

New approaches to contact issues in the subgrouping of Austronesian linguistic relations

Traditional approaches to Austronesian subgrouping sometimes assume a strictly hierarchical family-tree model with hard divisions between subgroups taking place at nodes in the tree and with the innovations defining those subgroups inherited from a discrete proto-language. In pursuing such a model of linguistic relations, some proposals tend to conflate truly inherited innovations with innovations that spread through contact and diffusion within complex networks of dialects and languages. The result is the large higher-order subgroups of the classical model often defined by weak, lexical innovations that may be better explained as arising through some means other than inheritance.

In light of these issues, this panel organizes a group of presenters whose research touches on these pressing issues in Austronesian comparative linguistics. We discuss challenges to the classical bifurcation model and propose alternative explanations for linguistic similarities in a series of presentations addressing both higher and lower-order subgroups. As a result, we hope to spur fruitful discussion on contact issues in subgrouping and chart a path forward for the field of Austronesian comparative linguistics.

Our panel begins with a presentation from Owen Edwards which discusses how contact with non-Austronesian languages may have motivated innovations in prenasalization in eastern Indonesian and Timor-Leste. Next, Emily Gasser presents on the history of the Yapen languages, and raises questions about the utility of a traditional family tree model in cases of intense and long-standing multi-family contact. Victoria Chen and colleagues present on the Proto-Philippines debate, and provide analyses of multiple forms of evidence supporting the reanalysis of the Philippine subgroup as a zone of contact and complex horizontal linguistic relations. Finally, Alexander D. Smith argues that the distributions of native-like lexical innovations across Malayo-Polynesian suggests diffusion through late-stage dialect networks, not inheritance, as an explanation for what are traditionally modeled as major first-order subgroups.

Panel Title: 12 words

Panel Abstract: 298 words

The development of prenasalisation in eastern Indonesian and Timor-Leste

Owen Edwards

A number of Austronesian subgroups in eastern Indonesia and Timor-Leste have prenasalized plosives (e.g. /mb/, /nd/, /ŋg/) or provide evidence for them at an earlier stage. With few exceptions, words with prenasalised segments cannot be traced back to Proto-Malayo-Polynesian etyma and cannot be attributed to subgroup-internal sound changes. I examine prenasalisation in three subgroups of Malayo-Polynesian: SUMBA (based on data in Onvlee 1984), ROTE-METO (based on data in Edwards 2021), and ARU (based on data in Nivens 2017).

With limited exceptions, words with prenasalised plosives in each subgroup are not cognate with one another and thus point to independent acquisition in each case. I propose that this was due to contact with prehistoric, now extinct, languages (or language families) with prenasalisation. This indicates multiple contact events in the Austronesian dispersal with several unrelated non-Austronesian languages (or language families). This talk highlights the importance of contact in the prehistory of Austronesian, as well as the need to examine *all* data in historical work—not just data which is cognate with related languages.

References

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Presentation Title: 9 words

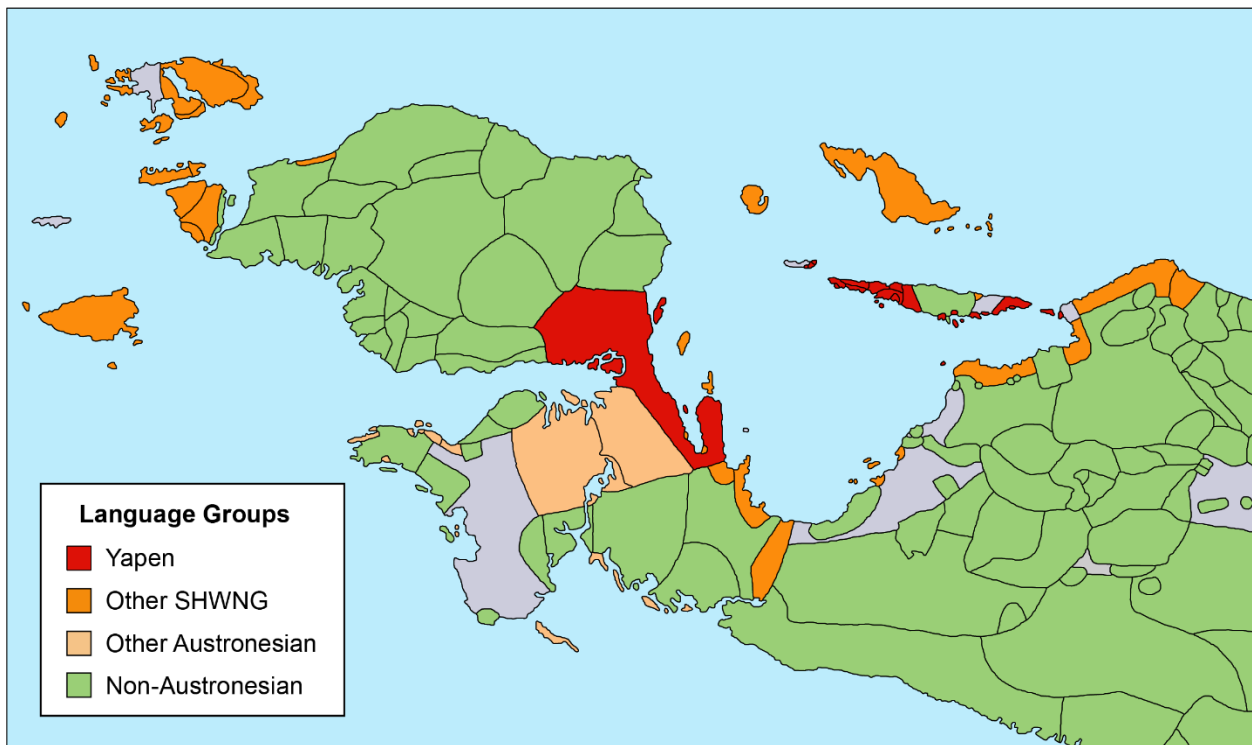
Presentation Abstract: 171 words

Contact, inheritance, and the lexicon of Proto-Yapen

Emily Gasser

The South Halmahera-West New Guinea (SHWNG) subgroup sits at a key juncture in the family tree, at the inflection point between the western languages of insular Southeast Asia and the Oceanic languages of the Pacific. However, its relationship with Oceanic is currently being reevaluated, and much of its internal structure remains unresolved.

