

THE EAST COAST BAJAU LANGUAGES

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0. INTRODUCTION

The origins of the Bajau-speaking peoples are not clearly known. In his master's thesis Warren (1971) offers merely that long ago a land-dwelling people, probably after prolonged contact with the sea, abandoned their former orientation to adopt a boat-dwelling lifestyle as sea nomads. The Brunei chronicles and Sulu tarsilas (genealogical records) share the common tradition that the Bajau emigrated from Johore on the Malay Peninsula, an event one investigator has dated early in the 14th century.¹ This relatively late dating for the arrival of the Bajau coincides also with the belief held commonly throughout the Sulu Archipelago that the Bajau arrived in the Sulu Sea subsequent to the Tausug (or Suluk as they are known in Sabah) people.

More recently this view has been challenged. Tom Harrisson (1973-74) and S.J. O'Connor have suggested the possibility that Chinese trade in the Sarawak River delta between 700 AD and 1350 AD may have been carried in Bajau vessels. Their conclusions that Bajau influence in the area of North Borneo may be much earlier than traditional accounts is based on archaeological evidence.²

Support for an earlier migration also comes from Pallesen (1977) whose historico-comparative analysis of Bajau and Tausug languages provides linguistic evidence that Bajau-speaking peoples had become well established in the southern Zamboanga-Basilan area of the Sulu Archipelago by 800 AD, predating Tausug habitation of the area. He hypothesises further that there was an outward expansion from this area toward the south-west, such that as early as the start of the 12th century subgroups could have been settled in Cagayan Sulu and in both Indonesian and North Borneo, areas in which they remain to this day.

The linguistic literature based on study of the East Coast Bajau dialects of Sabah is quite limited. Besides Schneeberger's (1937) short vocabulary only Abdul Ghani bin Bagul (1950) and Sather (1965, 1968) have published linguistic articles dealing with Sabah Bajau. Only Sather's articles are concerned with East Coast Bajau, particularly Bajau Laut as spoken at Bangau-Bangau SA. His earlier article deals specifically with numbers and adjectives of quantity, while the latter sketches elements of Bajau phonology and grammar. Linguistic descriptions based on Bajau dialects spoken in the Philippines include Pallesen's (1965) phonological description of Central Sama and Allison's (1977) discourse study of a Southern Samal text. Pallesen (1977) includes a reconstruction of the Bajau parent language which he uses to demonstrate socio-historical relationships between the Bajau and Tausug (Suluk) groups.

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113

The term Bajau (spelled Bajaw in the Philippines) is cited (Evans 1952) as an exonym applied originally by the Brunei Malays. Most speakers (particularly those in the Philippines) refer to themselves as Sama (also Samah, Samar, and Samal) and to their language as 'Bahasa Sama' or 'Bahasa Bajau' in Indonesia and Sabah and 'Sinama' in the Philippines. Other designations include Palaqu, Luwaqan, Sea Gypsies and Orang Laut (*sea people*).³ The term Bajau has gained wide acceptance in Sabah, and is used in this paper as a cover term for all speakers of Bajau or Sama dialects.

The population of the Bajau in Sabah was listed in the 1970 census as 72,563, a figure which included both the East Coast and West Coast Bajau communities. More recent estimates based on the 1980 census suggest there may be that many East Coast Bajau alone currently living in Sabah.

The primary areas included in the survey were the districts of Lahad Datu, Semporna and Sandakan (Figure 1). In Lahad Datu District there is a large Bajau population of varied origins. The dialect names indicate for the most part the location from which the people originated in the Philippines. The following dialects are found in significant numbers: Balangingi, which originated from the island of Balangingi in the Tongquil group of Northern Sulu PHL; Sikubung, which originated from the island of Sikubung near the north-eastern end of Tawi-Tawi PHL; Simunul and Sibutu, who for the most part have recently come from those places in the Philippines; and Bajau Asli, which is also known as Sama Kubang or Bajau of Semporna. In the Kunak LD area there are numerous Simunul and Sibutu people, most of whom came to the area within the last 20 years. The original inhabitants of the area are said to be the Bajau Asli (Sama Kubang) people. Within the past decade West Coast Bajau people have been resettled in several schemes in the Kunak LD area and in Sandakan District.

