CHAPTER 4

Austroasiatic Comparative-Historical Reconstruction: An Overview

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1 Introduction

At the time of writing (early 2014) more than a century and a half has passed since the first recognisable characterisation of the Austroasiatic phylum (Logan 1854) appeared in print, and almost 110 years since Schmidt’s (1905) *Grundzüge einer Lautlehre der Mon-Khmer-Sprachen* (*Outlines of a phonology of Mon-Khmer languages*) made the first substantial presentation of cognate vocabulary and sound correspondences across multiple branches of the phylum. Since that promising start, progress in comparative Austroasiatic (AA) reconstruction has proceeded in fits and starts, largely the work of motivated individuals rather than any coordinated efforts, and significantly undermined by a reluctance to publish provisional results. As it stands, the most comprehensive published work on the subject is Shorto’s (2006) *A Mon-Khmer Comparative Dictionary*, which itself is a posthumous and incomplete editing of drafts produced between three and four decades ago, and was compiled without the benefit of substantial field data collected at around the same time. This is not to suggest that little has been happening in comparative AA studies—something that I hope is made clear in my recent survey paper (Sidwell 2011c)—but the activity has been largely focussed at branch level, and a provisional phylum-wide synthesis has been lacking. Adopting the working principle (credited to Voltaire) that, “Le mieux est l’ennemi du bien” (*The best is the enemy of the good*) I take the opportunity presented by the compilation of this volume, to offer an integrated synthesis, a provisional working model of AA
historical phonology, word-formation and lexicon, while also briefly touching upon syntax. Limited by word count and general pressures of academic work, I am sure that what follows will variously inform and frustrate (if not enrage), but most importantly my hope is that it will move matters forward by stimulating critical response.

Before diving into the technicalities, it ought to be asked, just what is at stake in pursuing the reconstruction proto-AA? There are many benefits to investigating the history of a language family beyond merely improving our typology of language change. These lie in extending and/or complementing what may be gained from allied disciplines such as history, archaeology, anthropology etc. In this case the recent prehistory of Southeast Asia, and extending into South Asia, is somewhat obscure beyond the reach of the inscriptive record back to the middle of the first Millennium. The third and fourth millennia before present were evidently important periods of human migration, cultural interaction and innovation, marked especially by the extensive development of rice agriculture, and in the later pre-historic period the spread of Hinduism and Buddhism and the emergence of important regional states. Not only were Austroasiatic speakers at the heart of these developments, but many traces of these transformations remain, directly and indirectly, encoded in their languages. Regions such as the Annamite Cordillera, the Upper Salween, and the Isthmus of Kra, and others, were important prehistoric crossroads of cultures, and their ancient AA-speaking inhabitants have descendents either still living there or relatively nearby. All other language groups of the region (with the exception perhaps of Andamanese) were apparently borne by incoming populations; their early interactions left fingerprints in the lexicon, the phonology, and the other linguistic sub-systems that are revealed by comparative reconstruction. Thus one can argue that protoAustroasiatic occupies something of a priority position in unlocking the human history of greater Mainland Southeast Asia.

It must be acknowledged from the start that our knowledge of the AA phyllum is somewhat incomplete, such that scholars are still unearthing new languages/dialects, and many AA languages that have been quite well known to scholarship for decades still lack adequate published descriptions. That being said, there are more or less extensive lexical recourses available for around three quarters of the perhaps 150 AA languages, including coverage of all recognised branches, and branch level studies for various branches are well developed. Furthermore, one is able to say that many fundamental problems—especially of the ‘low hanging fruit’ kind—were solved, partly or wholly, by scholarly work of the early to mid-twentieth century, and it is notable that subsequent work has built upon, rather than overturned, these accomplishments. The great pioneers who preceded us (such as Blagden, Schmidt, Haudricourt, Pinnow,