The Internal Relationships of the Plains Languages
Paul Li
Academia Sinica

The plains languages (pepo平埔族 in Taiwanese) include Taokas, Papora, Babuza, Hoanya, Pazih, Thao, Siraya, Basay & Kavalan, which are mostly extinct except Pazih, Thao and Kavalan. More careful work needs to be done on the three extant languages, Pazih, Thao and Kavalan, and three extinct languages, Siraya, Favorlang (dialect of Babuza), and Basay, for which there are some written documents. Extremely limited data (only short wordlists) are available for all the rest. The three extant languages are on the verge of extinction.

The internal relationships of six western plains languages are examined and shown, as based on phonological and lexical evidence. They are: Taokas, Babuza, Papora, Hoanya, Pazih, and Thao. The first four, which were spoken in the coastal areas, have long become extinct, while the last two, which were spoken inland, have survived with a few older speakers. The four coastal languages share four phonological innovations: (1) loss of *k, (2) loss of *-y, (3) merger of *s and *t in non-final position, and (4) complete merger of *N and *n. Thao shares two phonological innovations with these four languages: (1) merger of *N and *n, and (2) merger of *s and *t. But there is scanty lexical evidence for a close relationship between Thao and these four languages. Pazih is even more distantly related to all the other five languages, as based on both phonological and lexical evidence. A map shows how the Proto-Northwestern language group splits into several languages successively and dispersed in different stages.

Both phonological and lexical evidence is examined to show the internal relationships of four ethnic groups in “East” Formosa: Basay, Kavalan, Amis, and Siraya. The merger of *j and *n defines the entire “East Formosan” group, as it is found nowhere else. Two phonological innovations, (1) merger of *j, *n, and *N as n and (2) split of *k into k and q before *a, are exclusively shared by Basay and Kavalan. Shared innovations are also found in the sporadic changes in a few lexical items in these two languages. However, linguistic evidence for a close relationship between Amis and Siraya is much weaker. A map shows how the Proto-East-Formosan group splits into four languages successively and dispersed in different stages.