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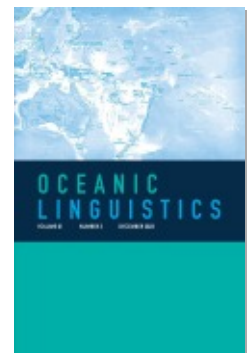
Austronesian Undressed: How and Why Languages Become Isolating ed. by David Gil and Antoinette Schapper (review)

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Book Reviews

David Gil and Antoinette Schapper (eds.) 2020. *Austronesian Undressed: How and Why Languages Become Isolating* (Typological Studies in Language 129). Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company. ix + 510 pp. ISBN 978-90-272-0790-6 (HB), 978-90-272-6053-6 (E-Book).

The book under review is an edited volume with the goal of addressing the question posed in its title: how and why Austronesian languages become isolating. More specifically, it concerns the Austronesian languages in an area which David Gil describes as a crescent, stretching from Hainan Island in the north, along coastal Mainland Southeast Asia into most of the Malay/Indonesian archipelago, with the other tip of the crescent at the Bird's Head of New Guinea. The question posed by this book is of great interest and significance to both Austronesianists and a wider audience in fields such as historical linguistics, language contact, creolistics, and typology, for at least two reasons. For one, within the Austronesian family there is a tendency of simplification from Formosan and Philippine languages, which exhibit a considerably higher degree of morphosyntactic complexity, to those currently found in the so-called Isolating Crescent. Such a trend roughly correlates with the direction of the Austronesian dispersal, hence the study undertaken here is a probe into the history of Austronesian languages and their speakers as a whole. In addition, isolating languages appear to be the anomalies on a world-wide scale. The study of isolating Austronesian languages therefore relates to a broader inquiry into whether there is any common driving force behind the simplification processes of languages in general.

This volume contains ten main chapters dealing with a wide range of Austronesian languages, including Cham, Riau Indonesian, Minangkabau, Javanese, Central Flores languages, Alorese and its close relative Lamaholot, Tetun Dili, and the languages of eastern Timor. Also included in the volume is an introduction which sets the scene for the book with a concise summary for each chapter, as well as a concluding chapter by John McWhorter (who introduced the metaphor of languages “undressing”) with a critical review on much of the content.

Chapter 1 by David Gil opens with the question of what it means to be an isolating language. Traditionally, the isolating nature of a language is associated with a low morpheme per word ratio, but it is notoriously difficult to properly define wordhood, upon which the notion of isolating rests crucially (Dixon and Aikhenvald 2002; Haspelmath 2011). Here, Gil defines *word* as a structural unit characterized by the convergence of a set of language-specific properties, and proposes a novel definition of isolating language as one that lacks a robust

structural unit of word. As Gil then demonstrates, a language like Riau Indonesian has few properties that can converge to define this unit of word, which means that Riau Indonesian has little morphological structure, and is therefore isolating. This chapter evokes some insightful thinking on morphological complexity and illuminates it with an elaborated and thorough case study. However, since the potential sources of evidence for wordhood are language specific, the question remains as to whether this view on morphological typology is readily applicable to other languages on a practical level, with crosslinguistically comparable results. Notably, while Gil intends to lay the groundwork for the remainder of the volume, his definition of isolating languages is not adopted in other chapters (except for an additional chapter on Riau Indonesian by Gil himself).

The subsequent chapters present a range of rich and original data on *how* and to what extent the Austronesian languages in the Isolating Crescent display isolating structures, and many of them also emphasize the question of *why*. As is argued in most chapters, morphological loss and isolating traits can often be ascribed to language contact, but exactly what kind of contact scenario led to simplification remains a question that is subject to different interpretations. Much of the discussion in this volume centers around the debate between two views: a pre-Austronesian substratum or insufficient adult acquisition. I shall summarize and evaluate these two views in turn.

Three chapters endorse the idea that the isolating profiles of the Austronesian languages under investigation reflect the structure of a pre-Austronesian substratum, which echoes the hypothesis of the Mekong-Mamberamo linguistic area (Gil 2015). The Mekong-Mamberamo linguistic area is proposed as an ancient linguistic area combining Mainland Southeast Asia, the Malay/Indonesian archipelago, and western parts of New Guinea (hence largely overlapping with the Isolating Crescent described above), which existed prior to the influx of Austronesian languages in the region. In chapter 3, Gil argues that the seemingly exceptional isolating structure of Riau Indonesian is the regional norm, which is not only prevalent in varieties of Malay/Indonesian, but also in other languages of Western Nusantara and the whole Mekong-Mamberamo linguistic area. The isolating grammar of Riau Indonesian and its relatives reflects the original state of the Mekong-Mamberamo languages *in situ*, whereas their lexicon is inherited from the incoming Austronesian languages, hence a “dual heritage.” Chapters 5 and 6, by Thomas Connors on Javanese dialects and Alexander Elias on Central Flores languages, respectively, take a similar stand, and they can be viewed as more concrete illustrations of the scenario proposed by Gil. By examining data from a geographically widespread range of Javanese dialects, Connors asserts that Central Javanese, which is often considered exemplary of Javanese as a whole, is actually the outlier with innovative features. The “peripheral” Javanese dialects exhibit more isolating traits, and they represent a fuller picture of the Javanese grammar and hint at the earlier state of Javanese being more isolating. In chapter 6, Elias assesses the manifestation of Mekong-Mamberamo features in Central Flores languages, and comes to the

