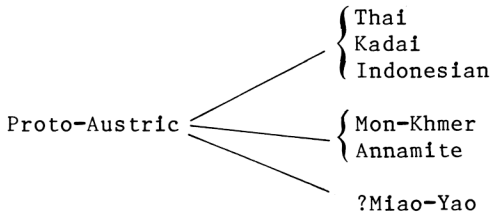# WHAT HAPPENED TO AUSTRIC ?

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One question remains problematic in Benedict's Austro-Tai and Austro-Japanese theories: in these vastly aligned perspectives, what is the place, if any, of the Austroasiatic family?

His position on this point has been changing over the years. When he first proposed his Austro-Tai theory (Benedict, 1942), Austroasiatic was mentioned as being included in "the Austric stock (Mon-Khmer, Khasi, Munda, et al.) established by Schmidt." He in fact volunteered to add: "The writer accepts Schmidt's postulation of an Austric superstock including Mon-Khmer and Austronesian, even though this relationship has not yet been thoroughly demonstrated" (fn.55, p.599). If Austronesian was possibly related both to Austroasiatic and to Thai-Kadai, it followed that all three families were related, and formed a larger stock. Consistently, Benedict took the plunge, saying: "Thai-Kadai-Indonesian appears in its true light as the Northern division of Schmidt's Austric superstock" (p.599). His proposed classification of the languages of Southeast Asia was then (p.600):

$$\text{Proto-Austric} \begin{cases} \begin{cases} \text{Thai} \\ \text{Kadai} \\ \text{Indonesian} \end{cases} \\ \begin{cases} \text{Mon-Khmer} \\ \text{Annamite} \end{cases} \\ \text{?Miao-Yao} \end{cases}$$

The only remaining problem, for him at the time, was the possible inclusion of Miao-Yao, which had to "await the reconstruction of Mon-Khmer and the assembling of more material on the Kadai languages."

Forty-four years later today, we are just beginning to have some light on Kadai languages and on Proto-Mon-Khmer, and it will probably take again that much longer before the question-mark can receive the rudiments of an answer. Sadly perhaps, most of us will not be in our present shape at that time; and we can only draw poetic satisfaction from the hope that our researches will be of some use, to some scholars, then.

Paul K. Benedict, however, would not have it that way.

By 1975, he had answered his own question about Miao-Yao, and many others beside. He also included in this volume (Benedict, 1975) two appendices which concern Austroasiatic: Appendix I is a reprint of Benedict (1942), and Appendix II "Austro-Thai and Austroasiatic" represents his current view on the matter, and contains a complete reversal of his position: "AT (Austro-Thai) and AA (Austroasiatic) do not have a core vocabulary in common, despite the morphological similarity of the two language stocks, hence the idea of an "Austric" superstock must be abandoned" (p.484). His account of resemblances between AA and AT, based in part on a faulty reconstruction of Proto-Palaungic, will not concern us here, see: Diffloth (1977).

A first indication of this reversal could already have been found in Benedict (1966), where a passing note (p.258) states: "the reconstruction of roots for AT has not closed the gap between this stock and Austroasiatic. Some structural similarities, notably the substantial infix *an-, along with a handful of significant root elements, especially *ka "fish" and *mat "eye" suggest that the relationship between the two stocks is of 'substratum' type."

The annoying fact is that Benedict's dismissal of the Austric hypothesis was not supported by any precise appraisal, or criticism on his part, of the 215 potential cognates, a gargantuesque "handful", and numerous prefixes and infixes, originally indicated by Schmidt (1906). The innocent reader might then be tempted to conclude that Schmidt's earlier idea had been too ambitious for the evidence at hand, and perhaps that Benedict's theory promised more immediate results. This, however, remains to be seen.

Since that time, at least two independent studies have recently proposed fresh evidence in support of Schmidt's Austric hypothesis: Pou and Jenner (1974), and Shorto (1976). Both listed dozens of new possible cognates, and Shorto stated that Benedict had clearly been wrong in rejecting Austric, adding that even if Austro-Thai and Austric did form a single super-stock, Austroasiatic and Austronesian were, within it, certainly closer together than either to Thai-Kadai.

