4 *Linguistic diversity in mainland Southeast Asia*

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1 Introduction

One way to look at human diversity in MSEA is through the prism of language. With an adequate understanding of the nature of linguistic diversity, and of mechanisms of linguistic diversification, we learn what can be presumed and what remains unknown for a proper understanding of the current state of affairs in MSEA. This chapter charts a territory of possibility for the analysis of linguistic diversity grounded in social relations, outlining a particular position and motivating an agenda for research. One aim is to clear the conceptual ground for what needs to be done in research on language in order to understand the special degree of structural convergence that the languages of MSEA appear to have undergone.

Research on human diversity often focuses on historical questions of how a modern state of affairs came to be the way it is. This presumes a satisfactory account of that modern state of affairs. What is the nature of linguistic diversity in mainland Southeast Asia today? While this question is normally answered in terms of patterns of genealogical relatedness among languages of a region, I want to address other measures of diversity as well, including structural diversity of MSEA languages. The situation of linguistic diversity in MSEA appears to be special among regions of the world (Dahl 2008), and for this reason begs explanation. In this chapter I note some of the characteristics of linguistic diversity in MSEA, and consider these in terms of the socially-grounded causal processes that are known to give rise to patterns of linguistic diversity over time. This addresses another goal: to point to the kinds of underlying, social processes of diversification that we want to keep in mind when discussing history and diversity across disciplinary boundaries.

2 Linguistics

In the kinds of interdisciplinary collaborations on human history and diversity that have inspired the present volume, 'linguistics' means comparative/historical linguistics. A central aim of this branch of linguistics is to establish phylogenies of language diversification, both in the sense of grouping (establishing that languages are related) and subgrouping (establishing how they are related).[1] The establishment of language

1 I am grateful to Malcolm Ross for insisting on this distinction and for suggesting the wording that I have used here.

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phylogenies is done typically if not exclusively with reference to word forms that are taken to be cognate across modern languages (for example Thai *ram* versus Lao *ham* 'bran'). If a linguist can establish regularities in sound change across groups of words, this may be used as evidence for a proposed phylogeny, where the evolving entity is the language as a whole. It is a cladistic approach (Moore 1994). The number of words that serve as data points is a subset of the number of words in the language, ranging depending on the researcher and the research method from a small fraction, say one or two hundred words, to a sizable portion of the lexicon, say a few thousand words. While it is always a subset, it is nevertheless taken to be sufficient for inferring the history of the entire language, and, by implication, the history of the community that has spoken the language and its earlier forms.[2] In this way, inferred linguistic phylogenies may serve as hypotheses for phylogenies of human groups, to be tested against other kinds of data (cultural, environmental, biological, genetic, etc.).[3] Such cross-checking requires interdisciplinary collaboration, and such collaboration is one objective of the present volume. It is one step in a long march, and as Blench (2008) advises, we are still at the early stages of achieving true interdisciplinary collaboration.

A phylogenetic approach to language relatedness assumes vertical transmission for languages as whole systems. Through vertical transmission, an entire language structure is passed on from generation to generation, with minor changes in each generational cycle. But like other anthropologists, linguists acknowledge processes of horizontal transmission as well—the borrowing of elements from one language into another **within** generations—and we need to account for these processes too. Accordingly, a special concern of historical/comparative linguistics is to distinguish between the results of vertical versus horizontal transmission (cf. for example Aikhenvald & Dixon 2001). When two languages share a given structure, is it because they each derive it from a common ancestor (common inheritance) or because one or both of the languages has borrowed the structure (diffusion)? One view is that horizontal transmission effects obscure the real signal of interest, the signal of language phylogeny. But the special effects of horizontal transmission are of no less interest in characterising linguistic diversity, particularly where—as is the case in MSEA—a relative **lack** of diversity is part of what needs to be explained. As it happens, historical processes in language can also be readily viewed as rhizotic, as Moore (1994) puts it, that is, involving hybridisation, implying quite different underlying processes from those represented in phylogenetic trees.

As a complement to work in the comparative/historical tradition, this chapter draws on two other areas of linguistics: language typology and sociolinguistics. Language typology asks: Are there universals in language structure? Are there dependencies between types of structure? What generalisations can be made? Typology provides a set of measures of diversity in language (see Comrie 1989; Shopen 1985, 2007; Croft 2003; Haspelmath et al. 2005). Sociolinguistics asks: How is variation in linguistic behaviour related to the position of speakers within a social system? What role do social networks play in determining language variation? What are the causal relations between social life and language

2 I make no assumption that the phylogeny of a human community coincides with the phylogeny of a language spoken by members of that community at any point in history.

