

# BIBLIOGRAPHICA

## A bibliographical guide to Aslian linguistics

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### 1. Introduction

The Aslian subgroup of Mon-Khmer is spoken by several minority groups in the Malay Peninsula, together numbering some 60,000 speakers. Aslian is further divided into three separate subbranches—Northern, Central and Southern Aslian, the latter two of which are spoken entirely within the borders of Peninsular Malaysia, whereas some Northern Aslian languages are also spoken in southernmost Thailand. Although anthropological work on speakers of Aslian has been voluminous, only a handful of linguists have felt prompted to carry out research on Aslian languages *per se*. Leaving the vast anthropological literature aside for the moment, this article is an attempt at summarising work done in the field of linguistics proper. It does not claim to be completely exhaustive, nor is it likely to be entirely up-to-date, but it is hoped that it will give a reasonably comprehensive picture of what has been, and is being, done within this area of Mon-Khmer studies<sup>1</sup>.

### 2. General

The term Aslian (from Malay *Orang Asli*, ‘aboriginal people’) as a generic designation of the group of Mon-Khmer languages spoken in the Malay Peninsula was first coined by Gérard Diffloth and later introduced in print by Diffloth (1974) and Benjamin (1976a). The three subbranches were labelled Jahaic, Senoic and Semelaic by Diffloth, though the alternative, geographical terms proposed by Benjamin—Northern, Central and Southern respectively—have gained wider acceptance. In the present article, the terminology and spelling of individual languages follow Benjamin (1997a:7).

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One of the first to recognize that several of the minority languages in the Malay Peninsula were related to Mon-Khmer was Schmidt (1901, 1903), who made a detailed classification of Aslian based on vocabulary. This was followed by a refined classification by Blagden (1906b), based not only on vocabulary but also on phonological features. Other classifications include those of Pinnow (1959:4-5) and Voegelin and Voegelin (1966), both relying heavily on earlier work.

In recent decades, two scholars have been particularly active within the field of Aslian studies: Geoffrey Benjamin and Gérard Diffloth. Benjamin, a linguistically trained anthropologist, made an extensive collection of lexical samples based on the Swadesh list from a large number of Aslian languages, and, using lexicostatistical methods, he put forward a tentative genetic classification of Aslian and its subbranches (Benjamin 1976a:37-81) and advanced a historical interpretation of the linguistic data (Benjamin 1976a:81-94). Apart from his work on Central Aslian Temiar (see below), Benjamin has also produced several recent papers on general aspects of Aslian (e.g. Benjamin 1997a, 1997b:10-20, 1997c). Furthermore, he has been very active in accentuating the need for urgent scientific attention to several topics of Aslian linguistics (see e.g. Benjamin 1989:20-23), and he is the author of a guide to the pronunciation and transcription of Aslian languages for anthropologists and other non-linguists working among speakers of Aslian (Benjamin 1985a, 1985b).

Diffloth, who conducted extensive linguistic fieldwork among speakers of Central Aslian Semai and Jah Hut, Northern Aslian Chewong and Southern Aslian Semelai in the 1960's and 1970's (see below), made a detailed genetic classification of the Aslian languages on the basis of comparative phonology (Diffloth 1968, 1975a, 1977, 1979), the results of which are in accordance with those produced in Benjamin's lexicostatistical study. Diffloth's general work on Aslian also includes a study of numerals (Diffloth 1976d).

One of the most thorough attempts to summarise what is known about the Aslian languages is a hitherto unpublished chapter by Matisoff (to appear), intended for a Cambridge University Press volume entitled *Languages of Mainland Southeast Asia*. Drawing on the works of Asmah, Benjamin, Diffloth and others, Matisoff gives an in-depth account of the phonological, morphosyntactical, semantic and lexical characteristics of Aslian, paying special attention to those features that are regarded as peculiar to this branch of Mon-Khmer, notably its unusually rich morphology.

Another general work worth mentioning is Adams's 1989 study of numeral classifiers in the Austroasiatic language family, in which Aslian data form a central part.

As far as previous bibliographies are concerned, a rather aged list of works on Peninsular Mon-Khmer can be found in Shorto, Jacob and Simmonds (1963:30-32). This was compiled before Benjamin and Diffloth took to the field and therefore obviously lacks references to the more modern developments in Aslian linguistics. More recent bibliographies include those of Parkin (1991:152-59) and Bishop and Peterson (1995), and quite a few references to work on Aslian appear in Huffman (1986).

### 3. Northern Aslian

The Northern Aslian languages are spoken in the interior of northern Peninsular Malaysia (parts of Kedah, Perak, Kelantan, Pahang and Trengganu) and across the border into southern Thailand. The group has three subdivisions: a western one containing the closely related Kensiu and Kentaq languages, as well as two varieties spoken exclusively in Thailand (Tonga' and Mos); an eastern one, including Jahai, Mendriq and varieties of Batek, which together form a continuum of dialects; and the southerly outlier Chewong (Benjamin 1997a:5-8).

Northern Aslian languages attracted quite a lot of attention in the 1800's and early 1900's, and several vocabularies were collected. For instance, see Crawford (1820:125-91), Hewett (1880) and Swettenham (1880) for Kentaq; Evans (1915) for various dialects; Evans (1927:8-12) for Tonga'; Miklucho-Maclay (1878) and Savage (1926) for Jahai/Mendriq/Batek; and Ogilvie (1949) for Chewong. Later collections include Carey (1970) for Mendriq. The first grammatical description of a Northern Aslian language was that of Schebesta (1928), who gave a brief overview of phonology and parts of speech in Jahai. Schebesta (1928:805) suggested the presence of tones in Jahai, which is interesting because Aslian languages are not normally considered to be tonal (Benjamin 1997a:15). Another notable feature is the use of role or case markers when the basic word order is shifted (Schebesta 1928:812-16), a phenomenon also noted by Benjamin (1983/1996:25-29) for Temiar and by Diffloth (1976a:92-93) for Jah Hut, two languages that belong to the Central Aslian subbranch.

Perhaps the most comprehensive work to have been carried out on a Northern Aslian language is Asmah Haji Omar's study of Kentaq (Asmah 1964), although only a short essay based on parts of this work has been published (Asmah 1976). This deals exclusively with the Kentaq verb, the morphology of which is characterised by affixation of various markers signalling aspect (desiderative, perfective and imperfective) and causative. More recently, several scholars working on the Thai side of the border have produced a fair amount of work on various aspects of the closely related Kensiu dialect. For instance, accounts of Kensiu phonology are to be found in Bauer (1991, 1992a, 1992b), Bishop (1992a, 1992b, 1996a) and Phaiboon (1984). The latter treats Kensiu as tonal, which is rejected by Benjamin (1997a:15). Vocabulary is treated in e.g. Bishop (1996b) and Bishop and Peterson (1993a, 1994b), and Peterson (1993) specifically describes the use of spatial locatives.

Other studies include that of Wazir (1996:9-13), who discusses the threatened status of several Northern Aslian languages; Hajek (1996), who dismisses claims in the Ethnologue database that there are speakers of Northern Aslian 'Lowland Semang' in the Riau archipelago, Indonesia (the now-extinct 'Lowland Semang' or Bila language was spoken on the coast opposite Penang, Malaysia, until the beginning of the 19th century and is also dealt with in Benjamin 1983); and the present writer, who is currently making a typological survey (so far unpublished) of Northern Aslian dialects spoken in northern Perak, Peninsular Malaysia, notably Jahai (Burenhult 1998). Also, Diffloth has studied Chewong in the field, but this work remains unpublished.

#### 4. Central Aslian

The Central subbranch of Aslian is spoken in the interior of western Peninsular Malaysia, embracing portions of Perak, Kelantan, Pahang and Selangor. It includes at least four major languages: Lanoh (which contains several distinct dialects or languages), Temiar, Semai and Jah Hut. However, the status of the latter as a Central Aslian language is uncertain, and it has been suggested by Diffloth that it may form an independent, fourth branch of Aslian (Benjamin 1997a:6, 7).

As with Northern Aslian, Central Aslian languages received some attention in the late 1800's and early 1900's. Early descriptions include that of Clifford (1891), and for vocabularies, see e.g. Daly (1880) for Lanoh; Errington de la Croix (1882:327-29) and Adams (1922) for Temiar; Wilkinson (1915) for Semai; and Morgan (1885) for Lanoh, Temiar and Semai. Schebesta (1931) provided a short description of the grammar of the so-called Ple-Temer language. On the basis of this description, Benjamin (1997a:13) states that this language is notably different from Temiar proper, and, failing to find evidence for it in the field, he suggests that it is an extinct intermediate dialect between Temiar and Lanoh. Schebesta's account treats the different parts of speech in Ple-Temer, and includes among other things notes on the use of case-like particles and the nominalisation of verbs by means of infixation.

Three languages of the Central subbranch of Aslian have been subjects of scholarly attention in recent years. Temiar has been studied by Carey (1961) and Benjamin (1976b, 1983/1996, 1993:104, 136-39), whereas Diffloth has produced several articles on Semai (see e.g. Diffloth 1968, 1972, 1974, 1976c, 1977). The latter has also made a detailed description of Jah Hut (Diffloth 1975b, 1976a). Benjamin's 1976b study involves a comprehensive account of Temiar grammar, including among other things a description of its very rich and productive verbal morphology. His unpublished essay *The anthropology of grammar: Self and Other in Temiar* (Benjamin 1983/1996) is an extension and partly a revision of this study, involving an attempt at explaining significant features of Temiar grammar in light of a cultural notion of a Self/Other distinction present in the Temiar-speaking society. Benjamin claims that this distinction is manifested through sound symbolism (or phonetic iconicity) in a large number of linguistic forms, including e.g. deictic categories like pronouns and demonstratives, verbal affixes signalling voice, modal particles, role-marking particles as well as number affixes on human nouns. Self-associated forms are shown to display sounds that can be characterised as 'front' and 'closed', whereas Other-associated forms are phonetically open. Hence, Benjamin argues that sound symbolism based on a cultural notion imbues the whole Temiar grammatical system and links together seemingly disparate areas of grammar.

Morphological data from Benjamin's 1976b description of Temiar grammar play an important role in McCarthy's presentation of his prosodic model of morphology (McCarthy 1982:208-21) and also in Broselow and McCarthy's theory of internal reduplication (Broselow and McCarthy 1983:38-43), further elaborated in Ter Mors (1984:279-95). This secondary discussion has also found its way into the linguistic textbooks and is cited and evaluated in e.g. Spencer (1991:51, 55), Anderson (1992:60-61) and Carstairs-McCarthy (1992:84-85). Furthermore, material from Benjamin (1976b) features in the global survey of morphosyntactic patterns presented by Nichols (1992:85, 296-97). This analysis suggests that Temiar

is an essentially double-marking language of moderate morphological complexity, showing an accusative alignment pattern.

Diffloth's work on Semai covers various linguistic domains, although much of the literature deals with historical phonology and the reconstruction of Proto-Semai (Diffloth 1968, 1977). Diffloth (1972) discusses the ambiguity of certain Semai morphemes, and his 1974 paper describes how transitive sentences involving body movement behave differently from other transitives with regard to word order shift. Subjects of transitive sentences referring to body movements, as opposed to those of other transitive sentences, cannot be moved to post-verbal position, and this is explained by the Self-orientated nature of body moves. Diffloth thus highlights iconic processes similar to those discussed by Benjamin (see above) but this time affecting syntax.

Diffloth (1976a) provides a thorough description of Jah Hut that includes discussions on its genetic affiliation based on phonological characteristics, phonology in general, morphology and syntax. The syntactic section contains among other things an account of expressives (see also Diffloth 1976c for a description of expressives in Semai) and also a discussion on the distribution of the agentive particle which suggests the presence of an unusual type of ergativity in Jah Hut. Jah Hut is also described in Diffloth (1975b).

## 5. Southern Aslian

The Southern Aslian subbranch is found in two separate areas of Peninsular Malaysia. Three of the four languages—Semaq Beri, Semelai and Temoq—are spoken in a continuous area stretching through much of central Pahang and adjacent parts of Trengganu and Negri Sembilan, whereas Besis (or Mah Meri) is spoken in the coastal parts of southern Selangor. Scholarly work specifically devoted to Southern Aslian has been markedly scanty compared to that of Northern and Central Aslian. Early descriptions are rare and include notes on Temoq (Collings 1949a) and Semelai (Collings 1949b: notes 2-5). Diffloth's fieldwork on Semelai remains unpublished. A short description of Semaq Beri is to be found in Nik Safiah (1978) and Nik Safiah and Ton (1979), and, more recently, Nicole Kruspe of the University of Melbourne has conducted fieldwork among speakers of Semelai for her doctoral dissertation *A grammar of Semelai* (so far unpublished) (Benjamin 1997a:13; Kruspe to appear).

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