THE EXPRESSION OF VULGARITY, FORCE, SEVERITY AND SIZE THROUGH R-L ALTERNATIONS:

PHONAESTHEMIC MINIMAL PAIRS IN RETA

THANKS TO: FIREBIRD FOUNDATION FOR ANTHROPOLOGICAL RESEARCH, WILLIAM MCGREGOR, REBEKAH BAGLINI, EHM HJORTH MILTERSEN

SCHOOL OF COMMUNICATION AND CULTURE
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JEROEN WILLEMSEN
PH.D.-FELLOW

This presentation contains swear words

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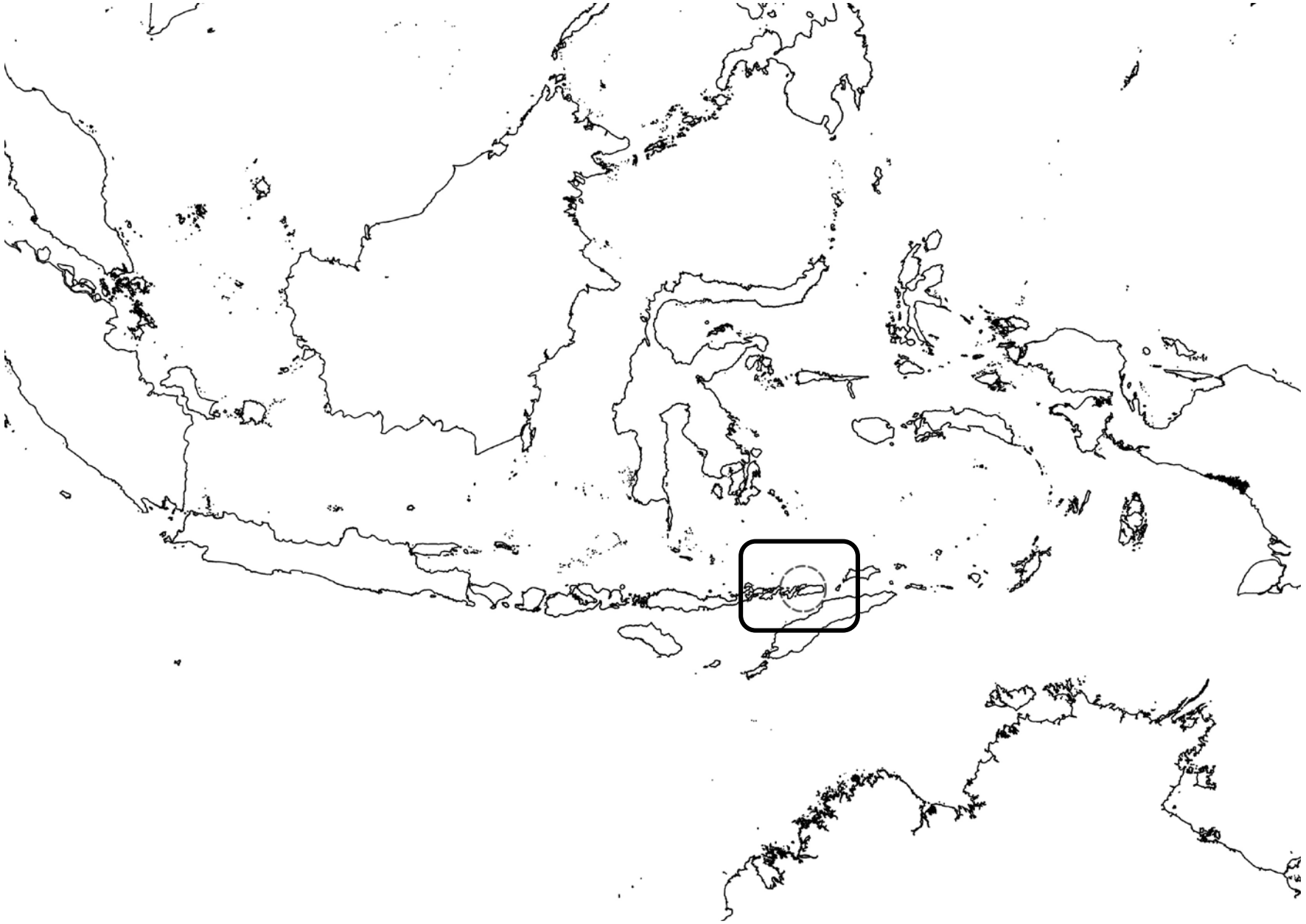
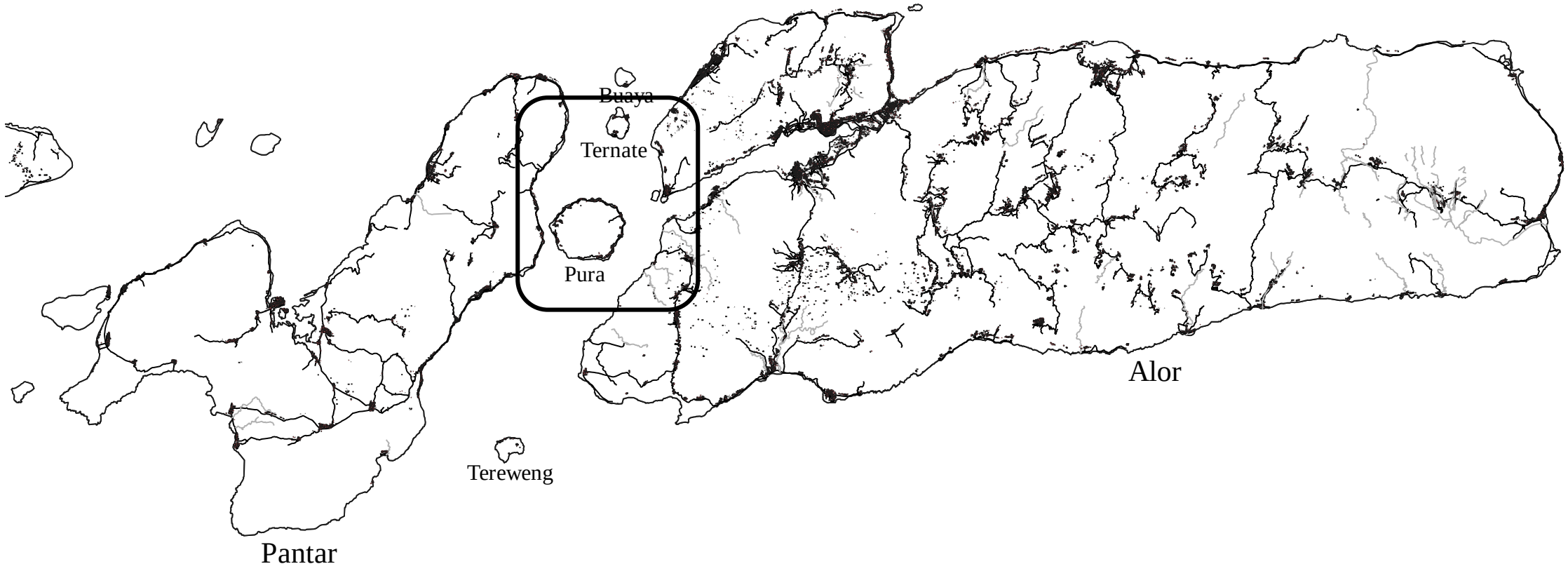
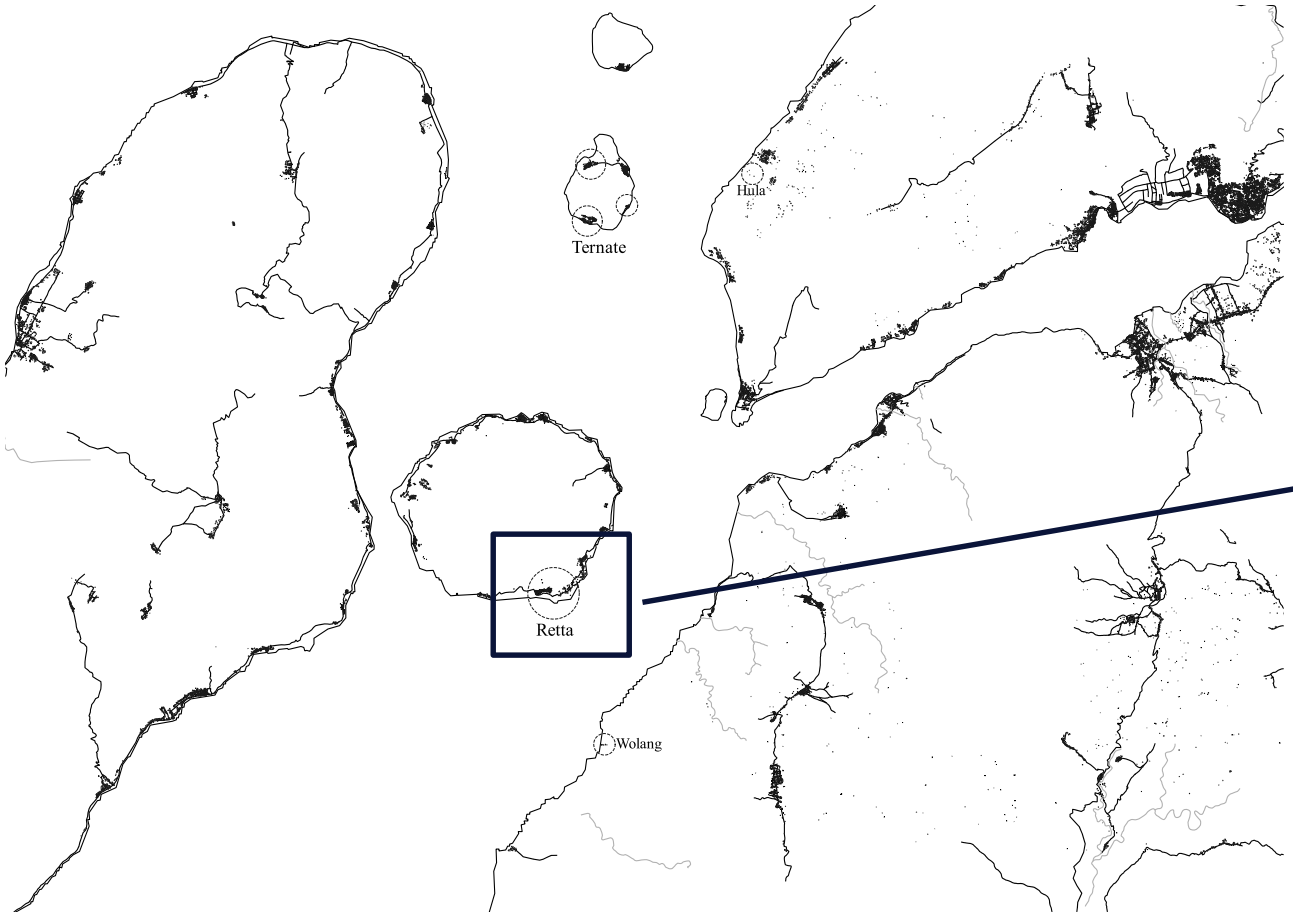
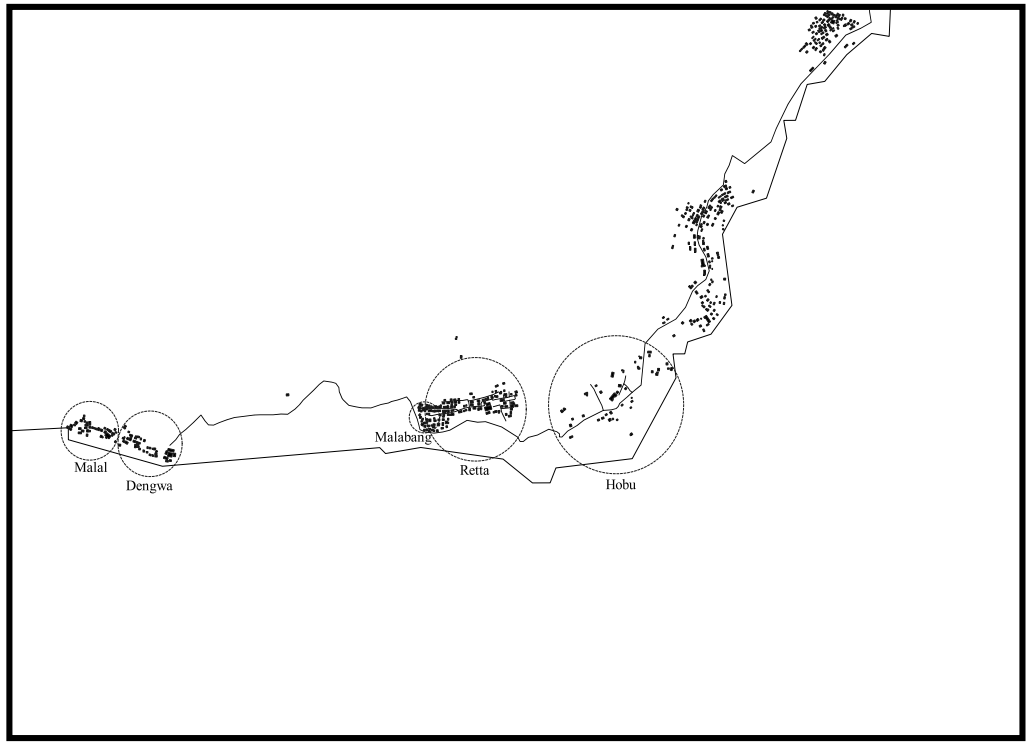