conclusion that when viewed from a Mekong-Mamberamo perspective, the isolating typology of Central Flores languages is neither surprising nor unusual.

Alternatively, a scenario of simplification through imperfect acquisition by adults is explored in Marian Klamer's chapter on the morphological loss in Alorese (chapter 7). By comparing the morphology of Alorese with that of its sister language Lewoingu-Lamaholot, paired with evidence from historical sources and oral traditions, Klamer infers that Alorese underwent drastic morphological loss after moving away from its homeland in Flores. Placing the linguistic data against the sociolinguistic background of Alorese being used as a language of trade and interethnic communication, both in the past and at present, Klamer concludes that the simplification of Alorese must have taken place through adult language contact. The history of Alorese exemplifies the view taken by McWhorter in a series of publications (2007, 2008, among others), who makes a strong claim that all isolating languages have developed as the results of insufficient adult acquisition. Many chapters in this volume, including the aforementioned chapters by Gil and Elias, engage themselves with this claim with the intention of refuting it. In the concluding reflections, McWhorter comments on the alternative accounts offered by these chapters and defends his position, and the discussion eventually ends in a peaceful disagreement.

Without wanting to take part in the debate directly, I find it worthwhile to point out some weaknesses in certain arguments presented in the chapters summarized above, especially those concerning the hypothesis of a Mekong-Mamberamo linguistic area with pre-Austronesian isolating languages. Overall, the link between the data and the hypothesis is weak and inadequately supported, and more often than not the proposed scenario creates more problems than it solves.

To begin with, the Mekong-Mamberamo linguistic area is reported to have a time depth of approximately 3500 to 4000 years (Gil 2015; chapter 3 in this volume). If the isolating structure of Riau Indonesian reflects substratal influences which go back so far in time, one wonders why Proto-Malayic, the direct ancestral language of Riau Indonesian and other Malayic varieties, has been reconstructed with over a dozen affixes (Adelaar 1992) but presumably has a much shorter history of less than 2500 years (Blust 1985). Confronted with this problem, Gil suggests that the affixes in Proto-Malayic were in fact borrowed, and pre-Proto-Malayic was probably an analytic, isolating language. This scenario is ingenious, but hardly plausible. First, most affixes reconstructed in Proto-Malayic are retentions from Proto-Malayo-Polynesian. There is no sociohistorical background supporting a contact scenario between pre-Proto-Malayic with neighboring Austronesian languages, whatever they were, which would result in such extensive borrowing of morphology. Furthermore, if anything, the neighboring donor languages must have also been spoken in the Mekong-Mamberamo area, thus would have encountered the same local isolating languages. The question is then, why did the Austronesian affixes survive in those hypothetical donor languages?

Next, in the treatment of peripheral Javanese dialects, Connors provides lexical evidence to support the claim that Central Javanese is innovative, but it suffers from two drawbacks. First, the lexical evidence presented in this chapter has little statistical significance: it is merely a selection of comparisons where Central Javanese replaced the original lexeme. Second, the degree of innovation in the lexicon does not necessarily correlate to that in the morphosyntax. The standard/prestigious varieties might have undergone more lexical replacements; for example, in the case of Standard Malay/Indonesian, centuries of influences from Sanskrit, Arabic, Portuguese, Dutch, and English are reflected in the lexicon, but it does not mean that Standard Malay/Indonesian is therefore morphosyntactically more innovative. Moreover, Connors rightfully mentions that “Old Javanese, similarly to other Austronesian languages such as the Philippine languages, marked a number of voice alternations primarily through a series of verbal prefixes and infixes” (p. 264). No matter how stripped the peripheral dialects might be in comparison to Central Javanese, when data from Old Javanese is taken into account, it is hardly imaginable that their ancestral language was isolating and analytic.

