

What can Historical Linguists Learn from Archaeologists? Some Reflections from Teaching Lingg 150¹

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ABSTRACT

In the semesters I was assigned to teach the undergraduate course Linggwistiks 150 - Ang Familia ng mga Wikang Ostronesya [The Austronesian Language Family], I have repeatedly caught myself asking, "What do the archaeologists, anthropologists, and geneticists think about this?" or "Are there recent findings outside our home discipline that will support or corroborate this migration pattern or language distribution?". It is in the spirit of interdisciplinarity and dialogue that I take stock of some of these lingering issues from our side of the fence. Were the Pre-Austronesian populations really mostly foragers and hunter-gatherers? Did Austronesian language speakers migrate one fell swoop into the Philippine archipelago? What motivated these communities to migrate in the first place? Is there archaeological evidence for later migrations and back-migrations such as those of the Greater Central Philippine language communities? Perhaps some of these questions are already "case closed" for archaeology. Others might remain unanswered or unexplored. What do we do when our respective discoveries yield discordant narratives?

Lingg 150, then and now

As a linguistic undergraduate in 2013, I considered Linggwistiks 150 - *Ang Familia ng mga Wikang Ostronesya* [The Austronesian Language Family] my favorite course. There was just something about seeing how everything was all connected that excited me and piqued my interest. The discussions of the micro—individual speech sounds and whether they were pronounced at the soft palate or further back at the pharynx—gradually and seamlessly transitioned to discussions of the macro—how a food producing, seafaring, and headhunting people spread a family of languages now spoken from Repoblikan'i Madagasikara (Madagascar) in the west, Aotearoa (New Zealand) in the south, to Rapa Nui (Easter Island) to the east.

The presentation of this range of topics was all thanks to my teacher in that course, Tuting Hernandez. He had already taken it as an undergraduate himself, but when it was his turn to teach it, he was the one who populated the syllabus with most of its current mainstays: Bob Blust, Laurie Reid, Andrew Pawley, Malcolm Ross, Peter Bellwood, Terry Crowley, John Lynch, etc.²

But as early as Academic Year 1923-1924, Otto Johns Scheerer was already teaching courses in the department like *Linguistics 101. History and methodology of the comparative study of languages* and *Linguistics 102. History of the exploration of the Oceanic languages*.³ So despite the shifting foci and

¹ Paper read at the 14 February 2024 installment of the *Binalot Talks* (formerly Brown Bag Talks), started in 2003 by members of the then Archaeological Studies Program (now the UP School of Archaeology or UPSA) to regularize and institutionalize the informal talks being done on various topics inside and outside archaeology, for the benefit of the UPSA community. I am grateful to Maria Kristina Gallego and Jesus Federico Hernandez for their input in the writing of this paper.

² Jesus Federico Hernandez, personal communication, 13 February 2024.

³ Scheerer, Richard G. *Señor Otto: The Life and Times of Otto Johns Scheerer*. Unpublished manuscript. 2022, p. 180

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research priorities of our department over the past 100 years, there has always been an interest in the history and connections of the languages of the Philippines with the rest of the Austronesian language family (An).

Come 1st semester 2017, I was given the assignment to teach Lingg 150 for the very first time. It was during that semester that I realized how dynamic and rapid the changes were in the field of An linguistics. It was in the same year that Laurie Reid delivered a lecture at the De La Salle University⁴ where he recapitulated all prior work done on the genetic unity of Philippine languages and reaffirmed his stance that there was no single Proto-Philippine language—the purported ancestor of all indigenous Philippine languages; a position he first declared in the 1982 paper *The Demise of Proto-Philippines*.⁵

In the following academic years 2019, 2021, and 2022, I was able to further fine-tune my syllabus; adding not just journal articles, but also podcast episodes⁶, video clips⁷, online posters⁸, and journalistic pieces⁹ discussing discoveries from different fields: linguistic historiography, archaeology, anthropology, even genetics.

Purpose and plan

My purpose for this talk is to take stock of some of the persistent questions in An linguistics. Some of the issues I will bring up today might already be addressed by recent archaeological and genetic findings. The other questions, admittedly, lie outside the purview of historical linguistics. After all, linguists deal with human languages; not genes, not bones, not teeth, not artifacts. Past the 10,000-year mark, linguistic evidence is unreliable, if it is even available.

