Central Institute of Indian Languages

53rd Foundation Day Lecture Series

Lecture 21

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Phonological Diversity in the Aoic Languages of Nagaland

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Aoic refers to a group of Tibeto-Burman languages spoken in central Nagaland in India's extreme northeast and traditionally includes Ao (subsumed by the Chungli, Mongsen and Changki dialects), Sangtam, Lotha, and Yimkhung (a.k.a Yimchung). The grouping may include other languages spoken in eastern Nagaland and in adjacent regions of Myanmar – such as Makuri, Tikhir, Longpfur and Chirr – but as yet very little work has been done on these other varieties, so their genetic classification remains uncertain. While lexical similarities, historical sound changes and limited morphological evidence establish the genetic relatedness of the Aoic languages, the higher branch affiliation of this grouping to other Tibeto-Burman languages of the region and ultimately to Sino-Tibetan remains an unsolved puzzle.

In this talk I will give an overview of the main phonological features of Aoic and will cover both segmental and suprasegmental phonology, but will focus on some of the outstanding phonological rarities that makes this cluster valuable from the perspective of phonological typology. I will discuss a highly constrained but nevertheless phonemic modal–creaky voice contrast occurring on just one articulatory position in Mongsen Ao, the historical development of retroflex coronals that have evolved independently of contact with Indo-Aryan languages, the widespread evidence of a voiceless sonorant series extending beyond nasals to all the approximants in some languages, and the phonetic characteristics of what may be the world’s rarest phoneme: the prestopped bilabial trill of Northern Sangtam. The paper will also discuss word and syllable structure, intonation, and their interaction with the tone systems of these languages. In Northern Sangtam a /k/ > /ʔ/ debuccalization process has had the ancillary effect of creating a new checked high tone, and the loss of nasal codas in this language is leading to the development of phonemic nasal vowels. Similar sound changes may have occurred independently in the other Aoic languages, leading one to consider the extent to which tone may be reconstructible to Proto-Aoic, or whether it may have developed independently in the daughter languages through similar sound changes affecting syllable structure.

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