

Linguistic Evidence for Austronesian Homeland and Dispersal

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There are three linguistic approaches to the homeland of a language family: (1) linguistic palaeontology, (2) migration theory, and (3) toponymy (the study of place names). In this paper I shall examine the uses of linguistic palaeontology and migration theory in relation to the question of the Austronesian homeland, which depends crucially on the subgrouping hypotheses of the Austronesian language family.

According to Sapir (1916), the area of greatest linguistic diversity is the most likely center of dispersal of a language family or linguistic subgroup. Several different subgrouping hypotheses have been proposed for the Austronesian language family, including (1) Dyen (1965), (2) Starosta (1995), (3) Blust (1999), (4) Sagart (2004), and (5) Ross (2009). Except Dyen, all these subgrouping hypotheses point to Taiwan as the center of greatest linguistic diversity. I shall discuss the merits and demerits of each of these subgrouping hypotheses, try to reconcile their differences and come up with a general agreement if possible. Dyen's classification is based on lexicostatistics. Few linguists would take such methodology seriously today. Blust's classification is based on phonological innovations, while Starosta's and Ross's classifications are based on grammatical. Sagart is based on the lexical innovations of a few cardinal numerals, from 5 to 9, so his linguistic evidence is not very solid. In each of the classification by Blust, Ross and Starosta, the Formosan languages in the south are far more diverse than the ones in the north. The southwestern plains of Taiwan are, therefore, the most likely center of dispersal in the early stage, circa 5000BP. Subsequently, a subgroup dispersed to the Philippines, which will be discussed by Prof. Reid in this session.