Semporna District apparently has the largest Bajau population of any of the areas included in the survey, although no population statistics are available at present. The original residents of the Semporna area were evidently Bajau (Sama Kubang) and Bajau is spoken by the vast majority of the people, including many who are not Bajau. In addition to the Semporna Bajau (Sama Kubang) there are several other large communities of Bajau who trace their origins to locations in the Philippines. These include people of Simunul and Sibutu who are largely located in Simunul SA and Kg Air SA; Bajau Laut, who trace their origin to Sitangkay PHL, are located in Bangau-Bangau SA; Ubian people are located in Terusan Baru SA on Bumbum Island and trace their origin to South Ubian Island in the Tawi-Tawi group.

In Sandakan District there are three Bajau groups: West Coast Bajau, which were not included in the survey; Kagayan, or Jama Mapun; and Simunul. The Kagayan population is quite extensive in the Sandakan area and has been there for a relatively long time. Pallesen (1977:171f.) suggests that the migration route of the Bajau group which eventually settled in Cagayan Sulu was via the coast of North Borneo, indicating the Kagayan people may have been living in the area for nearly 800 years. They are now found in Sibuga Besar SN, Simsina SN, Nunuyan Island and Libaran Island, and are reported to be in numerous other places along the northern coast extending as far as Jambongan Island and Kudat. The Simunul people for the most part live in Bokara SA and Kg Air SA and have been there for a long time.

