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On Haudricourt's "The Origin of Tones in Vietnamese"

André Haudricourt's article "De l'origine des tons en vietnamien" has been a key article for most comparative linguists in the Mon-Khmer language family. Paul K. Benedict, Joseph H. Greenberg among the comparativists, and Wycliffe linguists such as David Thomas accept it as a reasonable proof that the presence of tone in Vietnamese is not significant enough to discredit the Mon-Khmer relationship of Vietnamese. Haudricourt equates Vietnamese tone with consonantal features in other Mon-Khmer languages then claims that this proves that tone is an insignificant feature, lately arrived, and not a sufficiently stable criterion on which to define linguistic relationships.

Unfortunately, Haudricourt's article has seldom been critically examined. Haudricourt equated the ²hỏi-ngã tone classes of Vietnamese (Chinese 上) with Mon words ending in -h or Muong words ending in -s. He had only three examples; the words for "seven", "nose", and "root". There are many cases, which he does not mention, where Mon -h and Muong -s do not equal Vietnamese hỏi-ngã.

He equated the ⁴sắc-nặng tone class (Chinese 去) with Riang and Khmu words ending in a glottal stop. In this case he had five examples: "leaf", "rice", "fish", "dog", and "louse". For the four other tone classes of Vietnamese he had no formula and no examples.

There are a number of things to note. What is the status of Riang and Khmu in Mon-Khmer? They belong to the so-called "Northern group"; many people consider these Austronesian or Austroasiatic but not Mon-Khmer. David Thomas in: "More on Mon-Khmer sub-groupings" (Lingua 25, 1970) postulates nine branches of Mon-Khmer: Pearic, Khmer, Bahnaric, Katuic, Khmuic, Monic, Palaungic, Khasi and Viet-Muong. Haudricourt's equations pertain to (5) Khmuic and (7) Palaungic. We do not know whether they are relevant to the whole family. He gets his Khmu material from W.A. Smalley and his Riang material from H.G. Luce.

Haudricourt uses Riang to demonstrate that what is tone in Vietnamese is a glottal stop in Riang. His argument depends on the fact that Riang is not a tonal language. Unfortunately Luce printed his Riang material a few years after Haudricourt had used it. (See "Danaw: A Dying Austroasiatic Language" in Indo-Pacific Linguistic Studies North Holland Publishing Co., Amsterdam, 1965 Part I, pp. 98-129.) Luce states; "These Riang dialects have much in common....They appear to have only two tones, level and falling, according to whether the original initial of the main syllable was surd or sonant." Haudricourt has used a language that has two tones to demonstrate that one can make equations between tonal Vietnamese and non-tonal Mon-Khmer. When he ends up with tone on both sides of his equation he has demonstrated nothing except the gullibility of his readers.

The whole "Northern group" of Mon-Khmer (Thomas' Palaungic and Khmuic) seems to have tones. This means tone is a factor, not just in Vietnamese, but in other areas of Mon-Khmer. No matter how many times tone is read out of the party or explained away it always sneaks back in. Mon-Khmer was originally designed to be a non-tonal catch-all for what was not Thai or Chinese on the one hand, or Malay on the other. Perhaps this attempt to set up a linguistic "buffer zone" is less successful than its designers intended.

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