables, that is to say some of the languages of the southern groups, we find such as possess an evolved system of sounds and a great phonetic symmetry. I refer to the Austronesian languages. Here we find a simple vowel system (with a tendency for certain vowels to be influenced as to quality by neighbouring vowels; for *ablaut* alternations, cf. below). If we are to accept Dempwolff's four fundamental vowels (*a*, *i*, *u*, *ə*, with a tendency for *i* and *u* to alternate with the more open forms *e* and *o*) as basic vowels for the whole group of languages with which we are concerned, I think no serious difficulties will arise anywhere.

The polysyllabic southern languages have a richer consonant system: an early opposition voiced-voiceless (if we like, from an earlier opposition low tone-high tone)¹ is perceivable in the stops and affricates. Ancient Chinese is usually reconstructed with at least a triple series of stops; this system in any case mirrors the one found in written Tibetan.² For Munda-Santali and Austronesian, however, it seems impossible to trace even a triple series (Melanesian ought not to be an exception); we have everywhere a clear twofold basic opposition of voiced-voiceless stops. It is of course possible—and even probable—that the southern languages have lost one or two of the series typical of the northern groups. The latter reveal a regular alternation of the series of stops and affricates, which has become especially evident in the Tibetan verb. Whether anything like this occurs in Austronesian, I am not prepared to say (cf., for instance, Malay *gali* ~ *ka* 'dig').

Apart from the distinctions mentioned, the stops (and affricates) are found to occur in several series differentiated by their point of articulation; the Munda-Santali languages are perhaps representative with the following five series: labials, dentals, cerebrals (or retroflex sounds), palatals, and postpalatals (or velars)—incidentally, these classes are in part characteristic of Dravidian as well. If we consider Old Javanese as typical of Austronesian, we shall find an identical system for this latter group also. The cerebral (or retroflex) series is largely absent in the languages of the northern groups (even the reconstruction of Ancient Chinese does not seem to have revealed any such sounds); the Mon-Khmer languages also seem to lack them. On the other hand, they recur (in various arrangements) in some other Indonesian as well as in some Oceanic languages, notably

¹ H. L. Shorto, however, in his paper on Northern Mon-Khmer, treats tone distinction as having replaced a system of voiced-voiceless distinction in these latter languages.

² Søren Egerod attempts, partly depending on Karlgren, a reconstruction of a fourfold system which is reminiscent of the one found in Sanskrit; see 'Studies in Thai Dialectology', *Acta Orientalia*, 26, pp. 43 ff.

Malagasy and Melanesian. One significant fact is the poverty of sibilants in the Austronesian languages : Dempwolff reconstructs one only (which he denotes by *t'*). This does not hold for the northern languages, even though Munda-Santali and Mon-Khmer, as well as perhaps Thai also, seem to have had—originally at least—but one sibilant. Even in this respect we notice a significant Dravidian parallel : in Tamil, as we know, the only existing sibilant is an *s*-sound with a tendency towards palatalization (does Dempwolff's symbol indicate an analogous feature ?).

One more detail of the Austronesian phonetic system has often struck me as recalling Dravidian ; I refer to the consonant sounds which Dempwolff represents *l*, *l'*, *γ*, and *g'* respectively. To me it is rather evident that all of these are original liquids of various kinds : Dempwolff's *l* would be the Italian *l*-sound, his *l'* is evidently in most languages an *r*-sound, *γ* I do not hesitate to place among the *l*-sounds (as it actually is in some Melanesian languages), whereas the rarer *g'* (the medial consonant in Javanese and Malay *pira* 'how many?') is possibly a palatalized form. Could it not be that these sounds answer phonetically to the Dravidian *l* (as in Tamil *malai* 'mountain'), *r* (as in Tamil *oru* 'one'), *l'* (as in the Tamil plural suffix), and *L* (as in Tamil *tamiL*), respectively ? In any case, the variety of sounds appearing chiefly as *l* or *r* in the different Austronesian languages rather strongly suggests an original system of liquid sounds similar or related to the one found in Dravidian.

Structure of the word. It may be taken for granted that the monosyllabic word of the northern Austroasiatic languages has not been preserved until our day in its original form. In Chinese and Tibetan we can observe, even in historical times, a thoroughgoing reduction of the word forms, either by comparison with reconstructed forms of Ancient Chinese or with Tibetan orthographic forms. In certain languages of Assam (to which I have referred above), which otherwise show Tibetan analogies, vowels appear between certain consonants whereby the word becomes disyllabic ; it does not seem to be agreed upon whether these vowels were originally there or have a secondary origin (although the former alternative seems more likely to me). If we now consider the written Tibetan forms as more primitive than the spoken forms and further assume that, by analogy with the above languages of Assam, a vowel had once occurred between the first two consonants of such Tibetan words as e.g. *kluñ* 'river' (or *kloñ* 'wave'), *gtiñ* 'bottom', *ltuñ* 'fall', etc., forms would arise which would strikingly suggest the Indonesian type of word : cf. Malay *kalong* 'neck chain' or *Kěling* 'a Tamil or Telugu', *gětang* 'taut', *lutung* or *lotong* 'a kind of black ape', etc.

