

The distribution of velar gaps, and Southeast Asia

Many authors have pointed out that the absence of /g/ in the phoneme inventory of a language that otherwise has both velar stops and voiced stops has an explanation in terms of the physical limits on voicing given the small oral cavity imposed by a velar closure (eg., Javkin 1977, Ohala and Riordan 1979, Ohala 1983, 1995). As a result of this phonetically natural explanation, the presence of a velar gap is assumed to have a universal, rather than language-specific, explanation.

This paper argues that the global occurrence of velar gaps is relatively uncommon, and that missing-g languages appear in strong areal clusters, contra Maddieson (2005). We focus on Southeast Asia, a region frequently identified as being a linguistic area (in the sense of, eg., Emeneau 1980; see Enfield 2003). This area is identified as having an areal concentration of velar gaps (Maddieson 2005), and with a more detailed survey we see evidence that a previously larger linguistic area defined by this feature (among others) in the mid-Holocene, an area which was split by the spread of Austronesian languages in what is now western Indonesia.

The data argues strongly against an Evolutionary approach to phonology (Blevins 2004), suggesting that system-symmetries (or their lack) in the phonology of a language play a strong, albeit violable, role in shaping the diachrony of that language and its neighbours, and that a phonetic explanation is inadequate in light of the clear areality, and thus socially-conditioned, distribution of the feature.

References

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