

# Foreword

I first met John Wolff in the lobby of a Waikiki hotel during the 6th ICAL conference, in 1990. A Chinese specialist, I was impatient to present my theory of a genetic relationship between Chinese and Austronesian to real-life Austronesianists. I was going to talk the next day, my abstract was in the conference booklet. I had not circulated my paper. A man came to me, introduced himself as John Wolff, and said “you know, I am going to take issue with your paper tomorrow”. I replied that this was precisely what I was hoping for; that, not being an Austronesianist, I was hoping that criticism from specialists would either falsify the idea for good, or allow me to improve it. Then I added “and since you’re going to take issue with my paper... why not read it?”. There was a flicker of amusement in his eye. We agreed that I would leave a copy for him at the reception desk. The next day after reading the paper his only comment to me was that I was “cooking with gas”, meaning, I suppose, that he had not found any of the obvious methodological errors one expects to find in papers of that kind.

John Wolff, now an emeritus professor at Cornell University, has made the study of Austronesian languages the central interest of his life. After studying at Yale under Isidore Dyen and becoming an undisputed authority on Tagalog, Cebuano, Indonesian and Javanese, he has over the years offered a series of influential contributions to proto-Austronesian phonology, morphology and lexicon. This book, *Proto-Austronesian Phonology with Glossary*, is the first entirely devoted to the reconstruction of Proto-Austronesian phonology and lexicon since Dempwolff’s *Vergleichende Lautlehre des Austronesischen Wortschatzes* (1934-1938): it brings Wolff’s contributions together into a coherent system, adding a historical perspective which—I am gratified—arose out of the paper I left for him twenty years ago at the reception desk of that Waikiki hotel: one in which the Austronesian languages ultimately go back to a sister language of Proto-Sino-Tibetan spoken by a community of early rice and millet farmers in neolithic northern China.

We have before us a study of unprecedented proportions. Presentation of Wolff’s Proto-Austronesian phonology is continued by thirty-seven *chapters* detailing the evolution of the system—regularities and irregularities—into as many languages (Dempwolff’s eleven, plus twenty-six ‘new’ languages, including nearly all the Austronesian languages currently spoken in Taiwan; several known to him from personal fieldwork); this is followed by a Glossary of c. 2000 reconstructed etyma (about half of them assigned to a level above Malayo-Polynesian), with full supporting evidence, notes and cross-references to relevant sections in the Proto-Austronesian phonology chapter. The book ends with all the indexes, registers, and finder-lists the most exacting reader could wish for.

There are many uncertain aspects to Proto-Austronesian phonology and certainly no two linguists will agree on every part of its reconstruction. Wolff’s Proto-Austronesian consonant system is notable for its simplicity and symmetry. This he achieves by rejecting certain phonemic contrasts, like the distinction between \*C and \*t, treated as stress-conditioned variants. He reconstructs contrastive stress in Proto-Austronesian

based on stress-related facts in Philippine and Tsouic languages, although he admits that there are often inconsistencies between the two. This, at least, promises to be a controversial aspect of his reconstruction. What matters is the presentation by an experienced comparativist of a full set of interconnected, explicit hypotheses about Proto-Austronesian phonology, exemplified by a large number of cognate sets distributed over thirty-seven languages.

Treatment of phonological evolution into each language continues and makes explicit the tradition of study in each of the relevant geographical areas, while going into much finer detail than the simplified phoneme correspondence tables that can be found in the literature: Wolff identifies new sub-regularities, and exceptions to them. For instance, after stating the generally admitted fact that his Proto-Austronesian \*ɣ (the phoneme conventionally identified as \*R) normally goes to /r/ in Puyuma, he notes that final \*ɣ becomes /n/ if there had been an \*l or \*n in the word. This regularizes forms like *vanin* ‘board’, *padamanan* ‘dawn’, *vaʃinun* ‘egg’ and *unan* ‘snake’.

Wolff assembles cognate sets based on the sound correspondences he has identified, also taking into account certain general processes, morphological or phonological, that interfere with regular phonological development, generating lexical doublets.

