

Language in the Mainland Southeast Asia Area

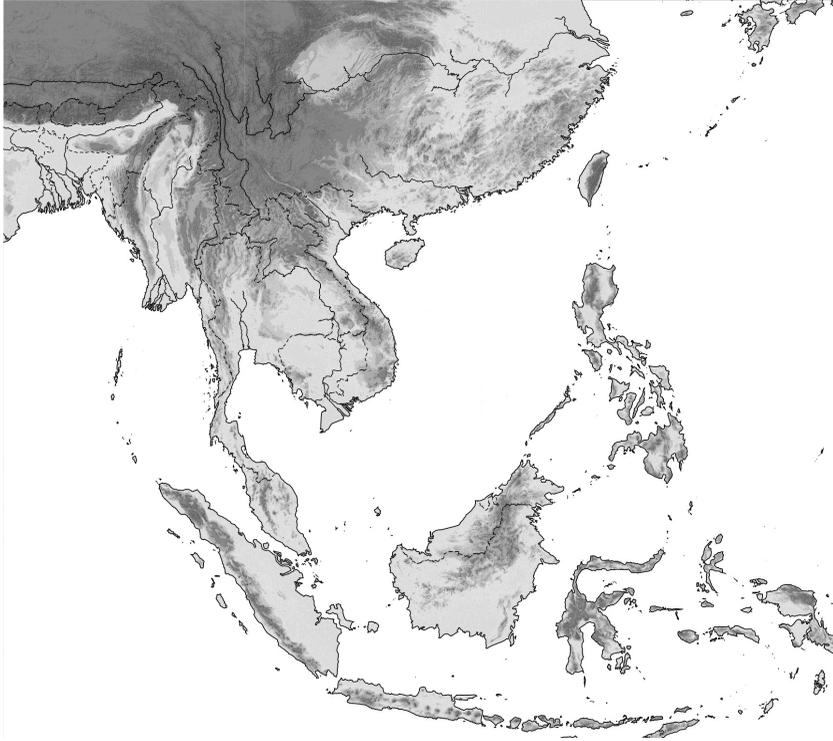
N. J. Enfield

25.1 Mainland Southeast Asia and its People

Mainland Southeast Asia (hereafter MSEA) can be broadly defined as the area occupied by present day Cambodia, Laos, Peninsular Malaysia, Thailand, Myanmar and Vietnam, along with areas of China south of the Yangzi River. Also sometimes included are the seven states of Northeast India, and – although here the term ‘mainland’ no longer applies – the islands from Indonesia and Malaysia running southeast to Australia and West Papua (see Map 25.1).

There are no exact borders around the MSEA area. Different scholars draw lines in different places. But there is nevertheless a core (Comrie 2007: 45). MSEA is always taken to include Indochina – Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia – together with Thailand, and usually Peninsular Malaysia and part or all of Myanmar (see Map 25.2). But there is often a broader scope of Greater MSEA, moving beyond the core area of Indochina and Thailand, in all directions; for recent work, see Vittrant (2015) and Jenny and Sidwell (2015) on Myanmar (cf. Bradley 1995; Watkins 2005), Post (2015) on Northeast India (cf. Hyslop, Morey and Post 2011, 2012, 2013; Morey and Post 2008, 2010), Gil (2015) on Insular Southeast Asia (cf. Adelaar and Himmelmann 2005; Blust 2013a, 2013b), and de Sousa (2015) on southern China (cf. Ansaldo and Matthews 2001; Bauer 1996; Chappell 2001).

