

Rice and the Homeland of Austroasiatic Languages and People

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Austroasiatic languages, scattered from central and eastern India to the Malay Peninsula and Vietnam, have opposite structures, as do other language families in South vs South-East Asia. We have argued that proto-AA was of the isolating SE Asian type, and that the opposite word orders and complex structures of the South Asian languages were innovated independently of other areal languages, and mostly even of each other. Their analysis to synthesis drift, the reverse of that of the Indo-European languages, involves a creation rather than a loss of complexity, and that, plus a greater loss of cognate vocabulary, suggests a time depth for AA greater than for IE. And the greater internal differentiation among AA languages of S Asia compared to those of SE Asia makes it plausible that the AA homeland may have been S Asia rather than SE Asia. Now there seem also to be nonlinguistic reasons to think that rice culture in S Asia did not come from SE Asia either. We will review what can be gleaned from the history and distribution of agricultural terminology in Austroasiatic and in the languages of peoples they may have been in contact with, while attempting to show that much of the data needed to correlate languages, peoples, and crops remains unharvested from the field, if it has not already been lost.

(Some writings and data, and updates, will be at <http://www.ling.hawaii.edu/austroasiatic/>.)