

The Sub-grouping of Sasak within the Austronesian Language Family: A Linguistic Controversy

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The Sasak language, spoken by the indigenous people of Lombok Island in Indonesia, has been the subject of much debate among linguists regarding its sub-grouping within the Austronesian language family. The controversy stems from two competing proposals: Adelaar’s (2005) Malayo-Sumbawan hypothesis, which places Sasak in a subgroup with Balinese and Sumbawa “Balinese-Sasak-Sumbawa (BSS),” and the alternative view put forth by Blust (2010) and Smith (2017), which includes Sasak in a larger “Western Indonesian (WIn)” subgroup. This paper aims to explore the arguments and evidence presented by both sides of the debate, analyze the implications for understanding Austronesian language history and relationships, and offer a perspective on which sub-grouping seems more persuasive based on the available data.

1 Overview of Sasak

Sasak is spoken on the island of Lombok, located in the Indonesian province of Nusa Tenggara Barat, just east of Bali. According to the 2010 Census, the Sasak people comprise approximately 85% of Lombok’s total population of 3,963,842 (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2024). Other ethnic groups on Lombok include an estimated 10–15% Balinese, with the small remainder being Tionghoa-Peranakan, Javanese, Sumbawanese, Arab Indonesians, and Chinese Indonesians. The Sasak people are thought to have originated from Java in the first millennium BC and are culturally and linguistically closely related to the Balinese.

Sasak has five major varieties based on regional distribution (Austin, 2004): Ngenó-Ngené (East Lombok: Selaparang), Menó-Mené (West and Central Lombok: Pejanggik and surroundings), Meriaq-Meriku (South and Central Lombok: Pujut), Kutó-Kuté (Northwest Lombok: Bayan), Ngetó-Ngeté (Northeast Lombok: Suralaga/Sembalun). Among these dialects, Ngenó-Ngené and Menó-Mené dialects are reported to be mutually intelligible, while the other three have limited mutual intelligibility (Staff, 1995). Javanese and the BSS subgroup share a large set of common lexicon, as Old Javanese gradually replaced Old Balinese as the literary language in Bali from the 9th century onward. Additionally, Sasak has been influenced by Javanese through Muslim contacts. The contacted parts of these languages have then stratified as a higher speech register, meaning that the high language register in the BSS languages is a loan stratum from Javanese. Consequently, the lower or unmarked registers in these languages would inherit and reflect the sound changes more regularly.

2 Adelaar's Malayo-Sumbawan (MS) and Balinese-Sasak-Sumbawa (BSS) Proposal

Adelaar (2005) proposed that Balinese, Sasak, and Sumbawa form a sub-group called Balinese-Sasak-Sumbawa (BSS), which is more closely related to Malay than to Javanese, forming the Malayo-Sumbawan subgroup (see Figure 1). This sub-grouping contradicts the previous Malayo-Javanic sub-grouping and excludes Javanese from the classification.