3 Also of relevance in using linguistics to test hypothesised scenarios of human descent are inferences that can be made from the presence of words with certain meanings, and what their presence implies about the history of the community (e.g. indigenous words for certain species of plant or animal whose geographical distribution may be limited: Evans 2010, Ch. 6; cf. discussion in this volume in chapters by Blench, Sagart, van Driem, Sidwell & Blench, and Diffloth).

structure? (See Weinreich et al. 1968; Labov 1972; Trudgill 1974, 1997; Milroy 1980.) This chapter considers the nature of human diversity in MSEA today through the lenses of linguistic typology and sociolinguistics together.

3 Typological convergence of language in mainland Southeast Asia

Convergence in the structure of neighbouring languages due to social contact between communities is a global phenomenon (see Weinreich 1953; Emeneau 1956; Muysken 2008; Thomason 2001; Silva-Corvalán 1994 and many others). It results in what are referred to as linguistic areas. Another common term for linguistic area is *Sprachbund*. In global terms, MSEA is a remarkable example of a linguistic area. Five major language families are found in MSEA: Tai-Kadai, Sino-Tibetan, Hmong-Mien, Austroasiatic, Austronesian. (How these families are related to each other is a matter of discussion by other contributors to this volume, including Blench, Diffloth, van Driem, Sagart, and Sidwell & Blench.) Languages from these different families show massive convergence in structure at every level (Matisoff 1973, 2001, 1991a; Clark 1985, 1989, 1996; Clark & Prasithrathsint 1985; Bisang 1991, 1999; Enfield 2003, 2005; Grant & Sidwell 2005, among many others). The relevant levels of linguistic organisation are as follows:

Levels of linguistic organisation

- phonetics/phonology: sounds and sound systems
- morphology-syntax: internal structure of words/phrases/sentences
- lexicon: words, their meanings, and relations among them
- pragmatics: patterns in language usage and interpretation

The convergence among languages in MSEA is so thoroughgoing that the typologist Östen Dahl has labelled the area ‘the ultimate Sprachbund’ (Dahl 2008:218). Using data from the *World Atlas of Language Structures* (‘WALS’, Haspelmath et al. 2005), Dahl computed a pairwise measure of typological distance among a set of over 200 languages. The typological distance between two languages is an expression of how similar they are on a range of structural measures. This numerical expression of distance ranges from a low of 10 (Dutch versus German) to a high of 75 (Ju|’hoan, a Khoisan language of Botswana and Namibia versus Central Yup’ik, a Yup’ik language of Alaska). The mean figure for typological distance among the world’s languages is 42 (for example English versus Persian). Dahl’s measure spans all domains of linguistic structure for which WALS supplies data. These include features of sound structure as well as presence and nature of grammatical patterns (for example, whether number is obligatorily marked in the grammar—yes for English, no for Khmer—or, for an ‘adjective-plus-noun’ type structure, whether the adjective comes before the noun as in English *new village* or after it as in Khmer *phuum thmei*).

The typological distance measures for MSEA are striking. For example, Dahl compared Hmong, a language of the Hmong-Mien group, spoken in China, Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam, with Khmu, a language of the Northern Mon-Khmer group, spoken in Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam. Even though Hmong and Khmu are entirely unrelated, and have been in direct contact only relatively recently (perhaps a few centuries), on Dahl’s typological

distance measure they score about the same as German and English, two closely related languages:

(1) Hmong vs. Khmu = 22.5
German vs. English = 21.1

In a more extreme example, genealogically unrelated languages of MSEA that have had more intensive contact—Thai, Khmer, and Vietnamese—measure as close to each other as Polish and Russian, among the typologically closest pairs on Dahl's global scale:

