

Malagasy linguistic history

Malagasy has developed outside the Austronesian-speaking world for thirteen hundred years or more and is sometimes considered a laboratory case for historical linguistic reconstruction. The language has maintained an essentially Austronesian structure including, so it seems, a typically "Philippine type" verbal morphosyntax. Influence from Bantu languages is generally thought to have been mainly lexical.

I would like to alter this perception. While it is true that in many ways Malagasy remained typically Austronesian, Bantu influence has been strong and is manifested at all linguistic levels. It even extends to verbal morphosyntax and deixis, areas that are considered as particularly emblematic of the rich Austronesian heritage in Malagasy. There has also been Malagasy influence on East Coast Bantu languages.

A more intimate contact situation in which Bantu languages exerted substantial influence on Malagasy is in line with interdisciplinary research on the settlement history of Madagascar. The combined research results of human genetics, archaeology and linguistics, favor a migration in stages. Austronesian speakers from Indonesian Borneo probably first stayed in mainland Africa, where they interacted and mixed with Africans, before they finally settled in Madagascar. Finally, there are clear indications that Madagascar was already inhabited by humans before the arrival of Austronesian speakers and people of Bantu descent.