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13. The comparative method in Austronesian linguistics

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1. Introduction

The terms “Austronesian” and “Malayo-Polynesian” are often used interchangeably. However, they do not mean the same thing: “Austronesian” refers to the entire language family, and “Malayo-Polynesian” to one of its branches. On the basis of phonological evidence alone, Robert Blust distinguishes ten first order branches in the Austronesian language family. Nine of these have their members exclusively among the 20 or so Austronesian languages in Taiwan (“Formosan” languages). A tenth branch, Malayo-Polynesian, includes the 1200 or so member languages spoken elsewhere in the Austronesian-speaking world. The special genetic position of Formosan languages only became apparent in the 1960’s (cf. Dahl [1973] 1976). Previously, “Austronesian” and “Malayo-Polynesian” had basically been different names for the same language family. In the following cursory overview, it is not possible to mention more than a fraction of the many scholars who have made valuable contributions to the discipline of Austronesian comparative linguistics, and of their works.

The first application of the comparative method to Austronesian languages was Van der Tuuk’s (1865) systematic comparison of Malagasy (the language of Madagascar) and Toba Batak (a language in Sumatra) in an attempt to demonstrate that these languages belonged to the same subgroup (a subgroup which has since been proven false). The first to apply the method to a large range of Austronesian languages was Brandes (1884), who however limited his comparison to the reflexes of two consonants only. Half a century later, Dempwolff (1934, 1937, 1938) proposed a detailed reconstruction of Proto-Malayo-Polynesian phonology and part of its lexicon, which became a milestone in Austronesian linguistics. Dempwolff labelled his reconstructions “Proto-Austronesian”, but nowadays they are equated with Proto-Malayo-Polynesian, because he did not include any evidence from Formosan languages.

Later on, Dempwolff’s Proto-Malayo-Polynesian phonological system was refined further and adapted, especially through the research of Isidore Dyen in the 1950s and 1960s, and Robert Blust since 1970, so as to become the hypothetical starting point for phonological developments in all Austronesian languages.

Dyen improved Dempwolff’s phonological system considerably by adding some proto-phonemes to it and re-aligning various others (including the problematic laryngeals *h and *‘). This enabled him to eliminate many doublets in Dempwolff’s lexicon and adapt his phonological system so that it would also reflect the Formosan languages and bring out their special position within the Austronesian family (cf. Dyen 1953, 1963, 1965a, 1965b).

Blust’s contribution will be discussed in Section 5.

Especially in its early days, Indo-European comparative-historical research was much oriented towards morphological analysis because of the availability of old texts. In contrast, Austronesian comparative-historical research was for a long time predominantly focused on phonological and lexical reconstruction. The reconstruction of Proto-Austronesian morphology and syntax has only become the focus of scholarly attention in the last 35 years (with the works of Wolff [1973] and Pawley and Reid [1976]), although the first systematic endeavour to compare the morphosyntax of several Austronesian languages from a historical perspective was probably Dahl (1951).

2. Time depth of data

Most Austronesian languages lack historical records that predate European contact, although there are notable exceptions: Cham and Malay have stone inscriptions from the 4th and 7th centuries CE respectively, and Javanese has a richly documented old language with sources going back to the 8th century CE. Malagasy has records written on cowhide from the 16th century. Almost all other languages, however, were only first recorded with the arrival of Europeans, and many of them only in the last one hundred years.

Austronesian written records do lack time depth in comparison to Indo-European ones. However, the data make up for this in two ways. First, through their number: with as many as 1200 Austronesian languages belonging to many different subgroups, it is theoretically possible to reach a relatively high precision in the reconstruction of proto-languages. Second, due to the maritime history of many Austronesian-speaking communities, some of them ended up on previously uninhabited and isolated islands or remained in the homeland and became out of touch with out-migrating members of their community. Their languages developed undisturbed with little or no influence from other Austronesian languages, in some cases becoming veritable laboratory cases for historical linguistics (However, it has also become increasingly clear that such isolation from other Austronesian influences was almost never total.). The Formosan languages, Malagasy, and the Eastern Polynesian languages (such as Hawaiian, Tahitian, Maori and the language of Easter Island), are such cases. Following the initial split some 4000 years ago, the Formosan languages in Taiwan have developed in almost total isolation from Malayo-Polynesian languages. Malagasy split off from the South East Barito languages in South Borneo some 1300 years ago (Adelaar 1989). The settlement of eastern Polynesia (which originally started from Samoa) ended less than nine hundred years ago, with the Maori migrating from central east Polynesia and occupying New Zealand in the 12th or 13th century CE (Kirch 2000).