(2) Thai vs. Vietnamese = 11.4
Thai vs. Khmer = 12.3
Polish vs. Russian = 12.8

These figures indicate a dramatic macro-level convergence in grammatical structure between unrelated or very distantly related languages that has taken place over centuries in MSEA. What kinds of micro-level, real-time causal processes have brought this convergence about? A fair amount is known of the micro mechanisms that must ultimately be involved in the macro aggregation of linguistic change (Weinreich, Labov & Herzog 1968; Keller 1994; Enfield 2008). But it is difficult to get a grip on these enormous processes of language transmission and change in real time, and virtually impossible to do so in historical retrospect (Enfield 2003). We are, however, beginning to get a reasonable idea of the general causal anatomy of language transmission and change (as an instance of cultural transmission and change more generally), both within and across generations, such that we may in due course be able to relate the micro-processes of transmission to their macro-level effects (see Rogers 1995; Ross 1997; Enfield 2008 and references therein). Let us now place the question of MSEA's linguistic diversity in a broader account of the nature of linguistic diversity in general, drawing primarily on Nettle (1999).

4 Linguistic Diversity

Linguistic diversity can be measured in three ways (Nettle 1999), always with reference to a geographical area: 1. The **language diversity** of an area is the number of distinct languages spoken in it; 2. The **phylogenetic diversity** of an area is the number of distinct language families found in that area; 3. The **structural diversity** of an area is the degree of typological difference between the languages. These are not three different ways of measuring the same thing, but represent different senses of linguistic diversity that may be independent from one another.

4.1 Language diversity

Language diversity in MSEA is high compared to many regions of the world. This is consistent with observed high language diversity in areas with similar environmental conditions to MSEA. There is a statistical association between tropical environments and high language diversity: 'language diversity tends to be greatest near the equator' (Nettle 1999:61). Nettle suggests a causal account: Because a tropical environment affords economic self-sufficiency, human groups can afford to maintain greater socio-economic distance from their neighbours. This independence allows greater differentiation in social identity between groups, of which language distinctness is a primary indicator. Groups will

still come into social contact under these conditions, but they will maintain more distant types of social relation, characterised less by reliance on exchange of fundamental economic resources. Exchange will be more specialised, including ritual exchange. In such conditions, Nettle argues, ethnic distinction is allowed to flourish.

Nettle (1999) insists on a connection between society, economy, and ecology.[4] He generalises two kinds of social bonds: primary and secondary. Primary bonds are 'relatively enduring, are often formed early in life, and are multivalent'. They are the bonds on which people depend 'for their basic livelihood' (Nettle 1999:67). Normally, our first language is learned from people with whom we have primary bonds (Thomason & Kaufman 1988:11), biasing faithful vertical transmission in which genes, culture, and language follow a single historical path, despite their logical distinctness (Boas 1911:12 and passim). Secondary bonds 'are based on specific functions, such as a trade in a specialised good'. These bonds 'are associated with greater social distance than primary ones and are more typical of the relationships between ethnolinguistic groups than those within them' (ibid.). Such relations are typical of neighbouring ethnic groups (linguistically defined) almost anywhere in MSEA.[5]

Nettle argues that an appropriate theory for explaining the latitudinal trend 'will be one that links human agents to their ecological setting' (1999:69). He illustrates with a case study of equatorial horticulturalists in Interior New Guinea, where the ecology affords an 'enormous potential for self-sufficiency'. This self-sufficiency allows language groups to be very small, and therefore more numerous. Social relations between members of language groups in this sort of setting are of the secondary type. This is contrasted with case studies from sub-Saharan Africa where a very different ecology brings about primary social links between spatially distant households. Nettle writes of Hausa: 'The wide extent of the language must surely have its origin in the wide extent of these [primary social] links, which are in turn a response to the dangerous highs and lows of the agricultural calendar' (1999:77).[6] If this account is correct, the hypothesis for MSEA will be that neighbouring groups have tended not to maintain primary social links across ethnolinguistic lines, a possibility arising from the low ecological risk afforded by the area's tropical environment.[7]

Language diversity in MSEA is observed to different degrees within different language families. In Laos, for example, the Austroasiatic language family shows greater language diversity than other language families—that is, there is a higher number of Austroasiatic languages than other languages, where each of these Austroasiatic languages is spoken by a smaller number of speakers. It should be possible to account for the different degrees of language diversity across language families in terms of socio-economic history and inter-group social relations, with multiple determining factors (including ecology). The problem

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4 Nettle restricts his account to 'the post-Neolithic, but pre-Industrial, world' (1999:96).

