

Semnam: an Orang Asli language of Perak, Peninsular Malaysia

Sub-fields

linguistic description, endangered languages research, phonology, morphology, syntax, lexicon

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Semnam, also known as Lanoh, is a previously undescribed Aslian (Mon-Khmer) language spoken by c. 250 Orang Asli near Lenggong, in Perak, Peninsular Malaysia. This paper reports on initial linguistic analysis of the language, based on fieldwork conducted 2006-2008. It outlines the rich phonemic system of the language (displaying, for example, 36 contrasting vowel nuclei), its elaborate morphological processes, as well as general syntactic features. A preliminary typological and lexical comparison is made with other Aslian languages, such as Temiar (Benjamin 1976), Semelai (Kruspe 2004), and Jahai (Burenhult 2005). Semnam shares several structural features with its closest relatives, including the rich phonology and productive morphology typical of Aslian languages. Nevertheless, it exhibits the most saturated vowel system so far discovered in Aslian, and it employs some allomorphic processes unknown elsewhere. Although historical phonology shows that Semnam is a member of the Central subbranch of Aslian (along with Temiar and Semai, cf. Diffloth & Zide 1992), analyses of its basic vocabulary point to significant lexical similarity to members of the Northern subbranch, spoken by culturally more closely related groups of people.

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