

The Mekong-Mamberamo Linguistic Area

Bordering on Mainland Southeast Asia are three linguistic areas: to the west, South Asia; to the north, Northeast Asia; and to the southeast, Insular Southeast Asia. However, whereas the languages of Mainland Southeast Asia are typologically very distinct from those of South and Northeast Asia, they bear a much closer resemblance to those of Insular Southeast Asia. One common perspective is to view the languages of Insular Southeast Asia as constituting an extensive transitional zone between those of Mainland Southeast Asia on the one hand, and those of New Guinea and/or Australia on the other. However, such a perspective does not take into account the fact that languages in parts of Western New Guinea also bear a striking typological resemblance to those of Mainland Southeast Asia.

This paper proposes an alternative perspective on the linguistic geography of Mainland Southeast Asia and its extension to the southeast. Specifically, it is argued that Mainland Southeast Asia forms part of a larger Mekong-Mamberamo linguistic area, encompassing Mainland Southeast Asia, most of the Indonesian archipelago and western parts of New Guinea, and named after the two eponymous rivers at its two extremities. Languages of the Mekong-Mamberamo linguistic area characteristically exhibit the following linguistic features:

- (1) (a) repeated dental clicks expressing amazement
- (b) conventionalized greeting 'Where are you going?'
- (c) lexicalization 'eye day' > 'sun'
- (d) place of articulation symmetry *d/t*
- (e) basic SVO word order
- (f) weakly grammaticalized voice
- (g) verby adjectives
- (h) numeral classifiers
- (i) isolating word structure
- (j) short content morphemes
- (k) short words
- (l) high content/function morpheme ratio
- (m) optional TAM marking

Thus, rather than constituting a transitional zone, Insular Southeast Asia with its mostly Austronesian languages, actually lies at the heart of a larger Mekong-Mamberamo linguistic area.

Within the Mekong-Mamberamo area, the above features are characteristic of Austronesian and non-Austronesian languages alike. However, both Taiwan, the Austronesian homeland, and the Philippines, into which Austronesian languages first spread, lie outside the Mekong-Mamberamo linguistic area, with the contemporary languages of those regions tending to exhibit fewer of the above features. Thus, it can be safely assumed that when Austronesian languages spread south, into the Indonesian archipelago, they picked up many of the characteristics of the Mekong-Mamberamo area. Some of the features in (1), most notably basic SVO word order, isolating word structure, and various other aspects of structural

simplicity, have been argued to be typical of creole languages. Accordingly, the adoption of Mekong-Mamberamo features by intrusive Austronesian may potentially have followed either of two alternative scenarios: assimilation to a typological profile already present in the pre-Austronesian languages of the area, or simplification due to massive imperfect second-language acquisition.