If the Indonesian forms appear most apt to serve as a pattern for primitive Austronesian as far as the elementary sounds go, let us see how these are combined. As a general characteristic we find that consonant groups are absent, with the single exception of certain groups with a nasal, which are permissible

in medial position only (they may, however, occur secondarily in initial position originally in *sandhi*—thus giving rise to the so-called prenasalized phonemes for instance, Melanesian).¹ The word stem is typically disyllabic, but short or longer stems occur occasionally. It might be said that there exists a certain tendency towards three-consonant stems, as in Semitic; for the instability (non-original character) of one of the consonants, I shall only refer to what is said in the sketch (by Ferrand) in the first edition of *Les langues du monde* (pp. 4420; originally put forward by R. Brandstetter, *Wurzel und Wort in indonesischen Sprachen*, Lucerne, 1910).

An important characteristic of the Austronesian vocalism is its being subjected in a high degree to *ablaut* variation. The alternation of *a*, *i*, *u*, and the *pè* (where it exists) in Indonesian is too well known to require examples. It appears more regularly in Tibetan (in the verb). In Chinese the apophony is also represented and I presume in the other continental languages as well.

The system of inflexion. Ever since the time of Wilhelm von Humboldt the Austroasiatic languages have been considered largely as uninflected. This is to some extent surprising when we take into account the modifications to which Indonesian and Oceanic words are subject in order to express different functions. The idea of non-inflexion much depends on what is understood by the term 'inflexion'. In von Humboldt's day it was customary to make a distinction between 'agglutination' and 'inflexion' and in conventional classification 'Malayo-Polynesian' is still often described as 'agglutinative'. Furthermore these languages (especially those of the northern continental groups) have been considered as uninflected mainly owing to facts which are of an orthographic nature. We may think of Tibetan, which has a declension with seven cases for whose characteristic elements are, however, usually represented as separate words, although they are sometimes very clearly of suffix character.

We have every right, I think, to speak of inflexion in a great number of the languages, although some of them have evidently passed into a stage practically devoid of inflexion (this process has been supposed to be taking place in modern English as well). Another thing is that the Austronesian inflexion is in many respects on quite different lines from what we find in the European languages long held to be the inflecting languages *par excellence*.

We are able to recognize two types of inflexion in the languages with which we are concerned: (1) one which we might perhaps call 'derivational' ('non-declensional-conjugational') and (2) one which we might term 'flexion proper' (or 'declensional-conjugational'). Let us begin with the former type.

¹ cf. Hans Kähler in *Afrika und Übersee*, 39, pp. 142-3, as well as M. E. J. G. Verstraete in *De bijwoordelijke bepalingen van het werkwoord in enkele indonesische talen* (Utrecht, 1919), pp. 63 ff.; incidentally, these authors suggest an evolution similar to the one I should like to propose, in which the Old Javanese 'article' *ng* plays a decisive rôle.

of inflexion. It is well known that the Austroasiatic languages make abundant use of prefixes. We see them in written Tibetan and in reconstructions of Ancient Chinese. In the border languages in Assam and Upper Burma, as well as in Munda-Santali and Mon-Khmer, they are clearly distinguished even in the pronunciation and in Austronesian they have evolved into a most complicated system. Although we may sometimes be poorly informed as to the original function of these prefixes, we notice everywhere a remarkable formal agreement between them.

In Austronesian the 'derivational' prefixes are based chiefly on the consonants *p-*, *t-*, *k-*, *m-*, *s-*, and zero (which latter might be identified with one of Dyen's 'laryngeals'; this, of course, is the element underlying the vocalic prefix *a-* in Indonesian), all followed by the vowel *-a-* or sometimes *-i-* and further liable to enlargement by an additional consonant (usually the one which Dempwolff writes **γ*). I do not have to quote any examples of these prefixes from Austronesian, as they are all too well known. The interesting thing is that the same type of consonant reappears in written Tibetan, e.g., the *b-*, *d-*, and *g-* of the verbal inflexion, further the initial *ʼ-* or *h-*. In Tibetan words beginning with consonant clusters we often notice *b-*, *d-*, *g-*, *m-*, *s-* as initial consonants. The same is the case in reconstructed Ancient Chinese, where the prefixes take the forms **p-*, **t-*, **k-*, **m-*, **s-*, and **h-*. Many of these initial consonants are recognizable in the other languages also.¹

Among the 'derivational' formatives we also have to consider the infixes, chiefly with *-n-*, *-m-*, *-l-*, and *-r-*, which play an important part in the Austronesian languages. They are also found in Mon-Khmer (*-l-*, *-r-*, *-n-*, and *-m-*) and in Munda (*-l-*, *-r-*, *-n-*). In the other languages they are difficult to trace.²

The flexional elements proper (or the 'declensional-conjugational' formatives) are twofold and we may hence distinguish between 'case inflexion' (including the use of prepositions or postpositions) and 'personal inflexion' (including possessive inflexion). Both types are extremely varying in the different languages as they appear to-day (and, as a matter of fact, even in the early stages), and I shall merely attempt to trace the probable evolution. To consider the case inflexion first, let me mention that the Tibetan system is hardly represented anywhere else. In Austronesian, the use of prepositions takes the place of declension forms and prepositions are also used in Thai and Mon-Khmer,³ although they do not seem to correspond formally to those of Austronesian. Conversely, the other languages have no trace of them, whether or not due to the fact that these might have been lost as easily as the prefixes dealt with above as having a 'derivational' function. Munda and Modern Chinese follow the Tibetan pattern of using

¹ cf. Judith M. Jacob's 'Prefixation and Infixation in Old Mon . . . '.

