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Language as a time machine



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Language as a time machine

Inaugural lecture by

Prof.dr. M.A.F. Klamer

on the acceptance of her position as professor in

Austronesian en Papuan Linguistics

at Leiden University

on Friday 6 february 2015



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Dear Rector Magnificus, ladies and gentlemen,

Austronesian, Papuan, and linguistics

Linguists study language as a system, taking into consideration the grammatical structure, the sounds, the meaning as well as the use of language. Language can also be used as a time machine, as it provides us with a window on the history of its speakers. Linguists collaborate with, for example, archaeologists, ethnologists, biological anthropologists, and population geneticists to chart prehistoric migrations and settlements. Historical linguists use data from languages spoken today to reconstruct a language family tree, and establish which language groups the speakers were in contact with in the past.

I investigate what are referred to as 'Austronesian and Papuan' languages. While everyone will have an idea about what 'Papuan' is, the term 'Austronesian' will likely raise a few eyebrows. Austronesian languages are found from Madagascar, through the Philippines and Indonesia, via the Pacific and New Zealand, to Hawaii and Easter Island. There are 1200 Austronesian languages (Tryon 1995), and they are spoken across half the globe:



Fig. 1. Spread of Austronesian languages

The vocabularies of all these languages are remarkably similar. This suggests that they descended from a common ancestor, proto-Austronesian. Well-known Austronesian languages include Indonesian, Malay, and Javanese. These are big languages, but most of the Austronesian languages are tiny, with only a few thousand speakers, and more than 90% of them do not have a written tradition.

The remarkable similarities between Malay as spoken in the East Indies and the languages thousands of kilometres away in the Pacific Ocean had already been noticed three centuries ago by Adriaan Reland (1708), a vicar's son from the village of De Rijp, just north of Amsterdam. Reland used word lists that had been collected a century before by two other Dutchmen, the explorers Willem Schouten (who sailed to the East Indies several times) and Jacob Lemaire (one of 22 children of a rich merchant from Antwerp).

Having the first Austronesian word lists collected by Dutchmen, and the first comparative Austronesian study published by another Dutchman, we can conclude that the Austronesian linguistic tradition was born in the Netherlands, which makes Leiden University a most suitable place to study it.¹

I also investigate Papuan languages. Papuan languages are spoken in New Guinea and its surroundings. Their number is estimated at 700-800. The term *Papooa* was used by Portuguese explorers in the early 16th century. It referred to a group of islands located north of the Bird's Head of New Guinea, and can be found on world maps of the time.



Fig. 2. Spread of Papuan languages, the original location of *Papooa*, and the location of Biak

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The term is likely to be a shortened, corrupted form of the expression *Sup i papwa*, literally 'land of down/below', i.e. 'land where the sun goes down, land in the west' in a dialect of Biak,² an island close to the Bird's Head of New Guinea. People from Biak have played a very dominant role in the Bird's Head region, and from the perspective of their homeland, the islands named *Papooa* are indeed located in the west.

Unlike the term 'Austronesian', which is used to refer to a language family, the term 'Papua' has a broader use, and refers to a cluster of more than 20 different language families plus some isolates (languages that do not belong to any family).

If we add up all the Austronesian and Papuan languages, we are looking at about 2000 languages. This is one third of the 6000 languages spoken in the world today. Clearly, the assignment I have been given cannot be criticized for lacking ambition. However, I am probably infected by the same sense of curiosity about unknown places and languages as the Dutch explorers just mentioned.

Out of those 2000 languages, I focus on those spoken in Indonesia in particular. Today, there are about 700 languages

spoken in Indonesia (Lewis, Simons & Fennig 2014), both Austronesian and Papuan. Most of them have not yet been studied.

