

Toward extrication of Trans New Guinea multilingual complexity:

An informed comparative analysis of the Southeast Papuan languages

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Linguistic Society of Papua New Guinea Conference: “Language crossroads: Standards, identity and multilingual complexity”

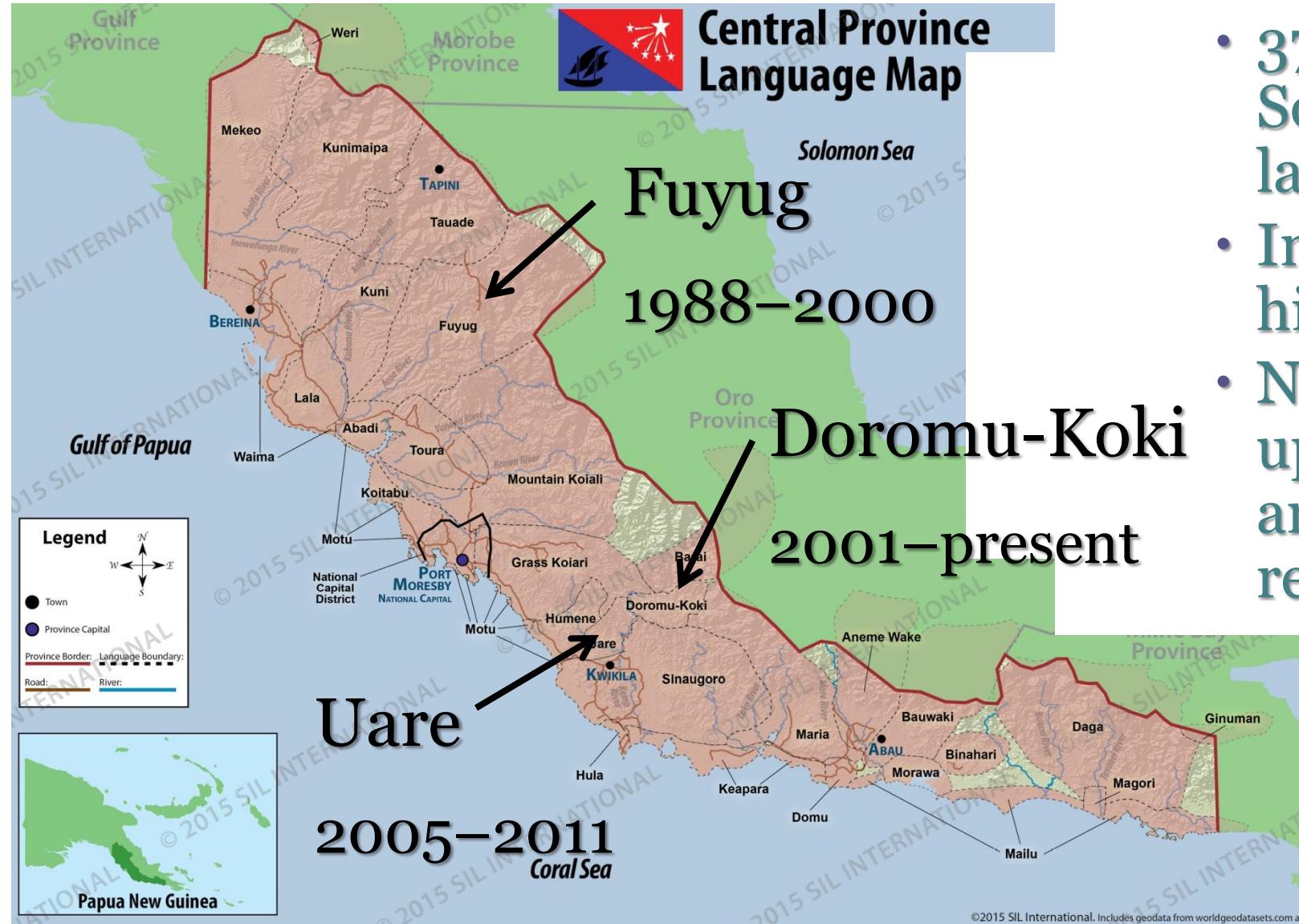
University of Goroka

18 September 2025

Abbreviations

A	transitive subject	PNG	Papua New Guinea
e	extinct	ref.	referent
EGIDS	Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale	S	intransitive subject
ISO	International Organisation for Standardisation	SE	Southeast
m	moribund	Subj.	subject
mrkrs.	Markers	t	threatened
No.	number	TAM	Tense-Aspect-Mood
o	object	TNG	Trans New Guinea
Obj.	object	v	verb

