

Reflections on linguistic fieldwork and language documentation in eastern Indonesia

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In this paper, we reflect on linguistic fieldwork and language documentation activities in Eastern Indonesia. We first present the rich linguistic and biological diversity of this region, which is of significant interest in typological and theoretical linguistics and language documentation. We then discuss certain central educational issues in relation to human resources, infrastructures, and institutional support, critical for high quality research and documentation. We argue that the issues are multidimensional and complex across all levels, posing sociocultural challenges in capacity-building programs. Finally, we reflect on the significance of the participation of local fieldworkers and communities and their contextual training.

1. Introduction In this paper, we reflect on linguistic fieldwork and language documentation in Eastern Indonesia. By “Eastern Indonesia,” we mean the region that stretches from Nusa Tenggara to Papua,¹ including Nusa Tenggara Timur, Sulawesi, and Maluku. This region is linguistically one of the most diverse regions in the world in terms of the number of unrelated languages and their structural properties, further discussed in the next section. This is the region where Nikolaus Himmelmann has done his linguistic

¹The term “Papua” is potentially confusing because it is used in two senses. In its broad sense, it refers to Indonesian Papua, formerly called Irian Jaya. Indonesian Papua has now been split into two provincial units, Papua Barat and Papua, with Papua Barat covering the western areas of Indonesian Papua, from the Teluk Wondama and the Kaimana regencies in the southeast to the Raja Ampat regency in the west. It covers the entire Bird’s Head region of New Guinea. In its narrow sense, Papua refers to the eastern part of the former Irian Jaya.

fieldwork and language documentation, investing his tremendous efforts in this endeavor for about thirty years (1980s–2018). Especially in Papua, he has worked with local linguists, linguistic students, and language community members through the Center for Endangered Languages Documentation (CELD), which he established at the University of Papua with the first author of this paper. Our reflections in this paper are slightly biased by our own linguistic fieldwork and modern language documentation in Papua (Barat) and Nusa Tenggara. Both of us are Indonesians, fortunate to have received high-quality training overseas. We can therefore reflect on linguistics and language documentation in Eastern Indonesia from two perspectives, as insiders and outsiders. We begin by considering the rich linguistic diversity of Eastern Indonesia, followed by our discussion of the issues faced in conducting fieldwork and language documentation in this region with respect to local collaboration, capacity building, and institutional support.

2. Eastern Indonesia: An area of rich biodiversity and ethnolinguistic diversity

The region of Eastern Indonesia, often called East Nusantara,² is home to about 500 of the country's approximately 700 languages; genealogically and structurally diverse (Arka 2016; Holton and Klamer 2017), they serve as living laboratories for linguistic research.

Genealogically, the languages in this region belong to the two major families—Austronesian and non-Austronesian (or Papuan)³—with their precise subgroups still needing further research (cf. Blust 2009; Donohue and Grimes 2008). In certain areas, particularly North Halmahera, Timor-Alor-Pantar, and Bird's Head, the languages of these two major families have been in contact over millennia. The different waves of migration of both Austronesian and Papuan peoples in this region are evidenced by archeological and linguistic data (Bellwood 1997, 123; Klamer and Ewing 2010, 3; Ross 2005, 42). Over millennia, these languages have undergone gradual diversifications, resulting from extensive dialectal variations in so-called dialect chains, forming a linkage (cf. Ross 1988, 9–11) but with no discrete proto-language, hence the debate on the existence of Central Malayo-Polynesian, for example (Blust 1993, 2009; Donohue and Grimes 2008; Klamer 2002a, 2002b). The linguistic complexity in Eastern Indonesia, which has resulted from a combination of contact-induced changes and other kinds of internal diversifications, has posed a challenge and will remain so in historical linguistics for years to come.

The diverse structural properties of the languages in this region are of primary interest in typological and theoretical linguistics. Some languages are highly isolating, typically in Flores, such as Rongga (Arka 2015) and Keo (Baird 2002); others are morphologically complex and fusional, such as Marind (Ndiken 2011; Olsson 2017), and several are agglutinative, such as Wooi (Sawaki 2016). Salient features of Austronesian and Papuan languages in this region (for details, see Hajek 2010; Himmelmann 2005; Holton and Klamer 2017; Klamer 2002b) include relatively simple phonemic inventories, commonly with five basic vowels and various simple consonantal systems with an average inventory size of sixteen (Hajek 2010, 27–28); the presence of implosives and/or prenasalized

²East Nusantara refers to the geographical region to the east of the Wallace Line, covering the areas of Sumbawa, Sulawesi, Nusa Tenggara, Maluku, including Halmahera, and Bird's Head of New Guinea, as well as East Timor (Klamer and Ewing 2010: 1; Klamer and Kratochvil 2014: 1).