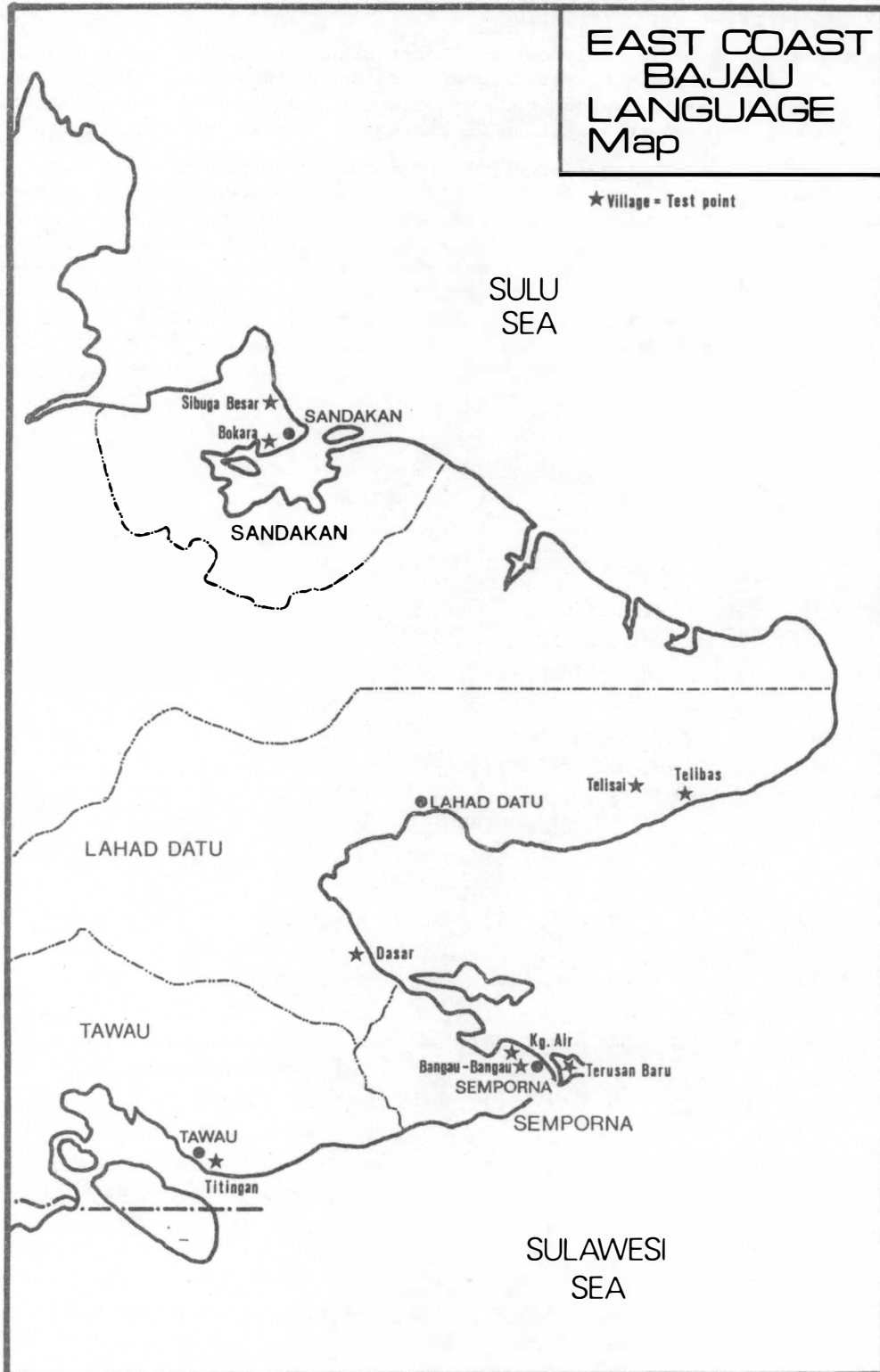


Figure 1: East Coast Bajau language map

The West Coast Bajau list is clearly distinct, relating at 57-69 PSC with the East Coast Bajau samples. Within the East Coast Bajau language group the Mapun (or Kagayan), Simunul and Balangingi lists may be said to represent separate dialects from the group representing Southern Sama, none of them relating at higher than 82 PSC with a Southern Sama list. The wordlist from Siasi PHL is designated Central Sama, based on Philippine information, though it exhibits a high (92 PSC) relationship with the Sitangkay PHL list representing Southern Sama.⁸

2. TESTING PROCEDURE

The purpose of the survey was to test the intelligibility of various Bajau dialects in the selected communities of long-term resident native speakers of Bajau languages on the eastern coast of Sabah (i.e. in Lahad Datu, Semporna and Sandakan districts). The testing was expected to indicate (1) which dialects of Bajau the Sabah communities could best understand, (2) how closely the indigenous Semporna Bajau dialect is related to Southern Sama of the Philippines, and (3) the extent of language change that has occurred since certain communities migrated from the Philippines.

A location for administering intelligibility tests was chosen on the basis of the percentage of cognates shared by the language of that location and other languages of the area and the length of time the community had been in Sabah. Communities whose speakers had not been in Sabah for more than 40 years were not chosen for testing since less than that amount of time was considered insufficient to allow for a significant amount of language change to take place.

The communities selected for intelligibility testing were: Telisai LD, Telibas LD, Bangau-Bangau SA, Terusan Baru SA, Kubang Baru SA, Bokara SN and Sibuga Besar SN.⁹

Selection of test sets was made on the basis of a knowledge of the Bajau dialects of the Philippines, the percentage of cognates shared by the various dialects in the area and with Bajau dialects of the Philippines, and a knowledge of the community to be tested. The test sets were different for each community tested since each had a different point of origin and showed a different cognate relationship to the other dialects.

3. TEST RESULTS

The results of intelligibility testing in East Coast Bajau villages are displayed in Figure 3. Average scores on the hometown reference tapes were in the range 94-98%, well within the expected norm.

3.1 Balangingi

The Balangingi scores from Telisai LD were as follows: 92% on Philippine Balangingi, 72% on Philippine Simunul, 81% on Bajau Laut, and 27% on West Coast Bajau.

REFERENCE TAPES TEST POINTS	Balangingi (Balangingi PHL)	Simunul (Simunul PHL)	Sikubung Semporna (Terusan Tengah SA)	Bajau Semporna (Kubang Baru SA)	Bajau Laut (Bangau-Bangau SA)	Central Sama/Sinama (Siasi PHL)	Jama Mapun (Cagayan Sulu PHL)	West Coast Bajau (Maruntum PG)
Balangingi (Telisai LD)	92	72			81 (72)			27 (63)
Sikubung (Telibas LD)		81	90 (84)		72 (79)	42 (76)		
Bajau Laut (Bangau-Bangau SA)		85	92 (80)	96 (86)		70 (80)		
Bajau Semporna (Kubang Baru SA)		83	92 (84)		90 (86)	46 (81)		15 (64)
Ubian (Terusan Baru SA)		83	92 (91)	95 (84)		46 (81)		
Ubian (Buah Pandai KB)		91		98 (71) *		56 (70) *	87 (60) *	
Simunul (Bokara SN)		82		89 (74)				40 (64)
Kagayan (Sibuğa Besar SN)		51					91 (83)	60 (68)
* PSC scores from Kuala Abai KB are substituted for Buah Pandai KB								

Figure 3: Results of intelligibility testing in East Coast Bajau villages.
(Intelligibility scores are shown as percentages. PSC scores are in parentheses.)

