

Towards a morphological history of the languages of Timor, Alor and Pantar

The fact that there are apparently cognate morphemes shared across the non-Austronesian languages of Timor, Alor and Pantar is well-known. The fact that most of the pronominal forms found in the various languages, particularly bound pronominals, show strong resemblances has been remarked upon since Cowan (1957a, 1957b). We do not dispute this scholarship, but note that a number of these morphemes also show plausible cognates with some non-pronominal morphemes in the languages concerned. From a cross-linguistic perspective, a historical relationship between the pronominal morphemes and the non-pronominal morphemes is highly likely, given some non-problematic semantic changes.[M1]

We also point out that it is perhaps better to look at the pronominal system ancestral to the non-Austronesian languages of Timor, Alor and Pantar as being a minimal-augmented one, not a number-based one. This helps explain the ‘fit’ of *t- and *pi- much more readily. It does, however, complicate the assumptions that have been made regarding the wider affiliations of the languages of Timor, Alor and Pantar: given that the pronominal evidence [M2] has been used to establish the link with the Trans New Guinea languages of New Guinea’s central cordillera (, a reconstruction that posits a pronominal system radically different to that supposed to underlie the Trans New Guinea languages makes this evidence problematic, unless we assume that the Timor-Alor-Pantar languages are ancestral to Trans New Guinea, which is not supported by any other evidence. While the ‘essential’ pronouns (1, 2, 3; ‘singular’ and ‘plural’) do show good matches with their corresponding Trans New Guinea forms, the 12 pronouns are not associated with any known Trans New Guinea reconstructions. Adding to the problems with this connection, the vocabulary that has been cited to support this link is not much attested beyond the Bomberai peninsula.

We can also identify a number of good correspondences that do not involve pronominal senses, such as TAM, applicative, causative and detransitivising [M3] affixes, an instrumental lexeme, and a set of locatives (*mi-*, *me-*, *ta-*), which do not show any obvious cognates in the Trans New Guinea languages (though we admit to the pronominally-related dual formative that resembles its Trans New Guinea equivalent[M4]).

As suggested by earlier researchers, we note that there is a plausible link between the Timor-Alor-Pantar pronouns and those of the ‘West Papuan’ languages of North Halmahera (and the western Bird’s Head, plus central Yapen). We argue for a grammaticalisation path of the West Papuan *t- ‘1SG’ to become a ‘12MIN’ pronouns, and discuss other North Halmahera semi-pronominal morphemes, both pronominal and derivational, establishing that at some time, at least, the Timor-Alor-Pantar languages and the West Papuan languages were related. The fact that the distribution of these cognates is not uniform suggests that not all Timor-Alor-Pantar languages participate equally in this relationship, and that the linguistic history of the area is complex and multilayered, going beyond a simple ‘Austronesian/non-Austronesian’ dichotomy. There is good evidence that there is at least one layer that is not Trans New Guinea (at least, not traceable to the languages now found in the Bomberai peninsula).