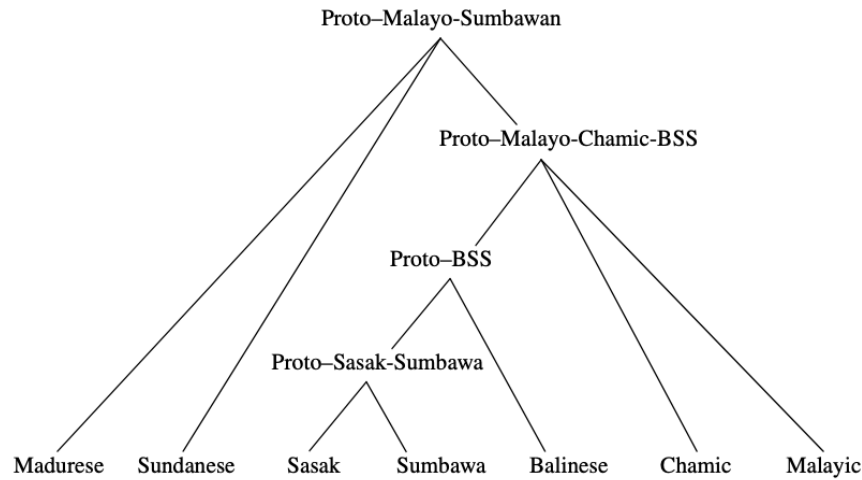


Figure 1: Malayo-Sumbawan Subgroup

Adelaar's evidence for this proposal is primarily based on lexical and phonological shared innovations. He identified 12 innovations from Proto-Malayo-Polynesian (PMP) to Proto-BSS (PBSS), out of which 8 are shared with Malayic. In comparison, Proto-Chamic (PC) shares 10 out of 17 innovations with Malayic, while Javanese shares 7 out of 14. Additional evidence can be found in numerals, where Malayic and Chamic have innovated the words for seven, eight, and nine, while BSS has retained the PMP forms. Adelaar argues that the strength of this sub-grouping lies in the totality of the shared developments and how they reinforce each other. He asserts that this grouping is more robust than the Malayo-Javanic sub-grouping, which is based on lexicostatistics. Adelaar points out that the loss of **w-* is the strongest indicator of this sub-grouping. While PBSS, along with Proto-Malayic (PM) and PC, lost the PMP **w-*, Proto-Malayo-Javanic (PMJ) and Javanese (Jav) have retained it. The following examples demonstrate the sound changes from PMP to PBSS, PM, PC, PMJ, Sasak, and Javanese:

- PMP **w-* > PM, PC, PBSS \emptyset > Sas \emptyset
 > PMJ **w-* > Jav *w-*
 PMP **wahiR* "water"

- > PBSS *air > Sas ai?
- > PMJ *waiR > Jav wé
- PMP *j
 - > PM, PC, PBSS *d > Sas d
 - > PMJ *l̥ > Jav r
 - *qijun̥ “nose”
 - > *hidun̥ > idun̥
 - > *hiḷun̥ > irun̥
- PMP *z
 - > PM, PC, PBSS *j > Sas j
 - > PMJ *z > Jav *d
 - *zahuq “far”
 - > *jauq > jao?
 - > *zauh > a-dòh
- PMP *R
 - > PM, PC, PBSS *r > Sas r
 - > PMJ *R > Jav Ø
 - *bəRat “heavy”
 - > *bərat > bərut
 - > *bəRRat > a-bòt

3 Alternative Sub-grouping by Blust (2010) and Smith (2017)

Blust (2010) and Smith (2017) proposed an alternative sub-grouping of languages in western Indonesia, challenging Adelaar’s (2005) Malayo-Sumbawan hypothesis. Blust argued that Sundanese, Chamic, and Malayic languages belong to the Greater North Borneo group, while Madurese, Sasak, Sumbawanese, and Balinese are part of a separate Western Indonesian (WIn) subgroup.

Blust criticized several of Adelaar’s proposed shared innovations, arguing that they are either too common or lack sufficient distinctiveness to be reliable indicators of subgrouping. For example, the merger of PMP *j > d is nearly universal in insular Southeast Asia, and the change of PMP *z > j is merely orthographic. The loss of initial *w- > Ø, which Adelaar presents as a key innovation, is problematic due to numerous exceptions and its sporadic occurrence in various Austronesian languages. Similarly, the developments of PMP *R (and *r) > r and PMP *q > h are too widespread to carry significant weight as subgrouping indicators. Blust also pointed out that Adelaar’s claim of *q > h in Sasak is not supported by the evidence, which suggests that word-

final *-q becomes a glottal stop in Sasak without an empirically motivated intermediate step of *-h.

