

Conference report - The 19th Annual Meeting of the Southeast Asian Linguistics Society (SEALS XIX)

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CONFERENCE REPORT
SEALS XIX: THE 19TH ANNUAL MEETING OF
THE SOUTHEAST ASIAN LINGUISTICS SOCIETY

*28-29 May 2009 University of Social Sciences and Humanities,
Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City*

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SIL International

Established in 1991, the annual SEALS conference has grown to become a significant gathering of scholars of Southeast Asian languages and cultures.

SEALS XIX marked a unique point in the conferences' history, as it was the first time SEALS has been hosted by Vietnam. By contrast, it has been held eleven times in the United States, thrice in Thailand, twice in Malaysia, and once in both Indonesia and Australia. It was entirely fitting that SEALS XIX be hosted by the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University-Ho Chi Minh City, inasmuch as that university's predecessor was the meeting place for the Saigon Linguistics Circle and the birthplace of the Journal of Mon-Khmer Studies.

This year's conference attracted 103 participants from 15 nations.¹ Two keynote addresses, 59 individual presentations (divided into 3 tracks—Phonetics and Phonology, Syntax and Lexicography, and Applied Linguistics/others), and 14 posters (another SEALS first!) ensured that there was "something for everyone."

Paul Sidwell's keynote address, "The Austroasiatic Central Riverine Hypothesis," started with the dramatic declaration: "Mon-Khmer is dead, long live Austroasiatic!" Having aroused the audience's attention, Sidwell went on to posit a new historic point of origin for the Austroasiatic peoples, along the banks of the central portion of the Mekong River. This contrasts with views that place the ancient Austroasiatics in either eastern India or Southern China. As evidence, Sidwell cited 1) floral and faunal terms that "rule out" a temperate zone origin 2) the great diversity of Austroasiatic languages along the course of the Mekong (just as the United Kingdom contains the greatest diversity of English dialects), 3) phonological explanations for the development of morphology in the Munda branch and 4) lexicostatistical evidence for a flat or rake-like branch structure. The breadth of Sidwell's paper was a good starting point for a conference characterized by lively discussion!

¹It is interesting to note that several linguists living in Cambodia travelled to the conference overland by bus—something that would have been unimaginable just a few years ago. This feat highlights the huge political and infrastructure changes of contemporary Southeast Asia—developments that are impacting minority peoples in ways both positive and negative.

The second keynote address, Scott DeLancey's "Language Replacement and the Spread of Tibeto-Burman", likewise reminded the audience to keep a broad historical view in mind when comparing languages. In particular, DeLancey dealt with the question of why some Tibeto-Burman languages seem less morphologically complex than others, suggesting that this could have been the result of political situations in which non-dominant groups took on the language of a dominant group without fully mastering its grammatical complexities.

Other papers of note included: David Gill's "Population Size and the Encoding of Thematic Roles in Southeast Asian Languages," which found a surprisingly clear correlation between the size of a language group and the language's ability to deal with thematically ambiguous statements (smaller groups do better!); Mark Alves' "Early Sino-Vietnamese Language Contact," which invited scholars to contribute to efforts to develop a database of truly ancient Chinese words borrowed by Vietnamese and other Mon-Khmer languages; Dr. Su'ad Awab's "Negotiating Mutual Intelligibility in Malay and Indonesian," which appealed to linguists to stop proclaiming "Bahasa Malay and Bahasa Indonesia are essentially the same language," as this has a negative impact on pedagogy, as native speaker and foreign students alike often receive insufficient training to handle the languages' phonological and semantic differences; Yukti Mukdawijitra's "Language Ideologies of Ethnic Orthography in a Multilingual State: The Case of Ethnic Thai Orthographies in Vietnam," which looked at policy issues related to creating a single Tai writing system for several distinct groups in Northern Vietnam; Dinh Lu Gian's "Social Dialects in Khmer Language in Mekong Delta (Vietnam), which touched on sociolinguistic and educational issues impacting one of Vietnam's largest ethnic minority communities; and Jake Terrel's "Semantic Case Marking in Akha," in which the author proposed a plausible explanation of a difficult feature of the Akha language that has vexed various linguists. A number of papers explored aspects of Thai language (mostly syntax and semantics), a smaller number dealt with Vietnamese and Khmer. Other papers (including that of Carson) reported research on various minority languages, while Person examined how linguists can help minority communities make progress toward the UN Millennium Development Goals. There were even two papers on Singapore English.

In the business meeting, participants elected a standing SEALS Committee (another SEALS first) and accepted an invitation for the next conference to be held in Zurich, Switzerland. In addition, Paul Sidwell unveiled the first edition of the *Journal of the Southeast Asian Linguistics Society (JSEALS)*, and explained the rationale for replacing SEALS conference proceedings with a peer-reviewed journal now available in both print and online at <http://www.jseals.org/>.

The University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University-Ho Chi Minh City is to be commended for hosting a well-organized, thought-provoking conference.