

Language Relationships in Kontum Province

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1960

1. Lexico-statistics
2. Kontum percentages and relationships
3. Wider relationships

1. It is common knowledge that some languages are more closely related than others. Techniques for determining the relative closeness of these relationships more precisely have been developed recently by Swadesh, Lees, Gudschinsky, and others.¹

These techniques presuppose, upon good evidence, (1) that words in certain basic portions of the vocabulary are lost more slowly than words in other portions, and (2) that languages change their vocabulary at a constant rate.

The general method, then, is rather simple: Using a basic vocabulary list of 100-200 items, tabulate the percentage of cognates between two languages. Then comparison of the cognate percentages reveals the relative closeness of the languages. (Further application of a formula can give a time differential.)

Using Swadesh's 200-word basic list, it has been suggested that 80-100% represents the same language.²

2. The province of Kontum is of interest because of its linguistic diversity and the scarcity of studies on it. The following figures are cognate percentages based on a test list of 183 words, a modification of the Swadesh 200 list. The abbreviations used are --
B: Kontum Bahnar; R: Longloi Rongao; H: DakRode Halang;
S1: DakBrong Sedang; S2: Konpia Sedang; S3: DakSut Sedang;
J: Jeh.

	<u>B.</u>	<u>R.</u>	<u>Sl.</u>	<u>S2.</u>	<u>S3.</u>	<u>J.</u>
<u>H.</u>	59	54	59	55	55	59
	<u>B.</u>	59	52	57	57	54
		<u>R.</u>	58	60	62	47
			<u>Sl.</u>	87	72	51
				<u>S2.</u>	73	51
					<u>S3.</u>	55

DakBrong and Konpia are only about 15 kilometers apart, so their high cognate percentage is not surprising. DakSut Sedang is more differentiated, yet it is much closer to the other Sedangs than to its neighbouring Jeh or any of the other languages.

These languages yield a consistent 50-60% cognateness, showing that they all started to split off from each other at about the same time, possibly between the 4th and 7th centuries A.D. This consistency also supports the accuracy with which the tribal names have been applied.

3. These Kontum languages are members of a larger group of languages, sometimes called Pemsian,³ found in the highlands of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. The southern Pemsian languages seem to fall into three groups -- Koho-Mnong,⁴ Bahnar-Sedang, and Boloven. The Koho-Mnong group would include such languages as Koho, Mnong, Stieng (Bulo), Budip, Bulach, Gar, and Chrao. The Bahnar-Sedang group would take in the Kontum languages and other neighbouring languages. The Boloven group would include Alak, La-ven, Jru, and others in the Boloven plateau area. Cognate percentages between these groups run in the neighbourhood of 35-45%

The Pemsian languages are part of the larger Mon-Khmer family, which includes Cambodian and several languages of Burma, Thailand, and Malaya.

Rade, Jorai,⁵ and Cham belong to a completely different language family, Malayo-Polynesian, found in the Philippines, Indonesia, and the islands of the Pacific.

Footnotes

¹Morris Swadesh, 'Salish Internal Relationships', I.J.A.L., Vol.16 (1950), pp.157-167, and other articles; Robert B. Lees, 'The Basis of Glottochronology', Language, Vol.29 (1953), pp.113-127; Sarah Gudschinsky, 'The ABC's of Lexicostatistics', Word, Vol.12 (1956), pp.175-210.

²Gudschinsky, op.cit., p.207.

³A term coined by Rene De Berval and used by Dournes and others.

⁴Dournes would group Mnong and Stieng with Bahnar rather than with Koho; but Mnong Gar gives 50% cognates with Koho and only 35% with Bahnar.

⁵see R.S.Pittman, 'Jarai as a Member of the Malayo-Polynesian Family of Languages', Asian Culture, Vol.1, no.4 (1959).