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Linguistic theories about the Austronesian homeland

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LINGUISTIC THEORIES ABOUT THE AUSTRONESIAN HOMELAND

That establishing genetic relationship between languages leads to thinking about a "homeland" can hardly come as a surprise. For such a relationship can only be thought of as the result of development from a common ancestor: a proto-language. That our knowledge of that proto-language may be very poor and that statements about it are mainly formulas of what is found as common elements in the actual language materials and, therefore, are of a highly hypothetical character, does not alter the fact that a real language must have existed. The question of where that proto-language was spoken, is only legitimate. And it is obvious that linguists are among those who try to find an answer to this question.

Still, it is remarkable that for the Malayo-Polynesian (or Austronesian, as it was called later) language family the question arose very early. About the beginning of the nineteenth century it was Marsden¹ who expressed the opinion that the inhabitants of the Pacific Islands must have come from Asia (from Tartary, he said). Only the population of the islands in the western part of the area — by which he must have meant Melanesia — might have come from New Guinea. Obviously, Marsden's guiding principle was more one of race than of consideration of linguistic facts. We shall see that, time and again, arguments of race and culture slip into linguistic discussions of the homeland problem.

Very important for a theory about the origin of a language-family is the possibility of a relationship between this family and another, especially if the latter is found in a distant area. Therefore, we shall first see what has been said about the possibility of the Austronesian family showing relationship to other language groups. In this connection we may pass over in silence Bopp's ineffectual attempt to prove a relationship between Austronesian and Indo-European and also MacDonald's theory on the Semitic origin of

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¹ Cf. what is said by *Gonda*, 1939.

Austronesian.² A longer life was granted to the ideas of Wilhelm Schmidt who advocated a relationship between a number of language groups in the southeastern part of the Asian continent, considered by him as constituting a subgroup which he called Austro-Asian, on the one hand, and the Austronesian languages on the other hand.³ For the whole family he introduced the name Austric.⁴ Schmidt's bold assumption was diametrically opposed to the much more prudent views held by Kuhn⁵ who not only kept apart the Austronesian (or — as he called them — Malayan) languages of Southeast Asia but also regarded the common elements and further points of resemblance found in the other language groups as probably being caused by an old substratum.

Another language that was proposed as a possible relative of the Austronesian family was Japanese; first by a Russian scholar, Polivanov, whose publication⁶ did not attract much attention, later by a Dutchman, Van Hinloopen Labberton.⁷ The latter's theory was so much based on the so-called "root" theory of Austronesian and on the assumption of many sound-shifts that a reaction was bound to follow. That reaction came from Matsumoto who was supported by Schmidt.⁸ These two scholars did not deny that Japanese and the Austronesian languages showed some common elements in their vocabularies but explained them as the result of Austronesian influence on Japanese: the common words were, according to them, borrowed by Japanese in olden times, before the influence of the Altaic languages made itself felt in Japanese. The conclusion that the Austronesian layer in Japanese vocabulary must be older than the Altaic was drawn by Schmidt from the fact that among the words, brought in connection with Austronesian, there were more belonging to the basic vocabulary.

Wulff put forward the view that Austronesian should be related to the Indo-Chinese family.⁹ Here again, the possibility of influence instead of genetic relationship was urged, a.o. by R. A. Kern.¹⁰

² MacDonald, 1904, 1907.

³ The term "Austronesian" had been coined by him before to replace "Malayo-Polynesian", for the first time in Schmidt, 1899^b. We use Austronesian in this article, others still use Malayo-Polynesian. Only Dyen, 1965, uses Malayo-Polynesian in a different meaning, i.e. for a subgroup of Austronesian.

⁴ Schmidt, 1906.

⁵ Kuhn, 1889.

⁶ Polivanov, 1918.

⁷ Hinloopen Labberton, 1924.

⁸ Matsumoto, 1928; Schmidt, 1930.

⁹ Wulff, 1942.

¹⁰ In an appendix of: Kern, R. A., 1943.

A different view was advanced by Paul Benedict¹¹ who believed that a genetic relationship can be found between Austronesian and a group of languages, spoken in the Vietnamese-Chinese border-area and named by him Kadai languages, and further the Thai group which, in his opinion, should be detached from Sino-Tibetan, as the resemblances of Thai to Chinese are the result of influence, not of common origin. Of all these theories, some died, suddenly or by inches, and the rest are still found in discussions, fully or partly supported by one scholar and energetically rejected by the other, as we shall see later on.

But it is not only by the evidence of relationship or influence that linguistics tries to solve the problem of the homeland. Another possible means to find an answer may be found in the knowledge which comparison of the present languages allows us about the proto-language itself. It was this approach that was the basis of the first detailed study on the Austronesian homeland, written in 1889 by the Dutch scholar Hendrik Kern.¹² The method used by Kern, following the example of what was done in his time in the Indo-European field, was the selection from the vocabulary which was agreed upon to be proto-Austronesian of those words which in their meaning had something to do with flora, fauna, or other elements connected with geographical environment. What he found certainly deserved attention. Concerning plants, he found common Austronesian words for sugarcane, coconut, bamboo (with some distinction of species), gherkin, pandanus, dioscorea, taro, and — with less certainty — rattan. Later he added the lemon. Some plantnames offered difficulties because they were used for different species in the various languages. A dubious point was also found in the words for rice. They are found all over the western part of Austronesia, with the distinction of rice in its natural state (*padi* etc.) and husked rice (*b̄aras* etc.), but in central and eastern Austronesia rice is unknown. This leaves unanswered the question whether rice culture was introduced after the Austronesians swarmed out of their homeland or whether it was given up by the Melanesians and Polynesians during their journeys eastward. Among the many names of animals, found by Kern as belonging to the original Austronesian vocabulary, there were many which did not give any indication of the whereabouts of the proto-language, like fly, louse, mosquito, spider, mouse, dog, and pig. More useful are the words for shark, cuttle-fish, lobster, ray, and

¹¹ Benedict, 1942.

¹² Kern, H., 1889.

turtle. These words show that the proto-language was spoken by people who were familiar with the sea. A clear indication is also found in the word for crocodile. In addition, Kern found words for some kinds of monkeys and for the water-buffalo, which might go back to proto-Austronesian. Words for minerals did not yield any results. Only a word for iron was found but its occurrence was limited to the west which could be explained by assuming that the use of this metal got lost in those areas where no raw material was found.

All this brings Kern to the conclusion that the homeland must have been a coastal region in the tropics. He does not overlook the possibility that it might have been somewhere on the eastern side of the Austronesian area, but he has an argument for looking to the west. This argument he finds in the rice culture which must have spread from India to the east. In this connection he draws the attention to the remarkable fact that for rice the Tibetan language has the word *bras*. Kern thinks that Tibetan must have borrowed this word from Austronesian at a time that speakers of these two language-families lived in contact, probably somewhere in southeast Asia. That is why he supposed that the Austronesian homeland was in the southeast of the Asian continent or in western Indonesia, the northernmost possibility being in southern China with the tropic of cancer as the limit.

Looking for indications for a more precise localisation, Kern pointed to the fact that many of the languages involved have a word for south which originally meant "straits-area". This, he thinks, points to a homeland north of the Straits of Malacca, although such an expression might have risen in Borneo. Another important fact, in Kern's view, is that in many languages words are used for two opposite points of the compass which originally meant "seaside" and "landside". This, he says, is typical for an area with a long coastal line going mainly in one direction, which can only be found on the continent or a very big island. This again gives Borneo a good chance; but Kern thinks that it is not very likely that the homeland may have been in that island, because it is not very densely populated nowadays. A homeland in the Vietnam area also explains the fact that in the non-Austronesian languages of southeast Asia many more loanwords from Austronesian are found than might be expected from the Austronesian languages spoken there nowadays and the unimportant role played by their speakers.

So much for Kern's argument to which we will add some remarks, especially concerning the concluding part. A greater influence from

Austronesian languages on their neighbours in former times might be explained by former circumstances, e.g. the importance of the great Campā empire in which Cham was an important language. That the Austronesian languages on the continent might be the result of comparatively recent immigrations, has been supposed more than once, a.o. by the French scholar Haudricourt.¹³ He argued that the Austronesian languages of the Vietnam area, on account of the development of some consonants, can best be grouped with the languages of southern Indonesia and that historical and sociological data point to a recent immigration of these languages to Indo-China. The linguistic situation there is, he says, the same as in the Malayan peninsula where Austronesian came in in recent times, the original languages (Semang, Sakai) belonging to the Austro-Asiatic group. A continental origin of Austronesian must, therefore, be sought more to the north. An important fact is the resemblance of some numerals (2, 5, and 6) found in languages of southern China, northern Tonkin, and Hainan to the corresponding Austronesian words. This resemblance is not found with the Austro-Asiatic languages (like Mon, Khmer, etc.). In Haudricourt's opinion the homeland must have been in South China between Hainan and Taiwan.

A close relationship between Cham and Indonesian languages, notably Achinese, was demonstrated long ago by Niemann.¹⁴ A more elaborate study was published by Cowan,¹⁵ who came to a conclusion which is quite the opposite of that reached by Haudricourt. Cowan agreed with Haudricourt that Cham is Austronesian, but he argued that Cham and Achinese, two languages which have much in common, show in their vocabularies and in some aspects of the development of their sounds that they lived in contact with Mon-Khmer languages for a considerable time. This can only be explained by a migration of Achinese from Indochina to Sumatra, not by a migration of Cham into Indochina. So, according to Cowan, Achinese constituted the rear-guard of the long migratory movement of the speakers of Austronesian languages out of Indochina to the east and southeast.

There is another point in Kern's argument which does not seem to be very strong: the use of the opposition "landside"- "seaside" for points of the compass. In those languages which have these terms they are not consistently used for the same points. So they do not prove

¹³ Haudricourt, 1954.

¹⁴ Niemann, 1891.

¹⁵ Cowan, 1948.

the necessity of a long straight coast. On the other hand they no more give prove of coming into use on a continent or in a big island. Some Austronesian languages in western New Guinea, although spoken in very small islands, show the peculiarity of having the land-sea opposition as basic for orientational terms. However, these minor points do not shake Kern's theory as a whole.

It is clear that results of researches into the subgrouping of the Austronesian languages can make an important contribution to the solution of the homeland problem. In this matter, however, no unity of opinion has been attained. From of old the geographic division (Polynesia-Micronesia-Melanesia-Indonesia) was used in linguistic classifications. The suspicion that the linguistic reality may be different and much more intricate grew only gradually. The first of the four to die as a classificatory term for linguistic use was Micronesia. That Schmidt used the terms Melanesian and Polynesian in his linguistic studies without giving much attention to their linguistic contents, is not surprising. Important is, that he was seriously concerned with the problem of the position of these groups within the Austronesian family. Looking through his publications we see that the idea that Melanesian and Polynesian constitute one subgroup was constantly growing, until it was emphatically pronounced in 1940.¹⁶ The idea of an eastern group as opposed to western Austronesian was also expressed by Kern in 1906.¹⁷ Something of the same view — but less outspoken and not very clear — was expressed by the outstanding comparatist Dempwolff whose "Vergleichende Lautlehre" has dominated the field of comparative Austronesian linguistics ever since its appearance.¹⁸ The idea of Melanesian and Polynesian constituting a separate branch and the latter being a later offshoot of this branch has been advocated in recent years by Grace,¹⁹ though with more deliberation and modern linguistic insight than is found in Schmidt's publications. Milke's standpoint in this matter is somewhat different from that of Grace but follows the same lines.²⁰ A totally different view on the position of the Melanesian languages was held by Fox²¹ who argued that the sound-forms found in these languages are nearer to the proto-forms than their Indonesian

¹⁶ Schmidt, 1899^a, 1899^b, 1926 (p. 146), 1940-41.

¹⁷ Kern, H., 1906.

¹⁸ Dempwolff, 1934-38; cf. what Grace said on p. 365 of *Chang-Solheim-Grace*, 1964.

¹⁹ Grace, 1955, 1959.

²⁰ Milke, 1958.

²¹ Fox, 1947.

counterparts. This is quite the reverse of what had been said about this by all other scholars in the field; it never gained general acceptance. However, the idea that some phenomena of the proto-language survived or left clear traces in Melanesian languages was advanced by Haudricourt who thought that consonants of the labio-velar type might be not only of proto-Melanesian but also of proto-Austronesian origin.^{21a} But it is impossible to go into everything that has been said on the classification of Austronesian.²² Indeed, some new theories will enter the discussion later on in this article.

After Kern's study, mentioned above, no fundamentally different migration-theories were advanced for a long period. But studies appeared concerning the course and directions of the migratory movements in different parts of Austronesia by Finck, Churchill, and Friederici.²³ In a review of Friederici's book Kern worked out his ideas about the migrations of the Austronesians after they left Indo-China, attributing to them different places in the original homeland but without giving arguments for these highly hypothetical observations.²⁴ When Heine-Geldern in 1932 summed up what was known at that time about the Austronesians' homeland and migrations from the data furnished by both prehistoric and linguistic research, Kern's hypothesis stood unshaken in its essence.²⁵

After the Second World War a new theory about the origin of the inhabitants of Polynesia was presented by Thor Heyerdahl who suggested that these people came from South America and not from Asia.²⁶ As this hypothesis denied the relationship between the Polynesian languages and the rest of Austronesian, it never found a willing ear among linguists. The well established genetic relationship between the Austronesian languages provided anthropologists with a powerful counter-argument, as was demonstrated by Heine-Geldern and particularly De Josselin de Jong.²⁷ But even though this east-west migration theory was not generally accepted, it had a refreshing influence. The problems connected with the settlement of the population

^{21a} Haudricourt, 1948, 1951.

²² Much more is found in Capell, 1962^b, where all sorts of theories — even those which were never expressed in publications — are discussed.

²³ Finck, 1909; Churchill, 1911; Friederici, 1912.

²⁴ Kern, H., 1915.

²⁵ Heine-Geldern, 1932.

²⁶ Heyerdahl, 1952.

²⁷ Heine-Geldern, 1952; Josselin de Jong, 1953.

of the Pacific were studied with renewed interest.²⁸ This inspired linguists to check their own theories and try to make contributions to the solution of those problems.²⁹ Among the many questions, raised in the study of the greater and smaller migrations which brought the people of the Pacific to their present places of residence, that of the so-called Polynesian outliers in Melanesia appeared to be very interesting. Are they the last remnants of the Polynesians' stay there, left behind when the rest moved to the east, or are they the result of small backward movements to the west? Linguistic data points to the second answer, as was demonstrated by several authors.³⁰

But a new attack came on the continental homeland theory and this one could not be so easily beaten off by Austronesian linguistics, let alone simply ignored. For this time a new hypothesis was formulated on purely linguistic grounds by a scholar well versed in general linguistics and thoroughly acquainted with the problems of Austronesian comparative linguistics: Isidore Dyen. His approach was based on the quantitative method, known as lexicostatistics. This method consists of comparison for different languages of that part of their vocabularies which may be regarded as basic, i.e. not directly bound to cultural or external circumstances and therefore less subject to replacement (e.g. by borrowing). Numbers of cognates in this list are counted and taken to represent the degree of relationship between those languages.³¹ Lexicostatistics had been used by others in the Austronesian field, e.g. Elbert and Grace,³² but Dyen gave it a much wider application. He used the idea of the basic vocabulary to correct Dempwolff's view on an "old" speech stratum in Ngadju-Dayak³³ and checked Dahl's comparison of Malagasy and Maanjan with his own lexicostatistic findings, hailing the agreement between the two as proof of the rightness of Dahl's conclusions and also of the justness of the lexicostatistical method.³⁴ As lexicostatistical comparison requires less effort than comparative studies of the "classical" type, the possibility presented

²⁸ See (amongst others): *Sharp*, 1957; *Suggs*, 1960; *Golson*, 1962; *Palm*, 1964; *Claessen*, 1964.

²⁹ E.g.: *Grace*, 1961.

³⁰ *Elbert*, 1953; *Goodenough*, 1961; *Milner*, 1963.

³¹ It is neither useful nor feasible to discuss here in full all the implications of lexicostatistics (or glottochronology). The reader is referred to: *Hymes*, 1960^a, 1960^b; *Bergsland* and *Vogt*, 1962; *Teeter*, 1963.

³² *Elbert*, 1953; *Grace*, 1959.

³³ *Dyen*, 1956^a.

³⁴ *Dyen*, 1951.

itself to make a general classification of the whole Austronesian family. Still this meant a gigantic effort, but Dyen accomplished it.³⁵ But he did not content himself to give the results of this classificatory study. He also tried to draw conclusions from the way in which the sub-groupings presented themselves on the map, to see if there was any clue in this data as to migratory movements and the Austronesian homeland. For this a starting-point was given long before by Edward Sapir,³⁶ who said that within a given area of related languages that part of the area where the greatest diversity is found is the most likely place from where these languages spread.

Comparing the results of his lexicostatistical data, Dyen found that prime-groups (groups or languages showing a low percentage with all other groups and languages) are rather rare in the west: in Formosa (the Atayalic and Tsou groups) and in the islands west of Sumatra (Mentawai and Enggano), but a great number of them is found in the Melanesia-New Guinea area: in New Caledonia, the New Hebrides, the Solomons, New Britain, and eastern New Guinea (about thirty in all). Some others are found in western New Guinea, Yap, and Nauru. This makes it most probable — according to Dyen's point of view — that the homeland, from which the Austronesian languages spread over their present area, is to be found in the Melanesian area, the New Hebrides and New Britain being possible areas of origin. Alternatives, but less likely, are western New Guinea and Taiwan. The general picture of the migrations, as Dyen sees it, includes early migrations to Enggano and Mentawai, and also to Formosa, the latter probably from the Philippines at a time that these islands were not yet fully populated. The Moluccan languages came from western New Guinea, but the languages of the greater islands of Indonesia and the Philippines came from Palau and/or Guam. The Polynesian languages had their origin in the New Hebrides-Solomons area and after their eastward movement split up into Western and Eastern Polynesian and Nukuoro-Kapingamarangi. Later still the "outliers" moved back to the west and Maori separated from the eastern group. In Micronesia migrations followed an east-west line.^{36a}

This revolutionary theory was bound to meet severe criticism. Grace

³⁵ Dyen, 1962, 1965.

³⁶ Sapir, 1916.

^{36a} The anthropological implications of Dyen's hypothesis are discussed by Murdock, 1964.

pointed to the theory of the eastern (Oceanic) group, mentioned above, arguing that Dyen's repudiation of this classification came from an over-estimation of the diversity in the east and an underestimation of the diversity in the west.³⁷ Grace rightly remarked that the Melanesian languages are not the best known and that we know very little about their history in which, maybe, explanations could be found for what seems to be a puzzle now. He further pointed out that a Melanesian homeland can hardly be reconciled with the relationship, suggested by Benedict, between Austronesian and Kadai languages. In general, Grace seems to have diffidence accepting results of such a quantitative comparison, so long as there is no corroboration by qualitative comparison. Wurm³⁸ called attention to the possibility that a substratum of non-Austronesian languages might be responsible for the peculiarities found in Melanesia. This idea of a substratum was not new: it has dominated the discussions about the origin of the Melanesian languages since Ray made it the corner-stone of his theories.

To all these objections Dyen had answers.³⁹ He argued that abandoning the New Guinea-Melanesian homeland raises more questions than it can answer, as his hypothesis gives the most simple explanation of the relatively high linguistic diversity in that area. An appeal to Benedict's Kadai theory is no more a menace: it needs corroboration and, if that corroboration were found, it might make Formosa more likely as the Austronesian homeland and this would mean that the Melanesian area would be a secondary, but still very important, centre of diffusion. For Dyen speaking about substratum is merely bringing an unknown into the discussion and means an abortive attempt to save Melanesian as a linguistic group. In his reasoning the most likely solution is the most simple.

That this need not always be true can be demonstrated with an example of a language situation which — though on a very small scale — is comparable to the problem in question. The languages of the south coast of the island of Yapen (western New Guinea) are in a closely related subgroup with the Wondama (Wandamen) language, spoken in a coastal area of the main island. The greatest diversity is undoubtedly found among the Yapen members of this subgroup which should point to the original habitat of this group in Yapen or somewhere else,

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³⁷ *Chang-Solheim-Grace*, 1964.

³⁸ In the Comments at the end of *Chang-Solheim-Grace*, 1964.

³⁹ See the same Comments.

but not in the Wondama area. However, the oral tradition of these people insists on Wondama as the place of origin of the people speaking these languages. This puzzled me, when I wrote about this⁴⁰ but I was unable to solve the problem. Later, when I visited the Wondama area, the solution appeared to be most obvious: the linguistic uniformity of the Wondama area is of recent date; names of languages now extinct are still known, in some villages Wondama is the language, but some very old people still speak or have a recollection of a different language, and in the more remote parts knowledge and use of Wondama are growing among the younger generation. So the tradition may be right, but a historical factor "spoiled" the picture.

Even if one does not accept the assumption of a non-Austronesian substratum as a starting-point for the discussion of the diversity in Melanesia, one still has to admit that it is a very remarkable fact that the greatest diversity among Austronesian languages is found in those areas where they have non-Austronesian neighbours. The reverse is also true, for we find an astonishing number of small languages, showing a high degree of diversity, in and around New Guinea at both sides of the borderline between Austronesian and non-Austronesian. It may well be that this great number of languages and their diversity are both due to special geographical, social, economical, or cultural circumstances. On the other hand it is quite possible that the existence of great linguistic homogeneity elsewhere must be ascribed to unificatory tendencies, to be accounted for by political and cultural backgrounds. In such cases apparency of dialect-borrowing may be a good index. All this makes it clear that comparative Austronesian linguistics can not be content with counting cognates in vocabularies.

Reviewing all the results as a whole, we must admit that a definite answer to questions of origin and migration could be given only in the case of some limited problems. In some cases linguistic data gave clear indications (e.g. the development of sounds in the Polynesian outliers), in other instances results could be obtained by taking into account other data as well. This was done by Dahl⁴¹ who managed to give a picture of the area from which the speakers of Malagasy came and of the time that they left Indonesia, making use of data provided by inscriptions in Borneo as well as Chinese, Arabic and Portuguese sources.

⁴⁰ *Anceaux*, 1961, p. 147-48.

⁴¹ *Dahl*, 1951.

All in all, some conclusions can be drawn :

- a. The history of the migrations of the Austronesian-speaking peoples is rather intricate. There was not just a single movement, but a complicated series of greater and smaller changes, forward and backward movements, the more recent ones obscuring the evidence of the older ones.
- b. Linguistics has an enormous task clarifying the mutual relationships, analyzing the internal situation in the various languages, and finding new methods of drawing historical conclusions from linguistic findings. To fulfill this task, a lot of descriptive work has to be done, as too many of the languages involved are insufficiently known and lack of knowledge might mean missing important clues for the solution of the more general problems.
- c. The problems of migrations and the homeland can not be tackled by linguists alone. Cultural history, prehistory, anthropology, etc. are as much involved and may make important, even the most important, contributions. Moreover, even if linguists might be able to finish this job on their own, their results must be compared and harmonised with those of other sciences.^{41*} Close co-operation will be most useful, and the first thing to do is to take note of each others results. A publication like the one, mentioned several times already,⁴² in which results and problems of the researches of prehistory, anthropology, cultural history, and linguistics concerning the old Austronesian wanderings are presented, is an important step in that direction.

The last point is most important: the limitations of the faculties of a certain branch of science should always be kept in mind. Therefore, the possibility of co-operation with other sciences is often needed. Such a co-operation may yield unexpected results or make certainties out of what was only hypothetical before. It always gives a wider outlook.

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^{41*} Cf. what is said about this by *Capell*, 1962*.

⁴² *Chang-Solheim-Grace*, 1964.

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Abbreviations:

- AA American Anthropologist
 BKI Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde
 BSLP Bulletin de la Société Linguistique de Paris
 BSOAS Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies
 CA Current Anthropology
 JPS Journal of the Polynesian Society
 JSO Journal de la Société des Océanistes
 Lg Language
 ZE Zeitschrift für Ethnologie.

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