The Balangingi of Telisai LD were tested mainly to find out if the language of the community had changed sufficiently to render Balangingi of northern Sulu PHL unintelligible to them. All the subjects' parents had been born in Malaysia. Some trace their lineage in Malaysia back five and six generations, others more recently. Most of the test subjects stated that their ancestors came from Boan Island in the Philippines. However, the origin of the Boan Balangingi community is known to be from the Tongquil group of islands in northern Sulu. All test subjects said that Balangingi was the language they use in their homes.

The scores of 72% on Philippine Simunul and 81% on Bajau Laut are quite high and are probably due to their living close to Sikubung people who speak a variety of the Southern Samal dialect.

3.2 Sikubung

Sikubung scores at Telibas LD were as follows: 81% on Philippine Simunul, 90% on Sikubung Semporna, 72% on Bajau Laut and 42% on Central Sama. The Sikubung people of Telibas LD were tested to find whether their dialect was more closely related to Southern or Central Sama as the scores indicate. Four of the subjects' parents had been born in the Philippines. Most test subjects trace their origins to Sikubung Island near Tawi-Tawi Island PHL. Many present marriages are arranged with relatives on Sikubung Island PHL. All test subjects said that Sikubung was presently the language they spoke in their homes.

Sikubung is clearly a variety of Southern Sama by its score of 81% with Philippine Simunul, which probably should be adjusted upward 5% because of a poor question which required an obscure term for an answer. The score of 90% with Sikubung Semporna indicates that the language of the two communities has undergone little change during the more than 40 years of isolation from each other.

3.3 Bajau Laut

Bajau Laut was tested in Bangau-Bangau SA and the scores were as follows: 85% on Philippine Simunul, 92% on Sikubung Semporna, 96% on Bajau Semporna, and 70% on Central Sama. Seven of the test subjects' parents were born in Malaysia; three of the test subjects' parents were born in the Philippines. All test subjects trace their lineage to Sitangkay Island PHL. Many present marriages are arranged with relatives there. All test subjects said that Bajau Laut is the language presently used in their homes.

Since these people refer to themselves as Sama Dilaut, as do the people of the Central Sama dialect in Siasi, Sulu PHL, and because of the high percentage of cognates shared by Central Sama and Sitangkay, the ancestral home of the Bangau-Bangau SA Bajau Laut (92 PSC), it would be expected that Bangau-Bangau SA people would score high on Central Sama. This however was not the case. The high scores with Bajau Semporna and Philippine Simunul indicate that the present linguistic relationship is closer to Semporna. This is further verified by the PSC relations. Bajau Laut of Bangau-Bangau SA is clearly part of the Southern Sama dialect area.

3.4 Bajau Semporna

Bajau Semporna (Kubang) people were tested in Kubang Baru SA with the following results: 83% on Philippine Simunul, 92% on Sikubung Semporna, 90% on Bajau Laut, 46% on Central Sama, and 15% on West Coast Bajau. All the test subjects' parents had been born in the Semporna area (with the exception of one who was from Tarakan KAL), their ancestors being from Bumbang Island and other off-shore islands and the coastal area near Semporna. All test subjects said that Bajau Kubang is the language used in their homes.

The test scores clearly indicate that this dialect is a part of the Southern Samal dialect since it has high scores with Philippine Simunul, Sikubung Semporna and Bajau Laut.

3.5 Bajau Ubian

Bajau Ubian was tested in two locations. The Bajau Ubian of Terusan Baru SA were tested to determine their relationship to Samal dialects of the Philippines. The Ubian of Gaya Island KK and Buah Pandai KB were tested to determine the language relationship between these villages whose residents call themselves Ubian and the Bajau language groups living along the east coast of Sabah, as well as the Samal languages of the southern Philippines.

3.5.1 Bajau Ubian of Terusan Baru SA

The Bajau Ubian of Terusan Baru SA showed the following test results: 83% on Philippine Simunul, 92% on Sikubung Semporna, 95% on Bajau Semporna, and 46% on Central Sama. Six of the test subjects had parents who had been born in the Philippines, two had one parent born in Malaysia and one parent born in the Philippines, and two subjects said both parents had been born in Malaysia. Their ancestors came from South Ubian Island PHL between 40 and 100 years ago. All test subjects said that Ubian is the language used in their homes.