The linguistic diversity of Indonesia is under pressure from the national language Indonesian. Particularly in eastern Indonesia, local minority languages are small, and parents often decide to bring up their children in Indonesian. Many of the children that I met during fieldwork still understand their parents' language but do not speak it. This implies that in a generation or two, virtually all of the minority languages in Indonesia will be extinct. If some of this wealth is to be preserved for future generations there is a lot of work to do, and little time to do it. Descriptive linguistic research is labour-intensive and (thus) expensive, and does not rank high on political-economic priority lists. But even if just a fraction of this linguistic heritage can be preserved, it is still better than nothing.³

Linguistic research also enables the speakers of today to write in their own language. We help them develop an orthography, so that they can write down their oral histories, traditional stories, and songs for the future, and even send each other text messages in their own language. We compile dictionaries to illustrate how words are written, and how they translate into the national language. Apart from this practical 'utilisation' of our work, there is of course also a scientific reason why we do it. Language data from this region are increasingly being used in linguistic typological studies that centre around the question of which patterns in language are frequent and which are rare, to investigate the range and limits of possible variation in human language. Finally, and this is the theme of this lecture, language data from this region can help us reconstruct pieces of the past.

What do we know about that past? Yet very little - as I will now discuss for the area where I did most of my research: the islands of Alor and Pantar in eastern Indonesia (fig. 3).

Alor and Pantar

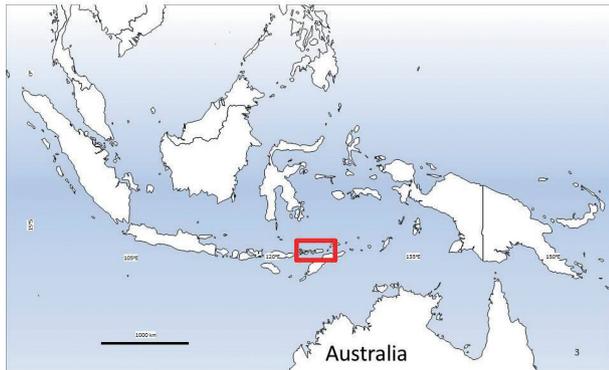


Fig. 3. Alor and Pantar in Indonesia

Long before the arrival of European explorers, Alor and Pantar were already part of a trading route between Java, Timor, the Moluccas, China, Vietnam and India. The earliest written sources on this region date from the 16th century. The Portuguese were the first westerners who made treaties with local leaders on Alor and Pantar, although they did not do much more than handing out Portuguese flags to the kings they met at the coasts.⁴ A few centuries later, Portugal and Holland exchanged some islands, and a Dutch military post was established on Alor in 1860. However, active Dutch involvement with Alor and Pantar only started in the early 20th century, and it lasted only a few decades until World War II broke out.

A Portuguese source from 1641 characterises the island of Pantar as a place where heathens and Muslims live, and Alor as an unattractive place with few opportunities for trade and a heathen, cannibalistic population (Sá 1956: 487-488). Two centuries later, a Dutch baron writes: [de bevolking] ‘[...] is verdeeld in *orang pantej*, waartoe voornamelijk de mohammedanen van Pandai, Blajar, Bamoelang, Allor en Koewi⁵ gerekend worden, en in *orang goenoeng*, die heidenen

zijn. [...]. De bergbewoners zijn minder beschaafd, twistziek en weinig te vertrouwen. Hunne kleding bestaat even als die der dajaks uit een trjawat [= *cawat*] van boomschors of van katoen, dien zij dan van de strandvolken koopen, want zelve weven zij niet. [...]. Vroeger hebben Allor en Pantar vele slaven geleverd en ook nog worden er wel eens slaven aan de vreemde handelaren, en aan de onder Portugal staande Timorezen (Oekoessi) geleverd. [...].⁶ (Van Lynden 1851: 332).

In those times, contact with the mountain people of Alor and Pantar was via the groups living on the coast. Most of these coastal people were immigrants, who originally came from the islands east of Pantar and had settled on the coasts of Pantar and Alor around 1300 AD or later.⁷ These groups were (and still are) referred to as *orang Alor*, Alorese, and they speak an Austronesian language. The fact that the inhabitants of Alor and Pantar actually consisted of at least 20 different population groups, each with their own language, and that these languages were completely unrelated to the language of the Alorese, remained unnoticed until the 20th century. The mountain dwellers themselves may have sought to remain invisible because of the slave trade mentioned in the quote above. To prevent being captured as slaves it helps to keep away from outsiders and cultivate an aggressive, fearsome reputation. As late as 1928, a Dutch missionary describes Alor as a ‘creepy’, ‘mysterious’ and ‘spooky’ place where one must travel with a rifle or gun to prevent being raided at night (Van Dalen 1928: 222).

