

How Many Independent Rice Vocabularies in Asia?

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The process of moving from collecting plants in the wild to cultivating and gradually domesticating them has as its linguistic corollary the formation of a specific vocabulary to designate the plants and their parts, the fields in which they are cultivated, the tools and activities required to cultivate them and the food preparations in which they enter. From this point of view, independent domestications of a plant can be expected to result in wholly independent vocabularies. Conversely, when cultivation of a plant spreads from one population to another, one may expect some elements of the original vocabulary to spread with cultivation practices. Reversing the argument, one might take loanwords as evidence of a transfer of cultivation practices. As a potential example, Japanese *kome* 'uncooked rice' could be borrowed from a precursor of the Old Chinese word 米 *C.m^sij? 'millet or rice grains, dehusked and polished'. Transmission of the term would have occurred as cultivation of temperated japonica rice spread northeast from east China.

Reconstructing the history of rice thus can be thought of as the problem of matching three kinds of objects: genetically derived rice clades (Japonica, Indica, Aus), archaeology observed centres of domestication (lower Yangzi, mid Yangzi, perhaps the Ganges valley), and independent rice vocabularies.

How many independent vocabularies of rice are there in Asia ? Sagart (2003) argued that there are no significant contacts between the Austroasiatic (AA) and Sino-Tibetan-Austronesian (STAN) rice vocabularies. The Hmong-Mien vocabulary was also shown to be distinct from the AA one, and to have points of contact with the STAN vocabulary. This might be taken as an argument supporting (at least) two distinct domestications of Asian rice.

In this paper I will examine the rice-related vocabulary that can be reconstructed for Sino-Tibetan (ST) and the larger Sino-Tibetan-Austronesian more closely, also discussing the vocabulary of foxtail millet, not easily separated. I will suggest that the STAN and Hmong-Mien vocabularies are the result of interaction between a southern rice vocabulary (Yangzi valley) and a northern foxtail-millet vocabulary (Yellow river valley).

I will also approach the question whether south Asian rice vocabularies have points of contact with any of the east and southeast Asian vocabularies. If so, this might constitute a linguistic parallel to the introgression of domestication genes from japonica into indica. Of particular interest is the east Asian term Proto-Austronesian *beRas 'dehusked rice', Written Tibetan ^mbras 'rice', compared with south Asian terms like Sanskrit *vrihi*, Afghan *wrižē*, Tamil *arici*, all 'rice'. The possibility that the resemblance between the two is meaningful will be discussed.