

Preposed possessor languages in a wider context

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The fact that the Austronesian languages west of New Guinea can be divided, typologically, into two groups has long been known. Recently Himmelmann 2005 has proposed seven features which define these two linguistic types. He calls the eastern group the 'preposed possessor languages', taking one of the seven features as especially salient. Although Himmelmann is careful to stress that Austronesian languages of this type are not confined to eastern Indonesia, he acknowledges that such languages are concentrated in that region. It has been suggested that at least one of the features Himmelmann lists, clause final negation, is an example of a non-Austronesian trait which has been borrowed into the immigrant Austronesian languages (Klamer et al. to appear, Reesink 2002), and this suggestion makes part of a recent (and ongoing) debate about what features might characterise a possible 'linguistic area' in eastern Indonesia, and what the source of such features might be (Donohue 2004, Klamer 2002, Ross 2003).

This paper examines the distribution of Himmelmann's seven features in a sample of non-Austronesian languages in order to address the question of whether others of them besides the position of negation might be considered as areal features. The initial focus is on Halmahera and the Bird's Head, and Timor, Alor and Pantar, that is, the geographically closest non-Austronesian languages. We also extend the investigation to other parts of New Guinea, such as the north coast (the non-Austronesian languages of Yapen, and the languages of Jayapura), the south coast (Asmat and interior Awyu-Dumut languages), and the central highlands (Ekari, Damal, Dani and Mek), in order to address two additional questions: firstly, how useful is to speak of 'Papuan' features in general, rather than of a number of geographically circumscribed areas within which smaller groups of languages display areal traits, as suggested by Donohue 2005. Secondly, whether the features identified by Himmelmann are of any value in attempting such differentiation within the non-Austronesian languages of eastern Indonesia and New Guinea.

References:

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