

Language Contact and Historical Reconstruction: The Case of Palembang Malay

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Older, native-born residents of the city of Palembang, as well as the residents of a few nearby villages, speak a group of closely related isolects which contain elements of both Malay and Javanese. For example, the core vocabulary, such as terms pertaining to body parts, exhibit a comparable proportion of Malay and Javanese. Thus *molot* 'mouth', *gigi* 'tooth', and *blakang* 'back' are clearly of Malay origin, while *sekel* 'foot', *gulu* 'neck', *cungur* 'nose', *ilat* 'tongue', *kopeng* 'ear', and *sikot* 'elbow' are Javanese. Some other terms can be assigned to either language: *rambot* 'hair', *tangan* 'hand', and *kolet* 'skin'. The same situation obtains for morphological elements.

The researcher who wishes to use material from these isolects for the purpose of historical reconstruction, must first examine them in their proper linguistic, social, and historical perspectives. If they are determined to be anything but direct descendants of Proto-Malayic, then their usefulness for historical reconstruction is greatly reduced.

For the isolects in question, three main hypotheses can be formulated:

1. This group of isolects developed from a form of Javanese, which was later partially relexified with Malay morphemes.
2. It was historically a mixed speech form such as a pidgin, used as a language for interethnic communication, which owed its origin to more than one language.
3. It was historically a form of Malay, which, though heavily influenced by Javanese, has retained enough of its core Malay structure and vocabulary to be classified as a Malay dialect.

If hypotheses (1) or (2) turn out to be correct, the isolects in question cannot be considered direct descendants of Proto-Malayic. If, on the other hand, hypothesis (3) is born out, then the isolects in question are indeed direct descendants of Proto-Malay, and material from can be used as input for historical reconstruction, using the comparative method. (We would still need to carefully weed out all the forms which were either directly borrowed from Javanese, or have undergone phonological interference from Javanese).

This study proposes a reconstruction of the core vocabulary of what is tentatively termed here Proto-Palembang, by comparing word lists collected in accordance with Blust's modified list of 200 core vocabulary items for Austronesian languages. Some grammatical features are also considered. The results indicate that despite the significant Javanese component of these isolects, they are still essentially Malay. Moreover, they exhibit regular similarities to some Malay dialects spoken in other areas, the most striking of which is the preservation of Proto-Malayic schwa in final closed syllables. The importance of this feature for the classification of Malayic isolects has long been recognized (e.g. Collins 1985, Adelaar 1992:34-39; Nothofer 1995:89). It is suggested here that it is regularly preserved only in isolects spoken in areas which were under direct Javanese rule for extended periods, and which exhibit

other signs of linguistic influence from Javanese. Therefore, the maintenance of this feature in these isolects is due to language contact. However, unlike more commonly recognized results of contact, such as loanwords, forms exhibiting this feature are valid as data for reconstruction.

References

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