

Tapan: An Exploration in Malayic Subgrouping

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At present, research into the Malayic language family has not produced any well-established internal subgroupings. In part, this is due to objective reasons: Malayic languages have been the scene of extensive language contact and horizontal transmission of linguistic features, which make it difficult to establish a single tree structure for the entirety of the family. In addition, though, the absence of any agreed-upon subgroups is also probably due to insufficient scholarship in this particular domain. However, even a cursory inspection of the data suggests the existence of several plausible albeit rather shallow subgroups, islands of tree structure, as it were, within a sea of dialects and languages less amenable to cladistic analysis. One obvious example of such a subgroup is provided by the various dialects of Minangkabau.

This paper presents a preliminary exploration of one particular language variety at the margins of the Minangkabau speaking area, namely Tapan, spoken in the eponymous town situated on the southern coast of West Sumatra province near the border with Bengkulu province. The coastal region straddling the boundary between these two provinces is one of considerable linguistic diversity, mostly still undescribed. The present study draws upon data compiled by the Padang Field Station of the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, including a corpus of naturalistic speech data from Tapan, plus lexical databases from Tapan, neighboring language varieties including Surantiah Minangkabau to the north, Muko-Muko to the south, and Sungai Penuh and Rawang Kerinci to the east, plus other Malayic languages further afield.

This paper attempts to position Tapan within the Malayic language family. Taking into account the absence of agreed-upon internal subgroupings, the following three hypotheses are entertained: (a) Tapan belongs to the Minangkabau family; (b) Tapan is not a Minangkabau language, but is nevertheless closely related to Minangkabau, belonging, together with Minangkabau and perhaps other languages, to a Greater Minangkabau family; (c) Tapan is not particularly closely related to Minangkabau. In order to test the above hypotheses, two strategies are invoked and their results compared: the classical historical-comparative method defining subgroups in terms of shared innovations, and the Automated Similarity Judgment Program developed at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology. At the time of writing, work is still in progress: while preliminary results seem to point in the direction of hypothesis (b), this may change by the time this paper is presented.