Travelling words and their lessons on the ‘Indianisation’ of Southeast Asia

The author’s research aims to cast a new light on the oft-neglected vernacular dimension of pre-modern contact between India and Southeast Asia. The nature of interaction between these two culturally diverse regions is reconstructed from historical linguistics, lexical borrowing and the distribution of biological, cultural and technological items designated by the ‘travelling’ loanwords under comparison. Doing so inevitably involves a departure from the traditional focus on the culture of the upper class, shaped by Sanskrit-speaking elites, towards a fuller appreciation of the roles played by sailors, merchants and craftsmen in the introduction of Indian concepts into Southeast Asia.

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Dealing with colonial paradigms

At present, the countries of Southeast Asia face substantial gaps of knowledge regarding their earliest history. Located between the powerhouses of China and India and demarcated by colonial-era borders, the region has obtained its conceptual validity due mostly to 20th-century geopolitical developments, although Southeast Asianists can rightfully defend the analytical legitimacy of their field by emphasizing shared cultural practices, agricultural systems, historical developments and contemporary transnational phenomena. As regards the pre-colonial situation, many scholars have called attention to Southeast Asia’s susceptibility to external influence, especially from India, as a feature defining the region’s pre-modern history. That being said, our understanding of the dynamics underlying the sociological process of ‘Indianisation’ – itself a controversial term – is still in its infancy. It is the aim of my research to demonstrate the contributions historical linguistics could make to it.

European understandings of Asian antiquity have served as strong advocacy tools to justify the ‘pacification’ of large parts of the continent. In India’s case, the subcontinent’s pre-Islamic civilisation stood on par with Graeco-Roman antiquity in the hierarchical taxonomies of colonial thought. It had not gone unnoticed that Cambodia, Java and other parts of Southeast Asia boasted a cultural substrate with Indian affinities, witnessed in Indic-derived epigraphy, religious practices, architecture and socio-political structures. Consequently, British, French and Dutch scholars – with Indian nationalists in their pursuit – have long perceived the lands and archipelagos east of the Gaṅgā River as little more than obscure outliers of the great Indian Civilisation, giving rise to such epithets as ‘Further India’, ‘Indochina’, ‘the East Indies’ and indeed ‘Indonesia’. Increased scholarly attention to Southeast Asia’s prehistory eventually shifted the discursive paradigm from ‘Greater India’ to ‘Indianisation’, until that concept, too, became untenable. Able to benefit from technological developments in identification and dating methods, a new generation of archaeologists have revealed ancient local traditions in Southeast Asian crop cultivation, arboriculture, maritime technology and copper metallurgy. These insights are gradually starting to facilitate a more balanced view of cultural contact across the Bay of Bengal.

Elite and vernacular transmissions

Lacking a purely indigenous written tradition, most descriptions of pre-modern Southeast Asia came from outsiders. The earliest written sources on the region mention kings, kingdoms and dynasties with Indian names. The impression to be gained from these textual accounts and other philological studies was that (Brahmanical) Hinduism and Sanskrit played a key role at the courts of Southeast Asia. This, in combination with temple excavations conducted by Europe’s prolific oriental institutes, firmly placed the traditional focus of research on the elite aspects of Indian culture. It was observed that this dispersal of ‘high’ culture was mirrored by the linguistic situation; the lexicons of Malay, Javanese and other Southeast Asian languages – especially the literary registers – display a profound Sanskrit influence in the semantic domains of architecture, political organisation, mythology, rites, art and scholarship. This led many scholars to believe that the transmission of Indian culture could not have been carried out by warriors *(kṣatriyas)* or merchants *(vaiśyas)*, leaving Brahmins as the most likely agents of ‘Indianisation’.

These insights, which administered the *coup de grâce* to the ‘Greater India’ narrative of eastward colonisation through military means, gave rise to new questions. Could not the process of ‘Indianisation’ have been initiated by Southeast Asians who visited India, rather than the other way around? Did Indian experts on religion, art and craftsmanship take the initiative to settle at the Southeast Asian courts, or were they invited by local rulers? On the one hand, Brahmins are widely believed to have maintained strong taboos against sea travel. On the other, Chinese and Sanskrit texts document them in high numbers at the ancient Southeast Asian courts, suggesting that actual practice considerably diverged from religious prescriptions. Recent archaeological research has further fine-tuned our understanding of pre-modern contact between India and Southeast Asia. The findings of Indian pottery, beads and other artefacts in a late first millennium BCE Southeast Asian context established beyond doubt that the introduction of ‘high’ culture was preceded by several centuries of vernacular or ‘low’ culture in the form of commercial contacts. While it was often assumed that the paucity, if not absence, of vernacular (i.e., non-Sanskrit) Indian loanwords in Southeast Asian languages disqualified merchants as the carriers of Indian culture, such linguistic inferences are problematic on various levels. Few scholars have seriously looked at the role of Middle Indo-Aryan and Dravidian languages and their possible impact on the speech communities of Southeast Asia. In the orientalist tradition, European scholars were rigorously trained in Sanskrit and Arabic, but knowledge of other languages remained incidental. It is not surprising, then, that vernacular influence was simply not detected.