Buaya
Ternate
Pura
Tereweng
Pantar
Alor


Ternate
Hula
Retta
Wolang


Malal
Dengwa
Malabang
Retta
Hobu

ɓela ‘bad, (lightly) damaged’

ɓera ‘terrible, heavily damaged’

abiaala ‘peel, skin something’

abiaara ‘peel, skin something with force’

SHORT VERBAL ABSTRACT:

In Reta, /l/ can be substituted with /r/ to create phonaesthemic alternations. This is not productive, and ultimately arose out of a sound change /r/>/l/ and subsequent re-introduction of /r/. Such alternations are sound-symbolic but are different from both morphology and ‘regular’ phonaesthemes like English *gl*-.

PHONEMIC VS. PHONAESTHEMIC

❖ Phonemic contrasts:

lupuk ‘fall into sitting position’	≠	*rupuk* ‘demolished’
dolu ‘protect new crops’	≠	*doru* ‘altar, stone heap’
paloha ‘warm, hot’	≠	*paroha* ‘itch from wet clothing’

❖ Phonaesthemic alternations:

betul ‘move (a little)’	≠	*betur* ‘move with force’
-ool ‘penis’	≠	*-oor* ‘cock, prick’
taloohang ‘fight, seize, compete’	≠	*taroohang* ‘snatch away, rob, violate’

PHONAESTHEMIC ALTERNATIONS

- Vulgarity (body parts):
  -ool ‘penis’ ≠ *-oor* ‘cock, prick’
  -aal ‘vagina’ ≠ *-aar* ‘cunt’
- Force (actions):
  abiaala ‘peel, skin sth’ ≠ *abiaara* ‘peel, skin sth with force’
  betul ‘move (a little)’ ≠ *betur* ‘move with force’
- Severity/extent (states):
  tabula ‘concerned, at a loss’ ≠ *tabura* ‘panic, frenzy, try to survive’
  lavak ‘broken’ ≠ *ravak* ‘destroyed, collapsed, uprooted’
- Size/significance (inanimate objects):
  bugul ‘(small) hole, leak’ ≠ *bugur* ‘big hole, leak’
  aliku ‘vein, fibre, sinew’ ≠ *ariku* ‘(big) vein or artery visible on the body’

WHAT MAKES IT NOTEWORTHY?

- Sound symbolism itself = a direct link between sound and meaning
- It is well-attested, e.g.:
  - Stutts & Torres (2012) on the link between vowel roundedness and creamy vs. tart taste
  - Köhler (1947) on the link between vowel roundedness and curvedness of shapes
  - Spence & Gallace (2011) on the link between vowel roundedness and various food types
  - Kuehnl & Mantau (2013) on the link between vowel frontness and preferred SUV brand names
  - Ngo, Misra & Spence (2011) on the link between vowel roundedness and bitterness of chocolate
  - Tarte & Barritt (1971) on the link between vowel openness and table size
  - …and other bouba-kiki/baluba-takete-like studies

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  - …and other bouba-kiki/baluba-takete-like studies

These are associations, but do not necessarily part of the lexicon

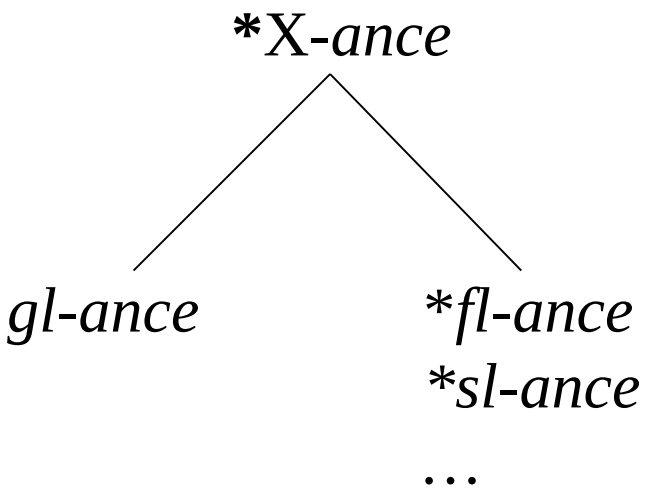
WHAT MAKES IT NOTEWORTHY?

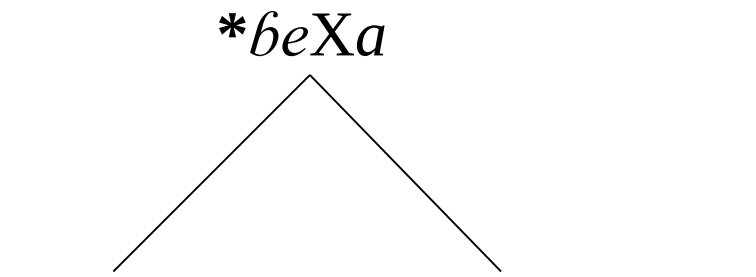
- We are dealing with *phonaesthemes* here
  - i.e., a lexical associations between sound and meaning
  - *gl*-initial words in German often denote shining or glowing things (von der Gabelentz 1891 :219)
    - in English they often denote ‘light’ or ‘vision’ (Bloomfield 1933: 245)
  - *sl*-initial words in English are often associated with pejoratives (Firth 1930: 50-1)
    - Swedish: pejoratives and quick/strong movement (Abelin 1991: 95, 109)
  - *-ump* final words in English are often associated with clumsiness (Bloomfield 1933: 245)

- These have been dubbed ‘submorphemes’ (Blust 1988) and ‘root-forming morphemes’ (Bloomfield 1933)
- They are meaning-bearing units

WHAT MAKES IT NOTEWORTHY?

