## Some notes on the complexity of Southeast Asian languages

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It is often assumed that all languages are equally complex, i.e. languages trade off complexity in one domain with simplicity in another domain. This assumption has recently been challenged in a number of papers. Complexity can be defined in many different ways. Miestamo (2008), for instance, distinguishes between absolute and relative complexity. The absolute approach defines complexity as an objective property of the system, i.e. in terms of the number of parts of the system, whereas the relative approach defines it in terms of cost/difficulty to language users. Whether or not a phenomenon is complex in this latter sense depends of the type of language user (speaker, hearer, L1 acquirer or L2 learner).

Although it is hardly possible to determine the overall (absolute) complexity of a language, it is possible to a certain degree to explore to what extent complexity is traded off across domains. Sinnemäki (2008) has shown in a typological study that there is a statistically significant inverse dependency between the functional use of word order and the presence of morphological marking. According to Bisang (2009), complexity has two sides: "overt complexity" is accessible through overt morphosyntactic patterns, whereas "hidden complexity" must be inferred from the context. He argues that the low degree of overt complexity of mainland Southeast Asian languages is counterbalanced by a high degree of hidden complexity. On the other hand, Gil (2008, 2009) argues that isolating languages do not compensate for their morphological simplicity by syntactic, semantic or pragmatic complexity, i.e. isolating languages are overall simpler than non-isolating languages. Thus, in Riau Indonesian, *Ayam makan* ('chicken eat') exhibits a large degree of semantic indeterminacy and possible translations are 'The chicken is eating', 'Someone is eating the chicken', 'The chicken that is eating', 'Where the chicken is eating'. Gil claims that this sentence is semantically vague rather than ambiguous.

As far as the evolution of language complexity is concerned, the following parameters have been claimed to be relevant:

- A. Age of a language (McWhorter 2001, 2008, Parkvall 2008): creoles are simpler than older languages;
- B. Language contact (Trudgill 2004):
- B1. Contact involving child language acquisition fosters complexity (cf. Nichols 1992: 193);
- B2. Contact involving second language learning results in simplification;
- C. Size of the speaker community (Trudgill 2004, Sinnemäki 2009): languages spoken by large communities tend to be of medium-scale complexity, languages spoken by small communities tend to be of either very high or very low complexity.

The present study aims at exploring the complexity of some selected variables from various domains in the light of these parameters. Examples are taken from a number of South-east Asian languages.

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