Reconstructing AA morphology: did proto-AA have markers of dependent predication?

Comparison of different Mon-Khmer (MK) languages shows that proto-MK had morphology of some kind [Diffloth 1984: 263]. Common prefixes and infixes traceable in the majority of MK languages no doubt constituted an integral part of this morphological component.

In this report the hypothesis is proposed that nasal infixes, which can be found in all groups of Ausroasiatic (AA) languages, originate from Proto-AA markers of dependent predication which were used in multiverb constructions of different types. Later the synthetic means of marking dependent predication were superseded by the analytical marker *ta*. The infixed forms started on their way to lexicalization and grammaticalization. In the descendant languages analytical forms were driven to the periphery by new, semantically differentiated grammatical means that is conjunctions and copulas, having left behind lexicalized and grammaticalized reflexes of different types.

In AA languages the reflexes of synthetic (infixed) forms of dependent predication are mostly found as deverbal nouns of agent, patient, instrument, place, name of action (in Cambodian we often find forms lexicalized with two different meanings), however in some languages the reflexes are found as adjectives, adverbs, function words (conjunctions, prepositions, grammatical markers). This polysemantic and multifunctional nature of the reflexes can be explained by their origin from forms of dependent predication.

Old Khmer and Nicobarese data have proved to be the most enlightening in formulating the hypothesis. Thus, in Old Khmer we find the three successive strategies of marking dependent predicates: the infixes *n* and *m*, the marker *ta* and new conjunctions. We also find superposition of the strategies in the form of double marking. Thus, in Old Khmer and Nancowry infixed forms can combine with *ta*: e.g. car *tö-k-an-ap-tö-rit* 'scorpio' (litt. ATR-bite-*an*-bite-INSTR-tail) [Whitehead 1925: 298]. In Nicobarese we find examples, when one infixed form exists both as a form of dependent predication and as a noun. Peculiarly, Old Khmer and Nicobarese demonstrate striking functional parallelism of reflexes of forms of dependent predication.

The proposed hypothesis makes it possible to explain not only the more or less regular comparable phenomena shared by many AA languages. What is more, it enables us to understand isolated morphological irregularities which are predominant when we come to compare different AA languages. Thus, for instance, in khmu, where unmarked verbs are generally used in adverbial function, we find four adverbial forms which contain the reflex of marker *ta* [Swantesson 1983: 112]. In Cambodian we often find unmotivated use of an infixed form where we would expect a simple one in attributive function, e.g. *miǝn cumŋǝǝ ciǝ tumŋŭǝn* 'to be seriously ill'(*tŋŭǝn* 'heavy; serious')

References

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