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Let's Talk about Trees

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Abstract

[Austronesian Language Case Studies 1]

Modeling the Linguistic Situation in the Philippines

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There are a considerable number of events that have affected the language situation in the Philippines over the last 4000 years. The first is the in-migration of Austronesian speakers into an area that was probably only occupied by non-Austronesian peoples speaking non-Austronesian languages. From all the available evidence these were Negrito peoples. The second significant event was the language shift by Negritos to speaking Austronesian languages. This was apparently not a single event but occurred multiple times, as Negrito peoples interacted with the Austronesian groups with whom they came into contact. The third significant event was the rapid spread south of Austronesian-speaking people, through Sulawesi and Borneo into Indonesia and the western Oceanic area within 500-800 years, bringing about a vastly extended dialect chain, which subsequently split into a large number of subgroups. The fourth significant event was the development of extensive trading networks resulting in widespread sharing of phonological and morphosyntactic features that have created the illusion of topological structural and phonological similarity, to the extent that 'Philippine-type' language is commonly used to characterize them. Subsequent events within the last 1000 years, such as the adoption of Islam in Mindanao, the influx of Malay and Chinese traders, the colonial policies of Spain, and then the Americans, and finally the globalization of English have all had major impacts, especially on the lexicon, but also on the phonology and to an increasing extent on the syntax of Philippine languages.

It is clear that no single model of change can cover each of these situations. The traditional comparative-historical method allows us to build bifurcating trees that capture the phonological changes that define genetically related languages. Such trees can also be adapted to capture the adoption of languages by one group from another, such as is found with the languages of Negritos but they fail to capture the extensive mutual influence and substratal effects resulting from chained dialects, trading networks, or extensive borrowing as a result of social, religious and political factors.

A network tree captures the spread of PMP to western Oceania, but other models are needed to demonstrate such features as substrata and other lexical influence from genetically and non-genetically related languages.