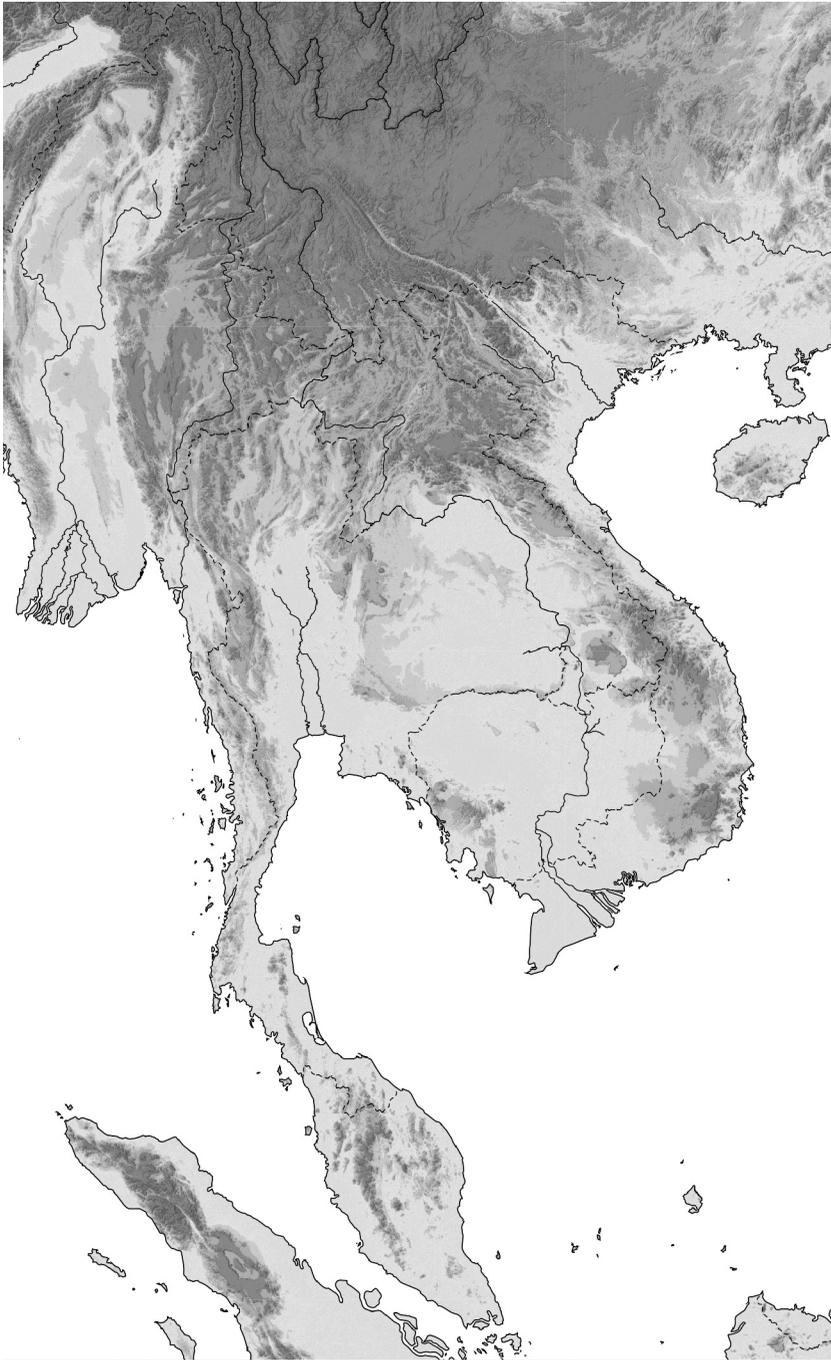
MSEA is a tropical and sub-tropical area with rugged and well-forested hills and river systems running from higher altitudes in the northwest to the plains and deltas of the south. Among the biggest rivers are the Mekong, the Brahmaputra, the Red River in North Vietnam, the Salween and Irrawaddy rivers in Myanmar, the Pearl and Yangzi rivers in China, and the Chaophraya in central Thailand. The lower reaches of these river systems are well-fertilized plains, which have attracted people partly because of the mobility the environment affords, but also because of the suitability for paddy rice farming. Paddy farming, in which rice plants are



Map 25.1 Greater Mainland Southeast Asia: present-day Cambodia, Laos, Peninsular Malaysia, Thailand, Myanmar and Vietnam, along with China south of the Yangzi River, Northeast India and Insular Southeast Asia

kept continually flooded as they grow, requires management of water via systems of dikes and channels (Hartmann 1998). This method is significantly more productive than upland dry-field methods and can support larger populations (Bellwood 1992: 90). It also reduces biodiversity.

MSEA has seen a long and complex history of human movement, contact and diversification. Evidence from genetics and archaeology suggests that there has been human activity in the area since some 40,000 years ago, when conditions were very different from today. At around 20,000 years ago, global sea levels were 120 m lower than now (Chappell and Shackleton 1986; Tooley and Shennan 1987), implying different possibilities for human movement and livelihoods. Then, one could walk on dry land in a straight line from the site of present-day Ho Chi Minh City to Kuala Lumpur, and then in another straight line to Bali and again up to Brunei (Oppenheimer 2011; Voris 2000; White 2011). While a fair amount is known from bioarchaeological evidence about more recent human activity in the pre-agricultural period (Oxenham and Tayles 2006), the time horizon of comparative linguistics is limited to the last few thousand years (for recent reviews, see Enfield 2011b). Just behind that horizon are the beginnings of agriculture in MSEA some 4,000 or so years ago.



