

Language contact and syntactic change in Austroasiatic languages

Austroasiatic (AA) languages are spoken in Mainland Southeast Asia and, in smaller numbers, in Northeast, East, and Central India. In addition, there are AA populations in peninsular Malaysia and on the Nicobar islands. The typological profiles of AA languages range widely from agglutinating, verb-final in the West (Munda) to synthetic, verb-initial on the Nicobars and isolating, verb-medial in the East (Vietnam). Some languages of the family have gender systems with two grammatical genders (Khasian) with an agreement system, other make use of classifiers (e.g. Khmuic) or do not distinguish noun classes. This leaves a very heterogeneous structural picture of the family. While much progress has been made in terms of lexical reconstruction of Austroasiatic in recent years, this great typological diversity of the family leaves little hope for syntactic reconstruction of the proto-language., which according to some authors has a time depth of not less than 7000 years.

Two AA languages, viz. Mon and Khmer, have a recorded history of well over 1000 years, allowing for diachronic studies. Taking these languages as examples, the present study shows a number of representative cases of syntactic change that can be partly ascribed to external influence, that is, replication of similar structures of dominant neighboring languages. Both Mon and Khmer have come to resemble their dominant neighbors, namely Burmese and Thai respectively, in many respects. In the case of Khmer and Thai, there is a striking isomorphism (Huffman 1973), though the languages are not genetically related and have been in contact for less than 1000 years. Mon has been under increasing Burmese influence since the 15th century, and has developed many structures more typical of a verb-final language like Burmese. One case in point is the emerging (though not exclusive) use of clause final subordinators (conditional, complementizer), which leads to a superficially radically changed profile of complex sentences in Mon.

While we are still far from understanding the syntactic development of the AA languages from the proto-language, it is evident that the role of language contact in the history of these languages, which are mostly well integrated into their areal settings, must not be underestimated. The earlier view that only lexicon can be borrowed among languages, not grammatical structures, has been disproved more recently (cf. Harris & Campbell 1995:120ff). Several scholars have proposed frameworks to deal with contact induced restructuring and grammatical borrowing, of which the work of Matras (2009, 2012) and Matras & Sakel (2007), as well as Aikhenvald & Dixon (2002, 2007) are of special importance to the present study.

References

Aikhenvald, Alexandra Y. & R. M. W. Dixon (eds.) 2002. *Areal diffusion and genetic inheritance: problems in comparative linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Aikhenvald, Alexandra Y. & R. M. W. Dixon (eds.) 2007. *Grammars in contact. A cross-linguistic typology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Harris, Alice C. & Lyle Campbell. 1995. *Historical syntax in cross-linguistic perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Huffman, Franklin E. 1973. Thai and Cambodian - a case of syntactic borrowing? In *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 93/4, 488-509.

Matras, Yaron. 2009. *Language Contact*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Matras, Yaron. 2012. An activity-oriented approach to contact-induced language change. In Claudine Chamoreau & Isabelle Léglise (eds.) *Dynamics of contact-induced language change*. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 17- 52.

Matras, Yaron & Janet Sakel (eds.) 2007. *Grammatical borrowing in cross-linguistic perspective*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.