In sum, the only written sources in the history of this part of Indonesia date from the colonial times, where the mountain people are depicted as scary, possibly cannibalistic, heathens. Indigenous written resources are lacking. Imagine that the history of the province of South Holland was based on a few sources by traders who sailed past our coast, plus a few articles by visitors in the 19th and early 20th century. This is the situation of the historiography of Alor and Pantar today, where history only comes to us through the languages as they are spoken today.

History in language

This raises the question: How is history reflected in language as spoken today? Below I discuss this with examples from the domain of number words. But first a few words on the theory about the origin of differences and similarities between languages.

In linguistics, just as in evolutionary biology, the metaphor of a family tree is used. Languages are like people: they descend from a common ancestor, and some of them are more closely related to each other than others. But languages are unlike people in that they *also* unashamedly mix with their neighbours.

The structure of human language has some characteristics that enable us to investigate in detail how similarities between languages arise. Some similarities are historical 'residues' that languages have inherited from a common ancestor (this is why many Dutch and German words look alike, because the languages are sisters). But languages also share similarities because they borrow words and structures from neighbouring languages. Obviously, this kind of horizontal transmission of features falls outside the family tree model, which only accounts for vertical transmission through the generations. Yet, both types of transmission play an equally important role in the evolution of language.

Each language has minimal meaningful units, called 'morphemes' (word parts). Morphemes are each composed of smaller units: 'phonemes'. Phonemes are sounds, and we represent them with letters. Phonemes in themselves have no meaning (the sounds *ch*, *i*, and *ck* do not mean anything by themselves) - they function to distinguish different morphemes from each other (the meaning difference between *ch-i-ck* vs. *l-i-ck* is marked by just one phoneme). A language has just a few dozens of such phonemes, but each language can build thousands of different morphemes with them. Moreover, morphemes also combine with each other. In sum, with a

very limited set of building blocks, languages can build an enormous amount of different forms.

A second important characteristic of language is that the relation between form and meaning of a morpheme is arbitrary. That *chick* starts with *ch* but *rooster* with *r* could just as well have been the other way around - there is nothing in the animal that makes us call it a *rooster* instead of a *chooster*. The arbitrary relation between form and meaning is important, because when we then observe languages with similar forms coupled to similar meanings, we know that cannot be coincidental. For instance, consider the German-Dutch word pair *alt-oud*: the words sound about the same *and* they mean the same, and this cannot be an accident.

As everything else in nature, language is subject to laws. These laws concern (among other things) the way in which speech sounds change over time. The words *alt-oud* form a group with words such as *kalt-koud* and *halten-houden*: each pair shows the same difference in sound, so the sound must have changed systematically. This system can be described as a sound law: "In Old Dutch, *ol* changed into *ou* when it came in front of a *d* or a *t*".

But how do we know that the change was from *ol* to *ou*, rather than from *ou* to *ol*? Sound changes are restricted by various factors, such as the shape of the speech organ. And changes always go in small steps because if your pronunciation diverges too much from the way others speak, you will not be understood. Some changes occur often because they are easy to realize, other changes are rarer. Linguists know a great deal about the restrictions and frequencies of sound changes, so that out of various hypotheses on directions of sound change, we can choose the one that is most plausible. In our example, the change from *ol* to *ou* implied a vocalisation of *l* that is very easy to produce, and (therefore) occurs in many languages, while changing a vowel *u* to a consonant *l* involves an articulatory effort that is much more complex, and hence

occurs less often in languages. So the first change is the most plausible one.

As long as changes in a language spread consistently across an entire speech community, everyone will speak the same language. Languages split off when one group of speakers is separated from the rest, by geographical barriers like a sea or a mountain range, or by social barriers that prevent people from talking to each other. The language of the group that split off will undergo changes that are no longer shared with the language of those that stayed behind. In due course, each language variety will have undergone so many changes that speakers no longer understand each other.

Similar words in related languages that are systematically different, such as *alt* and *oud*, are called cognates. On the basis of cognates we can formulate sound laws, reconstruct the vocabulary of the shared ancestor language, and work out how the languages are related to each other.