Map 25.2 Core Mainland Southeast Asia: present-day Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, and neighbouring parts of China, Malaysia and Myanmar

A widely accepted view is that the people of MSEA once spoke Austroasiatic languages in a ‘continuous distribution’, and that this distribution was ‘broken up by the historical expansions of the Chinese, Tai, Vietnamese, Burman and Austronesian (Malay and Cham) peoples’ (Bellwood 1992: 109; cf. Sidwell and Blench 2011: 338 and *passim*; Post 2011). By what mechanism did this take place? Some have argued that modern ethnolinguistic diversification in MSEA was associated with demic diffusion (Bellwood 1992; Blust 1994; Edmondson and Gregerson 2007; Higham 2002). This implies the incoming migration of groups of people who rely on agriculture and who can thereby support large populations. The incomers replace less populous and less powerful existing forager populations (Ammerman and Cavalli-Sforza 1971; Cavalli-Sforza, Menozzi and Piazza 1993; Nichols 1992).¹ An alternative to demic diffusion is cultural diffusion, whereby resident populations remain in place, but adopt new practices and ways of speaking. According to O’Connor (1995: 987), ‘there is no direct evidence that an actual influx of immigrants ever displaced earlier peoples’ in MSEA. He argues instead that an ‘agricultural paradigm’ is what diffused, bringing with it a ‘society-shaping complex’ (see Jonsson 2011, 2014 for discussion). For other critiques of the application of a demic diffusion model in MSEA see White (2011) on the view that hunter-gatherer communities have played a central role in shaping modern MSEA ethnographic diversity, and Fix (2011) on the genetics of ethnolinguistic diversification, in which he presents an alternative to the standard account of demic diffusion in the Malay Peninsula, with a model he calls *trickle-effect colonization*.

Regardless of whether one thinks the historical process of peopling and ethnolinguistic diversification in MSEA was driven primarily by the spread of people or by the spread of ideas – here, more work is needed – the modern distribution of ethnolinguistic groups is clear. In lowland areas, populations are denser, more culturally and linguistically homogeneous, and more closely affiliated with state political power. In upland areas, populations are sparser, more culturally and linguistically diverse, and have limited if any access to infrastructure, education or power. The dominant lowland populations are clearly distinct from each other in terms of political identity (‘the Thai’ versus ‘the Lao’ versus ‘the Khmer’, etc.), but the upland minority populations that straddle these nations have something in common: they are politically and geographically marginalized.

The upland areas in which many MSEA minorities live are conjoined in a single, elongated area, crossing political borders and encompassing

¹ Demic diffusion is the spread of genes. It is usually associated with the outcomes of migration. In world history, this has often involved the movement of groups who have adopted agriculture, and who are therefore more populous and viable than those (e.g. hunter-gatherers) who are resident in the area being entered. Demic diffusion may be associated with population displacement or replacement, but this need not necessarily be the case. There may be genetic admixture between an incoming population and a resident population, such that some fraction of the genes of the resident population survives. Thanks to Mark Stoneking and Dan Dediu for clarification of these points.

'virtually all the lands at altitudes above roughly three hundred meters all the way from the Central Highlands of Vietnam to northeastern India' (Scott 2009: ix). This area has been referred to as *Zomia*, a term coined by van Schendel (2002) in making the point that arbitrary research areas can be constructed and reified by 'academic politics', as he puts it (cf. Michaud 2010). Van Schendel's proposal of a *Zomia* area is a conceptual exercise, useful because it counteracts the politically sanctioned alternatives. The term has gained some recognition (though ironically not without danger of creating the reification it was warning against: Jonsson 2011, 2014), particularly due to Scott (2009). According to Scott, it is not that the inhabitants of *Zomia* simply share the fate of having been marginalized by states. Instead, he argues, they share a cultural distaste for being governed: they have chosen to remain isolated from central government control.

We do not have space in this chapter for more on the detailed history of human activity – peopling and migration, social contact and cultural shift, state formation and avoidance, war and peace – in MSEA. For further information, see Tarling (1992), Scott (2009) and Enfield (2011b).

25.2 Mainland Southeast Asian Languages

The degree of linguistic diversity in MSEA (i.e. the number of languages per square km) is high (Enfield 2011c), and it is highest in upland areas. Lower language density in lowland areas is likely related in part to geographical factors and their implications for the nature of social networks (see Nettle 1999). In historical demographic processes of the kinds noted above, formerly diverse lowland communities in MSEA have become homogenized by a combination of two processes. One process was ethnolinguistic shift. Some groups stayed where they were but stopped passing on their languages and identities to their children, instead adopting the languages and identities of new dominant groups. This process can be observed all over MSEA today. Another process was out-migration, typically to more isolated hill areas (Scott 2009). Geographical isolation is a force that still promotes language diversity in the region, where former diversity of lowland areas is on its last legs. Many of the lowland languages are heavily endangered or extinct (Bradley 2007; Enfield 2006; Suwilai Premsrirat 2007). This is quickened by effects of the concentration of political power of modern nation states in the lowlands. In recent decades, processes of language standardization in MSEA nations (Simpson 2007) have helped to heavily reduce language diversity.

The languages of MSEA are from five major language families: Sino-Tibetan, Tai-Kadai, Hmong-Mien, Austroasiatic and Austronesian.² There

² The Andamanese languages are located just outside MSEA as defined here, though we note with interest new work on these lesser-known languages: see Abbi's recent reference grammar (2013) and dictionary (2012) of Great Andamanese.

