THE ASMAT LANGUAGES OF IRIAN JAYA

C.L. Voorhoeve

1. INTRODUCTION

According to the most recent classification of the languages of Irian Jaya (Voorhoeve 1975) we find in the eastern part of the Bomberai Peninsula and in the south-western lowlands the Asmat-Kamoro Family with four member languages: Iria-Asienara, Kamoro, Sempan, and Asmat. The Asmat-Kamoro Family together with the Mombum Family, the Awyu-Dumut Family, the Ok Family and the solitary Somahai language are the Irian Jayan members of the Central and South New Guinea (CSNG) Stock (see Map I). The Mombum Family is the closest relative of the Asmat-Kamoro Family; together they form a subgroup within the CSNG Stock.

In this paper I shall be concerned mainly with the easternmost member of the Asmat-Kamoro Family, the Asmat language. I shall deal at some length with its division into dialects and with the question whether we have to do with one single language or with a small group of very closely related languages. Further, I shall indulge in some comparative work and shall present as a result a provisional list of reconstructed Proto-Asmat words. Only occasionally and mostly in the last chapter of this paper shall I have reason to refer to the other languages of the family, and to Mombum.

It has become customary to equate the Asmat language with the language of the 40,000 or so hunting and gathering tribesmen who refer to themselves as the Asmat, Asamot, Asomat, or Asemer people (Drabbe 1963:1). These people occupy a large expanse of lowland

swamp and rainforest area stretching from the Yac River[1] in the north to the Digul River in the south. North of the Sirec River their territory probably extends all the way to the foothills of the central ranges whereas south of the Sirec it rather abruptly becomes confined to a narrow strip along the coast (see map I, III). The area is generally called 'The Asmat', a name also used as a common denominator of the people living in it.

The idea that one language is spoken in the whole Asmat area finds its roots in the pilot dialect study by Drabbe (1963). In this study which is based on linguistic data from five check points[2] supplemented by locally obtained information on the extent and subdivision of the dialect areas, Drabbe distinguishes five main dialects (see map II):

1. Kawenak[3], spoken in the coastal region between the Yac and Ewta Rivers;

2. Keenakap, spoken in the region of the upper Mec, middle Sirec, and Sor Rivers;

3. Keenok, on the middle course of the Pomac, Unir, and Asewec Rivers;

4. Kaünak, in the Citak area to the east of the junction of the Sirec and Pasuwe Rivers;

5. Kaweinag, spoken along the Casuarina Coast from the Ewta to the Kuti River.

[1] River names have many local variants. I shall use here the names current among the Asmat people living in the vicinity of the main Government station Agats. All letters used in the spelling of Asmat names can be taken to have their usual phonetic values expect c, m, and n. c represents a voiceless alveopalatal stop [č]; as a rule of thumb, m and n stand for [b] and [d] respectively at the beginning of words, for [mb] and [nd] when they occur between vowels, and for [m] and [n] in all other cases. More details will be given in chapter 3, section 3.1.2.2.

The only official maps which to my knowledge feature native river names are the old 1 : 100,000 maps of the Dutch Topographical Service, 1956 edition.

[2] Drabbe's data represent Asmat as spoken in Ayam (Kawenak dialect), Namen (Keenakap dialect), Komor (Keenok dialect), Senggo (Kaünak dialect) and Pirimapun (Kaweinag dialect), see map II. The bulk of his dialect study is taken up by a short comparative grammar of the first three dialects. The last two are represented by word lists of 377 items.

[3] The labels chosen by Drabbe mean according to him 'real human being' (from kawe etc. *human being* and nak *true, real*). In my opinion they mean almost exactly the opposite, see chapter 8.3 no. 279. Also, the label Keenakap is not beyond suspicion: one would expect the equivalent of kawenak to be kaenak in this dialect (its equivalent of kawe is kae). The form keenakap does exist, but means *small* and contains a root kee and a diminutive suffix -nakap. kee and kae could be allomorphs; in that case keenakap would be comparable to Kawenak yiwinakap *small* from yiwi *child* and -nakap, or umunakap *full* from umu *top side of an object* and -nakap.

Within the Kawenak dialect he further distinguishes four sub-dialects coinciding with the four regional groups recognized by the coastal Asmat people. They are: Kainak, Simai, Mismam, and Mecəmup[4]. He mentions that the subdialects are sufficiently similar to be mutually intelligible (1963:3).

Mutual intelligibility is not a criterion he uses with respect to the main dialects. Neither does he use any other formal criteria to establish their dialect status. His classification is impressionistic, but not in a superficial sense. It is based on inspection of a sizeable body of data and his assessment is grounded on a lifetime of field work experience.

