

Where Did the Rejangs Come From?

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1. Introduction

Rejang is an isolated Austronesian language with roughly 200,000 speakers in five major dialect areas occupying the Barisan highlands in the Indonesian provinces of Bengkulu and South Sumatra. Rejang country is surrounded on three sides by various Malay dialects, and its western edge meets the Indonesian (Indian) Ocean. It is not to be confused with another language group with the same name occupying a territory near the mouth of the Rejang River in Sarawak, Malaysia. At one and the same time, however, there may well be a connection. McGinn (1999) raised this question and gave typological evidence. Section 3 of this paper continues along the lines of that quest. At the same time, Section 2 raises a new set of possibilities in search of a subgrouping hypothesis for the Sumatran Rejangs.

Rejang is a fairly well-studied language, at least from the point of view of its historical phonology, thanks in the main to a paper by Robert Blust (1984), which demonstrated that in this language there have been more changes in the vowels than in any other known Austronesian language. McGinn (1997, 1999) added further information, including the claim that pre-Rejang once had same stress pattern as contemporary Malay. In this pattern, the stress falls on the ultimate when the penult is schwa; otherwise on the penult. (In contemporary Rejang stress falls on the ultimate.) The advantage of reconstructing the Malay-type pattern for pre-Rejang is that a number of vocalic changes that had been described as irregular were shown to be regular.

The basis of the present paper is a set of 100+ ordered changes in phonology and morphology linking Rejang and Proto-Austronesian. (See Appendix 1 for a sample of the first 50+ changes.) The central rules in Rejang historical phonology affected unstressed reflexes of PMP *a. The rules

are shown as (31a-c) in Appendix 1, and summarized below.

(31a-c) *a > ə /-V:C__ (C[-velar])

This is a composite of three changes affecting unstressed *a word-finally in polysyllables.

31a. The first change affected pre-Rejang diphthongs

*aw and *ay (from PMP *aw, *ay, *ey), raising the nuclei to *əw and *əy (reflected as əw, əy in Lebong and Pasisir dialects; in Musi ie, uo; in Kebanagung əe, əo; and in Rawas uy, iw), e.g. *pisaw > Lebong pisəw 'knife' and *matay > Lebong matəy 'die'.

31b. The second change affected etyma with the shape CV:CaC except when the final -C was a velar; thus

*ta:ŋan > ta:ŋən 'hand', *surat > suʔət 'letter' and *zalan > dalən 'road' but *a:nak > a:naʔ 'child' and *da:qan > da:n 'branch'.

31c. The third change affected etyma with the shape CV:Ca; thus *bu:ŋa > *bu:ŋə (> *buŋi > buŋəy)

'flower' but *təka: > *təka: (> təkə) 'come'.

Rule 31 is central because it is dependent both for its regularity and its phonetic plausibility upon its interaction with two global patterns reconstructed for early pre-Rejang: the Malay-type stress pattern, and a set of syllable reductions (disyllabic and monosyllabic etyma reflecting PMP trisyllables and disyllables). See McGinn (1999) for discussion.

Of the three changes expressed in (31), change (31b) is the most promising for subgrouping purposes because it is both regular and typologically unusual. (Standard Malay shows virtually a mirror image change, reflecting *-eC as -aC in word-ending syllables: *taneq > Malay tanah; *qutek > Malay otak.) In this paper I shall explore the possibility that the three

factors just mentioned (change 31b, Malay-type stress pattern, set of syllable-reductions) might be useful in determining the position of Rejang in relation to other Austronesian languages. The quest is for a subgrouping hypothesis, hence an ‘external’ interpretation of the historical phonology, which would add to the contribution Rejang has already made to the study of sound change.

The basis of my subgrouping quest is the set of the first 50 changes shown in Appendix 1. These are assumed to represent the earliest changes in Rejang based on their relative ordering. The first six changes (not spelled out) merely identify Rejang as a member of the PMP subgroup. The next changes after PMP are the important ones for my purpose, especially (31b), as already mentioned. After (31a-c), the stress pattern shifted to the contemporary pattern (word-final) and the language began to diverge into the contemporary five major dialects.

2. Bedayuh (Land Dayak)

I assume that Rejang has no close relatives in Sumatra. In McGinn (1999) and in my SEALS X paper, I presented some data linking Rejang typologically with a set of Bornean languages, especially the Melanau dialects in Sarawak, one of which is called ‘Rejang’ (see below). During the discussion that followed my paper, Christopher Court pointed out that the “Bedayuh” languages spoken in the Serian District of Sarawak regularly show -əC reflecting PMP last-syllable *-aC except before velars, therefore satisfying the general description of Rejang change (31b). I have since read a brief account of Bedayuh phonology in Court (1967a), which does indeed suggest a resemblance to the Rejang rule. More on this below. In addition, there is a small bit of onomastic evidence pointing in the same direction. Three Sarawak place names in the Bedayuh district correspond suggestively with the names of villages in the Lebong dialect area of Rejang (Sumatra): Sarawak’s “Serian” (pronunciation unknown) corresponds with Lebong’s “Sien” [siən]; Batu Lintang (pronunciation

unknown) corresponds with Lebong's Butaw Litang [butaw litaŋ]; and Tapuh (pronunciation unknown) corresponds with Lebong's Topos [topos] (spelled Tapus on standard maps). On the strength of these threads of evidence, I now intend to explore the Bedayuh languages around Serian (as well as the Melanau group around the Rejang River) during my field trip to Sarawak in December 2000. Unfortunately, what linguistic information I have found through library research about the Bedayuh languages in general (see bibliography) does not suggest any close connection with Sumatran Rejang. The exception to this statement is the data provided by Court (1967a) mentioned above; moreover, Robert Blust (personal communication) has send me a wordlist for the Tapuh dialect provided to him by Donald Topping which corroborates Court's comment with respect to the existence of at least one Bedayuh dialect showing second-syllable schwas reflecting *a except before velars, e.g. beside Tapuh təŋətn 'hand', suʔət 'letter', berəs 'husked rice' and jərətn 'road' (cf. PMP *taŋan 'hand', *surat 'letter', *beRas 'husked rice' and *zalan 'road') one finds əmaŋ 'father', ləmak, 'fat', turakŋ 'bone', anak 'child', and deyaʔ 'blood' (cf. PMP *tuqelaN 'bone', *anak 'child', and *dalaq (*-q = velar) 'blood'). Finally, an interesting phonetic similarity is the feature of pre-stopped final nasals reported for both Rejang and Tapuh-Bedayuh; thus, beside Tapuh bulətn 'moon' one finds the 'pausal forms' of Rejang (e.g. bulən [bulədŋ] 'moon' reported in the literature (Voorhoeve 1955, McGinn 1982).

These data sets provide *prima facie* justification for investigating a possible genetic link between the Sumatran Rejangs and the speakers of Bedayuh-Tapuh. Thus a major goal of my upcoming field trip is to collect data from Tapuh and other dialects of the Serian district, and to reconstruct pre- (or Proto-) Bedayuh for purposes of comparison with pre-Rejang.