Waima'a, East Timor

Language endangerment and maintenance in a newly emerging nation

The Language

Waima'a is one of about a dozen Austronesian languages still being spoken in Timor-Leste (East Timor). It is typologically somewhat unusual, at least as far as Austronesian languages are concerned. Most importantly, Waima'a is largely isolating (i.e. it has next to no prefixes or suffixes on any of its words, much like Chinese or Thai). But its sound inventory is much larger than is typical for Austronesian languages, and includes rare speech sounds such as ejectives. Many of these special features are in all likelihood due to a long history of close interaction with speakers of neighbouring non-Austronesian and Austronesian languages.

\ref	005			
\tx	istoria	se	ta	hali/
\orth	istori	se	ta	hali
\glt	história	ida	mós	mós
\glm	cerita	satu	lagi	juga
\gle	history	one	again	also
\glp	história	um	também	também
\tlt	iha tan istoria ida			
\tlm	ada ceritera satu lagi			
\tle	there is one more story			
\tle	há mais uma história			
\dt	01/Apr/2004			

\lx	hali
\a	hal
\glt	mós
\Tn	mós
\glp	também
\Pt	também
\gle	also
\Eng	also
\glm	juga
\Ml	juga
\POS	V
\pht	
\Note	
\Ph_r	
\dt	24/Mar/2004
\syn	

The Waima'a team are working with five different languages in their annotations: Waima'a plus the official languages of East Timor - Tetum and Portuguese - as well as the (temporary) 'working languages' of the country - English and Malay.

The People

Local tradition has it that the name *Waima'a* is derived from the words *wai* 'water' and *ma'a* 'empty'. The Baucau plateau on which Waima'a is spoken is one of the driest regions in East Timor.

Buffalos are valued most highly in traditional Timorese barter.

The Waima'a people are hemmed in by two much larger populations, namely the Makasae to the east, and the Galoli to the west. Speakers live in small hamlets which have populations of 50-100 people.

A Waima'a ceremonial clan house or *uma fukun*

The location of the Waima'a language

As a relatively small cultural group, the Waima'a people have had a long history of interaction with speakers of other languages in the region. They thus exemplify in a highly typical way a striking feature of the East Timor area, i.e. the extent to which it may be viewed as a linguistic area (*Sprachbund*) as well as a cultural area (*Kulturbund*).

When the project began in 2002, signs of the post-referendum violence were still visible throughout the country.

The Project

The main phase of the Waima'a documentation project ran from 2002-2006. The team adopted a community-based approach to the documentation. This means that the basic documentation work (recording, first transcript, and translation into Tetum and Malay) was done by native speakers, in particular Maurício Belo.

Maurício Belo, the native speaker who collected most of the materials in the Waima'a corpus. In the background, you can see the Baucau plateau where Waima'a is spoken. It is extremely dry for most of the year, and not very fertile.

Cover of *The praying mantis and the ball of mud* book prepared for use in local schools

Core team members

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Members of the research team, Nikolaus Himmelmann (left), Maurício Belo (centre) and John Bowden (right), Waima'a speakers Degu Kai and a cousin of Belo (far left)

Acknowledgements

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