However, as mentioned above, languages do not only undergo internal changes, but are also changed through contact with other languages. Loan words, for instance, indicate with whom speakers have, or have had, contact, and in which social domain the contact took place. Some words enter a language through politics (e.g., Dutch *coalitie* from French), others through trade (e.g., Dutch *thee* 'tea' from Malay). Loan words can be dated by investigating how they spread through a group of languages: How did they adapt to the sounds and structures of the language that adopted them? Loans can inform us about the social networks and the type of relations that existed among people.

Another instance of how history is reflected in language is seen in place names or toponyms. The Roman presence in the Netherlands has left traces in place names such as *Katwijk*, where *wijk* comes from Latin *vicus* 'village, hamlet, district'. In the same way, toponyms on islands like Alor and Pantar may

contain traces of earlier populations in a particular area which currently live elsewhere.

At the moment, we know virtually nothing about loan words and toponyms in the languages of Alor and Pantar. In my current Vici project, we will investigate these topics in more detail. In addition, we will also compare grammatical structures because words and grammars are two distinct domains of language, which develop in different ways, and keep different historical traces.

Numbers in Alor and Pantar

In the third part of this lecture I will discuss number words of Alor and Pantar, to see what they show us about the history of the population (Schapper & Klamer 2014). It is important to keep in mind that the languages of Alor and Pantar I discuss here are *Papuan*, while *Austronesian* languages are spoken on the surrounding islands.

Not all languages have words for all the numbers. For example, traditional societies often lack an indigenous expression for 'thousand' or 'million', and borrow these words from a trade language or a language taught in school. Everywhere on Alor and Pantar the word for 'thousand' is *ribu*, which is a loan word from Malay/Indonesian.⁸ In barter trade you do not need such high number words. In the unlikely case that someone has thousands of bananas to trade, these are counted in bunches, not per piece. But high number words are necessary to talk about money (at least in Indonesia, where a thousand rupiahs is now worth 7 euro cents) and to do maths in school. So it is likely that the languages borrowed *ribu* when money trade was introduced, and through Indonesian education.

Incidentally, a word like *null* or *zero* (as in *There were zero euros left*) is not really a number word, and can be dispensed with. Instead, the Teiwa speakers on Pantar use expressions with *i hasak* 'be empty'. When they say *There were zero people (at my party)* this is expressed as *Yaf i hasak*, literally meaning

‘(the) house is empty’. I suppose that, before a word like *null* or *zero* emerges in a language, the language must be used to doing maths. But in Alor and Pantar you do your maths in Indonesian. This may also explain why arithmetic expressions such as ‘one plus one equals two’ are expressed somewhat clumsily in local languages. In Teiwa, for instance, ‘ $3 + 3 = 6$ ’ is expressed as *Add three with three so that it is six*; ‘ $5 - 2 = 3$ ’ is *Five, take away two to keep, then there are three left*; and ‘ $5 \times 4 = 20$ ’ is *Count those four five times and it is twenty*. These expressions have not yet become formulas because they are seldom used.

Numbers like *one, two, three, five, ten, thirteen, and twenty*, are words that may be composed of one or more morphemes (word parts). In the word *thirteen* the parts *three* and *ten* can still be recognized, and *twenty* consists of an old form of *two* plus the morpheme *ty* from ‘ten’. In English (and Dutch) the numbers *one* to *ten* consist of just one part; while numbers above *ten* combine two or more word parts in a decimal system.

The languages of Alor and Pantar also have a decimal system: *ten, twenty, thirty*, etc. are expressed in Teiwa as *qaar nuk* ‘10 1’, *qaar raq* ‘10 2’, *qaar jerig* ‘10 3’, etc. This decimal system combines with numbers of a quinary (base-5) system: *seven, eight, and nine* are composed of two parts: ‘5 2’ makes *seven*, ‘5 3’ makes *eight* and ‘5 4’ makes *nine*. (Interestingly, none of the languages has a number *six* composed as ‘5 1’; *six* has its own separate form.) The number system that combines a quinary system with a separate form for *six* is found in the west (Pantar) and the east (Alor), see fig. 4. This system was also used in the proto-language (Holton et al. 2009, Schapper & Klamer 2014, Holton & Robinson 2014).

