

REVIEW OF: *ROTE-METO COMPARATIVE DICTIONARY*

Alexander D. Smith
The Chinese University of Hong Kong
smith.alexander.david@gmail.com

Edwards, Owen. 2021. *Rote-Meto Comparative Dictionary*. Canberra: Australian National University Press. xii + 452 pp. ISBN 9781760464561. Print \$75. Open Access: <https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/52033>

The Rote-Meto Comparative Dictionary (RMCD) is a large and valuable collection.¹ The first line of the introduction states that this comparative dictionary “provides an initial bottom-up reconstruction of... the Rote-Meto subgroup.” (Edwards 2021:1). However, this book provides much more than the author’s reconstruction. It is also a valuable resource for lexical material from the Rote-Meto group, neatly organized into a single source that will undoubtedly provide data for future analysis beyond Edward’s own proposals for some time. The RMCD is available in print and online at <https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/52033>, and in searchable formats (Lexique Pro and text spreadsheet) at <http://hdl.handle.net/1885/251618>. The inclusion of searchable materials is greatly appreciated. This is a highly valuable work and a substantial resource on the Rote-Meto language group, perhaps the most significant contribution to the comparative study of these languages to date.

The dictionary contains data of 29 Rote-Meto speech varieties, with some entries containing additional comparisons with outside languages (non-Rote-Meto) where such comparisons are relevant. There are 86 pages of introduction (Chapter 1), descriptive material (titled *Language Background*, Chapter 2), and historical analysis (*Historical Background* Chapter 3) before the beginning of the actual comparative dictionary on page 88. The dictionary portion begins with Chapter 4, *Rote-Meto – English*, which contains entries organized by reconstruction (usually PRM, but sometimes by lower-level reconstruction). Chapter 4 contains the bulk of the comparative material. The dictionary continues with Chapter 5, *English – Rote-Meto*, a finders list with entries listed by their English gloss. Finally, the dictionary ends with Chapter 6, *Proto-Malayo-Polynesian – Proto-Rote-Meto*, a wordlist organized by PMP reconstruction. The total number of reconstructions reaches 1,174 (although additional reconstructions are available on the Lexique Pro version, totaling 1,257).

Introduction

The introduction provides the reader with the necessary preliminaries, a statement of the purpose of the dictionary, limitations, data sources, transcription practices, and an overview of the structure of the dictionary and of the entries. The description of data sources is particularly important, which I will discuss in more detail.

Much of the data in the dictionary is from secondary sources, although Edwards provides a significant portion from his own work, including most of the Meto data. Regarding the Rote data, they are largely from Jonker 1908, which focusses on the Termanu dialect but includes data for other varieties. Jonker has complete entries for Termanu forms, but cognate forms from other dialects are often not given complete entries, and as a result many of the non-Termanu forms that were sourced from Jonker are incomplete, containing only

¹ Languages in the Rote-Meto group are spoken in and around western Timor (Meto languages) and Rote Island (Rote languages). The division between Rote and Meto is geographic. Although there are two main divisions according to Edwards’ subgrouping, with one containing only Rote languages (Nuclear Rote) and another containing all of the Meto languages (West Rote-Meto), some “Rote” languages of Rote Island are classified with Meto in West Rote-Meto, not with other Rote languages of Nuclear Rote. Abbreviations include PMP = Proto-Malayo-Polynesian and PRM = Proto-Rote-Meto.

headwords and no additional description or glossing. This imposes a limitation on the comparative dictionary, but one that cannot be helped. Although more detailed information on these other dialects would be appreciated, it does not detract significantly from the value of the work. Meto data are mainly from Middelkoop (1972), an unpublished draft dictionary, and Edward's own fieldnotes. Recordings from Edwards' field work are available in the PARADISEC (*The Pacific and Regional Archive for Digital Sources in Endangered Cultures, based in Australia*) archive.

In addition to the issue of incomplete entries from Jonker (1908), another other issue with the data is the transcription of glottal stop and double vowels. Both Jonker (1908) and Middelkoop (1972) represent glottal stops in word medial position between two vowels, but both have inconsistent or non-existent marking in initial position, and Middelkoop further lacks marking in final position or in medial position when part of a consonant cluster. Jonker also does not have consistent glottal stop marking in dialects other than Termanu.