³As a linguistic term, Papuan has generally characterized all groups of unrelated languages that do not resemble Austronesian and Australian. Papuan languages stretch from Alor-Pantar to Halmahera in the west to the mainland of New Guinea and adjacent islands to the east of the mainland of New Guinea (Bellwood 1995; Foley 2000; Spriggs 1997; Wurm 1982). Linguistically, they feature diverse, structurally complex, and genetically unrelated languages but commonly share certain typological and structural similarities, setting them apart from the languages of different groups in this area.

consonants; and quite complex morphology, phonology, and morphosyntax (particularly in Papuan languages), with argument indexing, verbal serialization, and the absence of a grammatical subject/pivot. The diversity of these linguistic features expressed in the different languages in this region is of immense interest and significance in the field of linguistics. Many of the languages in this region are still under-documented or undocumented. Further documentation is needed and particularly urgent for the highly endangered languages. New data from these languages will add to the empirical basis required in linguistic typology and theoretical linguistics in general and promise a breakthrough in the understanding of the history of two groups of languages (the Austronesian and the Papuan languages) the people in the region, and the extent of variability in human language.

Eastern Indonesia and West Timor also constitute a region of mega biodiversity, which correlates with ethnolinguistic diversity. It covers the area of Wallacea, bioecologically known as a transition between Sundaland (the Malay Peninsula, Sumatra, Borneo, Java, and Bali) and Sahul (Australia and New Guinea). It is defined by its rich mix of biodiversity—flora and fauna—with some Asian, Australian, and several unique endemic types. Ethnographically, the areas of Wallacea and New Guinea are home to diverse ethnic groups, showing rich Austronesian and Melanesian cultures, often with a mixture of the two cultures due to internal diversifications and contacts among the Austronesian and the Melanesian people. Such contacts that result in inculturation are observed in Alor-Pantar (Klamer 2008), Halmahera (Bowden 2001; Platenkamp 1990), and Bird’s Head of New Guinea (Klamer 2002a; Timmer 2002), for example.

Some researchers affirm the correlation between biological and ethnolinguistic diversity (Harmon 1996; Harmon and Maffi 2002; Turvey and Pettorelli 2014). Schapper (2015) shows that while the rich biodiversity of Wallacea correlates with its rich linguistic diversity, the region also constitutes a linguistic area (i.e., with shared sets of features). Language plays a central role in the transmission of the local knowledge related to this biodiversity and ethnolinguistic diversity. However, current unprecedented changes in the physical ecology of Eastern Indonesia (e.g., the end of isolation with the construction of new roads, accompanied by an influx of immigrants) and related sociopolitical developments in modern Indonesia have threatened this region’s biodiversity and ethnolinguistic diversity. In this regard, language documentation is a matter of urgency. Our ethnobiological documentation projects funded by the Endangered Language Documentation Program (ELDP) are part of the efforts to record ethnobiological and ecological data. For example, we have conducted documentation research on the ethnobotanical, economic, and linguistic aspects of *sago* (*Metroxylon sago*) in Marori (Hisa, Mahuze, and Arka 2017) and mangroves in Wooi (Sawaki 2016). Local folklore and stories also contain rich information about how local communities traditionally live and manage their physical environments, for example, narratives about the Emayode clan, *sago* in Kokoda, and the south coast of Bird’s Head of New Guinea (Sawaki 2017). All these are in line with the language documentation principle of recording “as many and as varied records as practically feasible, covering all aspects of the set of interrelated phenomena commonly called a language” (Himmelman 2006, 2).

3. Local linguists and leadership Reflecting on the role of local linguists and project leaders in language documentation in Eastern Indonesia, we need to examine its history and current situation. Historically, linguistic fieldwork and language documentation with a recognized impact have been led and carried out by foreigners. The traditional linguistic

work in Indonesia was started in the late nineteenth century and continued to the early twentieth century by Christian missionary linguists, joined by non-missionaries, mainly academics (university-based and independent linguists) affiliated with various foreign institutions. Through their work, various publications have been produced, with subjects ranging from comprehensive grammar to topic-related descriptions. Over the last twenty years (from the late 1990s to 2018), the areas of Papua and Nusa Tenggara have been under intensive study, with linguists focusing on modern language documentation, including documentation projects undertaken by the first author for the Woi language in Papua (2009–2012) and by the second author for the Rongga language in Flores (2004–2006) and the Marori language in Papua (2016–2017). The projects have produced a number of multimedia files (deposited in the Language Archive⁴ and ELAR⁵) literacy materials for local communities, bilingual dictionaries, and grammar books.

