

# Grammatical features shared by Austronesian and Hmong-Mien

*Martha Ratliff*

*Wayne State University*

Over the past several years, linguistic similarities across pairs or sets of East and Southeast Asian language families have given rise to a number of well-known proposals for a closer relationship between one pair or set of families than others. This work has primarily involved comparing small portions of the lexicon, supported by hints of sound correspondences, but has also involved comparing some closed word sets and grammatical features. I do not find the idea of the late Stanley Starosta (2005) — that Sino-Tibetan, Hmong-Mien, Kra-Dai, Austronesian, and Austroasiatic may all somehow be connected at a great time depth — too daring as a working hypothesis. The problem is that the evidence does not allow us to draw a picture of his “Proto-East Asian” macrophylum: his AA/HM subgroup “Yangzian”, for example, does not work very well for HM. But I am open-minded when new evidence is presented for a closer relationship between any subset of the families within this group, including Yangzian. In every case, we are challenged to propose a historical explanation for the best of this evidence, such as the similarity between the numeral systems of the KD language Buyang and AN (Sagart 2004). In this spirit, I would like to present some grammatical similarities between the centrally-located (and thus historically significant) HM languages and AN, which, if not accidental, require an historical explanation of some sort. It is important to emphasize, however, that if one’s goal is to elucidate the internal structure of the “Proto-East Asian” complex, acceptance of the significance of evidence for any particular pairing of families does not require one to argue against, or abandon one’s belief in, another pairing of families within the complex.

At the 2004 SEALS meeting in Bangkok I presented the idea that the stability of individual basic lexical items is idiosyncratic, and the stability of phonologically-similar roots for the same basic concepts in two sister-candidate families, in conjunction with more conventional evidence, can point to a higher relationship. HM and AN share a few of these stable roots. In this presentation, I would like to present complementary evidence from grammar to suggest that HM and AN may have had a period of shared history. In particular, I will review and extend my earlier work on (1) the stative and causative prefixes of AN (both prefixes as well as the AN root for ‘die’ appear in the HM words for ‘kill’ and ‘die’); (2) the personal pronoun paradigms of both families, which, among other similarities, employ the same root for the second person, unmarked for number; and (3) the spatial deictic systems, which are three-way systems in both AN and HM (‘this near me’, ‘that near you’, ‘that neutral’). The three-way deictic system is typical for AN, but is relatively unusual for languages spoken on the mainland. The lexical and grammatical evidence is slight in quantity but is strong in specificity, and requires an explanation.