

What is bahasa Lamma? Logonyms, dialectology, and the future of endangered languages

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1. Introduction

For the past few years I have been working to assemble documentation of a language known in most academic circles as “Lamma”. This name appears in the Ethnologue language catalog (www.ethnologue.com) and in many publications which derive data from the Ethnologue. This name also appears in the recently adopted ISO 639-3 international standard for language names (with the code *lev*), which derives from Ethnologue. The language is spoken by approximately ten thousand people on the western part of the island of Pantar, in the regency of Alor, in the Indonesian province of Nusa Tenggara Timur. With only three exceptions, Western Pantar is the language of the entire west Pantar physio-geographic region. The exceptions are limited to three coastal areas. The areas around Baranusa on the northern coast and the island of Marica off the western coast are populated by Austronesians who speak a dialect of Alorese, sometimes referred to as *bahasa Baranusa*. In addition, the mangrove swamps in the extreme northeast corner of west Pantar in the village of Maliang are home to speakers of Deing, sometimes referred to as a dialect of the Teiwa language (cf. Stokhof 1975).¹

One of the first problems encountered in this research is the choice of an appropriate name, or logonym, for the language. Within Pantar itself Lamma is known as both a clan (*suku*) name and a village (*desa*) name. The term Lamma language (*bahasa Lamma*) is used in the same sense that a clan or village name can be used to denote the language of any particular clan or village. Thus, clans such as Mauta and Tubbe give rise to logonyms *bahasa Mauta* and *bahasa Tubbe*, respectively. Likewise, village names such as Latuna and Puntaru give rise to logonyms *bahasa Latuna* and *bahasa Puntaru*, respectively. To the extent that the languages spoken by the clans Lamma, Mauta, and Tubbe are mutually intelligible, the term Lamma can be seen to be an inappropriate logonym for the language of these three clans.

This situation is not at all uncommon in the Alor-Pantar region, and indeed through much of eastern Indonesia. With west Pantar the local language is known simply as *pi habbang birang*, literally ‘our village speak’. There is no logonym referring to a larger language which covers multiple clans and villages. Thus, it is only natural that when one wishes to distinguish one ‘village speak’ from another, a particular clan name or village name is used. At least two factors are responsible for the term Lamma gaining currency outside of Pantar as a logonym for the larger language. First, in terms of sheer numbers of speakers, Lamma is the largest of the three primary language varieties, or dialects, in west Pantar. The total number of speakers of Western Pantar is approximately 10,804.² This number breaks down according to dialect as follows.

¹ Deing speakers with whom I spoke in mid-2007 claim to be able to understand Teiwa, thus the mutually intelligibility criterion would argue for classifying Deing and Teiwa as dialects of the same language. A comprehensive study of Deing-Teiwa dialectology remains to be done.

² This figure was arrived at using results of the 2005 census (Badan Pusat Statistik 2005), which lists population at the level of the village (Indonesian *desa*). In some cases it is not easy to assign a particular village to a particular language. For example, the village of Beangonong contains mainly speakers of WP but also some speakers of Alorese. On the other hand, the

Table 1: Number of speakers by dialect

Dialect	Speakers	Percent
Lamma	4823	45%
Mauta	4566	42%
Tubbe	1415	13%
Total	10,804	

However, numbers alone are not enough to account for the widespread use of the term Lamma, as Mauta speakers are in numbers a close second to Lamma. It seems likely that socio-political factors are also at work. Many powerful individuals, including a former member of the Indonesian parliament, originate from the Lamma region and have had influence on government surveys and publications. For example, the first grammatical description of any variety of west Pantar language is entitled *Struktur Bahasa Lamma* (Nitbani et al. 2001) and was compiled entirely from Lamma speakers residing in Kupang, the provincial capital.

One of the difficulties with logonyms which originate from clan or village names is that they can be used in more or less restrictive senses. For example, the term Lamma is used by speakers in Pantar to refer the language of the Lamma clan (and several other clans) to the exclusion of the Tubbe and Mauta clans. In particular, the term Lamma as used in Pantar excludes those speakers residing in villages of Kakamauta and Puntaru. On the other hand, as used by government officials in Alor and by outside academics, the term Lamma refers more generally and widely to the language of west Pantar (excluding of course Deing and bahasa Baranusa). This variation in scope of the term Lamma reflects in part a lack of firm knowledge of dialectology and language relationships in the region. For some, Lamma is a term referring to a particular dialect or language variety, while for others Lamma is a term for a larger language or language group.

2. Language and dialect

The distinction between language and dialect is a difficult one in the best of circumstances. No less so in Pantar. There are two aspects to this problem. The first involves definitions, while the second involves the lack of hard data.

