

Abstract: Are the MP languages a sub-group?

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Archeological evidence shows that the earliest grain agriculture on the islands of SE Asia began on Taiwan and spread from there southwards and then southeastwards and southwestwards. These are the areas in which Austronesian (An) languages are spoken and the widely accepted hypothesis is that the An languages spread in tandem with the spread of agriculture. The question arises whether the history of the An languages provides evidence for the validity of this hypothesis.

If the An languages outside of Taiwan form a sub-group, that fact would provide definitive evidence. The proof of their status as a sub-group involves the determination of innovations that they shared. In this paper I look at the evidence that has been proposed in the past and additional data that constitute evidence of shared innovations. There is a great deal of data on innovations, and a great number of them are shared exclusively by the languages outside of Taiwan, the Malayo-Polynesian (MP) languages, yet they do not inexorably lead to the conclusion that these languages constitute a subgroup, and therefore it is not possible to say that linguistic data provide definitive evidence for the origin and the spread of the An languages and not for the spread of populations from Asia out into the islands of SE Asia and the Pacific. Nevertheless, this view of the spread of the An languages best explains history of the data attested in the currently spoken An languages and thus is very likely to reflect historical events.

In this paper I also discuss the implications that this view of the spread of the An languages has for the nature of the reconstruction of Proto-An.