

When Words Erode: Moken Trisyllabic Syncopation and PAN Stress

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Moken is an Austronesian language spoken by a sea-based population of uncertain origin along the west coast of the SEA peninsula, ranging from southern Tenasserim to Southern Thailand. Its divergence from the rest of the Austronesian group makes it an important piece of the puzzle in the reconstruction of Proto-Austronesian (PAN). While previous researchers (particularly Larish 1999) have identified some changes from PAN to Moken, in many cases the exact processes by which these developments took place have not been systematically explored. In particular, Larish (1999: 371-376) attributed the idiosyncratic pattern of syncopation in Moken to an earlier prominence system but fails to show how the Moken data support the reconstruction of unpredictable stress in PAN and how the language has developed from the Proto-Austronesian stress system.

This paper analyzes the pattern of trisyllabic syncopation in Moken and argues that it provides evidence for PAN stress, in support of Wolff (1993) and Zorc (1988). My data are based in part on primary field research conducted in Phuket in July 2004 and in part on the description by Chantanakomes (1980). Moken trisyllabic syncopation is unique among Austronesian languages, as exemplified by the development of PAN etyma for 'ear', 'bone', and 'pestle'. The intermediate developments in the following chart involve independently-motivated phonological developments in Moken.

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|----------|---|---------|---|--------|---|----------------|
| *talíŋa | > | *tlíŋa | > | *tíŋa | > | tɛŋa: 'ear' |
| *tuqəláp | > | *tqəláp | > | *qəláp | > | kəla:n 'bone' |
| *qásəlu | > | *qáslu | > | *kásu | > | kaʔɔy 'pestle' |

This paper systematically examines the pattern of syncopation of PAN trisyllabic roots in Moken in a wider Austronesian perspective, drawing evidence from related languages such as Malay and Tagalog. Data from Moken show that trisyllabic roots could be accented on the antepenult, the penult, or on the final syllable. An account is given of the development from PAN trisyllabic roots with contrastive stress to Moken disyllabic forms with a strict iambic pattern.

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