Table 25.1 *A breakdown of numbers of languages in MSEA, separated into language families*

	Core MSEA	Greater MSEA
Austroasiatic	122 (44%)	138 (24%)
Sino-Tibetan	74 (26%)	288 (49%)
Tai-Kadai	51 (18%)	93 (16%)
Austronesian	25 (9%)	26 (4%)
Hmong-Mien	8 (3%)	38 (7%)
Total	280	583

are nearly 600 distinct languages spoken in Greater MSEA.³ If we exclude the China and India data, thus representing the Core MSEA area, the number of languages is about half this amount; see Table 25.1.

The very high linguistic diversity (i.e. the number of languages) in north-eastern India and southern/southwestern China adds dramatically to the number of languages included in the area. It also reverses the relative proportion of Sino-Tibetan and Austroasiatic languages.

The MSEA area is unusual in global terms in that there is good agreement among scholars as to the basic language family affiliation of known languages. There are unresolved issues about lower-level subgroupings and there are unresolved hypotheses about possible macro-groupings. But for every known language, scholars agree as to which of the five main language families it fits into. This is unusual, firstly because it means that each language's basic affiliation is apparently uncontroversial and secondly because it suggests that there are no language isolates (Blench 2011: 125–126).⁴ For a survey of the historical-linguistic background, see Sidwell (2013).

Following is a list of some of the typological features that characterize MSEA languages (drawing mostly from Enfield 2005: 186–190, and 2011c: 69–70; see further references there).

Sound system features

- Large vowel systems. It is sometimes difficult to determine how many vowels a system has. There are alternative analyses of features such as diphthongs and phonation splits.

³ Data are from glottolog.org, accessed in May 2014. Many thanks to Harald Hammarström for his input and assistance. Core MSEA was defined for this count as Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam; Greater MSEA included this, along with Peninsular Malaysia, areas of India east of 90 degrees (i.e. the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura) and China south of the Yangzi river (specifically, the provinces of Zhejiang, Jiangxi, Hunan, Guizhou, Yunnan, Guangxi, Guangdong, Fujian and Hainan).

⁴ Not considered in this chapter are sign languages. The sign language used in Ban Khor, Thailand (Nonaka 2004) appears to be an isolate, and there are surely more of its kind. Among spoken languages in MSEA there is Kenaboi, now extinct, and known only from two early twentieth century word lists. Hajek (1998) refers to Kenaboi as 'unclassified' but does not call it an isolate. Benjamin (2006) summarizes and analyses the available data as far as is possible. His view is that Kenaboi is 'a specially-invented form of speech', a 'taboo-jargon' associated with forest collecting trade. Kenaboi had large proportions of both Austroasiatic and Austronesian vocabulary, along with some unexplained forms. The data are too tenuous to establish whether it was an isolate or not.

- Common underlying structure of vowel phoneme system, often 9-place, symmetrical, hi-mid-low by front-central-back.
- Long versus short vowel distinctions.
- Many more consonants are possible in initial position than in final position. Syllables have an initial-and-rhyme structure.
- Preference for one (major) syllable per word, with many languages featuring minor syllables or pre-syllables in an iambic pattern; see Pittayaporn (2015), Butler (2015), Post (2015) and Brunelle and Kirby (2015).
- Lexical contrast is marked by laryngeal features including pitch and phonation type, often in combination. Tone systems are complex: number of tones ranges from 4 to 15, with counts for a language differing depending on the analysis chosen. Phonation type systems usually distinguish two registers, e.g. 'clear' versus 'breathy'. Lexically contrastive pitch and phonation type are strongly correlated in functional and historical terms.
- Gap in voiced stop series at velar place of articulation (no voiced 'g').

Morphosyntax-semantics system features

- No inflectional morphology: no case, gender, number or definiteness marked on noun phrases, no agreement or tense-marking on verbs. Note that *derivational* morphology is widespread and sometimes highly productive in Austroasiatic languages of MSEA (see Alves 2015).
- Open class items – mostly nouns and verbs – serve functions that are expressed by dedicated functional morphemes (including bound morphology) in other languages, e.g., nominals as prepositions, verbs as aspect markers, comparative markers, adversative passive markers and valence-changing devices (Ansaldò 1999; Clark and Prasithrathsint 1985; Kölver 1991).
- Widespread use of verb serialization (meaning a range of different kinds of predicative structures that use combinations of verbs), with a rich array of types and functions in each language (Bisang 1991).
- Order of major constituents of the clause tends to be relatively flexible within languages, sensitive to pragmatic factors (though verb-object constituent order is dominant). Noun phrases tend to be left-headed and may have discontinuous constituents, especially when classifiers are involved.
- Zero anaphora: noun phrases may be ellipsed when their referents are contextually retrievable. This combined with flexibility in constituent order results in quite variable surface options; for a case study see Enfield (2007: 271–284).
- Extensive use of topic-comment structure in clauses.
- Large set of labile or ambitransitive verbs, especially of the causative/inchoative or unaccusative type (e.g. Lao *hak2* can mean transitive 'snap' or intransitive 'is/has been snapped').

