

Single handclaps in Papuan Malay – Why some of them avoid stress:

Abstract

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Papuan Malay, a nonstandard variety of Malay, is spoken in coastal West Papua. This paper discusses a particular form of gestures used by Papuan Malay speakers, namely single handclaps. More specifically, the paper explores why some of the attested handclaps avoid stress in that they are anchored with an unstressed syllable of their embedding lexemes.

The discussion is based on an analysis of 136 single handclap tokens recorded during narratives and spontaneous conversations between Papuan Malay speakers.

Papuan Malay speakers employ single handclaps to accentuate or emphasize particular constituents of their discourse and thereby to reveal their conception of the discourse as a whole. Half of the handclaps are either associated with discourse elements pertaining to the discourse organization or to the relations between propositions. Other discursive environments are, for example, reactions to propositions, interaction management, or attitude specification.

The analysis of the phonological environments of the recorded handclaps shows that the majority are embedded with the stressed syllable of their lexical anchor points, while about one quarter precedes or follows their anchor points with an audible delay. The remaining handclap tokens, however, are anchored with an unstressed syllable of their respective anchor points.

This paper explores the reasons for this phonologically unexpected behavior, showing that most of these handclap tokens can be explained in terms of their syntactic embedding. More specifically, the data indicate an overall preference for the handclap tokens to occur in clause-boundary position. The example below illustrates this preference with the speaker anchoring her handclap with the unstressed ultimate syllable of the clause-final lexeme *begini* ‘like this’.

(1) baru Magda pu mata ni besar **begini** ||
and.then Magda POSS eye D.PROX be.big like.this

[After having seen a ghost:] ‘and then Magda’s eyes here (got) big like **this**||’

[The single handclap is signified by two juxtaposed vertical lines “||”, the lexical anchor point for the single handclap is bolded, and the stressed syllable of the anchor point is marked with the acute accent which signals the slight increase in pitch.]