- Phonaesthemes are ‘atomic’ and have a meaning component
  - No contrast with other elements and are not compositional
- Reta phonaesthemes do contrast with non-phonaesthemes and have a base form





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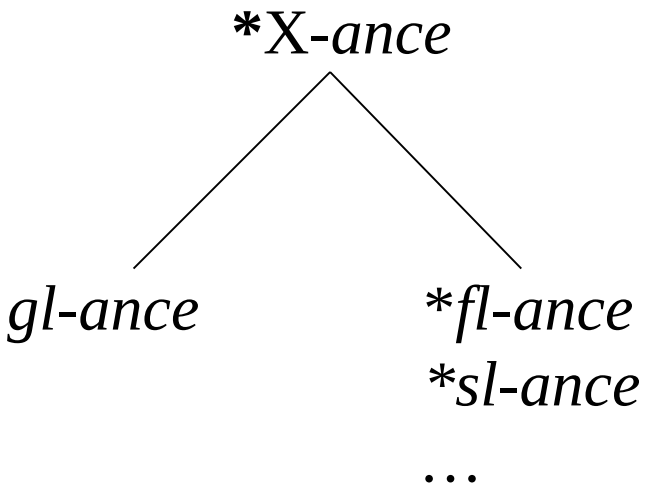
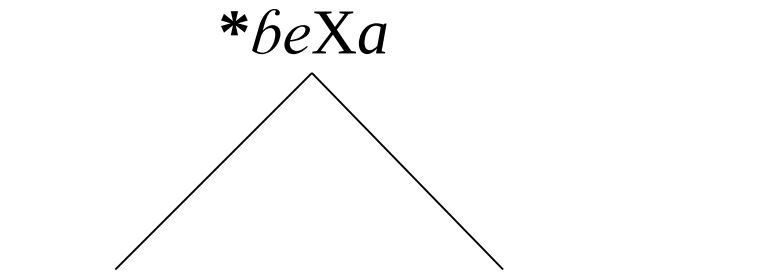




☞ *ɓela* ‘bad’ ⟶ *ɓera* ‘terrible’

IN SUM

- /r/ is a single sound that bears meaning
- It bears a paradigmatic relation to unmarked /l/
  - Unmarked /l/ is the base form

IS IT MORPHOLOGY?

- Before we draw a comparison with morphology, we want to know a bit more
  - Is it productive?
  - How did it emerge?

IS IT MORPHOLOGY?

- Before we draw a comparison with morphology, we want to know a bit more
  - **Is it productive?**
  - How did it emerge?

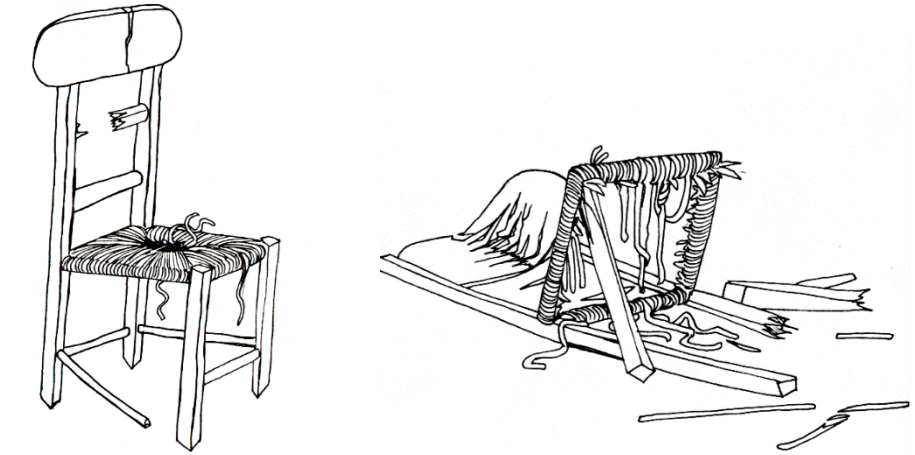
IS IT PRODUCTIVE?

- Type frequency of 1709 (/l/) vs. 609 (/r/) (lexicon +/- 4000 items)
- 63 total minimal pairs between /r/ and /l/
  - 32 phonaesthemic ☞ might be productive

- Two ways of measuring productivity
  - Language game
  - R-colouring of existing L-words & vice versa

IS IT PRODUCTIVE? – LANGUAGE GAME

- Set of picture-pairs capturing semantic differences
- Nonce-words conforming to Reta phonology, forced responses
  - *tolo, hale, teeli, peli, bilo, voola, benol, moobel, gidil, hoonel*



