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About Babar: Enigmatic Language Contacts in East Nusantara

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The region of the Southwest Moluccas and Timor and surrounding islands has been an area of heavy linguistic turmoil. Papuan languages classified as belonging to the Trans New Guinea Phylum (in the Alor archipelago, East Timor, and on the island of Kisar) are surrounded by Austronesian languages. Both the Non-Austronesian and the Austronesian languages in the area show an unusual degree of typological diversity, ranging from nearly isolating with predominantly open syllables and very few consonant clusters to heavily inflecting with CCVCC syllables and metathesis (progressive in one language, regressive in another) to indicate syntactic cohesion.

In this paper we will present data from one of the Austronesian Isolects of the Babar archipelago (the village of Letwurung, Lexwyorl in the local language). These data have been collected from the last remaining speaker of the language in the Netherlands. They will be compared with one of its closest relatives, Letinese, and with other languages in the area.

So far none of the Babarese isolects have been documented. A preliminary scenario is that rather radical sound changes have separated Babarese from Letinese, resulting in phonologically unusual word shapes such as in the following hortatory construction:

Mai p-y-o x-weapk lyapk paprlet's
in.order.to 1PLINC-speak language Babar

'Let's speak Babarese.'