² cf. Judith M. Jacob, *op. cit.*

³ On the whole, Thai syntactically approaches Austronesian; cf. the paper on Thai and Vietnamese by P. J. Honey and E. H. S. Simmonds.

postpositions (which do not bear any direct formal relation to the Tibetan ‘*o*’ suffixes’).

The question now arises : since in the course of linguistic evolution one type of language may, by a slow process, evolve into another type, ought we to suppose that the postposition languages in the north have stuck to, and further evolved, an original system of suffix declension (as existing in most parts of Asia), or have the same languages lost an original prefix declension (as found in the Australasian islands), due to the influence of the bulk of ‘*agglutinative*’ languages of north-east Asia ? There may be some truth in each of these theories, which do not necessarily exclude one another altogether. It is quite possible that the Austronesian system of case inflexion (by prefixed elements) is not as ancient as it is general. Although a change from the suffix-postposition construction to the prefix-preposition construction is by no means improbable (this is, as a matter of fact, what has happened in the modern European languages), the lack of agreement on this point is indeed remarkable.

What I have said about the system of case inflection holds in a great measure for the system of personal inflexion also. The conjugation of the verb in many languages of the world has in certain cases and to a large extent arisen from the possessive inflexion of the noun (as we find it in, for instance, Arabic or Indonesian). When dealing with the Austroasiatic languages, in which formal non-distinction of nominal and verbal stems is a salient and ancient feature, we seem especially justified in treating the personal inflexion of the verb in closest connection with the possessive inflexion of the noun. As far as this latter is concerned, it is, however, difficult to find any kind of uniformity in the various languages. We naturally have to start with a state of affairs in which possession is expressed by suffixes (as in Indonesian). This system is further that of Thai, although the possessive formatives may appear to have less of a suffix character, and of Munda-Santhal. In Burmese, Chinese, and Tibetan, however, this construction is unknown. These latter languages use, by analogy with so many other continental Asiatic languages, the genitive (or possessive) form of the personal pronoun (Tibetan *na-i*, Chinese *wo ti* ‘*of me, my*’), which is placed before the noun.

The evolution of the conjugation (where one may be said to exist) is more doubtful and more complicated. It is rather probable that one has to start with the evolution of elements expressing either the subject of an intransitive verb or the direct object of a transitive verb, from an original system of possessive inflexion (as described above), and the process is perhaps indicated, although sparingly, in Javanese, Malay, and Melanesian. (Parallels are clearly traceable in Arabic ; cf. the suffix in *yadu-hu* ‘*his hand*’ and *daraba-hu* ‘*struck him*’, etc.) But it is important to note that Austronesian seems to have early abandoned the objective genitive construction as the normal means of forming a basic conjugation, by contrast with so many ‘*primitive*’ languages both in Asia and America. I have, although with some hesitation, been trying to spot traces of the ancient

construction (as I would consider it). The placing of the pronominal elements, especially those expressing the subject, in relation to the verbal stem as well as to a preceding sentence connective, constitutes a problem of its own and one, as I believe, of great interest for 'comparative structure'. Unfortunately, space would not permit even to touch upon this problem.¹

In the main, I think, the evolution is quite on a par with what may be observed in other languages where a possessive inflexion is found. But what are we to do with the so-called 'personalizing' languages in the Himalayas, to which I have referred? In Limbu, for instance, the corresponding formatives seem to be primarily *prefixes*. If these are not to be explained as the result of a secondary evolution (which I frankly believe cannot be the case), we are forced to assume that these languages in this respect do not represent the common Austroasiatic type, but have conserved features of a more ancient linguistic structure (the one found in the Kashmirian Burushaski or the languages of the Caucasus).

By way of conclusion, I should like to take the case of these archaic Sino-Tibetan languages in order to demonstrate that no type is really pure, and that it is impossible to draw any definite limits between any types or to make a classification which does not suffer from overlapping (cf. the end of the first part of G. B. Milner's 'Notes on the Comparison of Two Languages', with a reference to Professor J. R. Firth). And, furthermore, although the structure of a language, in the sense that I have tried to illustrate in this sketch, is in many respects constant, it may nevertheless happen that it changes on essential points even more rapidly than do certain of the very oldest concrete morphological elements.

¹ cf. the construction *ka-m* 'not-you' in Munda (appearing in an example given by Pinnow in his paper in this volume, 5.4), with, for instance, Tongan *ka u* 'and I', an agreement which I find in a way significant.