⁴ Reid, Lawrence A. Revisiting the Position of Philippine Languages in the Austronesian Family. The Br. Andrew Gonzalez FSC (BAG) Distinguished Professorial Chair Lecture, De La Salle University. 2017.

⁵ Reid, Lawrence A. The Demise of Proto-Philippines. *Papers from the Third International Conference on Austronesian Linguistics, Vol. 2: Tracking the Travellers (Pacific Linguistics C-75)*. pp. 201-216. 1982.

⁶ McElvenny, James. Podcast episode 9. The Neogrammarians. History and Philosophy of the Language Sciences. <https://hiphilangsci.net/2020/10/01/podcast-episode-9/>. 2020.

⁷ Centre of Excellence for the Dynamics of Language, Australian National University. *Language Across Time – Reconstructing Culture Through Language*. no date;

Austronesian Forum 南島民族論壇. Prof. Peter Bellwood | Pre-recorded Video Speech for "The Origins of the Austronesians" Book Launch. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ihOQ18C3wl4&t=198s>. 2021.

⁸ Linguistic Society of the Philippines. [BITALAN+]Philippine Microgroup Album 1: BASHIIC. <https://www.facebook.com/linguisticsocietyphil/posts/4460920033928621>. 2021.

⁹ Chen, Victoria. Linguistics locates the beginnings of the Austronesian expansion – with indigenous seafaring people in eastern Taiwan. <https://theconversation.com/linguistics-locates-the-beginnings-of-the-austronesian-expansion-with-indigenous-seafaring-people-in-eastern-taiwan-186547?fbclid=IwAR1Ttq3oJipr4AXBUMuEWcZV-27uaYvYFV0Zo6euMeGZgAlj-1VFA1iz8B4>. 2022.

Question #1: Why Out-of-Taiwan?

The main reason why An linguists have agreed on the general narrative that the language family originated in Taiwan (f.k.a. Formosa) is because the indigenous Formosan languages (i) retain the most sounds and sound distinctions from the reconstructed ancestor Proto-Austronesian (PAn) and (ii) exhibit the highest level of diversity relative to other parts of the family. Put differently, if language groups such as the Atayal and Tsou retain the most phonemes and phonological distinctions in PAn and all the primary subbranches of An remained in Taiwan¹⁰, then that must be the homeland. It is from this linguistic conclusion that we try to find parallels, supporting evidence, and clues from other fields.

Two mainstays of the Lingg 150 syllabus are the archaeologists Peter Bellwood (already mentioned a while ago) and Wilhelm G. Solheim, II. At first glance or surface-level reading, they seem to present two competing narratives. Solheim, in his 1985 paper *The Nusantao hypothesis: The origin and spread of Austronesian speakers*¹¹ identified Mindanao or northeastern Indonesia as the center of development for PAn, a maritime lingua franca formed out of barter and contact. He first proposed the term *Nusan-tao* from the indigenous An roots *nusa* 'island' and *tao* 'person' to replace the cumbersome phrase "speakers of Austronesian languages" or "Austronesian-speaking peoples" and to acknowledge the inherently archipelagic and sea-bound nature of the communities who left behind the artifacts he studied.

Bellwood backed the Out-of-Taiwan narrative of An linguistics from the area of archaeology. In his view—standing on the shoulders of Richard Shutler and Jeffrey Marck¹²—An-speaking peoples came from Taiwan and moved south into the Philippines, into the rest of island southeast Asia (ISEA), Madagascar, and the Pacific. They brought with them food production, some form of dentate-stamped pottery, tattooing, and even headhunting.

I have since learned that Solheim made some recalibrations to his theory, stating that the Nusantao were "a maritime-oriented trading people probably speaking an Austronesian language".¹³ Thus, the Nusantao Maritime Trading and Communication (NMTC) Network, he clarified, was not in one-to-one correspondence with the speakers of An languages. And, as Victor Paz rightly pointed out in his introduction to the book, NMTC is more than just a reaction to the Out-of-Taiwan narrative and is a comprehensive synthesis of the archaeological and cultural record of Mainland and Island Southeast Asia, southern China, and Taiwan.