1. Introduction



- 37 years of research in Southeast Papuan languages
- Interest in comparative/historical research
- Need for a comparative update due to great amount of linguistic research in last 50 years

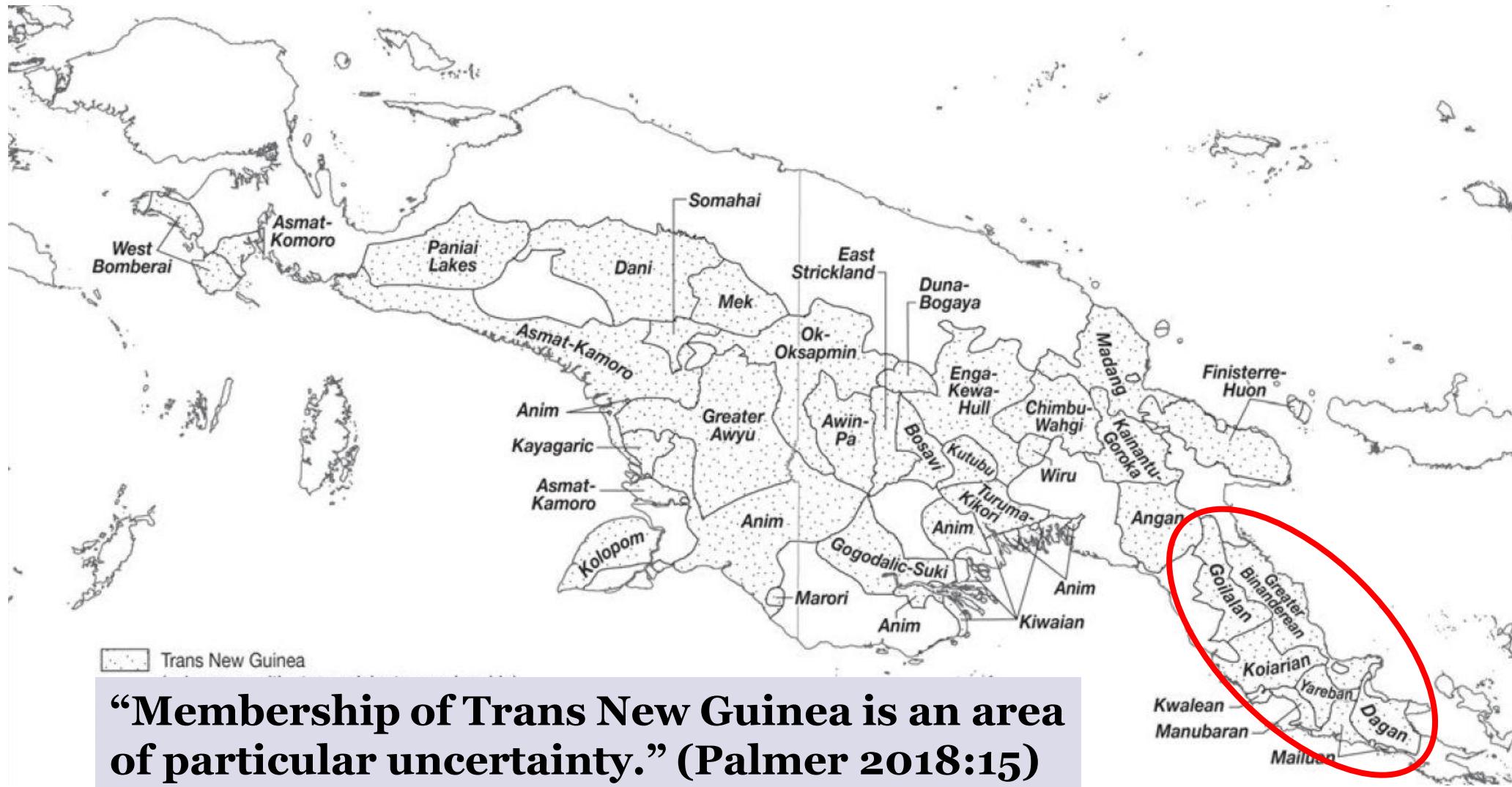
Trans New Guinea (TNG), Southeast (SE) Papuan:

- **Seven families (populations from 50+ to 26,500)**
North to South: Goilalan, Koiarian, Kwalean, Manubaran, Yareban, Mailuan and Dagan
- **Location (four provinces):**
Morobe (2), Central (18), Oro (12), Milne Bay (6): 38 total
- **Initial research:**
Dutton 1969a, b; 1970, 1971, 1973, 1975a, b, c (50+ years)
- **Much research since that time (190+ linguist research documents alone)**

2. Trans New Guinea

- 482 languages; 39 families (or subgroups) [Eberhard et. al. 2025]
- Hypotheses:
 - **TNG I (1970; Pawley and Hammarström 2018:24)**
 - **TNG II (1975; Pawley and Hammarström 2018:24–25)**
 - **TNG III (1975; Pawley and Hammarström 2018:25–27)**
 - **TNG IV (1990s; Pawley and Hammarström 2018:27–29)**
- More recent studies:
 - **2012: Hammarström and Nordhoff; Wichmann; Wichmann et al.**
 - **2018: Palmer; Pawley and Hammarström**
 - Currently SE Papuan still member in TNG.
Yet, it was not clear if the newer research was consulted.

Map 1: *Trans New Guinea phylum*
(from Palmer and Hammarström 2018:32, Map 2.1)



2.1 Southeast Papuan families

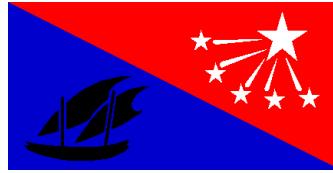


Family	Subfamily	Language	Population estimate
<i>Goilalan</i>	Kunimaipa	Biangai	6,831
		Amam/Weri	8,668
		Kunimaipa	17,651
		Tauade	15,845
	Fuyug	Fuyug(e)	26,435

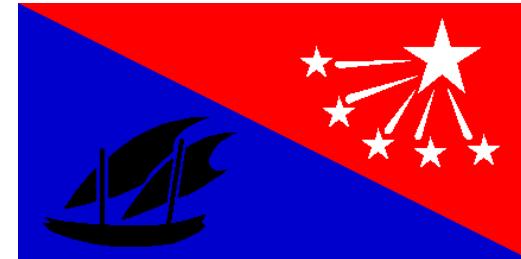
(Morobe and Central Provinces)

Extinct (e) = 2, Moribund (m) = 1, Threatened (t) = 4



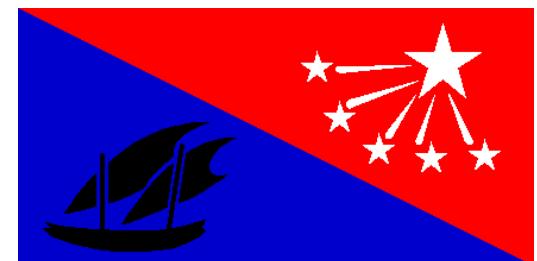
Family	Subfamily	Language	Population estimate
<i>Koiarian</i>	Koiaric	Biage	2,368
		Mt. Koiali	6,242
		Koita(bu)	(t) 5,871
		Koiari	(t) 8,415
	Baraic	Ömie	2,562
		Ese/Managalasi	21,526
		Barai	4,723
		Namiae	2,266
(Central and Oro Provinces)			 

Family	Language	Population estimate
<i>Kwalean</i>	Mulaha	(e)
	Humene	2,023
	Uare/Kware	3,343
<i>Manubaran</i>	Doromu-Koki	2,396
	Maria	2,906
(Central Province)		