3. Word structure

One of the things that strikes one immediately when observing Proto-Austronesian and Proto-Malayo-Polynesian roots is their well-defined disyllabic structure. This disyllabicity is maintained in many of the Austronesian languages in Formosa, the Philippines and West Indonesia, but it is not ubiquitous in the daughter languages. The basic structure of Proto-Austronesian and Proto-Malayo-Polynesian roots is CV(C)CVC. In it, each C

can stand for $\emptyset$, and consonant clusters are allowed in intervocalic position. There are monosyllabic and trisyllabic roots, but these are in the minority: monosyllables are usually grammatical words (prepositions, etc.), and trisyllables are often subject to reduction or re-interpreted as derivations, if they were not already polymorphemic in origin. The daughter languages may have lost the original disyllabic structure of certain Proto-Austronesian/Proto-Malayo-Polynesian roots; however, when this happened, languages like Malay, Javanese, and Tagalog tend to restore disyllabicity through, for instance:

1. vowel contraction and lexicalization of affixes (e.g. PAN $*(\text{ə})\text{sa-}$ ‘one’ + $*\text{baCu}$ ‘stone’ > $*\text{sə-batu}$ ‘one stone’ > $*\text{səwatu}$ > *suatu*, *satu* ‘one’; PAN $*\text{ma-}$ (stative prefix) + *iRaq* ‘red’ > Malay *merah*;
2. the lexicalization of a reduplicated root (e.g. PAN $*\text{duSa}$ ‘two’ > PMP $*\text{duha}$ > Old Javanese *rwa*, *rwa-rwa* > Javanese *oro*, [with regressive dissimilation of $*\text{r}$ to l] *loro*);
3. the reduction of a compound to a single form (i.e. PMP $*\text{quluh}$ ‘head’ + $*\text{tuSəj}$ ‘knee’ > $*(\text{hu})\text{lu tuhət}$ > $*\text{lu-tūt}$ > modern Malay *lutut* ‘knee’).

The identification of disyllabicity as the basic root structure is Dempwolff’s legacy. However, scholars before and after him have been able to demonstrate the existence of meaning for units smaller than the disyllabic lexeme, especially for the last syllables of roots (cf. Blust 1988).

There are other, less obvious, features belonging to especially Proto-Malayo-Polynesian etyma, such as phonotactic constraints applying to consonants in roots. One is articulation type agreement: in Proto-Malayo-Polynesian roots reconstructed by Dempwolff (1938), if the first and second consonant share the same place of articulation, they must also be of the same articulation type. In other words, the first and second consonant can be totally identical, or totally different in both articulation type and place, but they cannot agree in articulation place while differing in articulation type. For instance, Malay forms like *papan* ‘board, plank’ and *bibit* ‘seed’ conform to this constraint, but forms like Malay *bapak* ‘father’ or *bomoh* ‘sorcerer’ do not and, as a matter of fact, *bapak* is historically polymorphemic, and *bomoh* is a Thai loanword. Apparent exceptions to this constraint are Proto-Malayo-Polynesian forms of a $*\text{tV(d,n)VC}$ and $*(\text{d,n})\text{VtVC}$ structure (e.g. $*\text{tiduR}$ ‘to sleep’; $*\text{tanəq}$ ‘earth’), but here the compatibility of $*\text{t}$ with $*\text{d}$ or $*\text{n}$ is explained through the fact that PMP $*\text{t}$ is a dental, whereas PMP $*\text{d}$ and $*\text{n}$ are alveolars (cf. Adelaar 1983; Chrétien 1965).

Finally, Proto-Austronesian and Proto-Malayo-Polynesian may have had contrastive stress (Zorc 1983; Ross 1995: 740; Wolff 2010), but this remains a contested issue.

Several alternative analyses emphasize the phonetic similarity between $*\text{u}$ and $*\text{w}$ and between $*\text{i}$ and $*\text{y}$ and treat these pairs as single phonemes (cf. Wolff 1988 and 2010; Mahdi 1988; Dahl 1976, 1981). While these analyses reduce the Proto-Austronesian/Proto-Malayo-Polynesian phoneme inventory, they also yield a more complicated syllable structure and obscure the other phonotactic constraints discussed here.

Proto-Austronesian and Proto-Malayo-Polynesian were agglutinative. Although there are presently also quite a few languages that tend to be fusional or even isolating, historical reconstruction of Austronesian morphology indicates that these are secondary developments, and that the languages in question must derive from an agglutinative original stage. In Proto-Austronesian/Proto-Malayo-Polynesian, prefixes were the most numerous, indicating, among other things, causality, inchoativity, potentiality, instrument voice,

aspect, and stative and dynamic action. There were also various suffixes (indicating several voice categories as well as mood), and two infixes (one indicating perfectivity, the other, actor orientation). These were verbal affixes, but they also appeared in deverbal nouns. A typical nominalizing affix combination was the confix *ka-/-an*, which derived nouns denoting a quality from stative verbs. In many Austronesian languages adjectives are basically stative verbs, and they have been reconstructed as such for both Proto-Austronesian and Proto-Malayo-Polynesian.

4. Morphosyntax

The many Austronesian languages are typologically rather diverse in their morphosyntax and hardly lend themselves to a general characterization. Three important areas can be distinguished, each representing a different pattern of verbal morphosyntax. These areas and patterns are neither exclusive (i.e. they can overlap), nor do they cover all morpho-syntactic variation in the Austronesian world.