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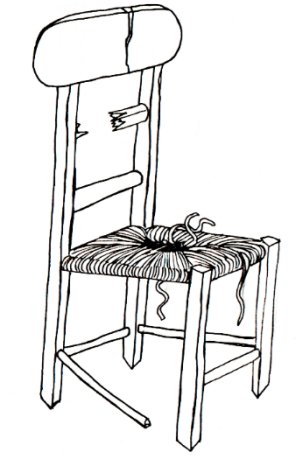
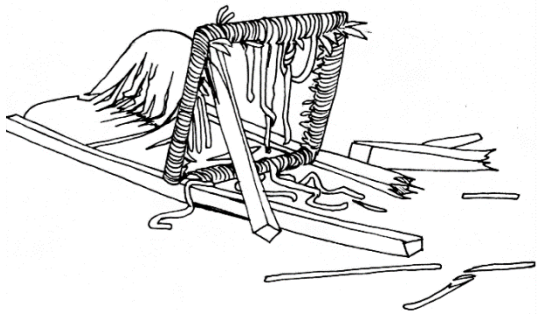
- Nonce-words conforming to Reta phonology, forced responses
  - *tolo, hale, teeli, peli, bilo, voola, benol, moobel, gidil, hoonel*
- Not a single R-coloured response





IS IT PRODUCTIVE? – EXTANT WORDS

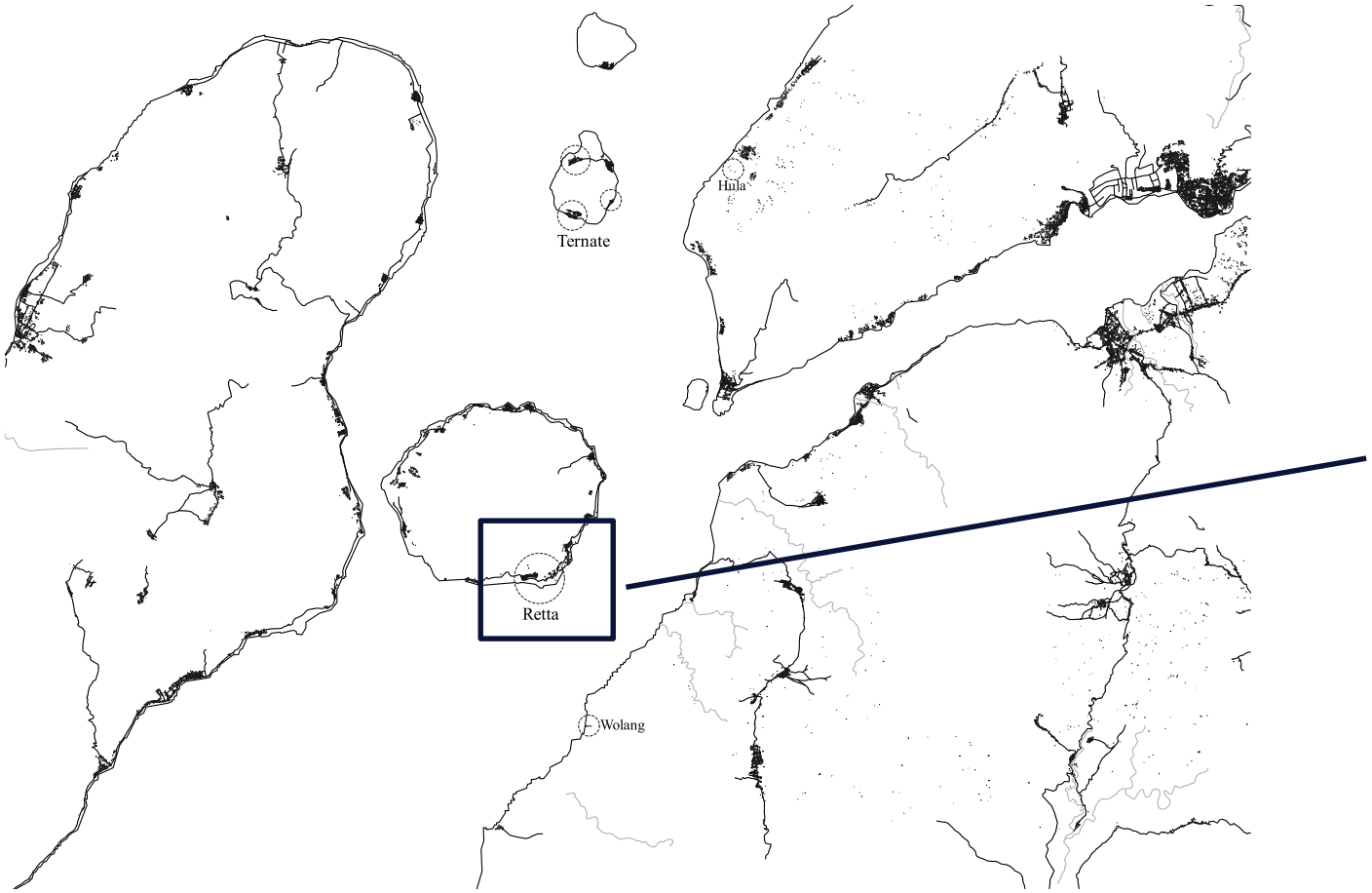
- Two 35-item word lists (r/l) containing existing words
  - /r/>/l/ and /l/>/r/
  - **No results**

