Early European encounters with Taiwan’s languages

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The Western encounter with Asia and the Americas after the 15th century triggered a growing interest in non-European languages. The linguistic diversity of the far West and of the far East was first recorded by European missionaries. Early descriptions of African, Asian, and Amerindian languages compiled by Western missionaries after the 15th century are now attracting increasing interest from linguists and historians.

The first descriptions of Taiwan’s languages date back to the 17th century. Whereas the earliest Spanish grammar of a Formosan language has obviously been lost, some of the oldest extant Dutch documents are still preserved at Leiden University. Whereas the history of early European language description in Taiwan has been treated in previous research, the contents of the preserved documents have largely been neglected.

The first part of this paper is a synopsis of previous historical research on European missionary linguistics in Taiwan. The second part addresses the languages as they are described in the preserved documents. How were the languages classified? Which metalanguage is employed in the documents? Do the documents provide valuable data for diachronic research on Taiwan’s Austronesian languages?