5 There is room for further distinction of types of social relation, beyond Nettle's primary versus secondary bonds; Evans & McConvell (1997) speak of neighbouring groups in Australia as being either 'isolated' or 'linked'; Thomason & Kaufman (1988) speak of more or less 'intense' relations between groups; Ross (1997) speaks of groups being more or less 'tight-knit'; and so on.

6 Roger Blench (in personal communication) is skeptical, citing languages with 200 speakers spoken in the same area as Hausa.

7 Note that beyond developing certain types of social links with neighbours, there are other strategies for dealing with ecological risk, including livelihood diversification (certainly relevant for MSEA; cf. White 1995, this volume), storage, and mobility. People who specialise in diversity or mobility—hunter-gatherers—may thereby offset any tendencies to rely on primary social bonds outside the group.

is to find evidence independent from language for these historical patterns of social dynamics.

4.2 Phylogenetic diversity

The languages of MSEA are from five distinct families, whose distinctness is well established: Tai-Kadai, Sino-Tibetan, Hmong-Mien, Austroasiatic, and Austronesian (cf. Diller et al. 2008; Matisoff 1991b; Thurgood & LaPolla 2003; Ratliff 2010; Blust 2009; Grant & Sidwell 2005). Considerable controversy surrounds the internal structure of these families (how many sub-groups, what are they, etc.), as well as their possible grouping at higher levels (for example, whether Tai and Austronesian share a common ancestor).[8] On this point I defer to the chapters in this volume written by historical/comparative linguists (Blench, Diffloth, Sagart, van Driem, Sidwell & Blench).

Nettle attributes to Nichols (1990) the idea that 'stock diversity is an increasing function of the time since founding' of distinct populations (Nettle 1999:119). He takes issue with Nichols' assumption of constant rate of ramification (citing Nichols 1990:503). Nettle writes, 'linguists have no rigorous or widely accepted method of dating the split of phylogenetic groupings', stating that 'the rate of diversification is actually rather variable' (Nettle 1999:120). Different types of speech-community event (Ross 1997) clearly have different dynamics, for social reasons.

Nettle's proposals concerning the causal role of social relations among neighbouring groups are based on an idealised notion of equilibrium, a relatively static social state of affairs with established patterns of economic and ritual contact between interacting groups. But of course social relations are dynamic. How to capture this? Dixon (1997) takes a punctuated equilibrium model—earlier applied to biological speciation (Eldredge & Gould 1972) and then cultural diversification (Bellwood 1996)—and applies it to the diversification of languages. The idea is that during equilibrium periods, ethnic groups live alongside each other with a rather unconstrained process of diffusion of features between languages. Punctuation arises from cataclysmic social events that trigger the split and expansion of groups (Dixon 1997:67; cf. Nichols 1992).[9]

The modern day states of affairs that we are presently trying to disentangle were initially caused by dramatic expansions of Neolithic societies into open or effectively open territory (Nichols 1992; Nettle 1999). Such scenarios provide the bread and butter of the comparative method: sub-families separated by the split and spatial separation of sub-communities. The problem of course is that the split and spatial separation (and subsequent domination by expanding groups over others) is seldom neat and tidy. Moore (1994:15) notes the special nature of the Polynesian situation which so neatly fits a cladistic approach:

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8 An inherent problem for interdisciplinary research on the dynamics of human diversity arises from limitations in the time depth of historical/comparative linguistics' reach. Once we are looking further than 8000 years or so into the past, the traditional comparative method ceases to be effective. But archaeologists and biological anthropologists are interested in significantly greater time-depths (see chapters in this volume by White, Halcrow & Tayles, Oppenheimer, Matsumura et al., Bulbeck, and Fix). Many hope that this gap may be bridged by the application in historical linguistics of statistical methods from evolutionary biology (see Burenhult et al. this volume, and references therein).

9 The distinction between equilibrium and punctuation does not imply different underlying processes of social diffusion at the fundamental micro-level (Enfield 2005:194-7).

> While an ocean limited contact among neighbouring Polynesian ethnoi [= distinct ethnic groups], thereby preserving the integrity of ethnic boundaries, continental populations are constantly surrounded, buffeted, and confronted by their neighbours. Unless they are contiguous to an ocean or desert, continental populations are normally surrounded by foreign ethnoi, often of several ethnic and linguistic types. (Moore 1994:15)

But despite the continental nature of the MSEA populations with all their interethnic buffeting, there is surprisingly crisp separation of languages in different linguistic families of the region.[10] While higher-level distinctions between families may be controversial, there is virtually no case of an MSEA language whose membership in one or another established family is disputed.

