

Metathesis in Helong: is it motivated by prosody, syntax, or both?

Metathesis is the phenomenon whereby two sounds that appear in a particular order in one form of a word occur in the reverse order in a related form of the word. While sporadic metathesis is common enough in most languages (e.g. when the English word 'relevant' is mispronounced as 'revelant') productive metathesis is much less common cross-linguistically. In Austronesian languages, productive metathesis has been reported in Rotuman (Churchward, 1940), Kwara'ae (Pawley and Gegeo, 1988), and a number of languages from the Timor region: Leti (van Engelenhoven, 1995) and Dawan (Steinhauer, 1991).

In this paper I present metathesis in Helong, another Austronesian language from the Timor region. Helong is spoken by about 15,000 people on the island of Semau and in neighbouring parts of Timor in the region of Kupang (Lewis, ed. 2009). In Helong, metathesis affects virtually every lexical root in the language. Most work on metathesis in the languages of the Timor area has concentrated on the formal properties of metathesis shown by individual languages, but little work has been published on the motivations that drive metathesis in the first place. In this paper I present an analysis of Helong metathesis, looking both at the formal properties of metathesis and at the functional motivations – operating at the interface between syntax and prosody - that drive the phenomenon.

References

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