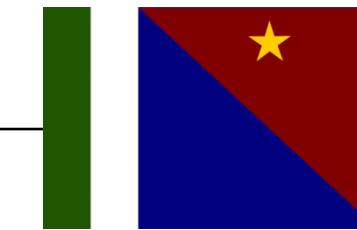


Family	Language		Population estimate
<i>Yareban</i>	Bariji		990
	Yareba		2,648
	Nauwaru	(t)	571
	Moikodi/Doriri		1,959
	Aneme Wake/Abia		1,953
(Oro Province)			

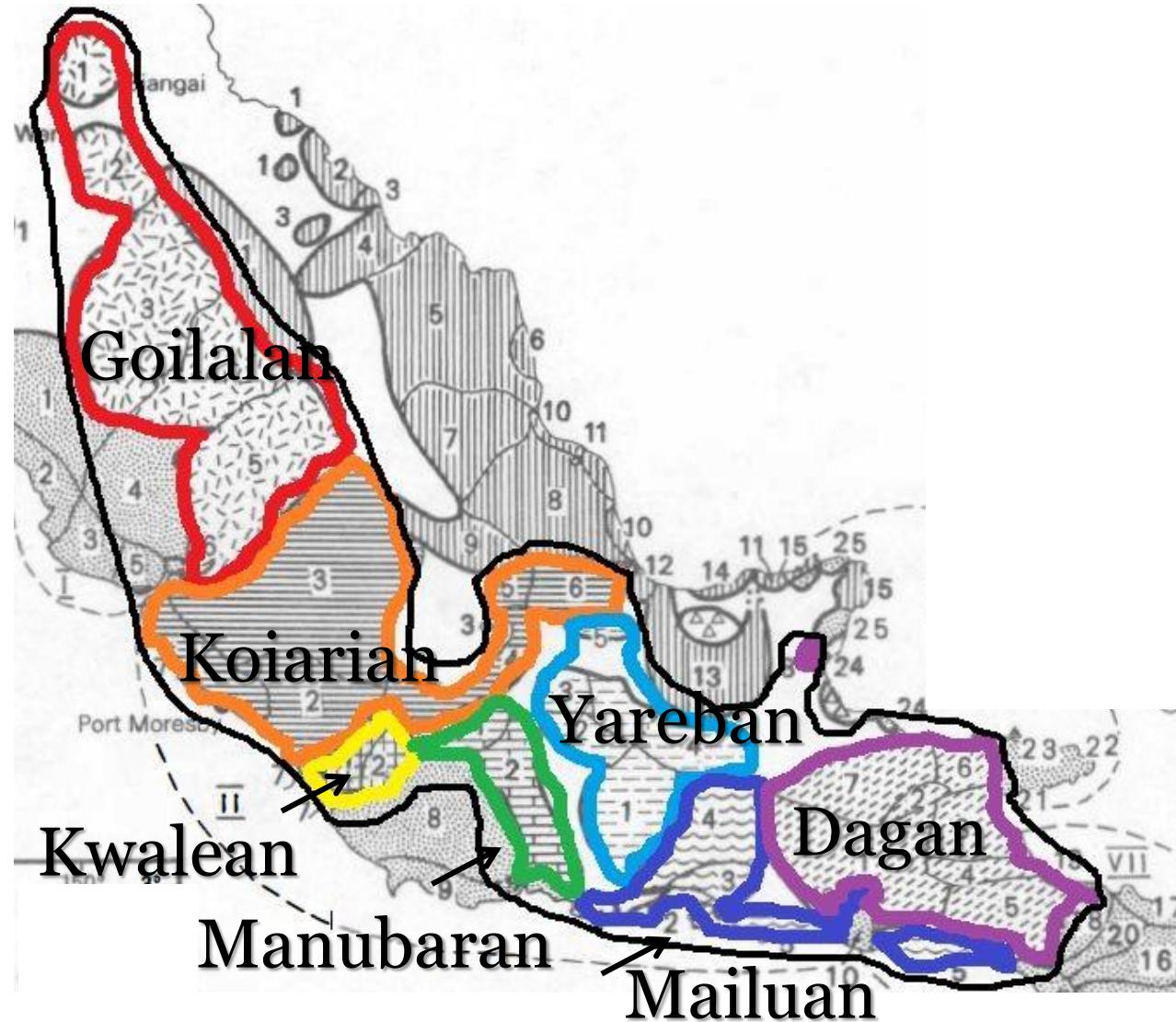
Family	Language	Population estimate
<i>Mailuan</i>	Domu	2,045
	Laua (e)	0
	Magi/Mailu	18,297
	Morawa	2,153
	Bauwaki	1,119
	Binahari	1,356
(Central Province)		