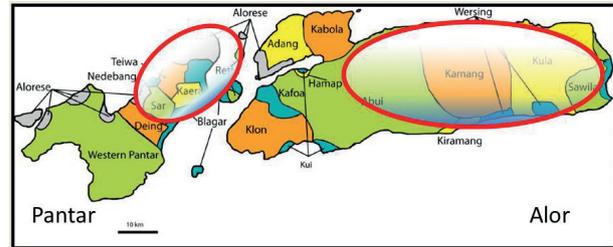


Fig. 4. Alor-Pantar languages with quinary (base-5) counting systems

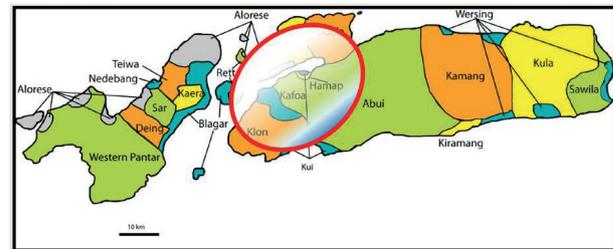


Fig. 5. Alor-Pantar languages with subtractive counting systems

The languages in the middle use a different system (fig. 5). They express *eight* as ‘minus 2’, and *nine* as ‘minus 1’. This is a so-called ‘subtractive’ system (‘10 minus 2’, ‘10 minus 3’), in which the word part for ‘10’ has worn off. The word for *seven* is an odd one in these languages, as it consists of the parts ‘7 3’, but does not mean 10. The part for 7 is not composed as ‘5 2’, as is common in this family, but is similar to the word *seven* in Austronesian languages. The group of languages in the middle thus borrowed the word *seven* from an Austronesian language, and then combined it with the original word for *three* (which was part of the original subtractive system). As a result they created a number *seven* that is composed as ‘7 3’.

If you could not follow all these details, that’s fine. The point is that these forms exist in the languages in the middle of the map (fig. 5) and that these languages thus diverge from the rest

of their family and form a little family on their own with their own rarities. Moreover, all of the languages in this group also have a word for *hundred* that is borrowed from Austronesian, while the other members of the Alor Pantar family do not.

Analysing numbers and counting systems thus provides evidence that the people in this middle group went through a stage where they were separated from the rest of the family. What caused their separate status, and what else did they borrow from outside? A more detailed study of the languages and cultures of this group may answer questions like these, but what it already tells us is that this group had contact with outsiders while the other family members did not.

Let's leave the islands of Alor and Pantar now and consider the surrounding islands, where Austronesian languages are spoken. Much is already known about proto-Austronesian: it had a decimal system, and the numbers *one* to *nine* consisted of one word parts. Strikingly, however, two languages in northern Timor (Tokodede and Mambae) (fig. 6) compose *six* to *nine* as two morphemes using a quinary system (5 1, 5 2, 5 3, 5 4).



Fig. 6. Austronesian languages on Timor with a quinary counting system

This is odd, especially because their sister languages simply follow the conservative Austronesian decimal system. So where did Tokodede and Mambae get this quinary system from? Note that northern Timor and southern Alor are only 60-70 km apart. In addition, there are traces of cultural contact between certain groups on Alor who sing songs that contain Tokodede words and place names from north Timor (Wellfelt & Schapper 2013). It is thus likely that contact between speakers on Alor (who use a quinary system) and Austronesian speakers on Timor played a role in adopting the quinary system in Timor. But we must also note that the direction of cultural influence goes from Timor to Alor, while the direction of the linguistic influence is from Alor to Timor. This may indicate that there was not a single period of contact, but several - something which requires further study.

Another Austronesian language with unexpected traces of a quinary counting system is Kedang, spoken on Lembata, west of Pantar (fig. 7):



Fig. 7. An Austronesian language on Lembata with a quinary counting system

In Kedang, *nine* is composed as ‘5 4’. Again, this cannot be an inherited Austronesian feature. Neither can it be borrowed from the Austronesian neighbour of Kedang, Lamaholot, because Lamaholot clearly uses a decimal system. Moreover, the Kedang are culturally quite different from their Lamaholot neighbours (Barnes 1974). At the same time the Kedang are known for the number of *gongs* they possess: percussion instruments that are used as dowry, a custom shared by the Papuan groups on Pantar and Alor. Thus the unique form for *nine* in Kedang may have entered the language through contact with Papuan groups, for instance through negotiations concerning the number of gongs in a dowry.

