

A first look at grammatical structure of West Damar or Damar Batumerah: a language of Eastern Indonesia

Svetlana F. Chlenova
Moscow State Lomonosov University

The paper deals with some aspects of the grammatical structure of West Damar or Damar Batumerah, an Austronesian language spoken in villages Batumerah and Kwai on the northwestern coast of Damar island (Eastern Indonesia).

Damar Batumerah obviously occupies a specific place in the area. Lexicostatistically Damar Batumerah shows a significant proximity to the other languages of Southwest Maluku but the coefficient of proximity is lower than that inside the Kisar–Leti dialect chain (Chlenov 1976: 210–211) and its historical phonology is quite distinct from phonology of the nearby languages (Chlenova and Chlenov 2006). Taber’s lexicostatistical study basing on 193 items wordlists of the Southwest Maluku languages (1993) also defines the status of this language as unclear.

In fact, until now Damar Batumerah remains unexplored. In this paper I have taken a very preliminary look at its grammatical system since all data on the language are only from our informant S. Lutrunawawoy, a native speaker of village Batumerah and the material is rather limited: above 500 items wordlist, a set of 36 elicited sentences and two verbal paradigms.

In the analysis it was very helpful to compare the set of the Damar Batumerah sentences with their equivalents in the other languages of Southwest Moluccan group available in our basic questionnaire: Leti, Meher (Kisar), Moa, Luang (Sermata), Nila, Serua, Damar Batumerah, Tepa-Teun, Daweloor. Typologically Damar Batumerah is similar to other languages of the region. It has Subject-Verb-Object word order, subject agreement on verbs, no passive voice, tense and aspect marked through adverbials, no formal alienable/inalienable and singular/plural distinction on nouns, preposed genitive, apocope and metathesis as a device to link morphemes within the phrase.

A salient feature of Damar Batumerah morphology is the final affix /o/ that can be categorized as a productive one which co-occurs with nouns, verbs, adjectives when they appear as free forms.

Another specific proper of Damar Batumerah is negation through circumfixation. The internal-clausal negator *ke-we* is attached to nouns, verbs and adjectives. This feature does not attested in the other Southwest Moluccan languages but it is characteristic to some Austronesian languages of Timor, for instance in Viqueque, where we find the pre-verbal negative marker as circumfix *ka-fa* (Hull 2001:172).

The conclusions drawn here are very tentative. Closer examination of the Damar Batumerah grammatical structure would require more complete data.

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