The use of data from these sources means that those working with the comparative dictionary will have to be careful about citing specific forms from languages where glottal stop was not consistently marked. However, because Edward's own field notes, and many of the more modern resources that he uses, do consistently mark glottal stop, it is often possible to infer glottal stops where none are marked. This means that Edward's reconstructions are usually able to spot glottal stops and that reconstructed words, as well as those from modern resources, may be more freely cited as accurate. Additionally, because Edwards took the time to meticulously explain these limitations in the introduction, the reader is well prepared for the presentation of these data in the dictionary itself.

Language Background: Edwards does a commendable job offering the reader a condensed overview of the linguistics of modern Rote and Meto languages. There is only so much that can be covered in a 20-page chapter, but Edwards provides brief discussions on interesting topics including morphological metathesis, word-final vowel insertion, the system of verb agreement, and numerous other morphological processes. Overall, one is left with more questions than answers after Chapter 2, although it was not necessarily Edwards' goal to provide all of those answers in this chapter. Indeed, the main purpose of this chapter seems to be to inform the reader of the rich and interesting phonological and morphological features of modern Rote-Meto languages and to give enough background on these topics for the reader to accurately interpret the dictionary entries. Sufficient citations are given for the interested reader to follow up with other resources on specific topics. In my case, at least, Chapter 2 left me with an appetite to learn more about these topics.

Historical Background: As a historical linguist, I am particularly interested in the historical analysis presented in Chapter three. I discuss two topics in some detail below: phonological and lexical reconstructions as well as subgrouping. I offer some criticism in this section but want to make clear that Edwards provides a strong analysis and any disagreements do not detract from the value of the work and the strength of Edwards' proposals.

Reconstruction: Edwards makes the decision to reconstruct definitions to PRM for some plant names that were introduced rather recently. He cites *uas, which is glossed as 'jicama', a type of yam bean native to the Americas and thus likely imported to the region during the colonial era. Edwards only makes such reconstructions where additional information is unavailable, and although this is reasonable considering the near impossibility of determining precisely what *uas meant, and the unsatisfactorily vague alternative of reconstructing 'type of tuber', I wonder if assigning the recent imported crop name to PRM was the correct decision. It could have been reconstructed as 'unknown tuber variety, shifted to *jicama* in modern RM languages', or something of the sort. This may have more clearly indicated in the reconstruction itself the unknown semantics of the word. To his credit, Edwards makes it clear in the introduction that this and other similar words probably meant something else in PRM.

Another decision on the reconstruction methodology was to make the reconstructions themselves strictly "bottom-up", meaning that reconstructions to the PRM level must have evidence from both Proto-West-Rote-Meto and Proto-Nuclear Rote. This has the consequence of forcing Edwards to reconstruct to lower-level subgroups retentions from PMP without accompanying reconstructions to higher levels. A demonstration of this is the reconstruction of Proto-Meto *metam 'black', which Edwards points out on page 71 is a reflex of PMP *ma-qitam 'black'. He does not reconstruct a PRM word for 'black', however, since reflexes of *ma-qitam are restricted to Meto. From a bottom-up perspective the decision to not reconstruct PRM is correct, but

it seems unnecessarily restrictive to forbid the reconstruction of a PRM reflex due to a strict bottom-up requirement. If Proto-Meto is a daughter of PRM, and Proto-Meto *metam is inherited from PMP, then that means that PRM must have also had a reflex of *ma-qitam. Although one may argue that a pure bottom-up approach is necessary to avoid undue influence from our knowledge of PMP, I feel that in some cases, like the case of *ma-qitam, the purely bottom-up approach can place unnecessary restrictions on the PRM reconstruction.

This leads to another point about Edwards' bottom-up reconstruction, this time about the reconstructed phonology. It is interesting that PMP *d, *z, and *j should merge in so many instances, yet each maintain slight differences. To clarify, PMP *d becomes PRM *d, *d̥, and *r; PMP *z becomes PRM *d̥, *d, and *nd; and PMP *j becomes PRM *d̥, *d, *r, and *d̥ʒ. Edwards reconstructs *d, *d̥, *nd, and *d̥ʒ separately. This is a plausible situation, since Edwards sketches out a hypothetical language shift scenario whereby the pre-Austronesian people of the area are shifted to Austronesian over a period of time, with different stages representing different stages in the shift. I have some questions, however, about these reconstructions and the PMP phonemes that they reflect.

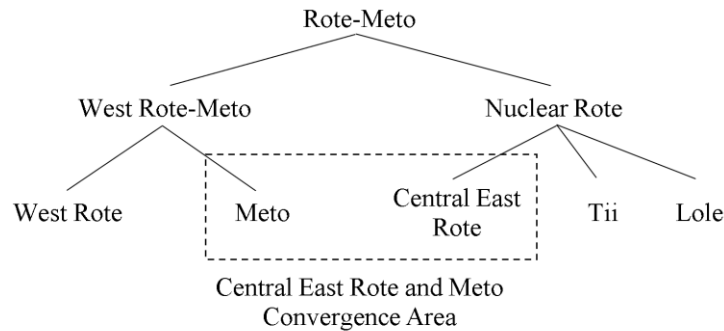
First are the *d̥ʒ reflexes of PMP *j. The phonetic value of PMP *j is disputed, although it may have been a palatalized velar, [gʲ] (Blust 2013). There are two reconstructions that Edwards attributes to PRM *d̥ʒ: *fud̥ʒə 'foam' (< PMP *bujəq) and *nad̥ʒa-k 'name' (< PMP *ŋajan). There are two reasons that Edwards reconstructs *d̥ʒ. First, the correspondence sets for these two words differs slightly from those of *d, *d̥, and *r but with significant overlap. Second, there is irregular fronting and raising of the vowel following *d̥ʒ, for example, Dela-Oenale *na-fu~fure* and Dengka *na-fu~fule* (expected final *a* in both). Given the irregularity in reflexes found throughout Rote-Meto languages, a couple of irregular words might not seem like much of an issue, but the raising of vowels does suggest palatal influence, possibly from *d̥ʒ. Edwards does not consider the possibility, however, that palatalization in these words was triggered not by *d̥ʒ, but directly by *j, which was itself a palatalized velar [gʲ]. This again appears to be due to the strict bottom-up approach. If *j persisted into PRM, then the elimination of *j via irregular merger after PRM might also explain both the multiple reflexes of *j as well as the irregular raising of vowels in some words, triggered by *j itself, without having to posit a new PRM phoneme *d̥ʒ.

Reflexes of *z are also interesting because they contain the only direct continuations of PMP reconstructions with prenasalized stops (PMP *z becomes PRM *nd in two instances). Here, the evidence for a merger between *d and *z before or at the PRM level is much stronger. Edwards notes that a possible explanation for a split in the voiced stops to a series of voiced, implosive, and prenasalized stops is that preexisting languages in the area had prenasalized and implosive stops, and irregularly incorporated the Austronesian system into this preexisting system over an extended period. The fact that *z is a source for *nd means that *z had probably already merged with *d. This is potentially significant, since other languages in the greater Timor region tend to have distinct reflexes of *d and *z. Edwards does not point out this potential merger, but did change an earlier reconstruction in Edwards 2018 which kept PMP *z [d̥ʒ] as PRM *d̥ʒ.

My personal appetite for more top-down analysis, however, does not detract from the significance of Edwards' analysis. He presents a clear and meticulously organized account of the historical phonological development of Rote-Meto languages, no easy task, and gives the reader much to work with, including detailed tables and descriptions of correspondences, as well as highly organized tracking of the numerous unconditioned splits (e.g., there are ten correspondence sets reflecting PMP *k).

Subgrouping: Edwards faces a difficult task in determining the interrelatedness of Rote-Meto languages as well as their position in Malayo-Polynesian. The history of Rote-Meto has not provided for many clear-cut divisions between subgroups. Rather, Rote-Meto languages developed through complex dialect networks and periods of mutual development between groups. Edwards proposes a primary division between West Rote-Meto and Nuclear Rote. He additionally notes a Central East Rote and Meto group that is not a traditional subgroup but rather a group of languages that are not exclusively related to one another but nevertheless share a series of sound changes that indicate a period of common development.

His subgrouping hypothesis is made clear in Figure 3.1, which has a traditional family tree with a primary division, but Central East Rote and Meto encircled by a dotted line, indicating their shared history. This figure is reprinted in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Rote-Meto internal subgrouping and convergence area (Figure 3.1 in Edwards 2021)

It can be confusing at times, however, keeping these distinctions clear, since a discussion of Central East Rote and Meto, a non-subgroup, is sandwiched between two other sections dealing with traditional subgroups, the first on Nuclear Rote, and the other on West Rote-Meto. The ordering of the discussion feels a bit out-of-order, and it is not helped by a traditional family tree model in Figure 3.4, which presents the Central East Rote and Meto group as if it were an actual subgroup. The reader will have to be sure to keep Edwards' actual hypothesis in mind while reading through these sections.