Smith (2017) elaborated on the WIn subgroup, which includes all indigenous languages of Borneo and the Austronesian languages of Sumatra (excluding Batak, Barrier Islands languages, and Nasal), as well as Javanese, Madurese, and Balinese. However, he noted that the inclusion of languages from Java, Bali, and Lombok (Javanese, Madurese, Balinese, Sasak, and Sumbawa) in this subgroup is not straightforward. Although these languages merged PMP *j with *d, the lexical evidence for their inclusion in the subgroup is not as robust as one might hope. In Javanese, the strongest evidence comes from the words (*h*)*ulun* “I; servant” and *bubut* “a type of owl; coucal”, while the literary word *sue* “river” may be a Malay loanword. Balinese, Sasak, and Sumbawa have even less evidence for inclusion, with some potential reflexes of WIn innovations, such as Balinese *tkjut* “startled; shocked” and Sasak *bubut*, but also possible borrowings like Balinese *brua* “bear” and *duren* “durian”. The paucity of lexical evidence for including these languages in WIn compared to the languages of Borneo may be partially explained by the different ecologies of the islands. Many WIn innovations are faunal, based on the renaming of animals upon reentering the faunal zone of Mainland Southeast Asia after their names were lost during the migration through the Philippines. However, many of these animals are absent in Java, Bali, Lombok, and Sumbawa, particularly the latter two, which are located across the Wallace Line, resulting in the loss or repurposing of inherited words for these animals. Blust (2010) included Balinese, Sasak, Sumbawa, Madurese, and Javanese in the WIn subgroup partially due to their geographic position, proposing that the first Austronesian speakers arrived in this part of Island Southeast Asia in two separate groups, one following the northwest coast of Borneo and the other, ancestral to Barito and the languages mentioned in this section, traveling along the southeast coast.

4 Commentary

Adelaar’s proposal to exclude Javanese from the Malayo-Sumbawan subgroup and establish a closer relationship between Balinese, Sasak, and Sumbawa (BSS) seems problematic, given the deep-rooted influence of Javanese on the lexicon and culture of the BSS languages. The Sasak people have adopted various Javanese cultural traditions, including the caste system and an aristocracy modeled on the Javanese court. They were also influenced by Hindu-Buddhist cultural concepts and practices, including literacy, probably during the time of the Majapahit Empire’s influence in the 14th century. The Majapahit King Hayam Wuruk (1328-89) is said to have expanded Majapahit’s influence over Bali and claimed Lombok, Sumbawa, and parts of Sulawesi. In 1334, the Majapahit Regent is said to have visited the two most important Sasak kingdoms, Selaparang in east Lombok and Pejangik in central Lombok (Austin, 2004). In the 17th century, the

Islamic Makassarese empire established relations with the Selaparang Kingdom of east Lombok, introducing Islam and the Arabic script. Later, in 1740, the Karangasem Balinese conquered the island and introduced law books and other texts, established a priesthood, and promoted Balinese culture. These historical events and cultural influences highlight the complex linguistic situation in Lombok and the surrounding regions, with Javanese, Balinese, and Makassarese all playing significant roles in shaping the Sasak language and culture.

Despite the evidence for Javanese influence on Sasak, most scholars agree with Adelaar's sub-grouping within BSS, which places Sasak and Sumbawa as the closest relatives, followed by Balinese (Hidayat et al., 2019). However, to further support or refute these proposals, more evidence is needed. One valuable approach would be to consider dialect diversification and internal sub-grouping within the languages in question. For example, Sasak has five major dialects that have undergone a process of migration and diversification (Hidayat et al., 2019). To accurately reconstruct the language's history and relationships, data from the oldest attested dialect, such as the Kutó-Kuté and Ngetó-Ngeté dialects spoken by the first community to settle on Lombok island, should ideally be used. These dialects are believed to represent the Proto-Bayan-Sembalum dialect. However, most research and available data seem to focus on the more widely spoken Ngenó-Ngené and Menó-Mené dialects. While these dialects provide valuable insights, it is essential to reconsider the data sources and include information from the older dialects to gain a more comprehensive understanding of Sasak's linguistic history and relationships.

In conclusion, while Adelaar's proposal of a BSS subgroup within Malayo-Sumbawan is supported by most scholars, the exclusion of Javanese remains controversial, particularly in light of the historical and cultural evidence for Javanese influence on Sasak. To resolve this debate, more evidence from dialect diversification, internal sub-grouping, and an examination of contact-induced changes is necessary. By carefully considering data from the oldest attested dialects and investigating the influence of Javanese, Balinese, and Makassarese on the BSS languages, researchers can work towards a more accurate understanding of the linguistic history and relationships in this region.

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