

Dalkalaen (Oceanic): Articulatory variation shaped by phonological contrastivity, and vice-versa

APLL 16

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Dalkalaen is an endangered and underdescribed Oceanic language spoken by ca. 1,000 inhabitants of the island of Ambrym, Vanuatu. It exhibits a large degree of articulatory variability of its phonemes, such as variable lip rounding in front and back vowels, and inconsistent place and manner of articulation in many consonants.

This presentation will look at the particular phenomenon of the articulatory range of realization of four of its consonant phonemes, marked in red in the table:

	labial	labiovelar	coronal	dorsal
plosive	p	p^w	t	k
nasal	m	m ^w	n	ŋ
fricative	f	f ^w	s	ʃ
approximant	β	w	l	j
flap			ɾ ɽ	

Table 1: Consonant phonemes of Dalkalaen

These phonemes contain reflexes of what used to be a voiced plosive series /b b^w d g/ in Proto-Oceanic. Some languages of Ambrym, such as Daakaka (von

Prince, 2015), have retained this contrast between voiced and voiceless plosives, while others, such as North Ambrym (Franjeh, 2012), have undergone a similar shift to Dalkalaen:

- The voiceless and voiced labials have collapsed into phonemes underspecified for voice.
- /d/ and /g/ have shifted to an alveolar flap and a dorsal fricative, a process easily traceable through cognates in other Ambrym languages which have retained the voicing contrast, such as Daakaka.

The presentation will talk about:

- how the loss of these phonemes has shaped the phoneme system, such as how the loss of the voiced coronal plosive has (probably) led to a chain shift of */d/ > /r/, */r/ > /ɽ/
- how the phoneme system of Dalkalaen has shaped the reflexes of the lost voiced plosive series, such as how a gap in the dorsal fricative slot has “provoked” a reflex of the lost voiced dorsal plosive as a fricative (as opposed to a merger with the voiceless dorsal plosive, like in the labial plosives)
- how phonological contrasts in the phoneme system condition non-contrastive probabilistic variation in Dalkalaen, such as how /ɸ/ allophonically varies all over the velar/uvular domain, but specifically avoids articulations covered by the allophonic domains of /k/ and /ŋ/

The talk will provide a context within which to discuss the following two research questions:

- How do articulatory contrastivity and variability depend on each other?
- Is the geometry of phoneme tables a mere artifact of abstract human thought, or grounded in reality?

References

- Franjeh, Michael. 2012. *Possessive classifiers in North Ambrym, a language of Vanuatu: Explorations in semantic classification*. SOAS, University of London.
- von Prince, Kilu. 2015. *A Grammar of Daakaka*. De Gruyter.