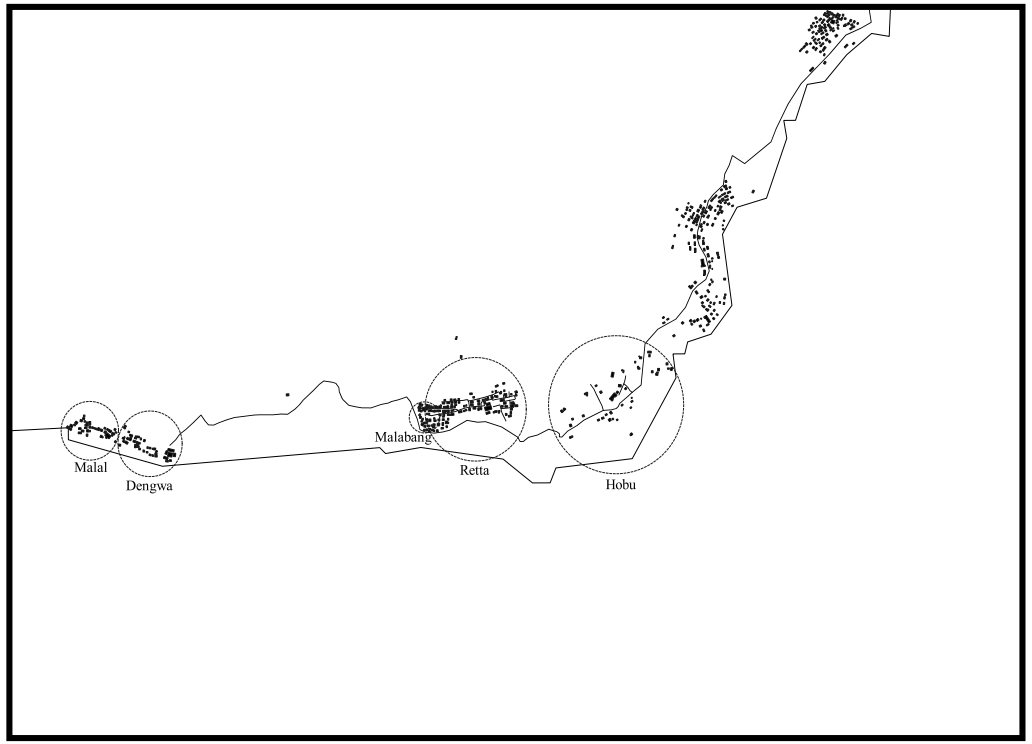
- Phonaesthemic pairing is **not** productive.

IS IT MORPHOLOGY?

- To draw a comparison with morphology, we need to know a bit more
  - Is it productive?
  - **How did it emerge?** ☞ Comparison with Blagar

HOW DID IT EMERGE?





HOW DID IT EMERGE?

❖ pAP *r > overwhelmingly /l/ in Reta, but not in Blagar

pAP	Reta	Blagar (Pura or otherwise)
*hagur ‘yawn’	*agaagul*	*agur* (Warsalelang, Bama)
*lamar ‘walk’	*lamal*	*lamal* (Pura), *lamar* (Nule/Bama/Warsalelang)
*araqu ‘two’	*alo*	*aru*
*lebur ‘tongue’	*lebul*	*-elebul* / *-jabur* (Pura), *-jebur* (most other dialects)
*war ‘stone’	*vaal*	*var*
*dara ‘dance’	*daali*	*dari*
*sibar ‘shark’	*hibil*	*hibir*
*uari ‘ear’	*-veli*	*-everi*
*jibar ‘dog’	*jobal*	*jabar*
*por ‘dry in sun’	*puali*	*poring*

Blagar data from Holton et al. (2012), Steinhauer & Gomang (2016), Robinson (2010a-f), Klamer 2016

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Blagar data from Holton et al. (2012), Steinhauer & Gomang (2016), Robinson (2010a-f), Klamer 2016

HOW DID IT EMERGE?

- Instances of /r/ in 2 comparative word lists: 180 (Bl.) vs. 46 (Rt.) (=>*4)
  - Many of these 46 Reta words are loans from Blagar

HOW DID IT EMERGE?

- proto-Alor-Pantar *r > /l/ in Reta, not in Blagar
- Blagar /r/ = /l/ in Reta
- Where Blagar /r/ = Reta /r/, usually a loan
- /r/ more prevalent in Blagar (~4*)
  - Often over-emphasised in imitative speech
- Blagar is the dominant language

- Probably either:
  - (i) borrowed /r/-coloured look-a-likes (though synchronically rare), or (ii) mocking speech

IS IT MORPHOLOGY?

