From words to history in Alor Pantar

The Alor-Pantar (AP) family comprises ~20 Papuan (or 'non-Austronesian') languages spoken in the Alor Pantar archipelago in eastern Indonesia (Holton et al. 2012 (=H2012) Holton & Robinson 2014a, Holton & Robinson 2014b, Klamer 2014a). The subgrouping of this family has proven to be a challenging issue. H2012 reconstructed the internal relationship between the AP languages on the basis of shared innovations of consonants in the history of the family, see Fig. 1. One of the striking characteristics of this tree is that it has so little resolution: the Pantar languages directly branch off from proto-Alor Pantar without an intermediate node, and the Alor subgroup has only few lower-level subgroups.
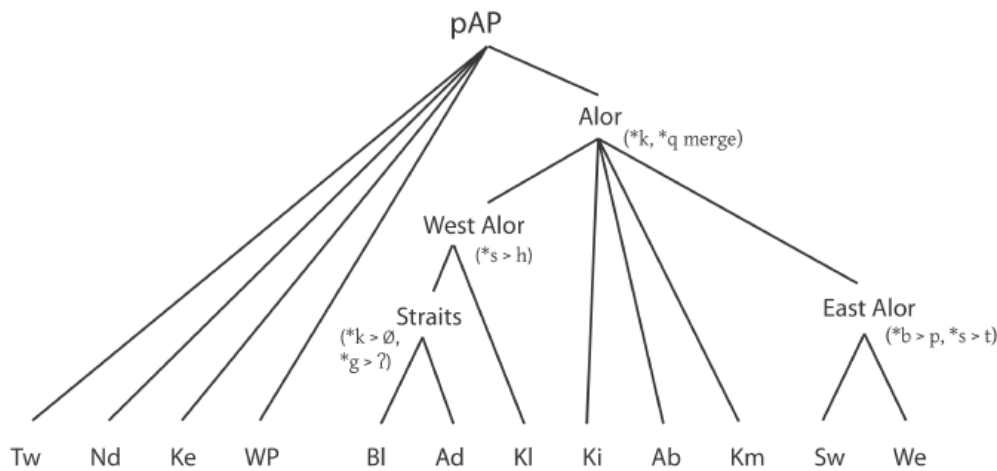

Fig 1. Subgrouping of the Alor-Pantar language family based on shared phonological innovations (H2012)

While a number of regular consonant changes were attested in H2012, only a few of these (given in Fig. 1) were actually considered to define subgroups within the family. It was asserted that this apparent lack of phonetic historical signal in the AP family was due to either parallel sound changes, or sound changes that got diffused after subgroups had been formed.

The proposal in H2012 was based on a ~200 item word lists of lexical data collected before 2009. Since then, much additional comparative lexical data has been collected on the AP languages so that a re-assessment of the earlier subgrouping proposal is now in order. The current paper investigates ~400 item lexical lists from 27 language/dialect varieties.

By studying consonant innovation alongside - for the first time - lexical innovation, we are able to substantially refine the subgrouping of the AP family. We also assess patterns of lexical borrowing and sound change diffusion between subgroups. It appears that the lexical signal is much more crucial in the reconstruction of the vertical language history in Alor Pantar than the phonetic signal.

References

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