Many languages in western Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, Taiwan, and the Philippines are “symmetrical voice” languages. They are either predicate-initial (and subject-final) or they have an SVO clause structure. They have “at least two voice alternations marked on the verb, neither of which is clearly the basic form” (Himmelman 2005: 112), meaning that these voice alternations are each marked to an equal extent, and one is not a transformation of the other (unlike European languages, where the passive is a heavily marked transformation of the active). Within this type, a further distinction is made between the so-called “Philippine-type” languages spoken in the Philippines and surrounding areas, and the “West-Indonesian-type” languages represented in Sumatra, Java, Bali, Lombok and Borneo. Philippine-type languages have at least two formally and semantically different undergoer voices, phrase-marking clitics for nominal expressions, and pronominal second position clitics (cf. Himmelman 2005: 113). “West-Indonesian” languages have a simple active vs. passive voice opposition. They also have various applicatives selecting different objects, which can be raised to subject in passive clauses.

In eastern Indonesia in the interface area of Austronesian and Papuan languages, the so-called “preposed possessor” pattern prevails, in which the possessor precedes the possessum in noun phrases. Preposed possessor languages have an SVO clause structure. They usually have no voice alternations, and if they have them, these alternations are not symmetrical; they often distinguish between alienable and inalienable possession, and have person-marking prefixes or proclitics for Subject/Actor arguments; verbs are in second position or in final position, and negators often occur in clause-final position (Himmelman 2005: 175).

In the Oceanic languages of the Pacific (which form a genetic subgroup within East-Malayo-Polynesian),

subjects are co-referenced by a prefix or proclitic to the verb, objects by a suffix or enclitic. Verbs often fall into morphologically related pairs with a transitive and an intransitive member. In some languages these verb pairs in turn fall into two classes. With A-verbs, the subject of both members is the Actor. With U-verbs, the subject of the intransitive is the Undergoer, which is to say, it corresponds to the object of the transitive. (Ross 2004: 491)

Verbs can be suffixed with various applicatives, which take on different objects. Oceanic languages also distinguish between alienable and inalienable possession (Ross 2004: 491). Most Oceanic languages have VO order, with the position of the subject varying across groups and regions; within the verbal complex, the order of the verb and clitic pronouns is SVO.

Historical linguists and typologists are currently trying to find out how these different morphosyntactic models have developed from one another. There is a growing consensus that the Austronesian and Malayo-Polynesian protolanguages must have had a Philippine-type structure. The West-Indonesian-type and Oceanic-type structures are considered to be regular transformations of the Philippine-type structure. The preposed possessor-type structure, on the other hand, is seen as the result of intensive contact with neighbouring Papuan languages, which often share the same typological features. Ross (1995) and Ross (in press) are comprehensive sources for the reconstruction of Proto-Austronesian morphosyntax.

5. Recommended further reading

Two recent reference works which include up-to-date historical linguistic information are Lynch, Ross, and Crowley (2002) on Oceanic languages, and Adelaar and Himmelmann (2005) on other Austronesian languages. An older but still useful work with much introductory information on the Austronesian language family is the *Comparative Austronesian dictionary* by Tryon et al (eds.).

The chapters by Durie and Ross, Blust, and Grace in Durie and Ross (1996) reflect on the use of the comparative method in Austronesian linguistics. Some older publications which nonetheless give an interesting view on the development of the discipline are Dyen (1971) and Dahl (1976). Pawley and Ross (eds.) (1994) gives an overview of Austronesian terminologies.

Himmelmann (2005) gives a good survey of Austronesian typological variety; Reid and Liao (2004) do the same for Philippine languages, and Ross (2004) for Oceanic languages. Wouk and Ross (eds.) (2002) deal with the history and typology of West-Austronesian voice systems.

Robert Blust has had an immense impact on the field ever since 1970. This has extended to Proto-Austronesian/Proto-Malayo-Polynesian phonology, lexicon, morphosyntax, semantics and lexical taxonomies, as well as to classifications of Austronesian languages at all levels, homeland theories, and the reconstruction of Proto-Austronesian/Proto-Malayo-Polynesian social organization and material culture. Within the limits of this chapter it is impossible to discuss the full extent of his contribution. Reference will only be made to his most important contributions, which include an 800-page introduction to Austronesian linguistics covering all the issues mentioned above (Blust [2009] 2013), the aforementioned monograph on root theory (1988), an extensive Austronesian Comparative Dictionary (Blust and Trussel), and various other publications containing lexical reconstructions (Blust and Trussel 1970, 1976, 1980, 1983–1984, 1986, 1989). The latter all appeared in *Oceanic Linguistics*, the main journal of Austronesian linguistics and an important outlet for Blust's publications. Blust 1991, 1993, 1995, and 1998 are some of his publications on subgrouping.

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14. The comparative method in Australian linguistics

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1. Introduction

Comparative linguistics has finally come of age in Australia, particularly in the past two decades. While this chapter ends with a brief summary of recent studies, it devotes more space to earlier work, which tends to be more revealing of the particular nature of the Australian linguistic area.

2. Early studies and the problem of attestation

Until recently the comparative study of Australian languages was severely hampered by the extremely poor data available. Even today many of the languages which are no longer spoken are known mainly from early wordlists recorded by interested pastoralists, police constables, and other non-linguists. Such attestation began with Captain Cook's