Correlating the lexicon and dispersal of proto-Austroasiatic with the arrival of rice agriculture in Mainland SEAsia

Paul Sidwell

Center for Research in Computational Linguistics (Bangkok), and Australian National University (Canberra)

<paul.sidwell@au.edu.au>

All discussions about the origins of the Austroasiatic languages have considered the fact that an elaborate vocabulary relating to rice agriculture is reconstructable for the proto-language, and this has been interpreted as indicating a historically deep familiarity with rice.

Both Diffloth and Shorto reconstruct similar proto-Austroasiatic/Mon-Khmer lexicon for rice and rice agriculture:

Diffloth (2005)

#(k)a:ʔ ‘rice plant’
#raːɡaʔ ‘rice grain’
#ŋaːʔəɡaː ‘rice outer husk’
#kandak ‘rice inner husk’
#pʰeːʔ ‘rice bran’
#t不动产 ‘mortar’
#ŋəɾʔ ‘pestle’
#ŋəɾpiaːɾ ‘winnowing tray’
#ŋəɾmual ‘dibbling-stick’

Shorto (2006)

*baʔ ‘paddy’
*ɾkəlwaʔ ‘husked rice’
*skəʔ ‘chaff, husks of paddy’
*ʔən ‘rice-bran’
*ʔəŋ ‘husked rice’
*tpəl ‘mortar for pounding rice’
*ŋəɾ ‘pestle’
*ŋəɾpia ‘to blow, to winnow’
*ŋəɾmual ‘to dibble’

This is more elaborate than the equivalent set of terms in either proto-Tai, proto-Hmong-Mien, proto-Sino-Tibetan. One interpretation is that this is indicative of great antiquity, and therefore should be correlated with the oldest rice cultivating regions (e.g. central Yangtze valley).

Is this logically necessary? AA languages are well known to have large, unanalyzable lexicons, which is quite different to other regional phyla (especially Tai!). What do other lines of evidence say?

Archaeology:

Archaeology reveals cultural/technical innovations emerging in Indo-China around the same time as the earliest dating of rice:

The main peculiarity of the incised & impressed pottery style is its sudden appearance around the second half of the 3rd millennium B.C.E. in Neolithic sites distributed in the major river plains of mainland Southeast Asia ..., Incised & impressed pottery style, moreover, does not appear in isolation, but it is associated recurrently with: small polished stone tools; stone or shell bracelets and necklace beads. (Rispoli 2008:238)

Roger Hench & I suggest that the sudden expansion of this distinctive pottery style and associated toolkit and decorative elements is a marker of the Austroasiatic expansion. With it, the integration of rice farming into established Neolithic tuberculture may be the catalyst which spurred the expansion and diversification of Austroasiatic. In a version of the ‘farming-language’ hypothesis, it is the greater flexibility and productivity of the new hybrid farming system, with the facility to farm dry rice in areas upland from main waterways, that facilitated the outward East-West spread overland.

We speculate that there was cultural (non-linguistic) transmission of rice agriculture from early Tai expansion out of SEChina and into the Mekong valley.