

Proto Siraya Phonology: A Reconstruction

Alexander Adelaar

Asia Institute, The University of Melbourne, Australia
澳洲墨爾本大學亞洲研究所

The Formosan languages have a special interest for historical linguistics because within the Austronesian language family they represent several branches that split off from Proto Austronesian at a very early stage. Siraya (once spoken in the Tainan area) is one of these languages.

However, until recently, it was not quite possible to make full use of the data for this language, which has been dormant for more than a century. Most comparative historical studies refer to one Siraya source only. This is the so-called “Utrecht Manuscript”, which is basically a wordlist from the first half of the 17th century (published by van der Vlis in 1842).

Another source, the Siraya Gospel of St. Matthew (Gravius 1661) has only recently become accessible for further study through philological linguistic analysis (Adelaar 2011). This analysis gives us an insight into Siraya morphosyntax and allows us to make more accurate observations about its phonology. The Gospel text is also rich in vocabulary.

Both the Gospel text and the data in the Utrecht Manuscript show Siraya as it was spoken (or rather, “perceived”) during the Dutch occupation of West Taiwan (1624-1661). Other, more recent materials are bilingual Chinese-Siraya land contracts (Li 2010) and various wordlists collected by Japanese scholars (Ogawa 1917; Tsuchida and Yamada 1991).

The various Siraya sources represent regional and historical varieties that differ considerably from one another. In this paper I will make a phonological comparison of these varieties and try to reconstruct Proto Siraya phonology. In doing so, I hope to obtain a stronger foundation for the reconstruction of Proto Austronesian and the classification of Austronesian languages at the highest cladistic level.

References

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