

Title: Proto Palaungic phonology: reconstructing vowel lengths and qualities in a partially restructured system.

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Abstract:

The Palaungic languages, spoken mainly in the Shan state of Myanmar and border areas of Laos and China, represent special problems for Austroasiatic reconstruction. Most have lost the Austroasiatic short-long vowel contrast and developed tones and/or voice registers, with strong parallels to the main contact languages Burmese and Shan. 4 or 5 sub-groups are apparent, and useful reconstructions have been published for 2: Waic and Palaung-Riang. I have prepared a Proto Palaungic reconstruction using data from all sub-groups. The proto-consonant system is straightforward, but the vocalism is challenging. It is difficult to systematise the vowel correspondences, and it is apparently necessary to reconstruct some peculiar asymmetries in the distribution of length contrasts, indicating a system in transition. And although diphthongs are common (even prolific) among some of the daughter languages, it is not obvious that more than one diphthongs should be reconstructed for Proto Palaungic. Finally, it is also difficult to model a classification of the languages which can be reconciled with the phonological history. Solutions to these problem are discussed.