

Marked Patterns of Lexical Borrowing in Southeast Asia

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Some features of Southeast Asian languages are shared among many languages of the region, regardless of genetic affiliation. When taken together, such areal features permit us to consider Southeast Asia as a linguistic area. The more universally marked these features, the stronger evidence they constitute for the existence of a Southeast Asian linguistic area. One such areal feature pertains to the patterns of lexical borrowing.

Several claims are often made regarding which classes of words are more (or less) borrowable than others. In particular, it has been claimed that members of closed sets, such as numerals and pronouns, are impervious (or at least resistant) to borrowing; that function words are far less susceptible to borrowing than content words; and that core vocabulary items are less likely to be replaced by loanwords than specialized ones. These ideas were formulated mostly on the basis of patterns observed in the 'Old World'. In this paper, I will explore borrowed vocabulary in some languages of Southeast Asia that cast doubt on the strength these generalizations. In these languages, members of closed sets (such as numerals and pronouns), function words in general, and core vocabulary items (like body parts and kinship terms) appear to be as borrowable as members of open sets, content words, and specialized vocabulary, respectively. These areal patterns force us to rethink previously held assumptions about the nature of lexical borrowing. Many of the data will be drawn from the Loanword Typology project currently underway at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology.