

The place of the Barrier Islands Languages inside Austronesian: Evidence from contemporary Simalur

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The Barrier Islands languages are a group of languages located along the Barrier Islands off the west coast of Sumatra. Aside from Nias and Enggano, these languages have received little attention in recent years. Older resources on these languages include dictionaries and texts collected during the early 1900s (e.g., Kähler, 1961, 1963 on Simalur), as well as sketch grammars produced in the 1970s-1980s (e.g., Faridan et al., 1981, 1983 on Simalur). Simalur is a language spoken in the southern half of Simeulue Island. It is the largest of three languages spoken on the island with more than 30,000 speakers (Aziz & Amery, 2016, p. 489). This study draws on two sources of data. First, the existing Simalur resources, and second, recordings of two native Simalur speakers collected by the author in January 2024.

The position of the Barrier Islands Languages within Austronesian remains uncertain. The most accepted theory places the Barrier Islands inside a Northwest Sumatra/Barrier Islands subgroup containing the Barrier Islands languages, Batak languages and Gayo (Ross, 1995). This classification is based on shared phonological and lexical innovations presented by Nothofer (1986). Since then, Smith (2017) has offered additional phonological evidence and Billings & McDonnell (2022) phonological and lexical evidence for the existence of the group, also positing an additional member: Nasal. However, aside from Edwards' (2015) study on the affiliations of Enggano, grammatical evidence has not been considered in determining the affiliations of the Barrier Islands languages. This work takes a preliminary look at this proposed Northwest Sumatra/Barrier Islands subgroup based on grammatical evidence from Simalur, focusing particularly on voice alternation and passive formation.

Languages of Sumatra generally display Indonesian-type voice systems (Chen & McDonnell, 2019, p. 176) with a two-way distinction between actor voice (AV) and undergoer voice (UV). In an Indonesian-type system, the alternation between actor voice and undergoer voice does not necessarily involve a change in valency. Simalur seems to have lost this AV-UV contrast and now displays an alternation between active and passive, where the passive involves a reduction in valency. Faridan et al. (1981, 1983) shows a pair of transitive verbs with and without the active prefix *maN-* (1a-b). Given the tendency for the loss of AV morphology to result in the loss of a UV contrast, constructions like this may have been part of the process that led to the loss of an AV-UV contrast in Simalur.

- (1a) Au mang-an layap
1SG ACT-eat rice
'I ate rice.' (Faridan et al., 1983, p. 82)
- (1b) Au an layap
1SG eat rice
'I ate rice' (Faridan et al., 1981, p. 38)

In contemporary Simalur though, constructions like that shown in (1b) are rare. (2a) shows an active construction in Simalur using the active prefix *maN-*. This contrasts with the passive form (2b) formed using the prefix *ni-*.

- (2a) ami mang-adeen ede mang-an batok
1PL.EXCL ACT-make ? ACT-eat sago
'...we cook and eat sago.'