4.3 Structural diversity

Every language contains a huge inventory of features, including tens of thousands of words, hundreds of smaller components of words like *-s* for plural in English (as in *dogs* vs. *dog*), scores if not hundreds of grammatical patterns for combining those words (for example active versus passive sentences in English), patterns of word meaning, and habits of language usage (greetings, speech formulas, etc.). The most accessible data for calculating structural diversity are in phonology (sound structure) and morphosyntax (patterns of building words and combining them into phrases and sentences). Here is a list of some technical linguistic features that are common to all or most MSEA languages, demonstrating the area's low degree of structural diversity (see Clark 1985, 1989, 1996; Clark & Prasithrathsint 1985; Bisang 1991, 1999; Enfield 2003, 2005):

Some phonological features shared across all MSEA language families

- very high number of vowels (relative to consonants)
- common underlying structure of vowel system (often 9-place, symmetrical)
- systematic distinction in vowel length (long versus short)
- preference for one (major) syllable per word
- laryngeal features lexically contrastive (tone, phonation type)[11]
- many fewer consonants possible in final than initial position
- gap in voiced stop series at velar place of articulation (no voiced 'g')

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10 I am grateful to Roger Blench for insisting on this point in personal communication.

11 Tone and phonation type are treated here as instances of a single sound system property because they each involve the use of laryngeal features for lexical contrast. While tone and phonation type are often considered to be fundamentally distinct phenomena, in fact most systems that are identified as one versus the other (in phonological terms) actually display properties of both (in phonetic terms; Henderson 1967:171). Pitch contours, distinctions in phonation type, and glottalic effects are all produced in the larynx (specifically, by the vocal folds), and are all articulatorily independent of segmental speech sounds produced with the lips, teeth, and tongue (i.e., typical 'consonants'). Tone and phonation are intimately bound, not essentially distinct, and for this reason I do not regard the sound system of a classical MSEA tone language such as Vietnamese to be of a different species from that of a classical MSEA register language such as Kri (Enfield & Diffloth 2009).

Some morphosyntactic features shared across all MSEA language families

- no inflectional morphology (no agreement, no case, no gender/number/definiteness on noun phrases, no tense-marking on verbs)
- zero anaphora (free ellipsis of arguments if contextually retrievable)
- prevalence of verb-object constituent order
- topic-comment structure in clauses
- large set of labile verbs (verbs that can be both transitive or intransitive)
- rich inventories of sentence-final particles
- rich inventories of expressives (or ideophones)
- numeral classifiers and related systems of nominal classification
- verb serialisation, richly multifunctional

Some of the most noteworthy commonalities among MSEA languages are their complete **lack** of values on certain parameters (most notably, 'no inflectional morphology', a property which denotes the absence of a great range of structures found in languages of the world, for example agreement, case, gender/number/definiteness on noun phrases, tense-marking on verbs). It might be said that a common **presence** of features would be more convincing evidence of convergence across languages. What is the significance of this shared lack of features? Consider how it is that languages may lose grammatical structure over time. According to one hypothesis, a way to remove structure from a language is to have a community of speakers learn the language as adults. (The inverse is also true: one is likely to **add** structure to a language by learning it as a child; Trudgill 2008.) This effect—where an adult speaker's native language affects the structure of the new language—is called substratum interference.[12] According to Thomason and Kaufman,

> in this kind of interference a group of speakers shifting to a target language fails to learn the target language perfectly. The errors made by members of the shifting group in speaking the target language then spread to the target language as a whole when they are imitated by original speakers of that language. (Thomason & Kaufman 1988:39)

The long-term effect of these changes on the target language comes about because the changes are learned by children in the next generation. In this way, widespread learning of new languages in adulthood (for example in large-scale language shift during migration or under strong domination from another ethnic group) is one driving force of structural convergence.[13]

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12 My use of terminology is as follows. When there is interference between two languages due to social contact of their speakers, the substrate language or substratum is the language of the politically subordinate group. The superstrate is the language of the politically dominant group.