Evidence for the Rote-Meto group as a whole is limited, but not non-existent. Edwards notes that there is a change of **wa-* to **o* in nine specific lexemes. Although the change is irregular, the fact that it is shared in these nine lexemes throughout Rote-Meto lends some strength to the argument. The second sound change is lowering of high vowels before **-R*. This sound change is relatively common throughout Austronesian, but less so in the greater Timor region. Again, this sound change is irregular, appearing in eight forms but not appearing in 6 others. It is the “regular irregularity” of these sound changes that makes them significant for subgrouping, i.e., the fact that they are attested only in some lexemes, but within those lexemes are regular throughout the subgroup. The potential merger of **d* and **z* may also lend additional evidence for the subgroup, but again this is not an uncommon sound change.

Rote-Meto is placed in the larger Timor-Babar subgroup which itself contains Helong, Rote-Meto, Lakalei-Idate, Eastern Timor, Wetar-Atauro, and Southwest Maluku. The single piece of phonological evidence is a shared change of **p* > **h*, which will undoubtedly leave some questioning the strength of the subgrouping proposal. Edwards (2018, 2019) has other publications dealing more with this proposal which the reader is encouraged to refer to.

Overall, Edwards' subgrouping proposals are well-defended and structured especially in the context of a subgroup of languages that offer so little to work with in terms of regular sound change and shared innovation. Edwards' subgrouping is plausible, clearly defended, and will likely remain the standard subgrouping of these languages for some time.

The Dictionary: Regarding the dictionary entries themselves, Edwards does such a thorough job preparing the reader for the entry formatting in the introduction that there is little, if anything, to complain about. As explained by Edwards, many of the Rote entries lack glosses, due to the source material (Jonker 1908). Entries are otherwise well-populated with data and on the whole feel complete and precise. It should be noted that PRM and lower-level reconstructions are mixed together in Chapter 4. For example, **afa* is listed as a headword, but is a Proto-Meto reconstruction and is then followed by **afi* ‘fire’, a PRM reconstruction. Another example is **uli* ‘rudder’ (< PMP **qulin* ‘rudder; steer (a boat)’), which is listed as *Rote* and appears between two PRM reconstructions. It may seem odd mixing reconstruction levels together in the dictionary, but it actually works well here. Take *Rote* **uli* ‘rudder’, for example. This word continues a PMP reconstruction, so there was probably a PRM **uli* ‘rudder’. Other words with lower-level reconstructions may have been present at PRM, but with no outside evidence to confirm. At any rate, the decision to list them together makes the material more easily accessible to the reader. It would be cumbersome to have multiple different lists each dedicated to a different level of reconstruction. Since the reconstructions are clearly marked for proto-level, there is little room for misinterpretation by the reader.

The one area for improvement that I can see in the dictionary entries themselves is the lack of subgroup indication. Evidence from various RM languages is listed by subgroup, with Nuclear Rote languages at the top, and West Rote-Meto languages at the bottom. This is a logical ordering, and for those who are familiar

with the languages it is easy enough to determine where the Nuclear Rote languages stop and the West Rote-Meto languages begin. However, for readers who are not very familiar with Edwards' proposals, an issue arises in the lack of any formal indicator separating the two subgroups. I found myself having to go back to the introduction to check if a particular language was Nuclear Rote or West Rote-Meto. After enough time with the dictionary one becomes able to spot the change: *Tii* is usually the final Nuclear-Rote language, and all languages that follow *Tii* are in the West Rote-Meto subgroup. To his credit, Edwards does make note of the language ordering and grouping page 16 (although he refers to the languages as Rote and Meto, a geographical separation, and not by Nuclear Rote and West Rote-Meto, a linguistic separation), but it still would have been nice to see a division in each entry.

Overall, the dictionary portion of the RMCD is its most valuable asset. The organization of data from multiple sources in a single place, the inclusion of new data from Edwards' dataset, and the highly detailed entries make Chapters 4 to 6, especially Chapter 4, invaluable resources.

Overall Impression: The RMCD is a thorough, well-implemented, and highly valuable resource. The gathering of comparative data from multiple sources, many previously unpublished, makes this a must-have for anyone interested in Rote-Meto, the languages of greater Timor, as well as anyone with an interest in Austronesian languages more generally. Edwards explains the details of the languages, their histories, and their interrelatedness in such a way as to make this book approachable even for those with little or no previous experience with these particular languages.

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