Another layer to the question "Why Out-of-Taiwan?": why did the speakers of Malayo-Polynesian (MP)—all the An languages found outside of Taiwan—migrate in the first place? Bellwood points to population instability due to an emerging food-producing (later, agricultural) economy. A relatively

¹⁰ Chen, Victoria, Kuo, Jonathan, Gallego, Maria Kristina, & Stead, Isaac, Is Malayo-Polynesian a primary branch of Austronesian? A view from morphosyntax. *Diachronica* 39(4), <https://doi.org/10.1075/dia.21019.che>. 2022.

¹¹ Solheim, Wilhelm G., II. The Nusantao hypothesis: The origin and spread of Austronesian speakers. *Asian Perspectives* XXVI (1), pp. 77-88. 1985.

¹² Shutler, Richard & Marck, Jeffrey C. On the Dispersal of the Austronesian Horticulturalists. *Archaeology & Physical Anthropology in Oceania*, X (2), pp. 81-113. 1975.

¹³ Solheim, Wilhelm G., II, *Archaeology and Culture in Southeast Asia: Unraveling the Nusantao*. University of the Philippines Press. 2006, p. 60.

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small island like Taiwan will only have a limited carrying capacity for a rapidly growing population who have learned to cultivate various cereals.

Solheim's work has emphasized the aspect of barter and material culture exchange in shaping the region. Thus, he invoked as evidence shell tools and wind current between the different island networks of ISEA to trace the movements of peoples.

Question #2: What came before the An speakers?

The archipelago that would be known as the Philippines was not uninhabited by humans when the first An-speaking communities dispersed.

Different collective identifications are given for these Pre-An populations: "Negrito" which is Spanish derived and frowned upon by many of these communities, "Black Filipinos" a term used by linguist Jason Lobel in his dissertation¹⁴ which has not gained much traction both in academia and in the indigenous communities themselves, and "Basal Australasians" used by geneticists.¹⁵ In my view and in my own teaching and research practice, it is best to take a particularist approach to naming conventions and just use the respective community names for themselves or for their languages: *Kabulowan, Ayta Mag-antsi, Ayta Mag-Indi, Katubung, Inagta Alabat*, etc.

The "received wisdom" in Lingg 150 is that these Pre-An populations were predominantly foragers or hunter-gatherers. Their social and economic structure was fundamentally different to that of the seabound, An-speaking agriculturalists. A 2019 paper by Marian Klamer¹⁶, however, referred to a 2005 study by Sue O'Conner and Peter Veth citing early Holocene shell fish hooks as evidence for pre-An complex fishing technology in ISEA.¹⁷ Further, Klamer concludes that "original [Pre-An] populations could also have been agriculturalists, or populations mixing vegeculture and arboriculture...If there is little archaeological data in the area to clearly support the hypothesis of a tuber economy prior to the cereal one that might be due to the difficulty in obtaining such evidence from the archaeological context, it does not prove that such an economy did not exist".¹⁸

Are there findings from archaeological sites in the Philippines that will shed more light on this?

¹⁴ Lobel, Jason William. Philippine and North Bornean languages: issues in description, subgrouping, and reconstruction [Dissertation]. University of Hawai'i at Manoa. 2013.
<https://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/items/397e5e9e-857a-4546-b114-8fd583fa9130>.

¹⁵ Larena, Maximilian, Sanchez-Quinto, F., Sjödin, Per, Jakobsson, Mattias, et al. Multiple migrations to the Philippines during the last 50,000 years. *PNAS*, vol. 118(13).
<https://www.pnas.org/doi/full/10.1073/pnas.2026132118>. 2021.

¹⁶ Klamer, Marian. The dispersal of Austronesian languages in Island South East Asia: Current findings and debates. *Language and Linguistics Compass*, 13(4), pp. 1-26.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/lnc3.12325>. 2019.

¹⁷ O'Connor, Sue & Veth, Peter. Early holocene fish hooks from Lene Hara Cave, East Timor establish complex fishing technology was in use in Island Southeast Asia five thousand years before Austronesian settlement. *Antiquity*, 79 (304), pp. 249-256.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003598X0011405X>. 2005.

¹⁸ Klamer, p. 17.

Question #3: How did later language groups get to where they are?

