Major morphosyntactic changes in early Austronesian

Malcolm Ross
Australian National University

【Abstract】

The goal of this four-hour series of talks is to discuss major morphosyntactic changes that can be reconstructed for the early history of Austronesian. These changes are principally those reflected in the Formosan languages, but, if time permits, we will also take a look at Proto-Malayo-Polynesian, the language ancestral to all extra-Formosan Austronesian languages. The reconstruction of early innovations depends on the reconstruction of Proto Austronesian, and reconstruction depends on subgrouping. In other words, a hypothesis about early Austronesian morphosyntactic innovations is also a hypothesis about reconstruction and subgrouping, but the emphasis here will fall on morphosyntactic changes.

The most important change in early Austronesian was the nominalisation-into-verb innovation, whereby certain pieces of PAn nominalising morphology were reanalysed as indicative verbs in an early Austronesian language, Proto Nuclear Austronesian. Three Formosan languages, namely Tsou, Puyuma and Rukai, did not participate in this innovation, and their morphosyntactic histories will also be examined. Alternative hypotheses based on the data supporting the nominalisation-into-verb innovation will also be discussed.

Another issue in early Austronesian morphosyntax is the organisation of the pronominal system. How many pronoun paradigms were there? What was the function of each? How did this organisation change over time? Was there an early rule whereby each predicate was followed by maximally one enclitic pronoun, or did sequences of two enclitics occur? If there were sequences, how were the enclitics ordered? This issue has a bearing on the reconstruction of Austronesian morphosyntactic history far beyond the Formosan languages.

Verbs in Formosan languages clearly fall into morphological classes. What were the probable PAn morphological classes? How are these reflected in modern Formosan languages and in Malayo-Polynesian languages? There is evidence that a substantial change in verb class morphology took place in Proto-Malayo-Polynesian.