- Rich inventories of sentence-final particles that make subtle distinctions in sentence type, stance, evidentiality and combinations thereof.
- Rich inventories of ideophones (or ‘expressives’) and other expressive forms, including rhyming four-syllable expressions and productive elaborative rhyming devices.
- Numeral classifiers and related systems of nominal classification (see Blench 2015).
- Complex pronominal systems, with multi-level social-deictic meanings.

Some of the most noteworthy commonalities among MSEA languages concern their *lack* of marking of certain semantico-grammatical categories. Most notably, as remarked upon in the list above, the languages almost entirely lack inflectional morphology in the usual sense of that term (i.e. including agreement, case, gender/number/definiteness on noun phrases, tense-marking on verbs). For an overview of selected national languages, see Comrie (1990), while Goddard (2005) presents a more topic-oriented approach; see also Vittrant and Watkins (in press).

25.3 Linguistics of MSEA: Resources and Developments

25.3.1 Conferences and Publications

The community of scholars working on MSEA linguistics is steadily growing. The South East Asia Linguistic Society (SEALS) – founded by Martha Ratliff and Eric Schiller at Wayne State University, Detroit, in 1990 – held its 25th annual meeting in 2015. Prior to 2009, proceedings of SEALS meetings were published in edited volumes. Since then they have appeared in the open-access *Journal of the Southeast Asian Linguistics Society* (for which, see www.jseals.org/). The SEALang Projects website (www.sealang.net) is an invaluable resource that makes accessible a range of primary and secondary sources on MSEA languages. Other regular publishing venues for research on MSEA languages include the journals *Mon-Khmer Studies* (an open-access journal, see www.mksjournal.org/) and *Linguistics of the Tibeto-Burman Area* (see sealang.net/sala/ltba/htm/index.htm). Some recent interdisciplinary explorations of ethnolinguistic diversification have focused on languages of MSEA and neighbouring places (e.g. Enfield 2011b; Sagart, Blench and Sanchez-Maras 2005). The last 10 years have seen the publication of multiple landmark overviews of MSEA language families, including Tai-Kadai (Diller, Edmondson and Luo 2008), Sino-Tibetan (Thurgood and LaPolla 2003; cf. Matisoff 2003a), Austroasiatic (Jenny and Sidwell 2015; cf. Shorto 2006), and the Austronesian languages of MSEA (Blust 2013b: 70–75; Grant and Sidwell 2005; Larish 2005; Thurgood 1999).

25.3.2 New Descriptive Work

A key measure of progress in an area is the production of reference materials based on new empirical research.⁵ Full-sized descriptions of MSEA languages published since the turn of the century include grammars of Semelai (Kruspe 2004), Jahai (Burenhult 2005), Garo (Burling 2004), Deuri (Jacquesson 2004), Mongsen Ao (Coupe 2007), Lao (Enfield 2007), Anong (Sun and Liu 2009), Hainan Cham (Thurgood, Thurgood and Li 2014), Turung (Morey 2010), the Tai languages of Assam (Morey 2005), Lisu (Yu 2007), Thai (Higbie and Thinsan 2003; Iwasaki and Ingkaphirom Horie 2005) and Cambodian (Haiman 2011). Numerous grammars have been completed as PhD dissertations; just in the area of northeast India, for example, see grammars of Galo (Post 2007), Atong (van Breugel 2014) and Karbi (Konnerth 2014). Sketches or partial descriptions have appeared on languages including Pacoh (Alves 2006), Kri (Enfield and Diffloth 2009) and Arem (Ferlus 2014), and detailed descriptions have appeared of specific domains of grammar such as phonetics/phonology; see for example Watkins (2002) on Wa and Coupe (2003) on Ao. Major dictionaries of minority languages are less abundant; two notable examples are Watkins (2013) on Wa and Svantesson et al. (2013) on Kammu Yüan. An important preoccupation of descriptive linguistics globally is the documentation of endangered languages; for excellent examples of new empirical work with this orientation in the MSEA context, see Morey (2005, 2010; see also Suwilai Premsrirat 1998, 2008).