This is where historical linguistics comes in. Knowledge of regular phonological innovations can reveal not only whether certain Indic loanwords belong to colloquial languages (‘Prakrits’) rather than Sanskrit, but also at which stage of language development they were transmitted into the recipient speech communities. My research calls attention to a large and previously overlooked quantity of Middle Indo-Aryan loanwords. The following well-known Malay words are among these tentative ‘Prakrit’ borrowings: *bəndahara* ‘treasurer’, *bəniaga* ‘to trade’, *biku* ‘Buddhist monk’, *cuka* ‘vinegar’, *labu* ‘gourd’, *pəlana* ‘saddle’, *puasa* ‘to fast’, *təlaga* ‘lake’, *təmbaga* ‘copper’ and *tiga* ‘three’. South Dravidian languages, especially Tamil, also played a role. Early Tamil loans into Malay include *cəməti* ‘whip’, *cəpu* ‘little box’, *kati* ‘a weight unit’, *panai* ‘earthen vessel’ and *pərisai* ‘shield’. In both cases, the words borrowed from vernacular languages (Tamil in Southeast Asia, although present in some medieval inscriptions, never obtained the literary prestige accorded to Sanskrit) tend to denote items related to trade, technology, plants, animals and other aspects of everyday life, marking a clear contrast to the more abstract concepts, scholarly terms and luxury loans for which people preferred to draw upon Sanskrit.

‘Indianisation’ versus ‘Malayisation’

With this new-found focus on vernacular agency and active Southeast Asian participation in the eastward exchange of commodities, we may also begin to revise cultural transmissions in the opposite direction. The spice trade remains the best known example of a large-scale transnational enterprise of chiefly westward directionality. Due to specific requirements in terms of soil, climate and harvesting methods, parts of Southeast Asia gained global importance through the export of cloves, nutmeg, pepper varieties, camphor and other aromatic resins. In addition, recent phylogenetic studies have confirmed a Southeast Asian origin of numerous widespread Indo-Pacific plant cultigens, including the banana tree, the areca palm, ginger, certain tubers, limes and various other types of fruits. Maritime archaeology, especially the study of early Southeast Asian shipwrecks, reveals not only that the Indonesian archipelago is home to one of the world’s oldest continuous seafaring traditions, but also that several of its ship-building techniques have spread westwards across the Indian Ocean World. The famous outrigger vessels rigged with spritsails, which can be found from East Africa and Sri Lanka to the remote Pacific, in all likelihood originate from insular Southeast Asia, as do the traditional lash-lugged plank-boats of the Maldives and South India. In fact, the advanced nautical skills that emerged in pre-modern Southeast Asia support a scenario in which local products and commodities were actively propagated into the Indian subcontinent and beyond.

The linguistic record strongly suggests that speakers of Malay played a key role in these interethnic transmissions. It has long been known that this language was instrumental in the dispersal of Indian and Middle Eastern loanwords across much of insular Southeast Asia; influence from Sanskrit, Arabic and other Indian Ocean languages spread as far as the Philippines, East Indonesia and even Madagascar through Malay-speaking intermediaries. Upon re-examining the available lexical data, we can discern similar patterns with words that travelled in the opposite direction. Several Southeast Asian commodities entered the Indian Ocean – and thence the rest of the world – under their Malay name. While many of Southeast Asia’s early kingdoms were Malay-speaking, the main reason for the transnational success of this language was its susceptibility to external influence. Up to this date, Malay both gives and takes vocabulary from languages in contact and is used as a *lingua franca* between people of various ethno-linguistic backgrounds. Examples of widespread Malay loanwords include *damar* ‘dammar (tree resin)’, *durian, jung* ‘junk (ship)’, *kakaktua* ‘cockatoo’, *kapur* ‘camphor’, *kəris* ‘kris (dagger)’, *limau* ‘lime (fruit)’, *nuri* ‘lory (parrot)’ and *sagu* ‘sago’. More research on the literary traditions of the Indian Ocean may help us to determine at which point in time these words started to travel outside the Malay World.

Re-appreciating Southeast Asia’s antiquity

The study of pre-colonial history and archaeology is gradually gaining ground in Southeast Asia. While ancient heritage has been used since independence to bolster nation-building and tourism, new developments in democratisation, stability, economic growth, political integration and travelling opportunities have provided Southeast Asians with an increased awareness of their shared regional history. This issue is starting to resonate in Southeast Asian academia, at the expense of the myopically nationalistic discourse that has shaped the thoughts of yesterday’s generation. More research on the pre-colonial situation and contacts with India will hopefully provide a solid footing to the region’s past and its position in global history. In doing so, the field of historical linguistics has the potential to provide important clues to cultural contact, especially when textual evidence is absent or chiefly preoccupied with the exploits of the elite. A study of vocabulary, after all, is one of the most efficient ways to learn what common people – all too often neglected in mainstream history – cultivated, ate, bought, sold, used and did in a pre-literate society.

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