

The prehistorical spread of Austro-Asiatic in South Asia

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In my talk I will summarize initial research into the distribution of morphosyntactic patterns in the languages of South Asia from three different families, above all in eastern-central South Asia, in a first attempt to unravel the linguistic prehistory of the subcontinent. To achieve this goal a small, preliminary morphosyntactic database has been compiled on 29 languages from throughout South Asia based on data from published resources, original field work, as well as questionnaires sent out to researchers working on a number of languages of the region. These data strongly suggest that there is a strong division within the Indo-Aryan group into eastern and western Indo-Aryan in terms of morpho-syntactic features: Whereas the western Indo-Aryan languages show no particularly close structural relations to any other language group, the eastern Indo-Aryan languages have converged considerably towards the Munda languages of central and eastern India. On the basis of this finding, I argue that the present-day Munda languages represent the “residue” of a previous spread of this linguistic group throughout the eastern half of the Indo-Gangetic Plain and that the majority of these pre-Munda Austro-Asiatic speakers switched at an early date to the Indo-Aryan *lingue franche* of the time as speakers of Indo-Aryan languages were spreading further towards the east. As I argue, this wholesale language shift resulted in a clear Austro-Asiatic substrate in eastern Indo-Aryan, which remains visible to this day.

This analysis fits in well with the argumentation in Bronkhorst (2007) whose “Greater Magadha”, based primarily on religious and cultural evidence, corresponds to this pre-Munda Austro-Asiatic speaking region of the eastern Indo-Gangetic Plain and whose western border corresponds remarkably well with the Indo-Aryan east-west divide.

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