

## **The languages of East Nusantara: State-of-the-Art**

This paper presents a State-of-the-Art of research on the languages of East Nusantara. ‘Nusantara’ is an indigenous name referring to the whole Indo-Malaysian archipelago (Jones 2007:x). In this paper, East Nusantara is defined as a geographical area that extends from Sumbawa to the west, across the Lesser Sunda Islands, the Moluccas including Halmahera, to include the Bird’s Head of New Guinea in the east. In the north, the area is bounded by Sulawesi. Linguistically, this geographic region displays great genetic diversity, being the meeting ground of languages belonging to the Austronesian and Papuan language families. In this area, some 400 languages are spoken (cf. Gordon 2005), most of which are endangered in terms of numbers of speakers, and the majority of which have not yet been described.

The talk will first sketch some background information, presenting an overview of what is known about the prehistory of the area -- particularly relating to what is known about the Papuan and Austronesian populations --, as well as a summary of previous and current linguistic studies on East Nusantara languages. Next, some major issues relating the genetic divisions of East Nusantara languages (Austronesian as well as Papuan) will be addressed. Third, the various typological characterisations of Austronesian and Papuan languages of East Nusantara that have been proposed in the literature will be examined, and I will propose some modified profiles which combine elements from previous proposals. Finally, the question is raised whether we can characterise East Nusantara as a ‘linguistic area’ “...a geographical region containing a group of three or more languages that share some structural features as a result of contact rather than as a result of accident or inheritance from a common ancestor.” (Thomason 2001:99). My suggestion will be that the linguistic contact zone in east Nusantara is indeed a linguistic area, which has Halmahera and the Bird’s Head as its core, and radiates outwards to the Moluccas, Alor-Pantar, and then Timor. However, as the definition of linguistic areas in general is fraught with problems, and written records of the history of east Nusantara islands are virtually absent, the exact characteristics as well as the boundaries of this area remain elusive.

### **References**

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Jones, Russell (ed.). 2007. *Loan words in Indonesian and Malay*. Leiden: KITLV Press.

Thomason, S.G. 2001. *Language Contact, An Introduction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.