Family	Language	Population estimate
Dagan	Maiwa	2,877
	Daga	14,458
	Dima/Jimajima	1,716
	Mapena	969
	Turaka	(m) 54
	Umanakaina/Gwedena	6,049
	Onjob	(t) 323
	Ginuman	3,100
	Kanasi/Sona/Sirio	5,295
(Milne Bay and Oro Provinces)		



Map 2: *Southeast Papuan* (from Dutton 1975c:617, Map 1)



2.2 Dutton's early research

2.2.1 The Koiarian languages of Central Province: A historical and descriptive linguistic study (1969a)

Australian National University PhD dissertation:

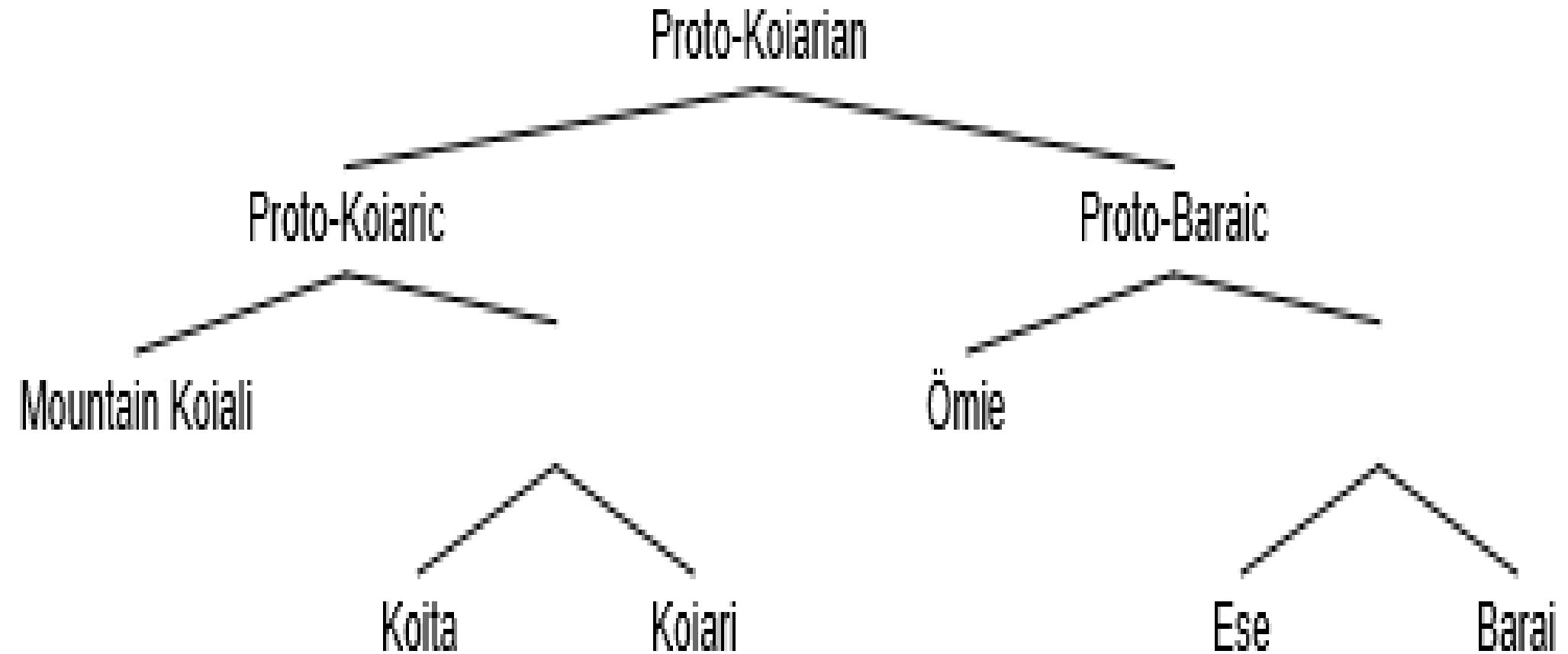
Provides Koiarian family component to subsequent research.