It is well-known that in lay circles the term dialect is often used in a pejorative sense to refer to a variety of language which is lacking in some way or of some lower status. Thus it is said that a language is a dialect with an army and a navy. Such definitions need not be pursued here. The most widely-cited academic definition relies ultimately on the notion of mutual intelligibility. Namely, two varieties are said to be dialects of the same language if and only if speakers with no previous exposure to the other variety can understand each other without undue difficulty. This definition is difficult to operationalize because of the assumption of no previous exposure. It is usually all but impossible to locate speakers who have not been exposed to other varieties of their language. Thus, in practice the mutual

village of Baranusa consists mostly of Alorese speakers but also some WP speakers. The speaker estimate for WP was arrived at by counting population figures for those villages assumed to have a majority of WP speakers. It should be noted that this estimate applies only to Pantar. Many more speakers of WP have settled other locations, such as Kalabahi or Kupang. The number of such “expatriate” WP speakers is difficult to estimate, though extrapolating from estimates of the number of people originating from the village of Puntaru but now living “abroad”, the figure may be as high as fifty percent of the speaker population on Pantar. This would bring the total number of speakers of WP to something like 15,000.

intelligibility criterion is often supplemented with phonetic and phonological information to aid in establishing linguistic similarity between two or more language varieties.

However, this definition is complicated by the fact that the terms language and dialect do not have straightforward translations into Indonesian. While the term language is generally translated as *bahasa*, the English and Indonesian terms do not have the same semantic range. In Indonesian several terms are used to refer to language varieties. These include: *bahasa*, *logat*, *dialek*, and *rumpun bahasa*. In general, the Indonesian term *bahasa* has a much narrower semantic range than the equivalent English term language. Sometimes, varieties which might be thought of as languages in English are in Indonesian rendered as *rumpun bahasa*, literally ‘language clumps’. Thus a recent brochure from the Alor tourism office cites 18 *rumpun bahasa* and 51 *bahasa* in the Alor regency. Speaking with people in Indonesian about the problem of distinguishing *bahasa* may lead to vastly different results than would be obtained in English. Which leads to the second problem in distinguishing language and dialect: the lack of data.

To date most work on dialectology has been conducted through impressionistic surveys or through analysis of short wordlists. This lack of data is in my opinion the greatest hindrance to the understanding the language scene in the Alor-Pantar region. Varieties which are “felt” by speakers or academics to be distinct languages are listed as such in publications and indicated as such on language maps. The criterion of mutual intelligibility is rarely employed, and little linguistic data are cited as evidence for language distinctions.

3. Dialectology in west Pantar

During the past three years I have collected data from across the west Pantar region and have made recordings in more than half of the villages. While I can not claim to have conducted a comprehensive dialect survey, this work does permit me to delineate with some confidence three primary dialects, each of which is mutually intelligible with the other two. In fact, these three dialects are even closer than the mutual intelligibility criterion would suggest. For the most part, speakers of a given dialect are not only able to understand speakers of the other dialect but are also able to imitate those dialects.³ I have assigned the names Lamma, Mauta, and Tubbe to these three dialects. While these labels originate in clan names, they are not restrictive. That is, while Mauta people do speak Mauta dialect, there are also other clans which speak Mauta. However, these labels are generally accepted throughout most of the region. The Lamma dialect is spoken in the villages of Latuna, Allung, Beangongo, Tulai, Nadda, Kayang, Wolu, Moba’a, and Boloang; the Mauta dialect in Kakamauta, Alimake, Lauki, Kapas, Ekajaya, Kolihabbang, Alikallang, Air Mama, and Beang; and the Tubbe dialect in Puntaru and Air Panas.

An name for the larger language—the language of which Lamma, Mauta, and Tubbe are dialects of—is more difficult to come by. To work around this problem I have coined the term Western Pantar (WP) language (*bahasa Pantar Barat*) as a neutral term for the entire language. It should be admitted that this term does not hold currency within the region and is not employed (yet) by local residents. However, this term has the advantage of not being biased toward any particular village or clan. As a consequence this term encourages unity among what might otherwise be thought to be distinct and separate languages. As I will argue below, this fact can be crucial to the eventual survival of an endangered language.

³ As might be expected this ability is strongest among speakers of the numerically smallest dialect, Tubbe, since these speakers are most often in contact with speakers of other dialects.

Dialect differences in WP are primarily lexical rather than phonological or syntactic differences. Most words are identical across all three dialects. Some examples of lexical differences are given in the table below.

Table 2: Lexical comparison of dialects of Western Pantar

Tubbe	Mauta	Lamma	
niar	nissar	niba	‘my father’
niaku	nebu	nekul	‘my younger sibling’
niu	niau	nau	‘my mother’
ganiaka	ganeka(r)	ginaka	‘see (it)’
dia	si	yel	‘go’

The above examples at least exhibit phonological similarity. There are also a number of ‘couch’/‘sofa’ type distinctions, as follows.