The scores indicate that the Ubian dialect is clearly a part of the Southern Samal dialects as evidenced by the high scores with Philippine Simunul, Sikubung Semporna and Bajau Semporna. There has been little linguistic change since these speakers left South Ubian Island PHL.

3.5.2 West Coast Ubian

It was difficult to find Ubian people to test on Gaya Island KK who had been born there or whose parents had been born there. Of the five people tested there was only one who along with his parents had been born on Gaya Island KK. Most others had been born on Banggi Island KT and their parents had been born elsewhere. With the exception of the score on the Central Sama story (14%) the scores are quite high (96-100%), but because of their short term of residence in the area the scores were not considered valid.

The Ubian people of Buah Pandai KB scored as follows: 94% on Ubian of Terusan Baru SA, 98% on Bajau Semporna, 87% on Jama Mapun of the Philippines, 91% on Simunul of the Philippines and 56% on Central Sama. Most of the people tested were born on Mantanani Island KB, the recognised home of the Ubian people in Kota Belud District.¹⁰ There is regular interaction between the people living in Buah Pandai KB and those living on Mantanani Island KB with intermarriage.

The high test scores reveal high intelligibility of Ubian of Terusan Baru SA as well as the Southern Samal dialects represented by Bajau Semporna (98%) and Philippine Simunul (91%). The relationship with Central Sama is clearly more distant (56%). The intelligibility of Jama Mapun of the Philippines was very high, as would be expected from their close relationship with the Cagayan people living in Kuala Abai KB, their market and school town.

3.6 Simunul

The Simunul test subjects of Bokara SN showed the following results: 82% on Simunul of the Philippines, 89% on Bajau Semporna and 40% on West Coast Bajau.

Nine of the test subjects' parents had been born in Malaysia; one had one parent born in Malaysia and one parent born on Simunul Island PHL. Ancestors of four to five generations ago migrated to Sandakan from Simunul Island PHL. Their language is mixed now with Malay, and there is intermarriage with people of other language groups.

The fact that Bokara SN people only scored 82% on a story from their ancestral home in the Philippines is probably due to the fact that one question required an archaic or little known word for an answer and so may have deflated the scores by 5%. The lower score may also indicate language change is affecting intelligibility. Even though the Bokara SN community has been isolated from the rest of the Southern Samal dialects, it has not undergone sufficient change to affect intelligibility greatly. This is evidenced by the 89% score with Bajau Semporna even though the two communities are separated by a great distance and there is little travel to the Semporna area.

3.7 Kagayan (Mapun)

Kagayan (Mapun) people of Sibuga Besar SN were tested with the following results: 51% on Simunul of the Philippines, 91% on Jama Mapun of the Philippines and 60% on West Coast Bajau. For three of the test subjects, both parents had been born in Malaysia; four had one parent who was born in Malaysia and one in Cagayan Sulu PHL. One had a parent born in Indonesia and the birthplace of the other parent was unknown. Two subjects said both parents were born in Cagayan Sulu PHL. Some test subjects said their ancestors had migrated to the Sandakan area three or more generations ago, having come from Cagayan Sulu PHL. All subjects said that Kagayan is the language used in their homes.

The test scores show clearly the distinction between the Southern Samal and Kagayan dialects of Bajau. It is interesting to note that the Kagayan dialect has not changed sufficiently during the years of separation from its ancestral home to affect intelligibility. Also, Kagayan speakers scored higher than the East Coast Bajau groups on the West Coast Bajau story, even though this affinity is reflected only slightly (4-5 percentage points) in the cognate percentages.

4. NATIONAL LANGUAGE INTELLIGIBILITY

Figure 4 displays the results of testing to determine the degree of understanding of a story told in Bahasa Malaysia in the eight East Coast Bajau communities. Taken district by district, the Kota Belud and Sandakan communities demonstrate the highest average test scores. The Sandakan scores correlate with higher educational statistics. The Kota Belud scores point to a high degree of language learning on the part of a minority language community who must rely on the national language for communication with other groups. For all Bajau villages, the average test score was 80%. Over half of the test subjects had received some formal education. The average education for the combined eight corpora was nearly four years.