Recognition and characterization of these processes allows him to unify forms that would otherwise be treated as independent. One of these is nasal substitution of the initial consonant in Formosan languages, for instance his Proto-Austronesian \*taya ‘wait’ includes both Pazeh *taxa* and Atayal *naya*?. Another is unstressed vowel weakening and syllable loss in trisyllables: ‘gall’ is reflected as *apdo* in Tagalog, with syncope of the penultimate vowel, but as *peru* in Tondano, where the first syllable was lost. Wolff is surely on the right track there.

More than others Wolff pays attention to processes outside of neogrammarian mechanisms, like contamination: although his \*ayak ‘lead by the hand’ evolves regularly to Bunun *alak*, he claims the meaning of the Bunun form: ‘bring with’, has received semantic contamination from \*alap ‘take’. Another kind of contamination accounts for phonological irregularities: thus some of the reflexes of his \*betihec ‘calf’ (of leg) unexpectedly reflect \*i in the first syllable due, in his view, to contamination from a word for ‘shin wrestling’. Although the details in each case are open to discussion, Wolff is right to systematically seek explanations for irregular and unexpected developments rather than to limit cognate sets to their mechanically regular core.

The Glossary is a trove of new cognate sets: I particularly like \*aci ‘cooking fire’, which explains Malay *nasi* ‘cooked rice’ by connecting it to a Puyuma word for ‘fire’. More sets are expanded or raised to a higher level: Wolff found persuasive cognates to Dempwolff’s \*bağah ‘inform’ in eight Formosan languages (see under \*bagaq). His Glossary will be a major source of information to those interested in the evolution of the AN lexicon.

Phylogeny matters for reconstruction. Wolff explicitly accepts my numeral-based Austronesian subgrouping, where the West Formosan languages branch off before the East Formosan languages and Malayo-Polynesian belongs in a relatively low-order East Formosan subgroup. This is in contrast to Blust’s subgrouping, where the Malayo-Polynesian languages are treated as a primary branch of the family, on the same level as nine primary branches spoken exclusively in Taiwan. Thus, Wolff relies less on Malayo-

Polynesian evidence than does Blust in reconstructing Proto-Austronesian. As an example, consider the word ‘ear’. Dempwolff gave \*taliŋa based on Malayo-Polynesian evidence. Corresponding forms are found in Formosa: accordingly, Blust raised Dempwolff’s reconstruction to Proto-Austronesian, as \*Caliŋa (200 list). But there are also in Taiwan forms where the last two syllable onsets occur in the reverse order, for instance Pazeh *sajira* ‘ear’. Based on these forms, Wolff reconstructs the Proto-Austronesian word for ‘ear’ as \*taŋila. He does so because even though \*taŋila is not reflected in any Malayo-Polynesian language, it is in several Formosan languages including Pazeh, one of the earliest-branching languages. Wolff’s interpretation further suggests a motivation for the metathesis: reversing the onsets of the penult and the final syllable in \*taŋila aligns the word with other terms for paired or plural things with infix -al-, like \*d-al-apa ‘palms’, \*d-al-ukap ‘soles’, \*b-al-aŋa ‘pots’.

The great paucity of monosyllabic content words in Proto-Austronesian is noteworthy. At the same time, many Proto-Austronesian words appear to have a meaning-associated final syllable (a “root”), even though their initial syllable(s) are not readily analyzable. Wolff’s treatment will, I believe, move the field forward. He argues that, far from being sound-symbolic strings of the kind of *gl-* in *gloom*, *glow*, *gleam* etc., Austronesian “roots” are the lost monosyllables of Proto-Austronesian: he identifies several processes which turned Proto-Austronesian monosyllables into disyllables: adding a prothetic vowel, “stretching” the nucleus (that is, gemminating the vowel and optionally inserting a glottal stop in the middle it, e.g. \*taq > \*taʔaq), reduplicating the root, and petrifying an affixed form. There may be others. The recognition of An roots as monosyllabic *morphemes* will be of the highest significance in establishing the outer connexions of Austronesian.

Wolff’s *Proto-Austronesian Phonology* presents us with a detailed picture of the evolution of the Austronesian family in the past five millennia. It is a complex, economically-written book with many new explicitly-formulated hypotheses on phonology, morphology and the lexicon. Whether these hypotheses become part of the mainstream, as some undoubtedly will, or end up being falsified, most will inevitably fuel discussion, pushing the field forward. *Proto-Austronesian Phonology* is a major contribution to the enterprise of discovering the history of the Austronesians and their place in the linguistic landscape of East Asia.

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