Table 3: Lexical comparison of dialects of Western Pantar

Lamma	Mauta	Tubbe	
salepi	bis	bis	‘mat’
bana	haweri	haweri	‘many’
kisang	kalla	kalla	‘small’
sinnal	karani	karani	‘canary tree (Java almond)’
hobi	hoba	sai	‘quiver’
kutti	sussung	sussung	‘throw out’
talasing	tuang	tuang	‘scrape’

The dialect variants are readily recognized by speakers of other dialects and in fact commonly occur in parallel constructions, such as *sai-hobi* ‘quiver’, *kalla-kisang* ‘children’.

There are few systematic differences in pronunciation, and most of these differences can be formulated in terms of tendencies which are more or less prominent in one dialect or another. For example, the in all three dialects phoneme /y/ may occur as liquid [j] or palatalized as [tʲ] or affricated as [dʒ]. However, the affricate pronunciation is much more strongly associated with the Mauta dialect.

The vowel systems differ slightly across the three dialects. The diphthongs /ia/ and /ua/ occur only in the Tubbe dialect. Tubbe /ia/ corresponds to Mauta /e/ or /i/, while Tubbe /ua/ corresponds to Mauta /o/. In Lamma these diphthongs are reflected as disyllabic forms. Tubbe /ia/ in final open syllables corresponds with Mauta /i/. Correspondence with Lamma is irregular, though Tubbe /ia/ often corresponds to Lamma /iCa/.

(1) Tubbe Mauta Lamma

pia	pi	hipa	‘descend’
mia	mi	mira	‘ascend’
gania	gani	gina	‘give’

Tubbe /ia/ in closed syllables or non-final open syllables corresponds to Mauta, Lamma /e/.

(2) Tubbe Mauta

ganiaka	ganekar	‘see’
tiaku	teku	‘glass’
lema	lema	‘coconut shell’

Tubbe /ua/ corresponds to Mauta /o/.

(3)	Tubbe	Mauta	
	tua	to	‘palm toddy’
	suaki	soki	‘chicken’
	haluapi	halopi	‘hear’
	kuang	kong	‘moko drum’

Tubbe /ua/ may correspond to Lamma /o/ or /a/.

(4)	Tubbe	Lamma	
	haluapi	walapi	‘hear’
	kuang	kong	‘moko drum’

Other vowel differences are more difficult to predict. For example, some Mauta /e/ may correspond to Tubbe /a/. However, in other words /a/ and /e/ remain as such in both dialects.

(5)	Tubbe	Mauta	
	dalla	della	‘tomorrow’
	yadda	yedda	‘not yet’
	bes	bes	‘mango’
	gaddi	gaddi	‘make’

Consonant correspondences are much fewer. One very general observation which can be made is that the presence of word-final *-l* is strong associated with the Lamma dialect, whereas, presence of word-final *-r* is strongly associated with the Mauta dialect. Word-final liquids *r* and *l* are only rarely found in the Tubbe dialect.

(6)	Lamma	Mauta	Tubbe	
	(a)namal	aname	aname	‘person’
	lama	lamar	lama	‘go, walk’

Most initial and medial consonants remain unaltered between dialects.

In summary, the linguistic distinctions between WP dialects can be seen to be of two types, lexical and phonological. The lexical distinctions are limited to a few common words, most of which are known to speakers of other dialects. The phonological distinctions are not so much regular rules as general tendencies, sound patterns which give rise to a particular “flavour” or “accent” in one dialect or another. Nevertheless, one crucial fact unites the dialects of WP. That is the criterion of mutual intelligibility. Throughout the west Pantar region speaker of Lamma, Mauta, and Tubbe communicate with each other without undue difficulty. Not all speakers are able to imitate other dialects, but many can. By all criteria except the existence of an Indonesian or English language name WP forms a well-defined single language.

4. Splitting, lumping, and language survival

During my time on Pantar, whenever it was discovered that I was researching local language I was asked roughly the same question: “how many languages are there on Pantar?” Unfortunately, this seemingly innocent question is not easy to answer. Ultimately, the distinction between language and dialect depends primarily on technical linguistic issues, as discussed above. Yet to a certain extent the choice is somewhat arbitrary. One could just as easily draw on social criteria (clan identity, etc.) to distinguish Lamma, Mauta, and Tubbe as three distinct languages. This approach might be termed “splitting”, in contrast to my “lumping” approach. The choice between one language or three may reflect a choice to focus on similarity or distinctiveness, respectively. All else being equal, the choice between

splitting and lumping is a matter of personal preference. Most Pantar residents have a strong sense of clan and village identity and thus lean toward the splitting approach. Moreover, as noted earlier, the Indonesian term *bahasa* has a narrower sense, having a meaning somewhere between English ‘dialect’ and ‘language’. Thus, the term *bahasa* lends itself more to the splitting approach.

In fact, other evidence is not equal. As I have shown, both the linguistic evidence and the mutual intelligibility evidence argue strongly for the unity of WP, that is, a single language rather than three. But even if the other evidence did not argue strongly one way or another, there would still be a good reason to adopt a “lumping” approach and recognize the unity of the WP dialects. This reason is grounded less in linguistic science or personal aesthetics but rather based on the pragmatics of language survival.

Like most local languages in Alor-Pantar—and indeed in NTT—Western Pantar is extremely endangered. Admittedly, WP is not the most endangered language on Pantar. Language use remains vigorous, and throughout most of the region children still grow up speaking WP. This is in sharp contrast to other Pantar languages, many of which show clear signs of decline. For example, in Teiwa children now show less fluency in local language (Klamer in prep), and in Nedebang there appear to be few if any speakers below the age of fifty (Holton 2004). But current vitality will not ensure future survival. Indeed, there are increasing signs that WP will soon follow the fate of neighboring Pantar languages.

First and foremost of these is the arrival of satellite television in 2007. While the introduction of television has been uneven across the region, a satellite dish, television, and generator set were installed at the regional junior high school in Puntaru in February 2007. Since that time, television broadcasts have been a regular evening feature, attracting almost all of the youth of Puntaru village. These broadcasts represent a significant source of exposure to Indonesian language for Puntaru youth. The arrival of television broadcasts has been correlated with language shift both in Indonesia in particular (Florey 1990) and across the world more generally (Krauss 1995). While television broadcasts are currently available only via satellite, the regency government is committed to installing a television transmitter in west Pantar by the end of 2007, making television even more widely available in the region.

The arrival of television will be followed shortly by the development of communication infrastructure within the Western Pantar region. In May 2007 a cellular telephone station was installed and made operational in Baranusa, the capital of Kecamatan Pantar Barat. This signal is now accessible from several Western Pantar speaking villages. Plans are underway to install additional transmitters within the region. (Ironically, cellular phone service has arrived prior to electricity in most villages in Pantar.) Plans are also underway to further develop transportation infrastructure, including the development of a ferry port, permitting direct connection between the Western Pantar region and the provincial capital of Kupang.

As a single language, Western Pantar at least has strength in numbers. The estimated population of more than ten thousand is roughly twice that reported for Teiwa. But this number is greatly (and artificially) reduced if the language is split into three. Resources for language documentation and language development are extremely limited. These resources are only further reduced if they must be split three ways. Working on and off over a period of three years with a number of collaborators we have managed to produce a draft grammatical description, dictionary, and collection of texts. Though most of this work was based in the Tubbe dialect area, much effort was put into making the documentation as inclusive as possible across all three dialects. It is hoped that these materials will contribute to the continued maintenance of the Western Pantar language, not just the Tubbe dialect.

5. Outlook

In July 2007 Mr. Mahalalel Lamma Koly and myself produced a preliminary dictionary of the Western Pantar language, including information on all three major dialects. The dictionary is written in Indonesian, with definitions in Indonesian and English. An Indonesian-Western Pantar finderlist is also included. The dictionary was distributed across the West Pantar region. This dictionary represents the first instance of the logonym Western Pantar appearing in an Indonesian publication. Only time will tell whether or not the logonym and the dictionary will be accepted by speakers—especially speakers of Lamma and Mauta dialects. Already, I have heard speakers request that I now come to work on “their language” (i.e., their dialect). The assumption underlying this request is that now that I am finished documenting Tubbe, I can begin with Lamma and Mauta.

Ideally, each dialect of each language would be independently and thoroughly documented. Unfortunately the exigencies of time and money require us to settle for somewhat less than that. Insisting on separate documentation of each individual dialect of Western Pantar may amount to a choice between all or nothing. All for Tubbe and nothing for Lamma and Mauta. It is not likely that in the near future another researcher will have an opportunity to devote significant time to documentation of Western Pantar dialects. Should such an opportunity arise, that researcher’s time would arguably be better spent working with a different, less documented language. There are thousands of languages in need of documentation, and the human resources available are far from sufficient to accomplish the task. Assigning additional labor to a language which has already been documented would seem to be an inefficient allocation of resources. In other words, a dictionary of Western Pantar—Tubbe, Lamma, and Mauta dialects—is perhaps the best we can hope for in the foreseeable future.

Of course, it would be a relatively simple task to generate dialect specific versions of the dictionary, but this returns us to the problem of divide and conquer. Instead of one large language we have three small ones, each competing for resources. We ignore the unity of the Western Pantar language at the peril of the long-term survival of that language. The term Western Pantar may not be the best logonym. Others may coin a better term. But the recognition of the underlying linguistic unity of the language referred to here with the name Western Pantar may contribute to language maintenance. The choice between splitting or lumping is not just a technical linguistic decision but one with important social implications.

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