While some traditional work has been carried out by *Badan Bahasa* (National Language Board), most modern language documentation in Eastern Indonesia has been undertaken by foreigners. Ideally, language documentation should be led and performed by Indonesian linguists from the community or at least by non-local Indonesian linguists, for at least two reasons. First, employing Indonesian linguists promotes sustainability of the documentation (cf. Arka this volume). Typically living in or near the communities, local linguists can closely interact with and supervise community members in their documentation efforts. If linguists are locals, they also usually possess greater sociocultural knowledge, expertise, and skills than foreign linguists. Such knowledge and skills are critical for the success and the sustainability of documentation activities. Second, financially, employing locals would be more cost effective than employing foreigners, and the money saved could be allocated for local needs.

However, very few local Indonesians have the necessary expertise and capacity of their international counterparts. Local linguists typically cannot compete to win international grants for language documentation. Among eighteen language documentation projects in Indonesia funded by the ELDP and the *Dokumentation Bedrohter Sprachen* (DOBES or in English, Documentation of Endangered Languages)⁶ over the past fifteen years, most of them have been proposed and led by foreign linguists. As the only Indonesians who have won ELDP grants to date (2018), we (both authors of this paper) attribute our achievements to our high-quality education in Australia and international collaborative research experience.

We believe that the locals' low capacity to compete internationally is a complex problem due to a combination of factors, such as the poor quality of education at all levels (including primary and secondary education and tertiary-level training in linguistics in particular) and insufficient financial support. In fact, the problem arguably started even earlier, socioculturally due to the oral tradition of (rural) societies where written literacy has been simply absent. Foreign linguists doing fieldwork in Indonesia are typically capable scholars who have been highly trained and have won competitive grants. They receive strong financial support and institutional backing from their home countries. Unsurprisingly, they are better equipped for fieldwork compared with local linguists. They are also in a better position to generate publications, organize seminars, and facilitate training activities. In contrast, local Indonesian linguists and linguistic students are typically not fortunate enough to receive proper training, financial backing,

⁴<https://archive.mpi.nl/>

⁵<https://lat1.lis.soas.ac.uk/ds/asv/?0>

⁶www.dobes.mpi.nl

and institutional support that could have equipped them to be as capable as foreign scholars. They are therefore disadvantaged by their lack of equal opportunity to win competitive documentation grants. Thus, for more local Indonesian linguists to win international grants and be able to manage and lead research teams, it is important that their expertise, capacity, and experience be improved through quality training and international collaborative research. These capacity and support issues are areas where foreign academics can be of immense help by contributing to capacity-building efforts at different levels, including tertiary education, as discussed in the next section.

4. Indonesian universities: Linguistic programs and advanced training

Reflecting on the need for capable local linguists brings us to the issue of advanced training in linguistics at both regional and national levels. Linguistic programs have been opened in major universities in Eastern Indonesia, including Hasanuddin University (Makassar, South Sulawesi), Cenderawasih University (Jayapura, Papua), and the University of Papua (Manokwari, Papua Barat), with the program at Hasanuddin University being the oldest, founded in the 1980s. Many of the faculty members in these linguistic programs have received doctoral training in linguistics overseas. Most of them subsequently become university administrators, overloaded with non-linguistic responsibilities and having almost no time to do proper fieldwork.

Additionally, while many linguistic graduates have been produced by the universities in Eastern Indonesia, the expertise of local graduates does not appear to be at par with the international standard. This complex issue is in fact part of a general education problem at all levels, including primary and secondary education, particularly in Eastern Indonesia. More generally, among 72 countries, Indonesia ranked 62nd in the Program for International Student Assessment results in 2015.⁷ If we take the set of national university rankings in Indonesia as an indicator, the universities in Eastern Indonesia are trailing behind their counterparts in Western Indonesia, particularly in Java. In Webometrics,⁸ the rankings of Indonesian universities show Universitas Pattimura Ambon in Maluku in the 73rd place nationally, while Universitas Nusa Cendana Kupang in Nusa Tenggara Timur (NTT) and the University of Papua occupy the 98th and the 99th positions, respectively. Indonesian universities are in turn lagging behind their international counterparts in the Asia-Pacific region and the world. According to the Quacquarelli Symonds university ranking, Universitas Indonesia (ranked first in Indonesia) is in the 277th place globally; Institut Teknologi Bandung (ranked second in Indonesia) is ranked 331st in the world, and Universitas Gajah Mada (ranked third in Indonesia) belongs to the 401–410 range in the world.⁹ Based on these relative rankings and our personal assessments about Eastern Indonesia, linguistic training in Eastern Indonesian universities needs improvement in various areas, including basic descriptive linguistics, typological-theoretical linguistics, fieldwork expertise, and modern language documentation. Contextualized training, specifically in preparing students for fieldwork in Eastern Indonesia, is also necessary and further discussed in the next section.

