

Blast from the past – The distribution of morphosyntactic features in modern languages as the key to unlocking the linguistic history of eastern central South Asia and beyond

Recent advances in quantitative methods and their practical application for linguistic data, together with detailed descriptions for an increasing number of linguistic varieties from all language families throughout the South Asian subcontinent, have led to an upsurge in the past few years in studies and research projects devoted to reconstructing the linguistic prehistory of South Asia, taking the structures of the modern languages as their point of departure.

In my talk I will summarize preliminary research by myself and colleagues at the University of Kiel from an ongoing project into the areal and genealogical distributions of morphosyntactic features in the languages of South Asia, in an attempt to begin to unravel the linguistic prehistory primarily of the eastern central part of the subcontinent. Although our research focuses primarily on the Indian state of Jharkhand and its immediate surroundings, data on ca. 50 languages from throughout the entire subcontinent is also being collected. These languages include Indo-Aryan, Dravidian and Austro-Asiatic languages as well as the isolates Burushaski, Kusunda and Nihali, and the features we are studying include information on pronominal paradigms, lexical typology, case alignment and its interrelations with TAM and person, non-nominative subjects, “echo word constructions” or melodic overwriting, “v2s” or auxiliary verbs in the so-called “vector-verb construction”, alienable and inalienable possession distinctions, number and gender systems, and numeral classifiers. This information derives both from published sources and information from language experts, but also from original research undertaken by the members of the project on Indo-Aryan, Dravidian and Munda languages of the region.

Although still preliminary, the distributions of these features already give us a first glimpse into possible contact scenarios in earlier times in this region, which we hope will ultimately contribute to our knowledge of the linguistic prehistory of this part of South Asia and beyond.