This study focuses on the Yapen sub-branch of SHWNG. SHWNG retains only very little Proto-Malayo-Polynesian lexicon, and has been subject to intense inter- and intra-family contact for the last ~3500 years (c.f. Arnold & Gasser to appear, Gasser 2019, Kamholz 2014, *inter alia*). The Yapen languages are no exception (see Gasser 2019). Northwest New Guinea, where the Yapen languages are spoken, is home to (at least) four Austronesian subgroups and roughly 17 Papuan families and isolates (see Map 1), with a rich history of trade, warfare, intermarriage, and all the expected linguistic consequences thereof. This has produced a Gordian knot of relationships to be untangled if the internal subgrouping of SHWNG is to be worked out.



Map 1: The languages of Northwest New Guinea and classifications.

Following Edwards' (2023) methodology, I compare the reconstructable lexicon of Proto-Yapen to several regional spheres to reveal likely sources and strata within the vocabulary, and the historical relationships they imply. Those lexical items which were not inherited must have been borrowed, derived, or coined; derived items are generally identifiable and purely *de novo* coinage is exceedingly rare, leaving borrowing as the source of most new vocabulary. Leaving

aside PMP reflexes, I look at words found locally on Yapen Island, across families in NW New Guinea, and across Wallacea more broadly. These results help to reveal the history of the Yapen languages, and raise broader questions about the utility of a traditional family tree model in cases of intense and long-standing multi-family contact.

References

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Presentation Title: 7 words

Presentation Abstract: 300 words

Proto-Philippines: Facts and fictions revisited

Victoria Chen, Kristina Gallego, Jonathan Kuo, Isaac Stead, and Benjamin van der Voorn
(authors listed in alphabetical order)

An outstanding question in Austronesian higher-order subgrouping concerns the linguistic position of Philippine languages. Due to a lack of attention to comparative evidence beyond lexical innovations, it remains unsettled whether these languages diversified from a shared single ancestor excluding all Malayo-Polynesian (MP) languages outside the Philippines or constitute multiple primary branches of MP. In this talk, we present three lines of new evidence countering previous arguments for Proto-Philippines (PPh) (Blust 2019 et seq.; Zorc 1986, 2020). First, we highlight the absence of PMP *d/z merger in Central Luzon languages as well as the Minahasan languages of northern Sulawesi, which undermines the sole phonological innovation defining PPh. We then examine the semantic categories of PPh-defining lexical items and their geographical distribution, demonstrating that both suggest a high likelihood of borrowing rather than inheritance. Finally, we explore an understudied variation in Circumstantial Voice morphology in Philippine languages, showing new evidence for multiple layers of borrowings across Philippine subgroups. We conclude that the high number of lexical innovations previously proposed as evidence for PPh is better viewed as the outcome of various types of contact scenarios (diffusion, borrowing, and linkage histories), as suggested in Ross (2020), rather than a case of lexical retention.

References

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Ross, M. (2020). Comment on Blust “The resurrection of Proto-Philippines.” *Oceanic Linguistics* 59(1–2), 366–373.
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Presentation Title: 5 words

Presentation Abstract: 200 Words

Innovation Distribution and the emergence of a Late Malayo-Polynesian network of dialects

Alexander D. Smith

Proto-Malayo-Polynesian (PMP) is often modeled with two or more primary branches, each with its own proto-language: Proto-Philippines, Proto-Central-Eastern Malayo-Polynesian, Proto-Western Indonesian, etc. Evidence for these post-PMP proto-languages is mainly or totally lexical. Some lexical evidence is compelling: exclusively shared lexical replacement innovations found in all member languages of a proposed subgroup. Other evidence is less compelling: homonymic innovations or novel concept innovations shared by a fraction of the total languages in the proposed subgroup.

Recent research has questioned the validity of these subgroups on the grounds that the lexical evidence does not inform a convincing argument for such large subgroups, especially in the absence of phonological innovations (Donohue & Grimes 2008, Reid 2020, Smith 2017, and others). If these intermediate post-PMP proto-languages never existed, then how did PMP develop? In this presentation I make the case that PMP developed into a complex network of regional dialects, not discreet proto-languages, shortly after the initial movement of Austronesian people into Insular Southeast Asia (ISEA). This conclusion is motivated by a reanalysis of evidence based both on the quality of the evidence as well as the distribution of the evidence. Critical subgrouping evidence is shown to exist in linkage-like distributions, not subgroup-defining distributions, challenging traditionalist assumptions about linguistic relations in MP. The implication of this approach is a flat family tree, with limited internal structure, but with horizontally-defined zones of contact and innovation diffusion. Such a tree is indicative of the rapid movement of people that occurred during Austronesian expansion into ISEA and the complex contact situations that arose afterward.

References

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Presentation Title: 12 words

Presentation Abstract: 258 words