These examples from the world of numbers show that the Papuan groups of Alor and Pantar did not all walk the same path through history. We have seen one group living around the straits in the centre who had contact with outsiders, and, independent of that, a second group in south Alor who had contact with Austronesian groups in north Timor, and a third group who had contact with an Austronesian group in Lembata. The Papuan people are more diverse and much more outgoing than the colonial writings suggests. Information like this enables us to zoom in on particular groups, and investigate in more detail what sort of contact they had with others, what the direction of influence was, when it happened, and which events and social domains it involved.

Conclusion

Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to close with a word of thanks. First I wish to thank the *College van Bestuur* of Leiden University, the board of the Faculty of Humanities, and the directors of the Leiden University Centre for Linguistics and Leiden Institute of Area Studies for their confidence in me.

Dear students of LUCL and LIAS, in particular the *Indonesian Languages* group, it is a privilege to share our fascination for linguistics, endangered languages and Indonesia with you. Dear colleagues at LUCL and LIAS, thank you for your

committed and enjoyable collaboration as colleagues over the years in several BA and MA programmes and in the supervision of PhD students.

I would like to thank a number of individuals in particular. Geert Booij was my teacher in General Linguistics at VU University Amsterdam. Geert suggested to me that I do a PhD before the thought of it had even crossed my mind. Beste Geert, dank voor je coaching gedurende die Amsterdamse jaren. Pieter Muysken offered me the opportunity to come to Leiden and join his Spinoza project. Beste Pieter, dankjewel voor die kans en voor je inspiratie en betrokkenheid sindsdien. Ton van Haaften, as director of LUCL, helped me to get back on track after a long sick leave. Beste Ton, dank voor je steun, zodat een positieve doorstart in Leiden mogelijk was.

In Indonesia I have been fortunate to meet an immeasurable number of helpful people. In particular, I thank Umbu Musa Maramba Hau for his collaboration on the Kambera language, Bpk Lorens Titing and Bpk Amos Sir for their collaboration on Teiwa, and Bpk Marianus Waang for his collaboration on Kaera. Ibu June Jacob from Universitas Kristen Artha Wacana in Kupang, Timor, and the department Pusat Penelitian Kemasyarakatan & Kebudayaan of the Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia I thank for their enthusiastic support in organising permits for my research projects.

I also thank the colleagues with whom I work, or have worked, in a number of projects: Ger Reesink, Lourens de Vries, Miriam van Staden, Cecilia Odé, Greville Corbett, Dunstan Brown, Sebastian Fedden, Laura Robinson, Gary Holton, František Kratochvíl, Antoinette Schapper, Tom Hoogervorst, Chris Haskett, Francesca Moro, Hanna Fricke, George Saad, and Benjamin Daigle.

Many colleagues devoted their time and attention to my Vici application, and I wish to thank them here because without that Vici, I would not be standing here today: Willem Adelaar,

Felix Ameka, Dunstan Brown, Lisa Cheng, Greville Corbett, Maghiel van Crevel, Jenny Doetjes, Michael Dunn, Miranda van Eck, Harald Hammarström, Anke Klerckx, Gerry van Klinken, Maarten Kossmann, Marco Last, Claartje Levelt, Pieter Muysken, Marc van Oostendorp, Johan Rooryck, Niels Schiller, and Ineke Sluiter.

To my parents I owe my childhood in New Guinea, Papua, Indonesia, where they worked as a missionary and a nurse among the people in the jungle and raised six children. Through their example I have learned to look with wonder, respect and humility at the diversity of God's creation. The colourful multitude of people, cultures and languages is a miracle that we must cherish, and it is a privilege to help doing this.