In response, Benedict (1976) found Shorto's article to be supportive...of his own position. He rejected the lexical items presented in favor of Austric because "they tend to fall in what might be termed the ketket/bongbong class involving lexical areas well outside core vocabulary." The examples he gives for

this new theoretical concept have meanings like "to bore a
hole", "to be hollow", "to pour", "to stick in", "to stab":
nothing semantically esoteric. But their phonological forms:
burbuŋ, bugbug, suksuk, saksak etc., all involve reduplication,
like the term ketket/bongbong itself; this is perhaps what
incurred Benedict's disdain, since he also refers to them
(orally) as being mere "tuktuk words". If so, it would be
unfortunate that a great scholar would fail to appreciate and
cherish the very bread-and-butter of Southeast-Asian iconic
morphology.

What B. is apparently looking for is a case where the
majority of the "basic" words once established by Morris Swadesh
have not been replaced nor semantically altered. Such cases
certainly exist, and somewhat simplify the task of
comparativists who scan hundreds of "basic" wordlists at once,
in their mind. But in many socio-linguistic situations and
cultural contexts, these are words which are precisely subject
to change and replacement, possibly more so than others.

The Semai of Malaysia borrowed such common Malay words as
"stone", and "flower", precisely because everyone knew these,
and could use them for puns, or fashion; but they kept the
Mon-Khmer word /gəsɔɔʔ/ "the red tailor-ant, Oecophylla
smaragdina" (cf. Mon: ʔəchao, Central Nicobar: kâhöa, Samre:
kənsuu, Ngeq: kasaaw, Khmu: khuʔ, Mundari: hao), partly because
very few Semai would be sure, or even know, of the Malay word
for it, kěrěngga. Much of the recondite vocabulary of such
languages is native, and often quite old. For unusual words and
notions, these people do not turn to dictionaries or thesauri.
To them the written word is not only dead, it does not exist;
they turn for that to the old people.

Swadesh's "basic" notions are also possibly more subject to
taboo and euphemistic passe-passe than others; the verb "to eat"
is an obvious case in Southeast Asia. And why else would
Mah-Meri borrow the Malay "basic" words for "flesh", "tongue",
"neck", "skin", "knee", "tail", among others, but keep the
Mon-Khmer word for "molar-tooth"?

Over the millenia, the recurrence of factors like the above
could easily wipe out 100 such "basic" words, or even 200, while
protecting for us many hidden gems, such as "to whittle bamboo
strips" or "scruff", not to mention "smegma" and the like.
Benedict may detest it, but the Austric hypothesis is still very
much alive.

Let us take for instance a close look at two possible
Austric etymologies; one of them is already well known, and the

other is new.

1. WOOD

Schmidt (1906) suggested this etymon (Appendix IV, No.132) on the basis of: -on the AN side: Mal., Jav., Sund., Day., Mak., Iban: kayu, Mad.: hazu, Bat.: had'u, hayu, Bug: ad'u, Tag. kahuy, Bis.: kahui, and several Melanesian and Polynesian forms, all meaning "tree"

-on the AA side: Khmer: jhö "wood (in general)", Mon: čhu "wood, bush", Stieng: čü "tree, wood", Nicob.: hišöi(?) "coconut seedling".

Schmidt's question-mark about Nicobarese was justified: the form is derived from: ishoi-hashe "to plant coconut seedlings", and ishoi-hanga "to put, to place", itself probably borrowed from a Malay-like source (cf. Malay isi "inside"); for a better candidate to cognacy, see below.

On the semantic side, the AN forms given do not really mean "tree"; they are normally used in compounds, such as Malay: pokok kayu "tree", Tagalog: puno-ŋ-kahuy "tree", where kayu and kahuy refer not to the living organism but to the substance, "wood". The same is true of the AA forms: in Khmer: /ɗaəm chəə/, in Mon: /nɔm chu?/, and in Stieng: /təəm jhɨɨ /, all meaning "tree", the second word refers to the substance, not to the plant itself. The semantic match between the AN and the AA forms is thus even more precise than Schmidt had thought.

On the phonological side, Schmidt, in 1906, noticed the interchange of -y-, -h- and jh-, and expressed his puzzlement in a footnote to this word. We can now go a few steps further.

- For AN, Dempwolff (1938) simply reconstructed PAN *kajǔ; but noticing some difficulties with the medial consonant, Dyen (1965) reconstructed *kaS₂iv[]. This was reinterpreted by Dahl (1973) as *kaSiu with the following comment (p.33): "(among the words reconstructed with *-S-) *kaSiu has the reflex in more languages than any other word." He also indicated (Chp.5) that there was no contrast between the high vowels *i, *u and their approximant counterparts *y, *w. As more and more medial clusters are being recognized for PAN, this word could also have, I imagine, a form like *kaSyu, with the phonetic value of *S still in question.

- For AA, South-Bahnaric forms suggest either *ch- or *jh- Sre, Mnong /chii/, Chrau /chəə/, Stieng /jhɨɨ/, the last possibly borrowed from Middle Khmer *jhəə; the Aslian forms, P.

Semai *jhuu? , Temiar /jhu?/, Che'Wong, Jahai, Bateg /jhũ? /,
Ten'en /yəhũ?/, Kensiw, Kenta'Bong /?ihũ?/, confirm an initial
*jh- at an early stage of MK, while Jah-Hut /nah5?/ and Lanoh
/ɲuhũ? / represent a nasal infixed form *j-n-huu?, which might
also explain Nancowry Nicobar /?uɲíha/. Since Monic lacks a
*jh-/ *ch- contrast, Proto-Monic *chuu? (Diffloth, 1984:80) can
support a Proto Southern-MK *jhuu?, or perhaps *jhɨɨ?. But in
Northern-MK, within the Palaungic branch, Lamet /khee?/ agrees
with Proto-Waic *kho? (Diffloth, 1980:113) in supporting P.
Palaungic *khəə?, the vowel correspondence being regular; and
the little known Angkuic branch of Palaungic confirms the
initial *k- and the proto-vowel *əə, but restores a medial *-s-:
Angku: kisu, Möng-Lwe: ka hsü, Kha-Kiorr: teseu, P'uman: zie,
Mok: /ɕé? /, Man-Met: /sé?/, U: /sĭ?/; so, we end up with P.
Palaungic *kəsəə?. This does not match South-MK with initial
*jh-, and no parallel cases have been found so far; the
reconstruction of a Proto-Mon-Khmer form stalls at this point.

Unless, of course, we look back to PAN : something like
*kəyhuu? or *kəŷuu? might be in order for PAA, which could both
explain the divergent No.-vs So.-MK initials, and also solve the
*uu/ɨɨ/əə problem, while suggesting a Proto-Austric form which
does not seem especially "tuktuk".

2. BONE

For AN, Dempwolff (1938) reconstructs *[t]ulaŋ "bone";
but Formosan languages have an initial palatal which would
exclude a plain PAN *t-, and certain Philippine languages (e.g.
Ilongot /tu?láŋ/, Isneg /tol?áŋ/) require a medial *- ?-;
accordingly, Dyen and McFarland (1970) reconstruct *CuqlaNə, and
Tsuchida (1976) gives *Cuq2əlaN, where *-N accounts for a final
-n in certain languages, instead of -ŋ.

In AA, a form like PAA *jə?aaŋ appears, at first, to
account for much of the material; this includes, for
Northern-MK: Khmu /cə?aaŋ/, Proto-Waic *sə?aŋ, P. Palaung
*kə?aaŋ: (Rumai, Da-ang, Ka-ang, Na-ang: /kə?aaŋ/), P. Angkuic
*sə?aaŋ: (Mok:/kə?àaŋ/, Man-Met: /?àaŋ/, U: /sə?âŋ/); in
Southern-MK we find: Proto-Aslian *jə?aaŋ (P. Semai *jə?aagᵑ,
Temiar: /jə?aak/, Semnam: /jə?aaŋ/, Mah-Meri: /jə?ak/, Semelai:
/jə?æŋ/, Jah-Hut: /jə?aŋ/, Che'Wong: /jə-egᵑ/, Jahai: /jə?eŋ/,
Kenta'Bong, Kensiw: /?i?eŋ/, Ten'en: /?iyegᵑ/); and in Munda
(Pinnow, 1959:70) the medial *-?- was lost: Kharia: /ɟaŋ/,
Santali, Munda, Birhor: /ɟaŋ/, Sora: /ə-ɟaŋ-ən/, Pareng: /zaŋ/.