13 LaPolla (2001) points in this direction in his assessment of the situation in China, with massive convergence between varieties of Chinese arising from massive migration over centuries; but see Ansaldo & Matthews (2001) against the idea that Chinese structure is evidence of earlier creolisation. Part of the problem relates to ideological baggage belonging to the term 'creolisation'. Ansaldo & Matthews posit 'hybridisation' instead.

If we are to understand why MSEA shows an especially low degree of structural diversity we want to know how it **came to be** like this. Processes of language change follow the same causal processes of innovation diffusion that underlie culture evolution more generally (Rogers 1995). An important feature of these processes are the biases that promote or inhibit diffusion (Boyd & Richerson 2005; Enfield 2008).

One of these biases is called a context bias (Enfield 2008:303). A social innovation will diffuse more effectively if the adopter of the innovation has a ready context into which it fits. For example, the necessary context for adopting downloadable ringtones is the presence and use of mobile telephones and the Internet—if members of a social group do not already have mobile telephones and the Internet, they will not adopt downloadable ringtones. The idea of a context bias is applicable to just about any technology. In language, a context bias favours diffusion of less 'embedded' linguistic items, since they are less dependent on structures that are specific to a particular language. This means, for example, that interjections like *Wow!* will diffuse more readily than grammatical markers, since the interjections do not have a language-specific grammatical context. For any given linguistic innovation, the grammar of the borrowing language is a potential set of brakes on diffusion and convergence.

Another source of constraints on diffusion is a content bias (Boyd & Richerson 2005). A content bias favours the diffusion of innovations which have some payoff for the adopter that the alternatives lack (for example certain agricultural practices will be of special interest to potential adopters if those practices offer greater yield for less effort; certain handtools will be more readily adopted if they are easier to use). In language, a content bias will favour adoption of 'unmarked' structures, that is, structures that are simpler, more transparent, and more frequent.

> In general, because they are harder to learn, universally marked features are less likely than unmarked features to be transferred in language contact. … In shift situations, this works two ways: shifting speakers are likely to fail to acquire marked features of the target language, and marked features carried over by shifting speakers from their original language are relatively unlikely to spread by imitation to the target language as a whole. (Thomason & Kaufman 1988:51)

Of course, simplification is not the only force in language change. Were it so, then all languages would be maximally and equally simple. Languages complexify, too, if given time, and specifically, if given a sufficient number of generations of normal transmission by which children who learn the language as a first language are able to effectively add structure and complexity to it (Thomason & Kaufman 1988; Trudgill 2008).

The MSEA situation of low structural diversity across the languages, and relative absence of many structural features within the languages, is compatible with a long history of widespread language shift with continuous bilingualism. This suggests a conclusion to be drawn from the MSEA linguistic facts. If the effects of large-scale contact are overwhelmingly in the direction of grammatical simplification, then this may have come from a historical context in which adults widely learn and use the languages of neighbouring groups, yet while keeping sufficient distance from those groups such that children are not heavily embedded in multilingual learning settings. This kind of social context may be called **ethnic pluralism**, as it requires the co-presence and interaction of a plurality of ethnic groups, yet where the distinctness of their respective identities is maintained as a matter of common preference.

An important goal is to uncover the causal processes that underlie language change, differentiation, and convergence alike. Any historical account of a region's human diversity must be compatible with a proper understanding of these causal processes. Such processes are critical not only to understanding the MSEA facts, but to understanding cultural processes in general. With this background on the social context of language, we turn to the current MSEA situation.

5 Linguistic diffusion in mainland Southeast Asia

In MSEA today, there are widespread asymmetrical social relations between language communities, with levels of nesting (Blench 2005). One class of language consists of the major national languages: for example, Thai, Lao, Khmer, Vietnamese, Chinese, Malay. These major languages are spoken by huge numbers of people. They are written, formalised, standardised, taught in schools, used in media such as newspapers, television, official correspondence and law. Large numbers of people are monolingual in these languages, but they are also second (non-native) languages for many speakers of ethnic minority languages. The recent existence of national languages is a major factor in obscuring the information we have about the linguistic past of MSEA, both through the acceleration of attrition and loss of ethnic minority languages, and through interference with scientific discourse and analysis thanks to the political ideologies that national languages introduce. In these respects, the major national languages are the least representative of the languages of the area. Vast numbers of people have shifted over recent generations to these languages, and this process continues in full swing.

