

Bahasa Alor: An atypical Austronesian language

Apart from the many Papuan languages, there is one indigenous Austronesian language spoken on Alor and Pantar: Bahasa Alor. B Alor has approx. 25,000 speakers (Grimes et.al. 1997) and is spoken in pockets along northern Pantar, along the coast of the Bird's Head of Alor, and on the islands Ternate and Buaya (Stokhof 1975:8-9). B Alor was used as the language of wider communication in the Alor-Pantar region till at least the mid 1970's (Stokhof 1975:8, Grimes et.al. 1997:57). The language lost this function during the last decades, with Indonesian (Malay) taking over as the language of inter-ethnic communication.

The vocabulary of B Alor is clearly Austronesian and the language is classified as belonging to the Central Malayo-Polynesian subgroup. Stokhof (1975:9) suggests that it is strongly related with Lamaholot, the language spoken on the eastern tip of Flores and on western Solor, a language that is also referred to as Lamalera (Keraf 1978) or Solor (Bouman 1943). Grimes et.al. (1997:57) state that because B Alor speakers used to be bilingual in the trade language Lamaholot, B Alor was formerly thought to be a dialect of Lamaholot. In the first section of my talk, I compare the Lamaholot (Lamalera) word list in Keraf (1978:262-267) with the the B Alor list that I compiled during a survey in 2003. There appears to be about 50% similarity in the basic vocabulary of Lamaholot (Lamalera) and B Alor. This suggests that while they are genetically related, they are quite different languages –certainly not dialects.

In the second section of the talk, I briefly sketch the major grammatical features of B Alor, based on primary data collected in 2003: phonology, clausal syntax (verbal and non-verbal), nominal phrases, pronouns, verb phrases and clause combinations.

In the third part of the talk, the grammatical features of B Alor are compared with the features of some other Austronesian languages spoken in East Nusantara (cf. Klamer 2002, Himmelmann 2005), and it is concluded that the syntax of B Alor is rather atypical for an Austronesian language. My hypothesis is that this is the result of convergence of B Alor with surrounding Papuan languages (see also Klamer, Reesink, Van Staden, in press).

This issue is taken up in the fourth section of the paper. The features of B Alor are first compared with the grammatical features found in Papuan languages of the New Guinea mainland (Foley 1986, 2000, Pawley 2005), and then with Teiwa, a Papuan language spoken on Pantar island (Klamer, forthcoming). In the concluding section, I suggest a scenario how Papuan features may have entered B Alor.

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