

Ross, M.D. 1988. *Proto Oceanic and the Austronesian Languages of Western Melanesia*. Canberra: Department of Linguistics, Research School of Pacific Studies, The Australian National University [Pacific Linguistics, C-98]. Pp. xiv + 487. AUS \$38.00.

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This work, a revised version of Malcolm Ross's doctoral thesis from the Australian National University, is a major statement of the interrelationships between the Austronesian (AN) languages of western Melanesia and their position within the Oceanic subgroup of Austronesian. For perhaps the first time, the AN languages of Papua New Guinea and the western Solomon Islands are examined in detail and in full, and although the picture which emerges from Ross's exhaustive comparative study is still complex, the situation is not nearly as chaotic as previous statements have led us to believe.

The first two chapters deal with various preliminary matters. Chapter 1 takes care of "housekeeping matters" (like sources of data, style of presentation, and theoretical and methodological considerations), while Chapter 2 ("Western Melanesian in outline") notes "some landmarks to aid the reader's orientation" in what follows (p. 19) in relation to the Proto-Oceanic (POC) homeland and unresolved questions about genetic relationships in the region under discussion, as well as providing an outline of the groupings of these languages which are established in the body of the work.

In Chapter 3, Ross reexamines POC phonology, on the basis of data from later chapters, and presents a phonological system "which is not radically different from previous reconstructions, but is...more solidly founded." After treating such perennial problems as oral vs. nasal grade and fortis vs. lenis grade, as well as the problems surrounding what have been reconstructed as POC *s, *ns and *nj, he arrives at his restatement of the POC consonant system which I reproduce here for the convenience of readers who may be interested:

*bw	*p	*b	*t	*d	*c	*j	*k	*g	*q
			*r	*dr					
			*s						
*mw	*m		*n		*ñ		*ŋ		
			*l						*R
*w					*y				

Chapter 4 examines various aspects of POC morphosyntax. Ross believes this to be of considerable importance to his task, since although there are no major phonological differences between the groupings he is proposing, there are significant morphosyntactic differences. Topics covered include articles, pronominal number, transitivisers, the verbal system, and prepositional morphemes.

Chapters 5 through 9 are concerned with establishing the major groupings in the area under examination. These are:

- (1) the North New Guinea Cluster: the AN languages of the north coast of the mainland of Papua New Guinea (including the Huon Gulf and the Markham Valley), of most of New Britain (excluding the Willaumez and Gazelle Peninsulas), and of the islands in between;
- (2) the Papuan Tip Cluster: the AN languages of the Oro (Northern), Milne Bay and Central Provinces of Papua New Guinea;
- (3) the Meso-Melanesian Cluster: the AN languages of the Willaumez and Gazelle Peninsulas (including Bali-Vitu), of the New Ireland Province (except the St. Matthias group), and of Buka and Bougainville, the Shortlands, Choiseul, New Georgia and Santa Ysabel (except Bugotu);
- (4) the Admiralties Cluster: the languages of the Manus Province (including Wuvulu and Aua), and possibly those of the St. Matthias group (Mussau-Emira and Tench).

In each case, Ross provides detailed sets of sound correspondences, as well as sets of phonological and other innovations which distinguish the cluster from other clusters and which also form the basis for internal subgrouping hypotheses.

Chapter 10 ("Western Oceanic") attempts to draw the threads together. Ross proposes that three of the four clusters mentioned above (North New Guinea, Papuan Tip and Meso-Melanesian) share certain innovations which suggest that they belong to a

single grouping which he calls Western Oceanic; and he notes (p. 382) that “sharp divisions can be drawn between Western Oceanic and the Admiralties [Cluster] on the one hand and between Western Oceanic and South-East Solomonic on the other on the basis of differing innovations involving POC *R.”

The Admiralties Cluster Ross views as being a first-order subgroup of Oceanic. He also suggests that, if the POC homeland was in the West New Britain/Vitiaz Strait area, “that the ancestors of the Admiralties and South-East Solomonic languages must have departed...before the occurrence of the innovations which characterize Western Oceanic languages” (pp. 382-383; emphasis mine). Western Oceanic itself diffused somewhat later, and is not seen as a first-order subgroup of Oceanic: “the Admiralties cluster forms a subgroup by virtue of its separation from its relatives; the Western Oceanic grouping forms a subgroup only because the ancestors of other Oceanic groups separated from it,” and thus “the languages of the three Western Oceanic clusters result from the diffusion of late POC” (p. 386).

Ross has done a magnificent “technician’s” job in marshalling, analysing and controlling masses of data from 218 western Melanesian languages. But he shows in this book that he is far more than simply a technician. On the one hand, his discussions are very firmly and solidly based in comparative linguistic theory, to which he (almost in passing) makes a number of contributions. On the other, he is keenly aware of the “real-world” implications of comparative linguistic hypotheses, and is concerned to relate his conclusions to the wider prehistory of Oceania.

I said in the foreword to Ross’s book (p. ix) that it “is a most significant contribution to Austronesian linguistics, and I am confident that it will remain a seminal work in the field for a very long time to come.” I have nothing to add to that.