TEST POINTS	AVG. SCORE	SEX M/F	AGE		EDUCATION		
			AVG.	RANGE	ED.	A.E.R.	A.E.S.
Telisai LD	85	6/4	30	19-50	5	6	3
Telibas LD	65	8/2	32	18-55	3	5	2
Bangau-Bangau SA	71	7/2	26	14-42	4	5	2
Kubang Baru SA	75	7/3	26*	15-45*	7*	6*	4*
Terusan Baru SA	76	6/4	29	17-50	7	8	5
Buah Pandai KB	96	8/2	23	15-30	6	5	3
Bokara SN	88	5/5	31	15-64	7	9	6
Sibuga Besar SN	85	7/3	27	14-49	6	8	5
* Age and education statistics were not obtained from one subject							

Figure 4: Comprehension of the national language in eight East Coast Bajau villages with sociological data. (Test scores are given as percentages. EDUCATION figures indicate the number of subjects having received some formal education (ED.), the average number of years of education those subjects had received (A.E.R.), and the average number of years of education for all subjects in the corpus (A.E.S.).)

5. CONCLUSION

Intelligibility testing in eight Bajau communities has confirmed Smith's West Coast-East Coast distinction. Moreover, the identification of most of the Sabah samples with the Southern Sama language can be firmly established. Language level distinctions can also be posited for the Balangingi and Kagayan (including Mapun) dialects. The testing further demonstrated that Sabah varieties of East Coast Bajau are distinct from the Central Sama language of the Philippines. Finally, within the Southern Sama varieties of East Coast Bajau, a Simunul dialect is apparent and is showing definite change from the language spoken in the ancestral homeland.

NOTES

1. The investigator (cited by Warren) was Najeeb M. Saleeby, who during his service as a medical doctor in the American administration in Sulu during the years 1901-1935, translated the tarsilas into English.
2. The evidence presented by Harrisson and O'Connor includes the absence of Chinese artifacts other than their ceramics and coins, as well as the abundance of Bajau-type pottery (Harrisson 1973-74:39-40).
3. Harrisson (1976) argues for a close relationship between the Bajau and the Ngaju of Kalimantan. He lists the following forms, appearing in literature as far back as the 17th century and covering territory from the South China Sea to Australia, as pertinent to his discussion: Bajau, Bajou, Baju, Badjau, Badjaw, Badjoo, Baijini, Byajo, Biajo, Beaju, Beadje, Viadje, Ngadju, Ngaju and Lutao.
4. A language survey of the Bajau languages of the southern Philippines conducted in 1970-71, using lexicostatistics and intelligibility testing identified seven Bajau dialects. The dialects were distinguished on the basis of mutual intelligibility scores of 80% or lower and PSC relationships of less than 70. The seven dialects are as follows:
 - Abaknon, spoken on Capul Island, Northern Samar;
 - Yakan, spoken in Basilan, Sakul Island and Bitali, Zamboanga del Sur;
 - Balangingi (Bangingi), spoken in the Tongquil group, along the coast of Zamboanga and neighbouring islands;
 - Central Sama (Sama Dilaut, Sinama), spoken on the islands in the Siasi area and extending to North Ubian Island;
 - Southern Sama, spoken in the Tawi-Tawi group, extending from Ungus Matata to Sibutu and Sitangkay with the communication centre in Simunul Island;
 - Pangutaran Sama, located on the Pangutaran group with resettled communities in Cagayan Sulu and the Brookes Point area of Palawan;
 - Mapun (Kagayan), spoken in Cagayan Sulu and Southern Palawan.
5. The self-designations represented within this central group were: Sikubung (2 wordlists), Ubian (3), Sibutu (2), Sama (4) and Bajau Banaran, Bajau Darat, Bajau Laut and Bajau Semporna (1 list each).
6. The one exception is the list from Siasi PHL, which fits better with the Central Sama dialect. Its relation of 92 PSC with the Sama (Bajau Sitangkay) wordlist seems aberrantly high.
7. The self-designations given for these ten wordlists were: Ubian (3 lists - all on Sabah's west coast), Simunul (2), Kagayan (2) and Jama Mapun, Balangingi and Laminusa (1 list each).
8. The relationship of 92 PSC between the Siasi PHL and Sitangkay PHL wordlists is established on the basis of 168 comparable items, with over 199 non-comparable items occurring on the two lists. The relationships with the other Southern Sama lists (80-85 PSC) are more in line with expectations.
9. Testing was not done in Tawau District since data collected during the initial phase of the survey indicated that those communities had not been in the area for a sufficient length of time to warrant testing.
10. This was indicated by district officers, village leaders, etc.