Foreign linguists working in Indonesia are typically aware of its low standard of tertiary training in linguistics. For this reason, they have collaborated with local universities to help improve the quality of tertiary education. For over two decades, from the 1980s to the 2000s, SIL linguists were based at Hasanuddin University and

⁷<https://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisa-2015-results-in-focus.pdf>

⁸www.webometrics.info/en/Asia/indonesia%20

⁹<https://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/world-university-rankings/2018>

involved in teaching linguistics under its graduate linguistic program. As mentioned, Nikolaus Himmelmann and his team helped set up the CELD at the University of Papua, with funding from the DOBES. The CELD has developed a training program focused on language documentation, integrating it with core courses in linguistics (phonology, morphology, and syntax) as part of the curriculum since 2009. From 2006 to 2018, short intensive training programs on language documentation and/or linguistic fieldwork have been organized by other foreign and local linguists. These include the DOBES-sponsored training in Bali, which was held twice (2006 and 2007) and led by Nikolaus Himmelmann; an ELDP-funded language documentation workshop conducted by Mandana Seyfeddinipur at Udayana University in Bali; and a series of workshops in Kupang, NTT, led by Asako Shiohara and Yanti (2017 and 2018) and funded by the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies grants. The success of such training programs is not easy to measure, however. The workshops seemed to have inspired some of the participants, including the first author of this paper, who then applied for grants/scholarships to conduct linguistic research and language documentation.

Three related points are noted here. First, all of the training programs mentioned have been sponsored by foreign funds. Second, they have been initiated and led by foreign scholars (with local collaboration). Third, the Indonesian educational system has an ongoing problem with leadership (cf. Arka this volume) and funding. A pressing issue is how to encourage more active participation in local linguistic programs, universities, and governments, individually and personally as scholars and collectively as institutions. The Indonesian government is currently putting pressure on academics and universities to conduct research and publish articles in respected international journals. The government has promised to provide more support for research and publication. President Jokowi's current administration has focused on building physical infrastructure for economic reasons but has promised to shift to the development of human resources in 2019, which is encouraging. We hope that this initiative will gradually make a difference in the quality of tertiary education in Eastern Indonesia, which will ultimately benefit linguistic fieldwork and language documentation in the region.

5. Working with local communities and contextualized training Successful linguistic documentation is determined by a combination of the fieldworker's capability and the local community's participation. The two components are interrelated. We reflect on the former in relation to contextual training, which should pave the way for the latter; for a discussion on participation issues in Indonesia, see Arka (this volume).

As discussed earlier, the capability issue is related to the inadequacy in high-level tertiary training. We believe that *contextual* training should be an essential component. This means that we must equip trainees (students, lecturers, language activists, etc.) with specific knowledge and practical skills to collect and analyze data for purposes that are relevant to fieldwork and language documentation in a given area. In the context of trainees from Eastern Indonesia, this means that the training should be contextualized to develop methodology and analytical skills targeting the familiarity with salient linguistic features and issues of the Austronesian and the Papuan languages of this region. They should also be trained in ethnographic skills and the knowledge of local cultures in Eastern Indonesia. In terms of the necessary tools, contextual training also entails practical hands-on courses in using modern devices that are specifically required for

language documentation (e.g., sessions on using annotation software, such as ELAN,¹⁰ Toolbox, and FLEX¹¹) and even the development of simple skills, such as how to save and back up data regularly on a computer. Our assessment is that the current curricula of the linguistic programs offered at universities in Indonesia do not generally include contextual knowledge and skills. Training programs for linguistic fieldwork and language documentation of the type organized in Manokwari and Kupang (as mentioned earlier) are therefore highly needed because they focus on developing such skills.

Working with local communities in Eastern Indonesia is more complex than language documentation alone. We often have to deal with different expectations of linguists and language communities so that both parties will be pleased and language documentation can proceed. We also have to handle local rivalries among people or clans. The expectations have been frequently associated with mutual benefits, with the local community or clan members often anticipating financial gain in return for their data given to non-local researchers or collaboration with the latter. This issue has arisen, largely due to past corrupt practices in government projects in which the Indonesian term *proyek* (project) has been equated with government money given to locals without accountability. While linguists fully understand that the local community members must be appropriately compensated for their time and efforts, we are also concerned about accountability in relation to project goals and outcomes, such as the amount of data to be collected, literacy materials to be produced, and outreach activities.