The remaining languages—that is, most of the languages—of MSEA are greater in number, and are spoken by much smaller communities. Within the 'smaller' languages, there is another level of nesting, where some languages that are relatively widely spoken have de facto or semi-official status as major languages in local terms: for example Karen in Myanmar and Thailand, Khmu in Laos, Cham in Cambodia, Tai Daeng in Vietnam, varieties of Zhuang in Southern China. Each of these second-tier languages has some degree of official and administrative recognition, and each is spoken by large numbers of people (from several hundred thousand in the case of Khmu to millions in the case of Zhuang). Still, the fact that they are not national languages means that their speakers will tend to be bilingual in a national standard language. As noted already, the national language phenomenon has been recently imposed upon the general linguistic scene that was in place before the 20th century (cf. Smalley 1994). That said, we have no reason to doubt that nested multilingualism was the norm in pre-nationalist MSEA.

While all minority languages are politically subordinate to the national languages of MSEA, they are not equally subordinate. Ignoring the national languages, we still see political asymmetries between minority languages at local levels. As an example, take Kaleum District in Sekong Province of Laos. Kaleum is a small, isolated upland district. Several languages of the Katuic sub-branch of Austroasiatic are spoken there. These languages are each politically subordinate to Lao, the official national language. So, most natives of Kaleum also speak Lao to some degree, and are in some circumstances obliged to do so (for example using Lao as a lingua franca when travelling outside of their home district or when dealing with visiting officials). But within daily life in their home district, there is a recapitulation of the language dominance relation at a more local level. One of the local languages—Ngkriang (also known as Ngeq)—belongs to a locally dominant ethnic group, and serves as a lingua franca for between-group dealings. So, if you are of the Ngkriang ethnicity, then you will speak Lao with people outside your district and

Ngkriang with people inside your district, including both fellow Ngkriang and people of other local ethnicities. If, however, you are member of one of those other ethnicities, you will speak at least three languages: (1) Lao with people from outside your district, (2) Ngkriang with people of other ethnicities inside your district, and (3) your own language with your own people.[14]

Such nested political asymmetries of neighbouring languages is the general pattern in MSEA. Social relations are typically asymmetric, and the asymmetry tends to be oriented in a downhill direction (Diller 2004; Blench 2005). The higher upstream you live, the less politically dominant you are, and the more likely you will be to accommodate to the language of your downstream neighbours. In the Kri-speaking area at the peak of the Nam Noy valley in eastern Khammouane Province, Laos, Kri speakers inhabit the highest reaches of a major watershed, and they are the most multilingual of all their neighbours (Enfield & Diffloth 2009). Kri men mostly speak proficient Sek, the Northern Tai language of their immediate neighbours downstream. The Sek tend to speak little or no Kri in return. But the Sek, in turn, speak Lao with their downstream compatriots, and the Lao, in turn, who speak no Sek, speak Thai to their neighbours over the Mekong to the West.

One account for the special degree of linguistic convergence observed in MSEA appeals to horizontal diffusion through sustained social contact between language groups, in a more 'rhizotic' account of language history (Moore 1994). As suggested by the discussion so far, to understand these patterns of contact, we have to look at the structure and dynamics of social relations, not within language groups, but across language groups. Recent research on language contact and its effects (for example by Thomason 2001; Ross 2003; Aikhenvald 2002; Muysken 2008; inter alia) has underlined the primacy of inter-community social factors in determining structural linguistic outcomes. This work offers empirically-based distinctions between types of inter-community relations. Direct social contact between groups—a necessary condition for horizontal transmission—is more likely when there is more loose-knit, open social organisation in a given group. Once two groups come into regular contact, the type and intensity of this contact will be a function of the nature of social relations between the two groups. In MSEA, it is a kind of ethnic pluralism defined above that will most likely account for the observed patterns.

A useful scheme for thinking about differences between types of inter-group contact is a scale from symmetrical to asymmetrical social contact (cf. Thomason 2001; Aikhenvald 2006).[15] Social contact between groups is more symmetrical when each group has a similar degree of control over local power and resources. The languages of the two groups will be mutually influential, each contributing structure to the other, resulting in gradual convergence. By contrast, social contact between groups is more asymmetrical when one social group wields significant power over the other, particularly when one group displaces the other, coming into control of land and other resources through military force, technology, or other means. In these conditions, speakers of a substrate language (the language of the subordinate group) may either find their language being heavily affected by the superstrate language (especially in vocabulary) or they may shift to the superstrate entirely. Language shift of this kind is currently in full swing in MSEA among many minority populations, especially those who speak Austroasiatic languages.

