

The Rise and Demise of Possessive Classifiers in Austronesian

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Many Austronesian languages make a grammatical distinction in attributive possessive constructions between inalienable and alienable possession, and they make further distinctions within alienable possession. The latter types of distinctions are typically made by means of possessive classifiers. It has been argued that the existence of the inalienable–alienable contrast in Austronesian is due to contact with non-Austronesian (Papuan) languages (e.g., Klamer et al. 2008). On the other hand, the development of the possessive classifiers was internal to Austronesian. The rise of the possessive classifiers may be seen as functionally motivated: they more closely characterise the nature of possessum–possessor relations (e.g., water as drink for the possessor or to be used by the possessor for some other purpose). However, in a few languages the earlier system of possessive classifiers has disappeared, and with it the grammatical distinctions signalling types of alienable possessum–possessor relations.

The paper will address the question of certain types of explanation of language change: external motivation vs. internal motivation, and functional motivation in the case of the latter. Language contact resulted in the development of the inalienable–alienable contrast in Austronesian, which set the stage for the development of further distinctions in the alienable category. While the rise of the distinctions in alienable possession may be explained in functional terms, there is no obvious functional explanation for their disappearance in a few languages. Some parallels between the Austronesian languages and languages in other parts of the world will also be discussed.

Reference

Klamer, Marian, Ger Reesink and Miriam van Staden. 2008. East Nusantara as a linguistic area. In *From linguistic areas to areal linguistics*, edited by Pieter Muysken, 95–149. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.