Phonological contrasts in Palu'e: synchronic and diachronic perpectives

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Palu'e, a language of northern Flores, ususually (for an Austronesian language) shows a contrast between plain and aspirated stops (as well as voiced, implosive and prenasalised). The contrast in VOT between plain and aspirated stops is much less than is normally found, averaging less than 30ms, suggesting that other acoustic cues are present to reinforce the contrast. Indeed, other cues are present, but are not what might be expected for an aspiration contrast: words with aspirated stops contain shorter vowels across the entire word, and have a higher amplitude on the syllable following the one with the aspirated stop.

Additionally, aspirated stops are constrained to only appear foot-initially; this is also the only position in which the glottal stop cannot apppear.

(1) *(C)VC^{h}V (2) *ʔV(C)V

Evidence from the occurrence of lax vowel allophones suggests that aspiration, rather than being a consonantal difference, is part of the realisation of the relics of a contrastive register system. The original register system has all but vanished, being replaced by a barely-phonemic glottal stop and barely-phonemic aspirated series, as well as near-phonemic vowel contrasts. We have discussed aspiration and glottal stops; examples of vowel near-contrasts are shown in (3) and (4).

(3)	lu	[luː]	'coral'	(4)	tai	[tai]	'sea'
	luʔu	[lʉ̰ː]	'tear'		taʔi	[tɐ̰ɪ]	'faeces'

If the register hypothesis is accepted as accounting for the appearance of contrast away from the 'primary' syllable, Palu'e falls into line with other Southeast Asian and Pacific languages, for which the number of vowels correlates ($r^2 = 0.36$, n = 850) with the presence of aspiration. Accounts of register and its developments, and antecedents, in mainland Southeast Asia (eg. Brunelle, Huffman, Matisoff) are all consonant with the changes and peculiarities that are found in Palu'e.

References

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