

Some remarks on the Ruc language¹

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The Ruc language is spoken by a small population settled in the mountain jungles in Central Vietnam. The Vietnamese found these people in the middle of this century. There were only two hundred of them. Now there are supposedly only one hundred and twenty of them left. These people mostly live by hunting and food gathering. For hunting they use wooden arrows, sometimes poisoned to kill big animals. They do not plough, but know the most primitive kind of agriculture. They burn out a piece of land and with sharpened sticks make holes in the soil in which they put some sorts of seeds. They use this piece of land only once in the year and then move to another place. That is why a field used this way becomes a sort of measure for time. An informant translated the sentence "My son is seven years old" as "My son has seven fields." One can say that these people measure space with time like all other people and measure time with space notion (a field corresponds to one year).

The Ruc language was investigated by the joint Russian-Vietnamese linguistic expedition in 1986. A book on this language is ready for print in Moscow now. Our Vietnamese colleagues have recently published a shortened variant of the description of this language. This description is also based on the materials of our joint expedition.

The Ruc language obviously is one of the Austroasiatic languages and within this language family most probably belongs to the Viet-Muong group.

We know very little about the contacts of this language with other languages. But one can assume that such contacts took place in different (sometimes probably very ancient) periods. We find in this language some elements common with certain elements of other languages. For example, in Ruc there is a classifier *kɛ⁴* which is used with nouns denoting all things excluding animated beings. This classifier resembles the Chinese universal classifier *ge^o* and the Vietnamese *cái*.

Ruc, being a Viet-Muong language, should be regarded as belonging to a huge language union (Sprachbund) of the languages of East and Southeast Asia, including Sino-Tibetan and most languages of the Far East. The main characteristics of this Sprachbund are: typological similarity, common ways of development and crossloans. I have spoken above about the genetic relation of Ruc.

¹ This paper is completely based on field materials of the joint Russian-Vietnamese linguistic expedition. This is why there are no references.

Like all languages belonging to this Sprachbund, Ruc used to have in ancient times an old morphology which in some respects reminds us of an inflexional morphology (one of the works of B. Karlgren, dedicated to Ancient Chinese was called—*Lange Chinoise—langue flexionelle*). Most of the languages of this region have lost this old morphology, some of them almost completely (Chinese, Vietnamese).

Some of East and Southeast Asian languages retain remnants of it. The Ruc language contains elements of old morphology which continue to function though on a limited scale. From the point of preserving the old morphology, Ruc is approximately in the same situation as the Taoih, Ksingmul, Ma, Katu and some other Southeast Asian languages.

We can state that in Ruc there are two subsystems of morphology (to say wider—of grammar): an old one and a new one. This is a very important feature of the Ruc language. Without taking into account this fact, it is not easy to understand and to explain many other facts of this language.

The Ruc language, as one can judge by the materials, preserves many ancient features. It contains probably more two-syllable roots than the other languages roots which in other languages became monosyllabic.

According to field data of the above-mentioned expedition in Ruc and the limits of material observed, there are 84% simple words and 16% compounds. Among simple words the greater part consists of disyllabic words. Monosyllabic words are a minority. On the whole, in Ruc about 50% are simple words, and corresponding morphemes can be estimated to be disyllabic.

The considerable number of disyllabic simple words (morphemes or roots) is evidence of the ancient character of this language. As it is known now, in ancient times the roots in East and Southeast Asian languages were disyllabic and only later became mostly monosyllabic. In Ruc one still can observe the process of monosyllabization. Usually the disyllabic (bisyllabic) unit loses the first syllable which is as a rule a weak syllable (a presyllable).

There are different ways of monosyllabization. One can trace the following chain: the vowel in a presyllable is reduced, instead of the presyllable there appears a consonant cluster and then the first consonant of a cluster is dropped. For example: *kulɛ¹ ~ glɛ¹ ~ lɛ¹* 'the chopsticks'. Very often all three forms of a word exist in a language and can substitute for each other in some patterns of constructions. They are variants of one and the same word (corresponding morpheme or root).

The high level of variation in Ruc is due to the changes which took place in this language. The system of the language looks unstable.

Monosyllabization can take place in a language only at such a stage of its development when a language does not need a lot of new words. Monosyllabic words (roots), if they remain monosyllabic, make poor bases for creation of new words. In the realm of monosyllables new words can be created by: a) semantic derivation, b) tone and sound change and c) adding to a syllable a consonant affix.

That is why monosyllabization in such languages as Chinese and Vietnamese took place several thousand years ago. Now these languages have mainly (but not completely) monosyllabic roots (morphemes), but an obvious majority of disyllabic words.

The need for new words forces the languages to create a lot of compound (complex) words to express new notions and ideas. Compound words appear in great quantity, usually if a language does not have many wordbuilding affixes. The language becomes on its word level polysyllabic.

In Ruc, along with monosyllabization, one can already observe the appearance of disyllabic words, partly by its own wordbuilding processes, and partly by borrowing words mainly from Vietnamese, but also from other Southeast Asian languages.

It is important to point out that the loan words, which for example in Vietnamese are etymologically transparent in many cases, can not be etymologized in Ruc. At least informants mainly refused to tell the meaning of the components of compound-loanwords. So the loan compounds in Ruc—just as in other Southeast Asian languages—become simple disyllabic words which can not be analysed based on their components. They do not have components any more.

I have mentioned that Ruc has two morphological subsystems. As for the one, it is represented in modern Ruc mainly by categories of causation and by dative forms. The prefix of causation is *pa-*. We also meet another prefix *a-*, which probably is an allomorph of *pa-* with a reduced [p].

The dative form which still functions in Ruc is expressed by prefix *pa-*, which is an homonym of a causative *pa-*. In old morphology we do not have plural forms, aspect-tense forms and forms of other categories. It is obvious that the old morphology still preserved in Ruc is a dying one.

Theoretically, it is possible for a language to have no morphology but only syntax. (By the way, one can say that a language can have more or less morphology, but it is impossible to say that it has more or less syntax). Practically, no language can get along without morphology. That is why upon losing one morphological system a language starts to develop a new morphology.

So it has happened in Ruc like in many other Southeast Asian languages. The new morphology typologically is common with the new morphology of other East and Southeast Asian languages. Its elements are etymologically quite transparent. But we do not know the etymology of prefixes *pa-* and *a-* (causative) and of prefix *pa-* (dative), but we know pretty well that the marker of causation in the new morphology *mun*² comes from the verb with a meaning 'to make, to do' the dative marker in the new morphology takes its origin from the verb *kəcə^l- cə^l* 'to give'. In the new morphology we find special forms for plural and passive.

In conclusion, I would like to note that the Ruc language, as many other East and Southeast Asian languages, demonstrates the change of morphological systems. The East and Southeast Asian region is a unique place where investigators can actually see the processes of fundamental changes in a language.

The scholars can observe how an old morphology passes away and a new one steps into its place.

I believe that the study of such a language as Ruc, and others similar to it, will bring us new knowledge about language change and progress.

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