

Punan and Penan languages of Borneo: Are they related?

This paper presents a study of the languages of some of the Borneo hunter-gatherers. As is well known, 'Penan' or 'Punan' is the term used indiscriminately to refer to most hunter-gatherers in Borneo. Penan is the term generally used to refer to a group of hunter-gatherers living in Sarawak and classified into Eastern and Western Penan whereas Punan is the term preferred in Kalimantan. Some scholars refer with this term to groups that are not mutually intelligible by other Penan. In a recent publication, Sercombe & Sellato (2007) propose a new definition: Pnan. The problem in classifying the Pnan languages is that the same group often seems to be called by different names in different areas and that there is a strong heterogeneity among the many groups of hunter-gatherers in Borneo, therefore detailed linguistic research should be carried out to cover all the Pnan languages, mapping them and defining their position within linguistic subgroups. The main purpose of this preliminary work is to demonstrate whether Punan and Penan languages are related or not.

This paper first provides a broad overview of the hunter-gatherers and their languages and then it focuses on the phonological, morphological and lexical differences among four different Pnan languages, mainly the Penan Benalui, the Punan Tubu', the Punan Malinau Segah and the Dayak Asi'i (Punan Basap) of which the author has primary data. These data will be then compared to secondary data on Hovongan, Bukat, Kereho, Punan Kelai languages collected by different authors like Sellato (personal notes, 2005) and Guerreiro (personal notes, 1996, and 2009) and subsequently will be examined against the most recent classification proposed by Ethnologue (Lewis, 2009).

The classification of Pnan languages is a complex problem. In the linguistic classifications Pnan languages are always related to languages spoken by non-Pnan people (see Blust, 1974, 1998, Sercombe 2002 and 2006, Ethnologue 15th edition – Gordon 2005, for instance). The classifications so far provided have always listed Penan/Punan languages as members either of Kenyah or Kayan subgroups of the Kayan-Kenyah family though no overall linguistic research within this controversial group has ever been undertaken. In particular, Penan languages are listed within the Kenyah subgroups whereas other Punan languages like the Punan Tubu' or the Punan Segah are classified within the Kayanic group, though such classifications have never attempted to make a clear distinction between borrowed and inherited materials. Very often, the Pnan, the Kenyah and the Kayan people are both linguistically and culturally associated and it is the purpose of this research to more rigorously assess the complexity of language and history in this particular context of relations between non-sedentary and sedentary populations. The evident similarities with Kenyah and Kayan languages may be derived exclusively from borrowings from the agriculturists.

Linguists and anthropologists have proposed different hypothesis on the origins of hunter-gatherers. These groups are separate populations that have borrowed linguistic and cultural elements from agricultural populations (Sellato 1993, 1994) or that these populations are derived from settled agricultural peoples and underwent a process of 'devolution' (Blust 1974, Hoffman 1986, Bellwood 1999). Another possibility not yet widely explored is that these people belong to multiple groups of foragers who are not necessary related to each other either culturally or linguistically.

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