

In Memoriam

Dr. Robert A. Blust, 1940–2022

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The end of an era arrived unexpectedly on the morning of January 5, 2022, with the passing of Dr. Robert Andrew Blust, the greatest Austronesian linguist of all time, at the age of 81, leaving behind three daughters, three grandsons, ten former students whose dissertations he chaired, hundreds of students who he taught, countless friends, and nearly 300 publications on Formosan as well as Western, Central and Eastern Malayo-Polynesian languages.

Born on May 9, 1940, in Cincinnati, Ohio, Dr. Blust’s childhood hardly foreshadowed the heights to which he would soar in the second two thirds of his life. He spent a year between foster care and an orphanage from three to four years old while his mother was hospitalized with tuberculosis. After the family reunited in 1944 and moved to Long Beach, California, he developed a penchant for self-guided reading and research, only to be discouraged by teachers who had no idea how to nurture a gifted student, instead insisting that he concentrate on his school assignments lest he become “narrow-minded”. After learning about the atrocities that had been committed against the American Indians, he was pulled out of class at age 10 for refusing to recite the Pledge of Allegiance to the American flag (only to find the part-Indian vice principal delighted by his concerns about “liberty and justice for all” for her ancestors). His prolific writing of lengthy novels in his preteen years was ultimately rewarded only by being informed that his principal didn’t believe that he was actually the one writing them (his passion for poetry, however, would earn him first prize in a national contest in 1958). His negative experiences in school, combined with his lack of interest in the unstimulating curriculum, saw him graduate high school with grades so low that he needed to attend community college as a bridge to university (his parents, for their part, “had no expectations that ... I should ever acquire any formal education beyond high school”). After failing to decide upon a course of study after three years of college, he dropped out in 1963 and enlisted in the Army, which provided his first introduction to Austronesian languages and Southeast Asia (studying and later teaching Indonesian in the 25th Division Language School in Honolulu,

which included training in Jakarta). Between his knowledge of Indonesian and his exposure to other Austronesian languages while in Hawai'i, he "became interested in the obviously greater-than-chance similarities between these languages". After attending a lecture by Howard McKaughan (founding chair of the University of Hawai'i Department of Linguistics), he enrolled at UH Mānoa in 1967. There, he completed a B.A. in Anthropology, followed by both an M.A. and Ph.D. in Linguistics under advisor George Grace, who described him as "remarkably self-sufficient", "well acquainted with the relevant literature", and "able to pick his own research topics" (Grace 2009: 19), while fellow professor Byron Bender remembered him being "exceptional", "gifted", and "well along the road to becoming ... a professional" (Bender 2009: 17). The decade after completing his Ph.D. included two years of postdoctoral studies at ANU, eight years teaching at the University of Leiden in the Netherlands, the publication of a book and 30 articles, and the birth of two daughters, Lani and Karen. Among his students in Leiden was a cohort of Indonesian scholars including Hunggu Tadjuddin Usup and Martha Salea-Warouw, who both spoke fondly of their time with him even a quarter of a century later.

In 1984, Dr. Blust joined the faculty of Linguistics at UH Mānoa. Over the next 38 years, he served on 37 doctoral dissertation committees, chairing ten, besides being advisor to nine M.A. students and having a cumulative student enrollment of well over 1,500. He taught introductory and advanced Comparative Method, Field Methods, Proto-Austronesian Phonology, Sound Change, and seminars on Austronesian, Formosan, Philippine, Bornean, Indonesian, and Oceanic languages, plus Archaeology & Language in the Pacific. Few scholars could teach even one of these seminars, but Dr. Blust taught all seven with a consistently-impressive level of expertise and enthusiasm.

Among Dr. Blust's many areas of special interest were Borneo, where he had conducted several months of research covering 41 speech varieties for his 1974 dissertation (Blust 1974); Taiwan and its Formosan languages; the Proto-Philippines debate; Austronesian root theory; and the link between rainbows and dragons (Forthcoming a). His "Languages of Borneo" seminar inspired three students to subsequently conduct in-depth surveys of large portions of that island, refining subgrouping hypotheses and discovering new speech varieties in the process. He greatly expanded our understanding of the Austronesian "root" (expanding upon the work of Brandstetter 70 years earlier), first in 1988 and most recently in a monograph in preparation at Pacific Linguistics (Forthcoming b). His research on rainbows and dragons took him far outside his linguistic "comfort zone", yet he considered the resulting manuscript (in preparation at Studia Instituti Anthropos) "one of the very best pieces of work I have ever done".

Dr. Blust had a special place in his heart for both Taiwan and the Formosan languages, which played a role in his work as early as his first article in 1969 (Blust 1969). “I have many fond memories of the nation of Taiwan and its people”, he wrote, from various stays including “a full calendar year in 1994, a full academic year from 2001–2002, and a number of shorter stays”. Paul Jen-kuei Li describes him as a “longtime friend” who provided “critical but very helpful comments” on manuscripts, and to whom he is “indebted for advocating for the great linguistic value of Formosan languages.” Elizabeth Zeitoun similarly remembers him as “extremely kind and encouraging” and “so nice to aboriginal people here in Taiwan”. He conducted fieldwork on Pazeh, Kavalan, Amis, and Bunun, but was particularly proud of his 1,106-page Thao Dictionary (whose dedication “For the ‘last leaves on the tree’ wherever languages are dying” attests to both his talent for poetry and his concern for language endangerment) and the challenging conditions under which he compiled it. He enjoyed having a native speaker of Truku Seediq, Apay Tang, as his student in Honolulu for several years. He was also supportive of the work on Formosan languages coming out of Taiwan, commenting, for example, that the volume on Saisiyat morphology by Elizabeth Zeitoun, Taihwa Chu, and Lalo a tahesh kaybaybaw was “not only valuable for its content, but timely in saving something of a language that may not survive very far into the future”, and pointing out that “[a] few pioneering studies of Saisiyat have been done so far, but nothing of this magnitude.” Most recently, he contributed a chapter to the *Handbook on Formosan Languages: The indigenous languages of Taiwan* (Forthcoming c) being edited by Li, Zeitoun, and Rik De Busser.

Besides the Thao Dictionary, Dr. Blust’s other largest works included the 845-page *The Austronesian languages* (2009; 2013), the 636-page *Eight languages of the Admiralty Islands, Papua New Guinea* (2021), and the online *Austronesian comparative dictionary* (ACD, Blust & Trussel 2020) which contains over 8,000 reconstructions based on data from over 700 languages, and, if printed, would exceed 9,000 pages of single-spaced supporting evidence. The ACD is the greatly-expanded 21st-century incarnation of the work he began in 1970 with his article “Proto-Austronesian addenda” (Blust 1970), adding daily to the inventory of reconstructions for Proto-Austronesian and various lower-level protolanguages. *The Austronesian languages*, on the other hand, is a comprehensive, single-author treatise on the language family by the only scholar capable of writing one, based on his (at that time) 40 years of research and experience.

A particularly impressive testament to Dr. Blust’s command of the literature and ability to work with primary sources is his work on Philippine languages. Without ever conducting fieldwork on a single Philippine language (except for a 2015 field methods class on Western Subanon), he managed to propose the Greater Central Philippines hypothesis and argue for the existence of a period of

mass language leveling in the Philippines (Blust 1991); identify evidence for an even earlier period of language leveling in the region (2005); and trace the origins of the Sama-Bajaw languages to southeastern Borneo (2007). Most recently, he reinvigorated the argument for a Philippine subfamily through a pair of articles (Blust 2019; Forthcoming d) in which he presented, respectively, over 1,000 putative Proto-Philippines lexical innovations and 76 instances of inherited /NC/ clusters in Northern Philippine languages that challenge earlier claims that all such clusters in those languages result exclusively from borrowing. Indeed, no other scholar has contributed as much to our understanding of higher-level subgrouping within the Philippine subfamily.

Dr. Blust could be a formidable adversary when it came to linguistics debates (most infamously in the series of heated confrontations with Isidore Dyen spanning the first three ICAL conferences), but was also indefatigably supportive of his students and colleagues, and showed nothing but unrelenting kindness and concern to his friends. The door to his office was always open, six and sometimes seven days per week, to anyone who wished to come in and talk. He relished interacting with students who were interested in working on Austronesian languages, and enjoyed learning from native speakers of these languages, having done fieldwork on 97 of them in the field, and three in the classroom. He took great pleasure in watching his students succeed, and in providing them almost fatherly guidance through their studies. He likewise spoke with pride about his daughters and grandsons, and delighted in the company of others' children, including this author's son, Pietro, who enjoyed reminding Dr. Blust that he had never forgotten him in his nightly prayers in the ten years since they first met in 2011. Impressively, despite his unmatched knowledge in his field, he nevertheless did not hesitate to admit when he was clearly wrong in his analysis of the data, noting in June 2020 that "Nothing matters more than the truth, and the truth will set us free" (words that ring all the more true in light of his passing).

Dr. Blust's luck took a turn for the worse in January 2009 when, at the age of 68, he was diagnosed with cancer, with doctors estimating that he had seven to twenty years left to live. However, far from allowing himself to slow down or be discouraged, nine of the ten dissertations that he chaired were finished after the cancer diagnosis, and he published a further five books and 69 articles, all while adding five to ten pages per week to the ACD. Determined to continue working at least until his youngest daughter Jasmine could graduate from college in May 2021, he ultimately taught full-time until the end of the Fall 2021 semester, two weeks before his death, and continued working until the day he died. He was realistic about his prognosis, especially as time went on, but he maintained his positivity, writing to this author in May 2020, "Every day is a gift, one for which I am immensely grateful."

Undoubtedly, Dr. Blust will be most widely remembered as the trailblazing scholar who brought Austronesian linguistics to new heights with his seemingly endless supply of high-quality publications produced at breakneck speed. As Geraghty noted in 1990, “Such has been Blust’s dominance of Austronesian comparative studies ... that it is very rare to find a scholar in the field who has not had cause to refer to a Blustian reconstruction, or been goaded into action by a piece of Blustian presumption” (Geraghty 1990: 530). Yet he was also a complex, deeply pensive, and down-to-earth individual who, in his farewell note, thanked both the friends who had prayed for him from afar, and those who had accompanied him in person to his cancer treatments, while naming his daughters, friends and colleagues, as well as “the kindness of strangers” and “the miracle of life”, as the things he would miss the most after he was gone. It is this aspect of Dr. Blust that his friends and family will miss the most, the kindhearted man with the gentle smile and intense concern for humanity and the planet we call home. We will be forever grateful for his innumerable contributions to our lives, and the blessing of having known him. Rest in well-deserved peace, Dr. Blust!

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