A significant amount of new data and analysis from MSEA languages has become available on most if not all domains of interest to linguists, and on most if not all language families and subareas of MSEA. As just one example, here we mention the Aslian languages of Peninsular Malaysia. In the last decade or so, we have seen the publication of typological overviews of the Aslian languages as a group (Matisoff 2003b), new reference grammars (Burenhult 2005; Kruspe 2004), other descriptive materials (Burenhult and Wegener 2009; Wnuk 2016), new interdisciplinary research on the history and diversification of ethnolinguistic subgroups (Bulbeck 2011; Burenhult, Kruspe and Dunn 2011; Dunn et al. 2011; Dunn, Kruspe and Burenhult 2013; Fix 2011; Oppenheimer 2011), and field research on the psychological implications of semantic systems that are indigenous to Aslian languages and world views (Burenhult and Majid 2011; Majid and Burenhult 2014; Wnuk and Majid 2014). Not only is this breadth and depth of new work improving our basic understanding of MSEA languages and their sociohistorical contexts, it is also helping to

⁵ We mention here only a selection of those recent materials that have been published in English, though we note that a substantial descriptive literature on MSEA languages is being published in other languages, including Chinese, French, Indonesian, Thai and Vietnamese. For some examples, see Bo (2002), Bon (2014), Buakaw (2012), Chen (2005), Gai (2002), Giaphong (2004), Kosaka (2000), D. Li (2003, 2004), Y. Li (2003), Lidz (2010), Zongwu Mao and Yunbing Li (2002, 2007), Mayuree (2006), Ploykaew (2001), Samarina (2011), Seng Mai (2012), Shee (2008), Shintani (2008), Srisakorn (2008), Wayesha (2010).

balance our perspective on the MSEA area, with effects on our image of what a Southeast Asian language is typically like (see below). The availability of new descriptive materials means that we can progress in the field by testing existing proposals and by continuously expanding the scope of our work (see Pittayaporn 2009 for a good illustration of this point).

25.3.3 New Methods

As new methods in linguistic research are being developed and applied in linguistics globally, so they are being developed and applied in Mainland Southeast Asia. In phonetics and phonology, for example, new instrumental and computational technologies are rapidly transforming the realms of possibility in data collection and analysis, both by making new kinds of measurement possible and by making the equipment smaller and more portable for fieldwork; see Edmondson and Esling (2006: 172–175) for the use of laryngoscopy to study the phonetics of breathy vocal register in Jianchuan Bai (spoken in Yunnan), and Brunelle (2009) for the use of electroglottography to study register in Cham dialects in Vietnam (see also Brunelle, Nguyễn and Nguyễn 2010 on Northern Vietnamese). Newly developed statistical techniques are being applied with interesting results: in historical linguistics, probability-based bioinformatic techniques are being used for exploring cladistic representations of language relatedness (see for example Burenhult, Kruspe and Dunn 2011), and in areal typology, statistical modelling is being used to test dependencies among phonological features, language history and language contact (Brunelle and Kirby, Chapter 26, this volume). In lexical and grammatical work, new field methods are being applied in the exploration of semantic fields, in a range of functional and conceptual domains (see e.g. Burenhult 2006; Enfield 2015; Wnuk and Majid 2014). There is an increasing interest in combining methods in order to further our knowledge of the area's languages, for example in the interdisciplinary collaborations of historical work (van Driem 2007; Enfield 2011b; Sagart et al. 2005). And computational power is being exploited in building larger and better databases of, or including, MSEA languages (Donohue et al. 2013; Dryer and Haspelmath 2013).

25.3.4 Historical-comparative Linguistics

Research in historical-comparative linguistics continues apace in MSEA. At the level of subgrouping, advances are being made in all the major language families. Old hypotheses are being tested with new data and techniques, and new hypotheses are being put forward. The appearance of new data, in particular, has made an important difference, enabling, for example, Pittayaporn (2009) to propose a new reconstruction of

Proto-Southwestern Tai phonology, Sidwell (2009) to offer an improved account of vowels in Proto-Mon-Khmer, and Matisoff (2015; cf. Matisoff 2003a) to re-examine the place of the Jingpho language within Tibeto-Burman. In research on historical Hmong-Mien, Ratliff (2010) has recently provided an assessment of previous work and offers substantial new reconstructions, with consideration of their implications. Historical Austroasiatic has seen substantial developments, including a suspension of the assumption of a highest-level split between Munda and Mon-Khmer. It is no longer widely assumed that 'Mon-Khmer languages' represent descendants of a single ancestor language below Proto-Austroasiatic, although the term is still useful with the meaning 'non-Munda Austroasiatic languages'; for a range of perspectives on this, see discussion in Sidwell and Blench (2011), Diffloth (2011), Sagart (2011) and van Driem (2011). Similarly, in Sino-Tibetan linguistics, assumptions are being questioned. For example, recent reconsiderations of the position of Chinese in the family have assigned it to a lower-level subgroup rather than the standard placement as a high major branch; more subgroups of Sino-Tibetan are identified, and the time depth of reconstructed Proto-Sinitic is pushed back to well before Old Chinese (Blench and Post 2013; van Driem 2013).

25.3.5 Language in Social Life

Numerous lines of work in linguistics deal with the role of language in social life. An important theme in recent work in MSEA is the sociolinguistics of language endangerment, and associated issues including language protection and revitalization; for an example, see Phattharathanit (2012) on identity maintenance in Lanna (cf. Bradley 2007; Suwilai Preamsritat 2007). Research on linguistic politeness continues, mostly in relation to national languages, and with reference to the languages' elaborated systems of social deixis, for example in their systems of personal pronouns, and the pragmatic alternatives that effectively create open class systems for person reference (Cooke 1968; Enfield 2015: Ch. 5; Haas 1969; Luong 1990). The more complex documented systems of person reference are those belonging to the major literate languages of the area, including Thai, Cambodian, Vietnamese and Burmese (Cooke 1968). There has been recent work in this domain on languages including Lao (Enfield 2007: Ch. 5; 2015: Ch. 5). On Vietnamese, see Sophana (2008) on politeness strategies, and Sidnell and Shohet (2013) on avoidance strategies (see also Luong 1988). Linking social life to central concerns of historical linguistics and typology, there has been recent work on sociolinguistic conditions for borrowing (Alves 2009); for similar work see Thurgood (2010) comparing two varieties of Cham with the Tibeto-Burman language Anong. A new line of work in MSEA is conversation analysis: Enfield (2013) presents several case studies of Lao language in conversation; Hà (2010, 2013) presents studies of

Vietnamese conversation with a focus on the role of prosody, for example in repair and backchannelling (see also Umaporn 2007 on backchannelling in Mon).

25.3.6 Changing Perceptions

Like in any area, linguistics in MSEA is subject to preconceptions. As soon as an idea becomes something of an orthodoxy it is right to revisit and question it. A trend in recent scholarship of MSEA languages has been to raise and sometimes challenge certain assumptions about the linguistics of this area.

25.3.6.1 The Idea of a Typical MSEA Language

Comrie (2007: 45) finds that, on measures taken using data from *The World Atlas of Language Structures* (Haspelmath et al. 2005), ‘Thai turns out to be the most typical of the three major national languages of Mainland Southeast Asia considered here.’⁶ This conclusion is shared by Dahl (2008). This of course does not mean that Thai is the most typical of all MSEA languages, although this is often assumed to be the case. The national languages of the area are the better-described and better-known languages, and they happen to share many typological features that characterize Thai, such as a tendency for monosyllabicity, a lack of productive affixation, and an elaborate numeral classifier system. But there are many MSEA languages whose properties differ from these and many other properties found in Thai and other national languages like Vietnamese. In fact, many languages of the area lack these features. Within MSEA linguistics one’s view of what is typical may depend on one’s academic background, and, especially, on which language one worked on first, or has worked on most, in one’s research career. If, for example, one’s earliest and most in-depth work on MSEA languages was on Lao (as is the case with the present author), then languages like Lao and Thai would seem typical. They are typologically very similar to other major languages like Vietnamese. Another researcher’s background would suggest otherwise. The viewpoint professed by our colleague Gérard Diffloth is that a typical MSEA language lacks lexical tone, has complex phonotactics including syllable-initial consonant clusters, and has productive derivational morphology, quite a contrast from the oft-cited set of features of MSEA languages; see Henderson (1965), Capell (1979), Suwilai Premasrat (1987) and Kruspe (2004); cf. Alves (2001, 2015). The problem with treating the area’s major national languages as reference points is not only that they are a tiny sample but that they are known to be not like the rest, due to factors including (1) they are spoken by very large, often urbanized populations,

⁶ The idea that a language may be ‘typical’ of an area seems to be an intuitive one, but the relevant sense in which a language can be said to be typical is seldom defined.

(2) they are spoken as second languages by large sections of the population, (3) they are official languages, used in major education systems, media and broadcasting, and legal documents.

25.3.6.2 Nominal Classification

MSEA is often cited in typologies of nominal classification as an area that has numeral classifiers (Aikhenvald 2000; Grinevald 2000). Recent research shows that systems of nominal classification in MSEA can be more complex than this. They not only contain the classic numeral classifier type, consisting of a large set of classificatory nominals that are used whenever something is being numerated, but also systems that resemble the *noun class* systems found widely in Africa and the Amazon, and ancillary systems that resemble numeral classifiers but which are involved in the use of more simple modifiers such as demonstratives and specifiers. Enfield (2007: 119–156) shows that in Lao there are in fact four distinct grammatical systems of nominal classification, of which numeral classifiers are one (see Blench 2015).