Our knowledge of what determines the likelihood and rate of language shift is limited. One factor concerns the language attitudes of a speech community. Some communities

14 People of Kaleum also know Vietnamese because of proximity to the border and contact with traders.

15 I doubt that social contact between different groups is ever truly symmetrical. The scale is perhaps better characterised as a scale of asymmetricality, running from maximally to minimally asymmetrical.

view their language as ethnically emblematic, and go to special lengths to make sure that the younger generation learns and uses it (for example Hmong in Laos). Other communities are apparently willing to let their language disappear. Differences in language ideology in communities of the past may account for modern day facts, but unfortunately, while it is possible to determine ethnolinguistic ideology through contemporary ethnography, it is not clear how this can be done for past states of affairs through archaeological or comparative linguistic research.

Large-scale language shift does not mean that a superstrate language simply replaces a substrate. In language shift, large numbers of people learn the superstrate language as adults and as multilinguals. Factors of both adult second-language learning and of multilingual speech contribute to the transformation of a language through contact. As noted above, when adults learn new languages, they do so imperfectly, and often with the result of simplifying the language learnt. If this simpler variety serves as input to the next generation of language learners, a net result can be simplification of the superstrate language as a whole.

Multilingual speech can also have a structural effect on language. In multilingual settings, multilinguals practice code-mixing, that is, they use multiple languages at the same time, often within the same utterance (Muysken 2000). Because such within-utterance language mixing involves the interlocking of components of two or more languages, the languages involved will tend to structurally converge where possible in order to better facilitate this (cf. Weinreich 1953; Silva-Corvalán 1994). The modern MSEA situation is compatible with a past scenario of long-term and widespread practices of code-mixing in multilingual settings. In line with this, Khanittanan (2001) argues that the C14-18 ‘Khmero-Thai’ society of Ayuthya in present day Thailand was fully bilingual, driving convergence of the two languages to an extreme degree (Huffman 1973).

If the above observations are correct, we may hypothesise that the MSEA facts—a very high degree of linguistic convergence combined with relative simplicity of grammatical structure—are to be explained by a history of widespread adult learning of neighbouring languages (indicative, say, of large-scale and repeated migrations) and widespread code-mixing in multilingual environments, as facilitated by a widespread ethnic pluralism.

6 Conclusion

The puzzle in MSEA, like in every region, is often seen to be that of distinguishing between two kinds of cause for the existence of common structure in languages: internal vs. external change, vertical vs. horizontal transmission, descent vs. diffusion. But do we not overestimate the extent to which these are competing accounts? Perhaps the reason that it is difficult to detect and maintain these distinctions is because the distinctions are weak or even illusory. There is an essential commonality to the causal processes that underlie them all, namely unit-based diffusion taking place in real time conducted through social interaction (Enfield 2003:368, 2005:190–198, 2008:304). Resolving the issue of ‘vertical’ versus ‘horizontal’ transmission—a distinction that may be fundamentally questioned—is a challenge for future research.

This chapter has addressed the question of human diversity in mainland Southeast Asia from the viewpoint of linguistics. While most linguistic research focuses on phylogenetic diversity (number of language families in an area, and putative relations of common descent between them), I have pointed to two other senses of diversity (Nettle 1999): language diversity (number of languages in an area) and typological diversity (similarity or difference in structure of languages in an area). MSEA appears to show an exceptionally

low degree of typological diversity in world terms (Dahl 2008). A likely explanation combines multiple factors, including (a) a tendency for MSEA peoples to maintain ethnic distinctions through language yet nevertheless cultivate close and sustained social connections across ethnic boundaries, and (b) a tendency for the isolating/analytic type of language found in MSEA to accelerate convergence through heightened facilitation of code-mixing. These hypotheses emerge partly from what is known ethnographically about the linguistic situation in modern MSEA, and partly from what is known about the linguistic effects of different types of social situation on linguistic diversity globally. To be plausible as a natural, causal account, any account must be statable in terms of the basic, micro-level mechanisms that underlie not just linguistic transmission but all cultural transmission. A priority for future research in MSEA is close ethnographic investigation of the micro-level processes of language transmission, and through this, the development of an account that links these micro-level processes to their macro-level products.

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