6. Final remarks In this final section, we reflect on the issue of different expectations between linguists and local communities. These issues are important for the local community members' active collaboration in documenting their own languages. As mentioned earlier, the problem with expectations has emerged due to past corrupt practices (associated with the term *proyek* in Eastern Indonesia) by government officials, non-government organizations, and other developmental agencies. As mentioned earlier, *proyek* has been misconstrued by locals as receiving "happy and easy money" (i.e., given by the government through various projects to compensate people without accountability). Local collaborators often tend to think that everyone involved in the project must receive regular payment throughout the duration of the project. Unfortunately, international developmental agencies, such as World Wide Fund for Nature with their conservation projects and UNICEF with their developmental projects, have used the same approach in their activities. Its negative effect is that local communities generalize their assumption that all outsiders come for *proyek* with a lot of cash to be distributed. They then often measure collaboration in terms of how much cash is given to local community members. The success of the project, particularly in relation to intangible outcomes, such as increased awareness of language endangerment, new skills in documentation, and literacy materials (e.g., for local elementary schools), is typically not their concern. It is a challenge to raise awareness that language documentation and maintenance are shared responsibilities and that while funds are needed in such efforts, it does not simply mean that a person can receive cash without an adequate contribution to the project, as the term *proyek* implies. For this reason, we suggest that foreign researchers avoid using the term *proyek* in describing their documentation research to locals. For instance, the CELD never uses the word *proyek* in its documentation activities. The terms

¹⁰<https://tla.mpi.nl/tools/tla-tools/elan/>

¹¹<https://software.sil.org/fieldworks/>

program and *aktivitas* 'activity' are more suitable because they carry a positive meaning, avoiding unwanted expectations from locals who seem to question project accountability.

Documentation projects come with a clear set of goals, planned activities, and a carefully considered budget. Thus, the limitations often constrain the kinds of activities and the number of local people recruited for particular documentation activities. In our experience, unexpected inquiries from locals include requests for payment in the form of food supplies, school supplies, clothes, and local infrastructure, all of which are not typically budgeted in the original proposal. Unfamiliarity with the documentation plan, budget limitation, and project accountability by the local community has often led to misunderstandings and different expectations; if not handled properly, these can derail documentation projects.

To avoid such misunderstandings, apart from avoiding the term *proyek* (as explained), one strategy that we have found useful is to adopt a persuasive participatory approach. Specifically, we first approach and invite local leaders (e.g., clan chiefs, village heads, educated locals) to be involved, seeking their advice to maximize community participation throughout the project and avoid certain possible problems. A community meeting involving all local stakeholders in the beginning of a documentation project is also essential. Such a meeting provides non-local researchers with the opportunity to openly explain the project goals, activities, and expectations. Based on our experience, the participatory approach mitigates conflicts of interest, allowing collaborative work between non-local researchers and local language community members, thus bringing the project to a fruitful conclusion. For this reason, a session on the participatory approach is part of the language documentation training offered in the CELD.

Our experience in the CELD has confirmed that involving local community members in language documentation leads to successful outcomes. In its first decade, CELD has supported local community members who have played active roles in documenting their languages (e.g., Woi, Iha, Mpur, and Yali). Certain local members have been trained and involved in working at the CELD. They have also carried out fieldwork in their own communities. Their deep understanding of their local cultures (a familiarity not shared by outsiders) has proven to be essential in the success of the CELD projects in Papua. From early on and throughout the documentation process, the CELD maintains close communication with the local communities to provide them with a proper understanding of the project goals and activities (e.g., documentation of their languages and cultures is part of promoting these). Open recruitment appears to be helpful as well (e.g., local members of the documentation project are appointed by the community through a fair and open process of consultation among community members). In return, the project's shared benefits for the whole community must be fairly negotiated.

To conclude, language documentation in Eastern Indonesia poses a challenge, whose success depends on several factors, including sound planning to anticipate a range of linguistic and non-linguistic problems. The local community's active participation is essential. In our experience, such engagement is not always easy because each speech community has its own local culture, needs, and expectations. These may vary considerably from one language and one place to another in Eastern Indonesia, and they are dynamic in nature. Thus, efforts to enable local communities' involvement in language documentation are ongoing and locally specific, in which all stakeholders (linguists, funding bodies, educational institutions, government institutions, and local communities) have to collaborate toward a common goal for the benefit of the local communities.

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