



Reality status in Teiwa (Papuan)

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the system of reality status in Teiwa, a non-Austronesian language spoken on Pantar Island. Teiwa has an overt realis morpheme, while irrealis is left unmarked. The discourse function of the realis suffix (marking foregrounded events in texts) is also investigated and the connections between reality status (intended as an objective property of states of affairs) and the discourse prominence of states of affairs are explored.

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1. Introduction¹

This paper presents a description of the reality status marking system of Teiwa. Teiwa (Ethnologue code *twe*, referred to as *Tewa* in [Gordon, 2005](#)) is one of the approximately ten non-Austronesian ('Papuan') languages spoken on Pantar island, just north of Timor island, in Eastern Indonesia. Teiwa has about 4000 speakers living in the north-western part of Pantar island, see the location indicated in Map 1.

Teiwa belongs to the Timor-Alor-Pantar (TAP) family of Papuan languages.² The data presented here are primary data collected during field research between 2003 and 2007. Published work on the language currently includes a reference grammar and some book chapters ([Klamer, 2010a,b,c](#)).

2. The category of reality status

A reality status morpheme "can be understood as the grammaticalized expression of an event or state in either the real world or in some hypothesized, but not real, world. Prototypically the realis component of the category asserts that an event or state is located in the real world, while irrealis events or states are perceived as being located in an alternative hypothetical or imagined world" ([Elliott 2000, p. 81](#)).

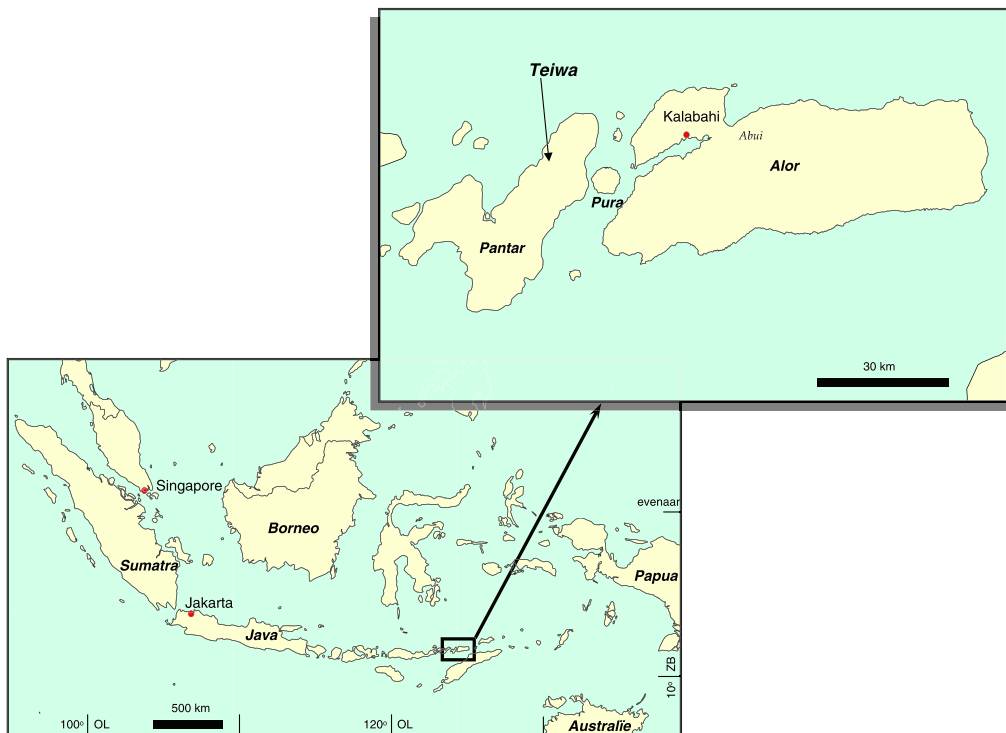
The notion "reality status" as proposed in [Elliott, 2000](#) is similar to the notion of "status" proposed in [Foley & Van Valin \(1984, pp. 213–215\)](#) and [Foley \(1986, pp. 158–164\)](#). In these cases, irrealis marking indicates whether or not an event has been realized: whether it is an actualized fact of reality, or whether it belongs to the realm of the imagined (*cf.* [Elliott, 2000, pp. 66–67](#)).