In 2017, Alex Smith who had just then received his PhD from the University of Hawai'i at Manoa published a paper titled *The Western Malayo-Polynesian Problem*.¹⁹ He addressed the discrepancy between how An is traditionally represented using a binary-branching family tree and the archaeological record of An-speakers' expansion into ISEA. The large left "branch" of the family tree, Western Malayo-Polynesian (WMP) did not stand up to scrutiny as a distinct subgroup of An and instead, it must be broken up into at least 9 primary nodes of MP. This alternative "rake-like" representation of language groupings would have been the result of a rapid movement of An-speaking peoples through ISEA, leaving behind communities that would develop their own distinct languages in different island networks. The previous binary-branching model presupposes a long settlement of WMP speech communities in a single, concentrated region. It is in that region that they "cooked" all of the linguistic innovations that would set them apart from the other parts of An like the Oceanic languages. Evidence—archaeological or linguistic—for this single locus of long-term development for WMP has not stood up to close scrutiny.

Zooming into the Philippines, there has also been much linguistic evidence of later migrations and even back-migrations of the language communities left by the Malayo-Polynesian "express train".²⁰ So, for now, while linguists can rest easy on the status of Taiwan as the homeland of An, the monolithic north to south direction of An-speakers might be considered a convenient idealization.

Kristina Gallego's master's thesis on Proto-Batanic²¹ acknowledges the seemingly competing signals from archaeology²² and genetics²³ on the question of the role of Batanes in the An story. Bellwood & Dizon's artifacts from Torongan Cave in Itbayat, Batanes point to a longer settlement history compared to mainland Luzon. On the other hand, the findings of Loo et al. point to the possibility of "a re-colonization of Batanes from the south based on the high genetic affinity between the Ivatans and the populations of Luzon".²⁴ On the side of linguistics, the Batanic languages descended from Proto-Batanic share more structural affinities with the languages of Northern and Central Luzon, tipping the balance in favor of a northward recolonization from Luzon.

Robert Blust, has also proposed a language leveling event in the spread of his hypothesized Greater Central Philippines group²⁵ which encompasses the majority of indigenous Philippine languages in

¹⁹ Smith, Alexander D. *The Western Malayo-Polynesian Problem*. *Oceanic Linguistics*, 56(2). pp. 435-490. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26408513>. 2017.

²⁰ Diamond, Jared & Bellwood, Peter. Farmers and their languages: the first expansions. *Science*, 300, pp. 597-603. 2003.

²¹ Gallego, Maria Kristina S. *Tracing ancestry and descent: a reconstruction of the proto-Batanic language* [Unpublished master's thesis]. University of the Philippines Diliman. 2014.

²² Bellwood, Peter & Dizon, Eusebio. The Batanes Archaeological Project and the 'Out of Taiwan' Hypothesis for Austronesian Dispersal. *Journal of Austronesian Studies* 1(1), pp. 1-32. 2005.

²³ Loo, Jun-Hun, et al. Genetic affinities between the Yami tribe people of Orchid Island and the Philippine Islanders of the Batanes archipelago. *BMC Genetics*, 12 (21), pp. 1-15. 2011.

²⁴ Gallego, Ibid., p. 164.

²⁵ Blust, Robert. The Greater Central Philippine hypothesis. *Oceanic Linguistics*, 30(2), pp. 73-129. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3623084>. 1991.

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the central and southern Philippines, and even some groups in Indonesia such as the Gorontalo-Mongondow languages in Sulawesi. In this scenario:

“...around 500 B.C., for reasons unknown, speakers of Greater Central Philippines began to expand outward from a center somewhere in northern Mindanao or the southern Visayas. Through conquest and absorption of weaker populations, they reduced the linguistic diversity of the Visayas, Palawan, and southern Luzon.”²⁶

Could archaeology help us understand and uncover these ‘reasons unknown’?

Tied knots, loose ends

What I have shared this afternoon are some scattered reflections and questions left hanging from my history of handling the class Lingg 150. Some of the questions, as I said, totally lie outside the province of linguistics. And that is why I proposed to have this Binalot Talk (thanks to Mark Garcia, by the way, for floating the idea when we were in Yogyakarta, Indonesia), to foster dialogue and interaction between our fields.

Our respective discoveries may yield discordant narratives; chronologies and timelines that are a mess to reconcile. But that’s scientific inquiry, attempting to make sense of the messy realities that confront us.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 73.