Tot slot dank ik mijn Reinoud, mijn man. Een half mensenleven delen we al met elkaar, en ik ben je dankbaar dat je door al die jaren heen mijn steun en toeverlaat was. Rienje, Jan en Thomas: jullie zijn prachtig zoals je bent, en laten me elke dag zien hoe mooi het leven is. Al dat moois van jullie is *minstens* zo mooi als de taalwetenschap.

Thank you.

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Notes

- 1 Incidentally, the name Austronesian itself is only a hundred years old, and means something like ‘of the southern islands’. *Auster* is the Latin name for *Notos*, the Greek God of the Southern wind, and *-nesian* is derived from Greek *nêsós* ‘island’. The term was first used by Wilhelm Schmidt in a presentation for *Die Anthropologische Gesellschaft* in Vienna, in December 1899.
- 2 In fact, the Biak dialect that was spoken on the Raja Ampat Islands (Kamma 1954, Sollewijn Gelpke 1993).
- 3 Recordings of more than 50 small Austronesian and Papuan languages (collected by Dutch researchers over the past 50 years) have been archived in a language archive that is accessible online. See <https://tla.mpi.nl/>: “Access the Archive”, see under the node “LAISEANG” (Language Archive of Insular South East Asia and New Guinea). See also the *Virtual Language Observatory*, <http://catalog.clarin.eu/vlo>.
- 4 At the places ‘Koei, Mataroe, Batoelolong, Kolana’ (Van Gaalen 1945: 2).
- 5 Today’s names are: Pandai = Pandai (NE Pantar), Blajar = Blagar (E Pantar), Bamoelang = Baranusa (W Pantar), Allor = NW Alor, Koewi = Kui (SW Alor).
- 6 Translation: ([the people] ‘[...] are separated into *orang pantej* [coastal dwellers, MK], to which mainly the Muslims of Pandai, Blajar, Bamoelang, Allor en Koewi belong, and into *orang goenoeng* [mountain dwellers, MK], who are heathens. [...]. The mountain dwellers are less civilised, fractious, and not to be trusted. Their clothing consists of just as those of the Dajak of a *trjawat* [= *cawat*, ‘loin cloth’, MK] from tree bark or cotton, which they buy from the coastal dwellers because they do not weave themselves [...]. In former days, Allor and Pantar provided many slaves and even now there are sometimes slaves being supplied to foreign traders, and to the Timorese (Oekoessie) who are subject to Portugal [...].’
- 7 This date is tentative and based on information from oral traditions, see Anonymous (1914), Lemoine (1969), Rodemeier (2006), Klamer (2011, 2012 a, b).
- 8 This is a loanword and not a word that descended from the proto-language, because it does not follow the regular sound changes that applied to the *b* in words of the proto-language. Proto-Alor Pantar *b* changes to *f* or to *p* in some of the daughter languages. In those languages we expect to find the original *ribu* to have changed to *rifu* or *ripu*; which is not what we find, as the word *ribu* is used everywhere.

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Het onderzoek van Marian Klamer richt zich al ruim 20 jaar op het beschrijven van talen in een uniek taalgebied in Oost-Indonesië waar tientallen Austronesische en Papuataalen naast elkaar worden gesproken. Deze talen zijn veelal klein, staan niet op schrift, worden niet meer door kinderen gesproken en zullen dus over enkele decennia, onder druk van het Indonesisch, uitgestorven zijn. Marian Klamer deed veldonderzoek naar een dozijn talen in de regio en publiceerde grammatica's van twee Austronesische en twee Papuataalen, naast ruim vijftig artikelen en een aantal bundels over een breed scala aan onderwerpen in de taalkunde. In 2014 verwierf zij een VICI-subsidie waarin de evolutie van taal centraal staat. Talen ontwikkelen zich op twee manieren: ze erven woorden en structuren van een proto-taal, en lenen van buurtalen. Het verschil tussen deze processen is vaak moeilijk te achterhalen omdat buurtalen meestal dezelfde proto-taal hebben. Klamer's VICI-project brengt het verschil tussen lenen en erven in kaart door de studie van taalcontact in een regio waar lenen plaatsvindt tussen talen die geen familie van elkaar zijn. Dit geeft informatie over de ontwikkeling van taal in het algemeen, en over de geschiedenis van de sprekers in dat gebied in het bijzonder.



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