

pdfA phonological comparison of Kula and Sawila

Kula and Sawila are two languages spoken in eastern Alor which were once thought to be dialects of the same language, Tanglapui (Stokhof 1975). There is indeed high degree of bilingualism across the two languages. However, more recent data based on lexical comparisons and speaker assessment of mutual intelligibility suggest that the two languages are indeed distinct (Grimes et al 1997). This impression is corroborated by phonological data gathered in recent field work. Kula and Sawila differ radically both in terms of vowel structure and syllable structure. In particular, Kula has five phonemic vowels while Sawila has ten. Sawila adds a phonemic quantity distinction, reflected as a height distinction in the mid vowels and a length distinction in the non-mid vowels (1). Kula vowels do not exhibit such phonemic length distinctions (2).

(1)	Sawila	tee [te:] ‘row’	te [tɛ] ‘move’
		pisi [pɪsi] ‘mango’	piisi [pi:si] ‘chop’
		nanu [nɛnu] 1SG	naanu [na:nu] ‘no’

(2)	Kula	nganu 1SG	nanu ‘no’
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While the consonant systems of the two languages are nearly identical (both have 14 consonants), the syllable structure of Kula and Sawila differ. In particular, Kula but not Sawila permits clusters of stop consonants in syllable onset position.

(3)	Kula	pte	‘corn’
		pka	‘child’
		mda	‘ascend’
		ndomala	‘male child’

These clusters may be optionally broken up by the insertion of a non-phonemic short central vowel, but this is not required. The second consonant of the cluster appears to be of longer closure duration, a curious observation given that related languages may have geminate consonants in cognate forms (compare Western Pantar *batte* ‘corn’, *wakke* ‘child’, *middang* ‘ascend’). In this paper we present data from acoustic analyses which clearly demonstrate the difference in cluster structure between Kula and Sawila.

In summary, this preliminary investigation into Kula and Sawila phonology clearly demonstrates the distinct nature of their phonological systems, further justifying their classification as distinct languages.