The history of Central Flores languages is apparently different from that of Riau Indonesian and peripheral Javanese dialects, as an isolating typology can indeed be reconstructed to the level of Proto-Central Flores. Elias suggests that Proto-Central Flores acquired its isolating grammar from the local Mekong-Mamberamo languages, whose speakers shifted to Austronesian “in a relatively short period of time, leaving a heavy grammatical influence but very little lexical influence” (p. 332). Assuming that the language shift took place at the time of the original Austronesian settlement of Flores, he dates the contact back to 2500–1500 BCE. One obvious issue with this conclusion is that it is at odds with the author’s earlier statement on lexical evidence in the same chapter: “this evidence includes the loss of bound morphology and all coda consonants . . . as well as a *hefty amount* of innovative basic vocabulary” (p. 302, emphasis mine; also see [Elias 2018](#)). The data presented by Elias convincingly shows that Proto-Central Flores had traces of contact, which were manifested as lexical innovations, loss of morphology, simplified syllable structure, and a mixed quinary–decimal numeral system. From these observed changes, it is likely that Proto-Central Flores was the result of language shift. However, given the absence of an identifiable substrate language, there is no evidence indicating which speech community shifted its language or when the shift occurred. The exact historical scenario proposed in this paper hinges on the hypothesis of the existence of a Mekong-Mamberamo linguistic area, which, unfortunately, cannot be verified.

Moving beyond the topic of language contact, a few chapters argue that language-internal mechanisms may also contribute to morphological erosion and overall simplification. In chapter 2, Marc Brunelle demonstrates that the monosyllabic and affixless profile of modern Colloquial Eastern Cham developed in two stages. The first wave of simplification was already evident from Classical

Cham inscriptions, where much of the original Austronesian affixation had been lost. A more radical structural change took place in the last century when Cham was in contact with Vietnamese, but the role played by contact was only of an indirect nature. Brunelle suggests that the restructuring from iambic rhythm toward monosyllabization was under internal phonetic and phonological pressure, and the contact with Vietnamese only facilitated the change. Chapter 9 by Antoinette Schapper on the origins of isolating word structure in eastern Timor also brings up the importance of phonological changes in driving morphological reduction. This chapter primarily takes issue with the claim by McWhorter (2007) about languages in eastern Timor being unnaturally simplified. By presenting data from over a dozen Austronesian and Papuan languages in eastern Timor, Schapper shows that these languages retain some morphological complexity, and their morphological profiles fit well into the overall patterns of the Timorese Sprachbund; therefore, there is no need to call for an external explanation of heavy non-native acquisition.

Toward the end of this volume, chapter 10 by Mark Donohue and Tim Denham takes a broader perspective, noting that present-day Austronesian languages have diverse typological profiles with varying degrees of “Austronesian-ness” in their lexicon, phonology, and morphosyntax, which evidences the different sociohistorical backgrounds from which they have emerged. Some show traces of creolization, some reflect pre-Austronesian strata, and yet others are better considered as relexified non-Austronesian languages.

Other chapters in the current volume seem to be less pertinent to the general topic. In chapter 4, Sophie Crouch describes and compares the voice systems in Colloquial Minangkabau and Standard Minangkabau, showing that bare verbs in Colloquial Minangkabau are underspecified for voice distinctions, and the function of voice-marking affixes is primarily semantic and conceptual. From this perspective, Colloquial Minangkabau is more isolating than the standard variety. Chapter 8 by Catharina Williams-van Klinken and John Hajek explores the contact between two languages with disparate morphological profiles, focusing on the borrowing of the agent suffix *-dor* from Portuguese to Tetun Dili. The authors show that *-dor* has not only been borrowed as a suffix along with numerous Portuguese nouns, but also been reanalyzed as an independent word *door* which combines with native lexical items to form compound-like constructions under the pressure from the overall isolating structure of Tetun Dili. While these chapters also touch upon aspects of isolating Austronesian languages, they do not address the question of how and why these languages become isolating.

Finally, I have noticed some minor issues and editorial mistakes. In the discussion of *Pidgin Malay Derived* (PMD) dialects (pp. 124–27), Gil refers to Jakarta Indonesian as a prime example of a PMD that does not have the common PMD characteristics. The inclusion of Jakarta Indonesian as a PMD appears to be an inaccurate interpretation of the original source (Adelaar and Prentice 1996), in which Jakarta Indonesian and PMDs are merely mentioned in

two sentences in the same paragraph (admittedly the phrasing in Adelaar and Prentice (1996) is somewhat ambiguous). Language names for some examples are missing or labeled erroneously: the label of Papuan Malay is missing for example (3) on page 450, and examples (29) and (30) on page 230 should be labeled as Colloquial Minangkabau instead of Standard Minangkabau.

Notwithstanding the above criticisms, I find *Austronesian undressed* a valuable volume that presents the readers with a wide collection of new data, insightful analyses, and fascinating arguments on how and why Austronesian languages become isolating. The readers might find themselves concurring or disagreeing with some of the conclusions, as a volume like this is organized in such a way to promote the exchange of ideas. One could consider McWhorter's idea on creolization as theory-oriented, whereas most chapters presented in this book take an alternative view on the basis of data-oriented case studies. Ultimately these two approaches can benefit from each other, and they are nicely brought together in this volume, which is best read as a forum for dialogue.

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