25.3.6.3 Sesquisyllables

Researchers of the sound structure of words in MSEA languages often refer to the idea of ‘sesquisyllables’ and even the property of ‘sesquisyllabicity’. This term was introduced by Matisoff (1973) to refer to the ‘one-and-a-half syllable’ form of words found in many MSEA languages (Butler 2015; Henderson 1952; Pittayaporn 2015; Shorto 1960). The term has not always been applied in an exact or consistent way. In a narrow sense, it can refer specifically to a syllable with schwa epenthesis between elements of an initial consonant cluster; that is, a syllable whose onset is phonologically /CC/ but phonetically [C^oC]. In a broad sense, it can refer to any word that has an iambic structure, with the main stressed syllable coming at the end. Consider the following three words in Kri (Enfield and Diffloth 2009): /cakaŋ/ [caka:ŋ] ‘to measure something by handspans’, /ckaŋ/ [c^oka:ŋ] ‘a hand span’, and /caŋ/ [ca:ŋ] ‘buttress of a tree’ (or /kaŋʔ/ [ka:ŋʔ] ‘chin/jaw’). In the broad sense, both /cakaŋ/ [caka:ŋ] and /ckaŋ/ [c^oka:ŋ] are sesquisyllabic, while in the narrow sense, only /ckaŋ/ [c^oka:ŋ] is. Recent work – by Butler (2015) and Pittayaporn (2015) – has made a significant advance not only by insisting that we be consistent and precise in the use of such terms, but by turning to empirical and theoretical accounts in order to offer motivated solutions, making the intuitive idea of sesquisyllabicity accountable to current theory and data in theoretical phonology and articulatory phonetics. Butler (2015) calls for more thoughtful consideration of the terms, and seeks to make progress by holding certain phonological ideas of syllable structure accountable to phonetic behaviour that can be experimentally tested. Pittayaporn (2015) takes a broader

comparative approach to the problem, offering a typology of sesquisyllabic languages, defining the distinct meanings that this term can have.

25.3.6.4 Tone Phonetics and Phonology

An oft-cited feature of MSEA languages is that many of them are tone languages. When asked what this means, most linguists would agree with Yip (2002: 1): ‘A language is a “tone language” if the pitch of the word can change the meaning of the word.’ But as linguists of MSEA languages since Henderson (1952, 1965, 1967) have insisted, it is wrong to think that *pitch* is the sole or defining feature of a tone system in MSEA (see Brunelle and Kirby 2015 and Sidwell 2015; see also Abramson and L-Thongkum 2009): ‘It is important to recognize that pitch is frequently only one of the phonetic components of “tone” as a phonological category . . . A phonological tone is in our area very frequently a complex of other features besides pitch – such as intensity, duration, voice quality, final glottal constriction and so on’ (Henderson 1967: 171). From this perspective, while tone and phonation type are sometimes considered to be distinct phonological organizations, they should instead be treated as instances of a single sound system property insofar as they each involve the use of laryngeal features for lexical contrast. Pitch contours, distinctions in phonation and other glottalic effects are all produced in the larynx, by the vocal folds, and are all articulatorily independent of segmental speech sounds produced with the lips, teeth and tongue (i.e. consonants). Tone and phonation are intimately bound and not essentially distinct. For this reason we recognize that the sound system of an MSEA ‘tone’ language, such as Vietnamese, is not of a different species from that of a classical MSEA ‘register’ or ‘phonation type’ language such as Kri (Enfield and Diffloth 2009). Most systems that are identified as one or the other (in phonological terms) actually display properties of both (in phonetic terms).

25.3.6.5 MSEA as a Linguistic Area

In research on areal linguistics, a great deal of new empirical and conceptual work from around the world has improved our understanding of historical processes of ethnolinguistic diversification, contact and convergence, while at the same time some of the basic tenets of areal linguistics have come under question (Muysken 2008; Stolz 2002). MSEA has been widely regarded as a classic linguistic area with close parallelism in structure between neighbouring languages that have no demonstrable common ancestor: see Henderson (1965), Capell (1979), Clark (1989), Matisoff (1991), Bisang (1991), Enfield (2005), Comrie (2007), Dahl (2008) and Vittrant and Watkins (in press). The cause of this parallelism is widely assumed to be language contact. While much work examines typological parallels across language families and interprets these as evidence of effects from language contact, recent work by Sidwell (2015), Ratliff

(2015) and Brunelle and Kirby (2015) calls for caution in jumping to that conclusion. If neighbouring but unrelated languages share typological features this can also be a result of parallel language-internal development (Enfield 2005; Thurgood 1998). That possibility is equally deserving of consideration, and so the idea that convergence is due to contact should not be assumed without question.

25.4 Summary

Languages in the Mainland Southeast Asia area are well known for their seemingly high degree of convergence in many – if not all – aspects of their grammar. Recent empirical and theoretical advances in the study of Mainland Southeast Asian languages are driving important developments in our understanding of the area. While much new work is confirming and enriching our understanding of known patterns of structure in the area, other contributions are challenging orthodoxy, including the idea of what a ‘typical’ Mainland Southeast Asian language is like, and even the very notion that the high degree of convergence in the area is a direct result of social contact among historical speech communities.

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