

# **BUILDING THE JIGSAW PUZZLE: Seeing the big picture still depends on solid descriptive work for individual languages and cultures**

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In Eastern Indonesia and East Timor, whether we are looking at Austronesian languages or non-Austronesian (Papuan) languages, many comparative and historical questions remain unanswered. How do individual languages fit into the bigger picture? How do “subgroups” fit into “branches”? How do “branches” fit into “families”? How has contact between Austronesian and non-Austronesian languages affected the flavour of the languages in this zone of contact? Do current theories about Timor-Alor-Pantar (Papuan) languages, and Central Malayo-Polynesian (Austronesian) languages actually fit the data we now have in hand? Or do the data force us to keep asking questions? What about the Bima-Sumba Group? Over the past 100 years or so, ideas about how the languages of eastern Indonesia fit into the larger picture of languages have ebbed and flowed with the tides, and with the impressions of those addressing the issue (some very astute, and some more rigorous than others), but largely in an absence of good reliable, accessible, and thorough descriptions representing all of the scattered island and mountain groups in the region. Over the past 20 years or so, more descriptions have started to become available. But in order to systematically address the inadequacies of existing theories, and address some of these higher-level comparative and historical questions, many more good descriptions of individual languages and cultures are still required.