

(1) Paper title:

Is Mon-Khmer dead? Long live Austroasiatic!

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(3) Name(s) of author(s)

Paul Sidwell

(4) Affiliation(s) of author(s)

Centre for Research in Computational Linguistics (Bangkok)

(5) Email address for each author

<paulsidwell@yahoo.com>

Abstract

In reviewing the classification of Austroasiatic languages in the twentieth century, it is evident that cleanly identifying the constituency of a “Mon-Khmer” family within the phylum has never been satisfactorily resolved. Initially narrowly defined, the putative membership of Mon-Khmer steadily expanded over time; perhaps the only consistent characteristic of alternative formulations was the lack of any claim to the Munda languages of India. And, since the 1980s, this has been the generally received consensus view: that Austroasiatic consists of the two principal clades Munda and Mon-Khmer.

Looking back, it is apparent that this view emerged absent a comprehensive Austroasiatic reconstruction, by researchers who relied on typological, lexical, and lexicostatistical considerations in making their classifications. But this methodology, however reasonable, has created divisions that go far beyond simple language classification. Over the last half century there has been an ongoing social separation between Mon-Khmer and Munda (mostly India-based) scholars; unfortunate if the existing classification paradigm is correct, but needless and harmful if it turns out that our attitudes and work practices have been framed around a model that is ultimately disproved.

While the Austroasiatic conferences held in India in 1977 and 2007 provided excellent opportunities for bridge-building, the three-decades gap between meetings is itself evidence of the conceptual fragmentation that has paralleled the geographic – as opposed to linguistic – distance between Munda and Mon-Khmer. In fact, from the comparative-historical viewpoint there are no data that decisively indicate that all of the Mon-Khmer languages are closer to each other than any are to Munda. Indeed, new and conflicting classification models have been advanced (e.g. Peiros 2004, Diffloth 2005), and it has been argued that the Munda languages are structurally innovative rather than archaic (e.g. Donegan & Stampe 2004). It may well be that Munda is best viewed as a typologically variant Northern Mon-Khmer branch (for want of a better term).

These considerations highlight just how precarious are our traditions of treating Munda as a distant cousin, while taking for granted the place of Mon and Khmer within in a sub-branch. On the contrary, we should recognize Munda’s integral role in the comparative study of the Austroasiatic languages of Southeast Asia, and go on to ask if there is any true cladistic motivation that requires the term “Mon-Khmer” at all. More importantly, even as we use modern resources and improved methods to help resolve technical issues of clades and branchings, it is equally imperative that we work to bring South Asian and Southeast Asian linguists together in an inclusive research community of Austroasiatic scholars.

References

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