Drabbe's dialect study does not cover the far interior and the upper As River area. These regions were still completely unexplored in the late fifties when he worked in the Asmat. Lexical data collected by later explorers[5] from people living on the upper courses of the main rivers seemed upon first inspection to be sufficiently similar to downstream Asmat to suggest that this language is spoken as far north as the foothills of the central ranges.

The present paper intends to fill out and partly correct the picture of the linguistic situation as sketched by Drabbe. It is based on the already published materials (Drabbe 1959a,b; 1963; Voorhoeve 1965) and on unpublished supplementary data collected by Bromley, Eyde, Van Arsdale, and myself[6]. The latter data consist for the most part of word lists of varying length, the shortest counting only a few dozen words, the longest almost 400. The language samples represent a total of 44 separate points within the Asmat area.

[4]The name Kainak has been taken from the Asmat census of cultural groups as quoted in Van Amelsvoort 1964:192. Drabbe does not provide a label for this subdialect. Kainak is a subdialectal variant of kawenak.

[5]Those I know of are two anthropologists, Eyde in 1960 and Van Arsdale in 1974; one missionary-linguist, Don Richardson of the Regions Beyond Missionary Union in 1973, and myself in 1970.

[6]I collected some dialect materials during my first field work in the area (1960-62) and collected more data during a trip through the region in 1970. I am further indebted to David Eyde who gave me a list collected in Momogo, to Myron Bromley who kindly sent me a word list collected in Senggo as well as his tentative phonological analysis of the Senggo dialect of Citak Asmat (Bromley 1973, 1975), and to Peter van Arsdale who sent me a travel report (Van Arsdale 1974) containing five short word lists (listnumbers 33,45,46,83,84). Unfortunately I did not have access to the data collected by Don Richardson.

The organisation of the paper is as follows. First, a number of word lists will be subjected to a lexicostatistical analysis (ch. 2). As a result, two of Drabbe's five dialects will be reclassified as separate languages. A new dialect will be added to the remaining three, and to the three Asmat languages resulting from the reclassification a fourth one will be added. In the following chapters (3-6) each of these languages will be dealt with in more detail. They form the descriptive part of the paper. The last two chapters (7, 8) are of a comparative nature. Chapter 7 gives a short description of Proto-Asmat phonology and traces the sound changes that took place in the present-day Asmat languages. Chapter 8 contains an annotated list of reconstructed Proto-Asmat words together with the data on which they are based.

To help the reader to find his way in the mass of data presented in chapter 8, an index of English glosses and an index of Asmat words have been added (Appendices I and II). They are followed by a list of approximate numbers of Asmat speakers on the language, dialect, and village level (Appendix III) and a list of phonetic symbols used in the text (Appendix IV). Five maps, notes, and bibliographical references complete the paper.

Before proceeding with the second chapter it will be necessary to identify the fortyfour language samples mentioned above. Throughout the paper they will be referred to either by the name of the villages or location where they have been collected or, more frequently, by their list numbers as given in the legend to map III. In the list below I have indicated the linguistic affiliation of the language samples according to Drabbe's classification but I have replaced his labels Kaünak and Kaweinag by the more generally accepted names Citak and Casuarina Coast. Names of villages where in addition to lexical data also grammatical data have been collected are starred.

Villages/locations where linguistic data have been collected:

Linguistic affiliation	List number	Name
Kawenak (KW)		
Kainak (Ka):	1.	Atat
	3.	Kapi
	5.	Yamas
Simai (Si):	7.	Ayam*
Mismam (Mm):	14.	Suru*
	15.	Yepem*
	16.	Per
	17.	Uwus

Mecəmup (Me):	21.	Ac*
	22.	Amanamkai*
	23.	Amisu*
	24.	Cowew
	26.	Kawet
	27.	Yow
	28.	Omanesep
Keenakap (KP)	29.	Namen*
	30.	Miwar (hutan)
	31.	Yaosakor
	33.	Awok
	34.	Fos
Keenok (KN)	35.	Komor*
	36.	Yipaer
	37.	Sawa-Erma*
	38.	Mu-Akani
	39.	Manep
Casuarina Coast (CC)	47.	Otenep
	48.	Masim
	49.	Muepis
	50.	Nanew
	53.	Makair
	61.	Pirimapun
	62.	Aorket
	65.	Tareo
Citak (CI)	67.	Senggo
Unclassified (not in Drabbe 1963)	42.	Mine
	43.	Sokoni
	45.	Yinak
	46.	Wooi
	83.	Upper Sirec (location)
	84.	Brazza River (location)
	86.	Ti
	89.	Momogo
	90.	Pupis
	93.	Irogo