

ABSTRACT

Waterworld: lexical evidence for aquatic subsistence strategies in Austroasiatic

The Austroasiatic language phylum has long been established, but limited progress has been made towards a consolidated reconstruction of its proto-lexicon. The largest body of putative proto-forms, Shorto (2006) largely consists of a compilation of lookalikes, and his starred forms are supported by citations from as few as two branches of Austroasiatic. These lacunae make it problematic to draw conclusions about the origin and routes of dispersal, as well as the potential subsistence systems of early speakers, a classical goal of historical linguistics. This in turn has implications for dating, since the SE Asian Neolithic is now very well known. This absence has not inhibited scholars from random unsubstantiated guesses (e.g. Van Driem 2007) nor from the enthusiasts of mathematical procedures in applying various procedures to come up with wholly fantastical proposals.

Turning to serious science, it is possible using a judicious combination of paper sources and the online Mon-Khmer Etymological Dictionary (MEKD) to make proposals for possible Proto-Austroasiatic starred forms, focusing on items indicative of subsistence. Since Sidwell & Blench (2011) put forward an aquatic dispersal model, the primary choice was the lexicon associated with water and aquatic exploitation of resources. Indeed, it turns out that many items associated with these can indeed be reconstructed, including waterways, boats and water transport, fish and other river fauna and fish capture techniques. Some proposals are made for the types of fish-trap based on comparative studies of museum specimens. A significant proportion of these lexical items are not attested in Munda languages, in marked contrast with the agricultural lexicon. This agrees well with a model which proposes a dispersal from SE Asia into India, with agriculture already established. As Munda-speakers spread into non-riverine areas, they inevitably dropped many terms associated with their previous water-based lifeways. Lexical data on subsistence terminology remains extremely weak in most branches of Austroasiatic and the kind of detail required for fine-mesh reconstructions is sorely needed.

If this dispersal model is the case, then there is considerable potential to correlate hypothetical proto-forms with the archaeological evidence. Recent redating of the SE Asian Neolithic (Rispoli 2008; Higham et al. 2011) suggests that agriculture only begins in the region between northern Vietnam and Thailand around 4000 BP, despite its much earlier inception further north. In terms of geography, this correlates well with an aquatic dispersal based on access to both livestock and crops, as well as new types of watercraft. This would also explain why Austroasiatic seems to have no internal structure, and to be a flat array with all branches of equal status. Speakers spread rapidly in all directions, following the main river arteries and even crossing the sea to the Nicobar Islands.

This late dispersal implies that the Austroasiatic speakers were migrating into areas already occupied by speakers of other language phyla, most prominently Sino-Tibetan [aka Trans-Himalayan]. Almost nothing is certain about the reconstruction of Sino-Tibetan, but it is not likely they were specialists of waterways. However, in areas where the two phyla are in contact, there is clear evidence for extensive borrowing of subsistence terminology.