

The Fourth International Conference on Austroasiatic Linguistics “An Austroasiatic Family Reunion”

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From the East of India to the South of China down through to mainland Southeast Asia, there are groups of people who speak languages belonging to the Austroasiatic Language Family. There are 168 languages which are categorized into two main sub-groups: Munda and Mon-Khmer Sub-language families. Munda, with 21 languages, is a group spoken in the East of India whereas the 147 languages of the Mon-Khmer group are spoken in mainland Southeast Asia.

It is well known that the ASEAN Community is a complex amalgam of cultures and ethnicities. In each country in mainland Southeast Asia, there are groups who speak unwritten languages belonging to the Mon-Khmer sub-language families. There are three languages with written scripts: Mon, Vietnamese and Khmer. The last two languages are national languages. The majority of ethnic groups are endangered.

In Thailand, there are more than 70 ethnic groups. More than 20 groups belong to Mon-Khmer Sub-language families. There are historical, linguistic evidences suggesting that the Mon-Khmer groups were ancient groups who had settled in Thailand a long time ago.

The teachers, researchers and students of the Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia at Mahidol University, have been conducting research on Mon-Khmer groups since 1983, producing more than 400 works to date. As a result, we have become one of the premier sources of knowledge and expertise on Mon-Khmer Studies. Moreover, in 1989, prior to the publication of the Mon-Khmer Studies Journal Vol. XV, Dr. Suriya Ratanakul and Dr. Suwilai Premsrirat, Mahidol University, started editing and preparing the camera copy. For Vol. XVI-XVII from 1990 up to the present 2009 (Vol 38), the Mahidol team has taken charge of manuscript preparation in collaboration with the SIL International

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of Dallas, Texas, USA. We have collaborated with renowned, international scholars in this field and the Journal has successfully extended the scope of its interest to cover cultural aspects of Southeast Asia. The name of the journal has been modified to “Mon-Khmer Studies: A Journal of Southeast Asian Languages and Cultures”.

The Fourth International Austroasiatic Linguistic Conference was hosted by the Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia from the 29-30 October 2009 on the theme “An Austroasiatic Family Reunion”. It was a good opportunity for native speakers of Austroasiatic Languages in Asia to interact and exchange ideas with international and local scholars. Moreover, most of the outstanding experts in this field participated at this conference so students and new scholars had an opportunity to hear from some of the foremost researchers in the field of languages, who have contributed so much over the years to our understanding and knowledge of Southeast Asia and beyond. Although Austroasiatic scholars may be few in number, we tried to select relevant and engaging papers from around the world. All who attended the conference were extended a warm welcome and reunion at the Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia, Mahidol University, Phutthamonthon 4 Road, Nakhon Pathom.

Conference Outcomes:

There were 21 parallel sessions with 195 participants from 20 countries. The details of the conference are as follows:

The First Day (29 October 2009)

After the opening ceremony by the Vice President of Mahidol University, the keynote address was given by Professor Franklin Huffman, a senior eminent scholar on Austroasiatic Linguistics and Southeast Asian Studies. His speech was entitled “Linguistic and Diplomatic Adventures in Cambodia 1957-present” in which he gave a chronological account of his working experience on Khmer languages and other Southeast Asian languages and linguistics. Of particular note were his descriptions of the problems he had encountered in his many years of research and the methods he used to resolve them which should serve as great inspiration to junior researchers in the audience. After the tea break, three parallel sessions were run from 10.30 am-4.00pm with a lunch break in the middle. The sessions were conducted on the following sub-themes:

- (1) Historical and Comparative Austroasiatics
- (2) Revitalization and Literacy
- (3) Narrative and Folklore

These were followed from 4.00-6.15 by another three parallel sessions with the following sub-themes:

- (1) Mon Historical Linguistics
- (2) Lexicon
- (3) Syntax and Grammar

In the evening, there was a Conference Dinner.

Because the theme of the Conference was “An Austroasiatic Family Reunion” with many eminent international scholars participating, the organizer took the opportunity to present tokens of appreciation to 7 senior foreign and Thai scholars, in recognition of their long-time academic contribution to the field of Austroasiatic Linguistics. Their continuous efforts serve as a model of discipline and determination for junior scholars.

There were several shows featuring dances from around the region, performed by groups from within the Austroasiatic family - Vietnamese, Khmer, Mon and Thai – in line with the conference theme.

The Second Day (30 October 2009)

There were three parallel sessions starting from 8.30-10.30 on the following sub-themes:

- (1) Phonetics and Phonology
- (2) Mon
- (3) Syntax and Grammar

After the tea break, sub-themes 1 and 3 remained the same but the second one was changed to the sub-theme: Aslian.

In the afternoon from 1.30-3.00, three parallel sessions were conducted as follows:

- (1) Iambic Effects in Austroasiatic
- (2) Vietnamese
- (3) Syntax and Grammar

From 3.30-5.15, there were three parallel sessions as follows:

- (1) Iambic Effects in Austroasiatic
- (2) Vietnamese
- (3) Khasi.

There were poster presentations and exhibitions by native speakers in Thailand: Mon and Khmer groups. Moreover, the contributions of scholars of Mon-Khmer - which belong to the Austroasiatic Language Family - from the Research Institute for Languages and

Cultures of Asia, Mahidol University, were presented in a poster exhibition.

Business Meeting: 5.15-7.00

There was a business meeting after the academic session in which the following issues and points were raised:

The participants appreciated the efforts of the host (the Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia, Mahidol University) in successfully organising and conducting such an important international event. There were some participants who would like the Institute to host another such conference in two years time by enlarging the scope to include Tai-Kadai Comparative Linguistics which would attract even more scholars. There was no final resolution from the meeting as to who will be the next host and the Committee in seeking offers of interest from other universities as well.

It was agreed that this conference was privileged to have been so well attended by native speakers of the Austroasiatic Language Family from India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia and Malaysia. Most eminent scholars in the field also participated and it was a particularly good occasion for native speakers and junior scholars to gain exposure at an international level and to meet luminaries from near and far. The atmosphere was like that of a family reunion. Scholars discussed new findings with colleagues or set out plans to do further work together.

The participants proposed to produce a special volume of the Mon-Khmer Journal by selecting suitable papers from the conference. The meeting agreed to this initiative.

Moreover, it was suggested that a book be developed on “Mon-Khmer Languages” describing each language in detail, for which a number of scholars volunteered to be part of the working group.

Lastly, there was the idea to set up an Advisory Board of the Austroasiatic Linguistic Conference which has not so far been established. Now that the conference is a regular feature on the academic calendar, this board would be useful in giving advice and making key decisions on hosting and planning activities for the future. Ten scholars volunteered to be members.

Post-conference Study Tour

On the 31 October 2009, 15 participants went to a Mon Village in Ratchaburi Province accompanied by staff and students of the institute. The village hosted the participants in its capacity as a model village displaying Mon daily life, culture and the fruits of language and culture revitalization projects. The experience and organization of the trip was universally appreciated and complimented.