

The 4 registers of Pearic.

G rard Diffloth
Independent Researcher,
Former Member of EFEO
Austro-Asiatic Languages

Pearic is a branch of Austro-Asiatic ("AA") on the verge of extinction, spoken in Cambodia and in a small adjacent area of Thailand.

The vowels of most Pearic languages display four phonation-types (voice-registers) in phonological contrast. This phenomenon, perhaps unique in the world, requires historical accounting.

The four registers of Pearic are analyzed as the combination of two independent laryngeal features of the vocalic space: (+/-) Breathy phonation, and (+/-) Constricted phonation.

The laryngeal feature of Breathiness is the result of a historical merger affecting the voicing feature of initial consonants, a well-attested development in AA languages and beyond.

On the other hand, the laryngeal feature of Constriction remains unexplained. In a total of 7,000 comparative Pearic vocabulary sets, Constricted vowels are found in about 32% of non-borrowed vocabulary, including many well-documented AA etyma.

In a few cases, we can see that an older glottal stop consonant of a word-onset has lost its segmental status and become the [+ Constricted] laryngeal feature of the vowel. Some other cases of Constricted vowels appear to accompany certain derivational infixes.

But most cases of laryngeal constriction indicate that they were present in Proto-Pearic, and this would require a comparison with the rest of AA. However, the place of Pearic in the AA family has remained undecided.

Contrary to previous claims, and against what the geographic distribution of Pearic languages suggests, we propose here that the Pearic branch belongs historically to the Northern Division of AA, i.e. with languages spoken in N.E. India, Yunnan, N.E. Burma, N. Laos and N. Thailand.

This proposal sheds light on several cases of agreement between Pearic items with constricted vowels, and the glottal features of cognates found in the little known language Iduh (also called Odu, or Thai Hat), of the Khmuic branch, Northern Division of AA.

But even then, many more Pearic cases remain unaccounted for; and since laryngeal constriction is found, either in the vowels or in the rimes of six branches of AA (Pearic, Khmuic, Vietic, Katuic, Bahnaric, S. Munda), this laryngeal feature may well go back to Proto-AA, as I have suggested many years ago.