Abbreviations: 1, 2, 3, person; CONT, continuative; DIST, distal; E, exclusive; EXCL, exclamation; FOC, focus marker (*la*); I, inclusive; IND, Indonesian/Malay loan; NEG, negative; PL, plural; PRF, perfective ('already'); PROG, progressive; RDP, reduplication; REAL, realis; SG, singular; SEQ, sequential; SIM, simultaneous; TOP, topic marker (*ta*).

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² On Alor and Pantar, there are approximately 24 non-Austronesian languages spoken; on Timor, there are a few more. All of them are endangered. The internal subgroupings of the Timor-Alor-Pantar (TAP) languages is currently under investigation ([Holton et al., 2009](#)). The external affiliation of the TAP family is unclear; some have hypothesized that it belongs to the Trans New Guinea (TNG) family of Papuan languages ([Capell, 1969](#); [Pawley, 1998](#); [Pawley, 2001](#); [Ross, 2005](#)), but this remains to be established.



Map 1.

Others would refer to realis/irrealis distinctions similar to those discussed in this paper as instances of ‘modality’ marking (Roberts, 1990; Mithun, 1995; Timberlake, 2007). Modality “characterizes the speaker’s estimate of the relationship of the actor of the event to its accomplishment, whether he has the obligation, intention or ability to perform it” (Foley and Van Valin, 1984, p. 214). With Modality, the speaker qualifies an event or proposition, and communicates a particular attitude towards it, such as necessity, possibility (epistemic modality), obligation or permission (deontic modality) (Elliott, 2000, p. 69). In the grammar of Teiwa, Modality is expressed by separate lexemes: adverbs and verbs. For example, the adverbs *tab* ‘truly, indeed’ and *quun* ‘surely’ mark the speaker’s certainty about an event, *bo* ‘maybe, perhaps’ marks his uncertainty, *maq* ‘let it not be’ marks apprehensiveness, and *be* ‘indeed’³ marks affirmation. The modality verbs include those that mark intention (positive *xogo* ‘want’ or *mau* ‘want’ (IND), and negative *naxa* ‘not want’), ability (*qau* ‘be good at, be able to, know how to’), disability (*paat* ‘not be able to, not know’), obligation *musti* ‘must’, and prohibition *gaxai* ‘do not’ (see Klammer, 2010a, chapters 3 and 7 for examples and discussion). While modality is marked with separate lexemes, reality status is expressed by a single verbal suffix only. This suffix conveys the ‘realis’ value; the ‘irrealis’ value remains unmarked. The realis suffix signals that the event is part of the real world, and unlike the modality words, it does not express speaker’s qualifications or attitudes about the event.

The Teiwa category ‘reality status’ is also distinct from the grammatical category ‘mood’. In its most common interpretation, ‘mood’ is the grammatical category that distinguishes between different speech act types, such as ‘indicative mood’ expressed by declarative sentences, ‘interrogative mood’ expressed by questions, and ‘imperative mood’ expressed by commands. While reality status does interact with certain speech act types, it is a grammatical category distinct from it. An illustration of how the reality status of a verb interacts with the mood of the clause it belongs to is that Teiwa imperatives never use realis verbs. This is because imperatives by nature refer to events that have not been ‘actualized’ at the time of utterance: events expressed in imperative clauses are never ‘a certain fact of reality’, so that the verb cannot be marked as realis.

In this paper we will also consider cases where the interaction between the various ‘moods’ and the reality status of a verb is less straightforward. Cross-linguistically, irrealis marking is often used in contexts of negation, prohibition, obligation, or condition (e.g. in Caddo, a language of Oklahoma, Chafe, 1995). Realis marking, on the other hand, is often associated with grammatical categories such as past and present tense, in contrast to future, imperative, hortative, or prohibitive, which are marked irrealis (as in Amele, Roberts, 1990). Such realis/irrealis contrasts reflect a split in real vs. imaginary, and actualized vs. hypothetical events.

In Teiwa, the same split applies to some extent, but there are also categories that can be marked as either realis or irrealis. These include future and past events, interrogatives, and prohibitives. This suggests that a simple categorial split of real/actualized versus imaginary/hypothetical event does not apply in Teiwa; there must be additional factors involved determining

³ In Teiwa orthography, *q* represents a uvular stop, *x* a pharyngeal fricative, and (‘) a glottal stop.

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