- To draw a comparison with morphology, we need to know a bit more
  - Is it productive? ☞ NO
  - How did it emerge? Ultimately through a sound change

PHONOLOGY? MORPHOLOGY? BOTH? NEITHER?

	Phonaesthemes	Morphology	Reta r/l
Form-meaning pairing:	✓	✓	✓
which may be productive:	✗	✓/✗	✗
with a recurring residue:	✗	✓	✓

PHONOLOGY? MORPHOLOGY? BOTH? NEITHER?

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Form-meaning pairing:	✓	✓	✓
which may be productive:	✗	✓/✗	✗
with a recurring residue:	✗	✓	✓

Phonaesthemic alternations have a lot in common with morphology

PHONOLOGY? MORPHOLOGY? BOTH? NEITHER?

	Phonaesthemes	**Morphology**	**Reta r/l**
Form-meaning pairing:	✓	✓	✓
which may be productive:	✗	✓/✗	✗
with a recurring residue:	✗	✓	✓

But, unlike morphology, target any /l/, regardless of position.

*bi**l**i*	‘pull’	*bi**r**i*	‘yank’
*-aa**l***	‘vagina’	*-aa**r***	‘cunt’
***l**avak*	‘broken’	***r**avak*	‘destroyed’

Recall that these came about through a sound change

PHONOLOGY? MORPHOLOGY? BOTH? NEITHER?

	Phonaesthemes	Morphology	Reta r/l
Form-meaning pairing:	✓	✓	✓
which may be productive:	✗	✓/✗	✗
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But these are always predictable position-wise

Other languages also have meaning-changing consonant mutations:
Arabic *ða**k**ara* ‘remembered’ > *ða**kk**ara* ‘reminded’ (Burridge & Stebbins 2016: 114)
Bemba *ko**m**a* ‘deaf’ > *ko**my**a* ‘cause to be deaf’ (Kula 2000: 174)
Abui *bate**k*** ‘strike’ ≠ *bate**t*** ‘strike (completive)’ (Kratochvíl 2008: 210)

PHONOLOGY? MORPHOLOGY? BOTH? NEITHER?

	Phonaesthemes	**Morphology**	**Reta r/l**	**Phonology**
Form-meaning pairing:	✓	✓	✓	✕
which may be productive:	✕	✓/✕	✕	**0**
with a recurring residue:	✕	✓	✓	**0**
Targets any environment:	✕	✕	✓	✓

PHONOLOGY? MORPHOLOGY? BOTH? NEITHER?

	Phonaesthemes	**Morphology**	**Reta r/l**	**Phonology**
Form-meaning pairing:	✓	✓	✓	✕
which may be productive:	✕	✓/✕	✕	**0**
with a recurring residue:	✕	✓	✓	**0**
Targets any environment:	✕	✕	✓	✓

- Formally, it resembles a **sound change**
- Functionally, it is akin to **derivational morphology**

HOW UNIQUE IS IT? – PERHAPS RARE, NOT UNIQUE

- Diegueño (Langdon 1971: 153)
  - *ʕəsal'* 'my hand, arm' vs. *ʕəsaɬ'* 'my little hand, arm'
  - *yarəyar* '(to be large and) circular' vs. *yar̥əyar̥* 'to be small and circular'

Fully productive

- Korean (Sohn 1999: 102)
  - *ping-ping ~ phing-phing ~ pping-pping* 'spinning, turning, whirling (increasingly faster)'
  - *cwul-cwul ~ chwul-chwul ~ ccwul-ccwul* 'trickling, flowing (increasingly faster flow)'

Three-way opposition

- Wishram (Sapir 1911: 638)
  - *itɕ'iau* 'snake' ≠ *itʂ'iau* 'small snake' ≠ *idʑiau* 'big snake'

Non-phonemes

- Also in Chuckchee (Bogoras 1992: 646, 834-7), Basque (Lafitte 1944: 147-9), Georgian (Neisser 1953: 39-45) and various other western North-American languages (Nichols 1971)

PHONAESTHEMES VS. MORPHEMES

- Phonaesthemes vs. morphemes: phonaesthemes have non-recurring residue
- Phonaesthemic alternations: much variation, but all constitute a regular phonological-based operation on all relevant segments of a given form that is neutral and unmarked relative to a given base form

- Both are different from morphology, but in their own way

TO SUM UP

- As for Reta /r/:
  - It came about through a sound change /r/>/l/ and re-introduction of /r/
  - This resulting opposition between /r/ and /l/ acquired meaning
  - It is formally like a sound change, and functionally like derivation
    - These are phonaesthemic alternations

- In general:
  - Phonaesthemes straddle the border between domains in various ways
  - But phonaesthemic alternations are best distinguished from phonaesthemes

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