

Deictic categories in three languages of Eastern Indonesia

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Abstract

Many languages in Eastern Indonesia, whether they are Austronesian or Non-Austronesian, have a complicated system of reference to space. In this paper two Non-Austronesian languages (Blagar and Nimboran) and one Austronesian language (Biak) are compared.

Blagar is spoken on the island of Pura and the opposite coast of Pantar in the Alor archipelago north of Timor by an estimated 10,000 speaker of all generations, twenty years ago Nimboran was still spoken by some 2,000 speakers (mainly older adults) in a number of villages west of Lake Sentani in North Papua. Biak is spoken mainly in the Biak Archipelago in the Cenderawasih Bay (West Papua) and some of the Raja Ampat Islands to the west. Although also under pressure from Indonesian and regional Malay Biak is still vigorously spoken by several tens of thousands of speakers.

Blagar and Nimboran have been identified as representatives of two different subgroups of the Trans-New Guinea Phylum, respectively the Timor-Alor and the Nimboran subgroup. Biak belongs to the South Halmahera-West New Guinea sub-group of Eastern Malayo-Polynesian.

Biak has an elaborate system of spatial determiners in which landmarks are prominent alongside elevational categories and relative distance and direction vis-à-vis the deictic centre. The prominence of landmarks in the system is a typical Austronesian feature. It is lacking in the two Non-Austronesian languages, but that is practically the only feature these latter two languages have in common. Blagar is to a high degree isolating and has several parallel lexical sets of morphologically related words and particles which not only spatially specify entities and events but also have modal and aspectual functions depending on their syntactic position. Nimboran on the other hand expresses all spatial and a whole lot of other information in the morphology of the verb, the maximal paradigm of which numbers more than 4000 forms.