But in both North and South MK, we find -n- infixed forms
quite common in Nouns (for example to give a "generic" meaning,
or to derive Numeral Classifiers from an original Noun) which

suggest a derivate PAA *j-n̥-ʔaaŋ : in Palaungic (No.-MK) we
have: Riang: /tsnʔɓŋ/, Lamet: /cəŋʔáaŋ/, Ta-ang: /kənʔaŋ/; in
Katuic (So.MK) we find: Proto-Katuic *ŋhaaŋ, (because *-Nʔ- and
*-Lʔ- clusters become *-Nh- and *Lh- in the Katuic branch): Bru,
Kui, Pacoh, Katu: /ŋhaaŋ/, Souei: /hahaaŋ/, Ngeq: /ghaaŋ/.

However, in three separate branches of MK we find
unexpected trouble in the vowel: in the Khasian branch: Khasi
/s̓ʔeeŋ/, Amwi /s̓ʔiaŋ/, in the Khmer branch /chʔəŋ/ (Middle Khmer
*cəʔiŋ), and in the Bahnaric branch: South-Bahnaric *ntiiŋ,
Central-Bahnaric *kətiiŋ, West-Bahnaric *kətɯəŋ, North-Bahnaric
*kəsiəŋ. One would have expected a regular /aa/ in all Khasian
and Bahnaric languages, and an *ɛɛ in Khmer. All three
"irregular" branches suggest a proto diphthong, perhaps *iə, but
this would not behave like the two diphthongs *iə and *ia which
are independently needed for Proto-So-MK, and probably earlier.
The Bahnaric forms are especially interesting, as they suggest a
possible P. Bahnaric *kənthiəŋ, where the *-h- would be the
outcome of a previous *-ʔ-, as in neighbouring Katuic, and the
*-t- would be epenthetic in a medial *-nh- sequence.

All this takes us back to a PAA *j(-n-)ʔaa/iəŋ "bone",
where the aa/iə fluctuation remains unexplained.

Metathesis of -ʔl- to -lʔ- or vice-versa is a simple
matter, as the history of Northern Philippine languages attests
repeatedly. Then, it would not take a very big push to bridge
the gap between PAN *Cuq$_2$əlaN and PAA *j-n-ʔaa/iəŋ; and perhaps
a small dose of Benedict's favorite Vocalic Transfer (across a
-lʔ- or -nʔ-) could even cure my vowel irregularities.

                            *   *   *

I could easily propose here my own additional would-be
Austric etyma, and this, ad nauseam; for the moment, I find it
preferable to keep these runts in my drawer. The unfettered
chase for wild cognates must and will go on; but I believe the
point has been reached where progress now consists, on the one
hand in finding specific and statable reasons for rejecting
without regrets certain would-be cognates, on the other hand in
sharpening the reconstructions of promising cases, as I have
endeavoured to do here.

NOTES

1. All etymological material presented here is quoted from my forthcoming <u>Mon-Khmer Etymological Dictionary</u>, which will begin to appear, in installments, very shortly I hope.   The reference to "Austric etymologies" begs, of course, the question of subclassification within that super-stock. In this paper, I have used the assumption that Austroasiatic and Austronesian formed a common stock, and that Thai-Kadai had branched off earlier.   This grouping is substantially different   from Austro-Thai, and requires a different label: I would suggest "Macro-Austric"   for   the Austroasiatic /   Austronesian   / Thai-Kadai / Miao-Yao (Hmong-Mien) phylum.

2.   I am intentionally leaving Vietnamese: xương, Mường: xiêng "bone" out of this discussion: the VN vowel /ɯə/ is the expected outcome of *aa after *voiced initials, which suggests that *-ʔ- was lost early in the Viet-Mường branch; but the tone is that of a *voiceless initial. The evolution of Vietnamese will only be understood when abundant material on the other languages of the Viet-Mường branch becomes available. According to Ferlus (Mon-Khmer Studies VII:7, fn10), the initial x of VN, in this word, would come from a preglottalised palatal; this is a reasonable guess though he does not give any supporting evidence; but he wants this to be of recent origin, which is very unlikely in view of the MK evidence.

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