

Historical morphology in Austroasiatic Expressives

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The Expressive mode found in some Asian languages presents a number of challenges to the historical linguist.

Expressive words might be “on the spot” improvisations, unlike prosaic words which are historically transmitted along with the language. If so, this would make it nearly impossible to trace the history of many Expressive words.

The presence of sound-symbolism in Expressives could also be an obstacle to the implementation of historical sound-changes. If so, history might be side-lined in phonology as well.

To these two arguments we can object:

First, in closely related languages we often find Expressives that are fairly similar in sound and meaning: they appear to be historically transmitted cognates, not improvised nonce words.

Second, the sound-symbolism of Expressives, often noticed and emphasised, is not always transparent or complete, and is not compulsory for the whole word-class. Actually, sound-symbolic properties are also found in prosaic mode, perhaps only to a lesser extent.

Here, we look at these two questions from another angle, that of historical morphology.

Two Austroasiatic languages of Vietnam, Sre and Bahnar, both of the Bahnaric branch, have well-recorded Expressives that number lexically in the thousands, and have productive systems of affixes.

Beyond the usual morphological copying patterns of prefixed or suffixed, complete or partial, so-called “reduplications”, we also find invariable affixed segments which are not the product of copying. They are similar in form and meaning in both languages, and can be treated as normal morphological cognates. In both languages, these are also found to replace certain segments of the copied material, even when suffixed. The result is the emergence of normal-looking, invariable replacive suffixes, even though morphological suffixing is otherwise unknown in the Austroasiatic family (except in the Munda branch in India). These suffixes must be considered Bahnaric morphological innovations, and analysed historically as such.

We can push the analysis further into the lexical base, or “root”, of the Expressive word. We find that the often noticed Main-Vowel mutations that are used for expressing various degrees of size-symbolism can be viewed as a kind of replacive morphology as well. The basic Main-Vowel, and its replacements, are then seen as related morphemes, each with their own history, with or without sound-symbolic qualities. Some consonants of the lexical base may be seen in the same manner, though they are more difficult to identify and analyse morphologically. The remaining fragments of the lexical base can then be treated historically in the same way as with prosaic words.

A morphological approach supports the view that the historical problems posed by Expressives are less serious than they first seem. Expressive words are historically transmittable, and they contain historically treatable morphology.