- 1) Linguistic literature review of the 'Central Papua' (Koiarian) languages, including Koiaric/Baraic division
- 2) Transformational grammatical sketch of Koiari

2.2.2 The peopling of Central Papua: Some preliminary observations (1969b)

- Foundation: Classification into groups and subgroups (Ray 1929)
- Mailuan classification (Capell 1943)
- Goilalan further established (Steinkraus and Pence 1964)
- Kwalean, Manubaran and Yareban as a family (Dutton himself: 1969b:4, 12)
- Interest in Koita and Koiari groups (Dutton 1969b:iii)

- Koiarian into **Koiaric** and **Baraic** subfamilies



Dutton 1969b:79

2.2.3 Notes on the languages of the Rigo area of the Central District of Papua (1970)

- **Very brief summary statements**

- Three Oceanic languages: *Keapara*, *Motu* and *Sinaugoro*
- Six Papuan languages

Three described in previous publication:

Barai, *Humene* and *Koiari*

Very little known and nothing published on the Kwalean and Manubaran languages—now no longer the case (cf. SIL-PNG work in Uare and Doromu-Koki)!

2.2.4 Languages of South-East Papua (1971)

Area to the east of line running North–South through Mt. Brown (Owen Stanley Range, Oro Province)

Papuan languages in four families (last three SE Papuan):

- Binanderean (stock level)
- **Yareban** (4): Bariji, Yareba, Moikodi/Doriri, Abia/Aneme Wake (not including threatened Nauwaru)
- **Mailuan** (5): Domu, Magi/Mailu, Morawa, Bauwaki and Binahari (not including extinct Laua)
- **Dagan** (8): Maiwa, Daga, Dima, Mapena, Umanakaina, Onjob, Ginuman, Kanasi (not including moribund Turaka)

2.2.5 A checklist of languages and present-day villages of central and south-east mainland Papua (1973)

Alphabetised list of languages and village names and population figures for SE Papuan (and Binanderean)

Limited usefulness: Department of District Administration's *Village Directory* of 1968 (now almost 60 years ago)!

2.2.6 Studies in languages of Central and Southeast Papua (1975a)

Grammatical descriptions of several languages in the area:

“...their interrelationships (were) unclear until the 1960’s (sic) when research workers from the **Summer Institute of Linguistics**...and the **Australian National University** began showing an increasing interest in this area. Since then...many of the hitherto little-known and previously unstudied languages have been studied in some depth (e.g., **Kunimaipa**, **Koiari**, **Mountain Koiali**, **Barai**, **Ömie**, **Managalasi**, **Daga**, **Yareba**, **Korafe**, **Suena**, **Guhu-Samane**, and **Yeletnye**).” (Dutton 1975a:x)

Six SE Papuan grammatical sketches in this volume:

- **Koiarian:** Koita (Dutton 1975b), Mountain Koiali, Barai and Ömie
- **Mailuan:** Magi/Mailu
- **Yareban:** Yareba

“Such a set of studies...would provide the necessary reliable data upon which the now-complete early classificatory work could and should be refined....” (Dutton 1975a:x)

2.2.7 A Koita grammar sketch and vocabulary (1975b)

One of the chapters included in Dutton (1975a):

Derived from Dutton's other early research

2.2.8 South-eastern Trans-New Guinea Phylum languages (1975c)

Typological overview with a caveat:

“In the process no attempt will be made to distinguish **characteristics of individual families** as such. This is a task for the future....” (Dutton 1975b:622)

- There are usually two series of **plosives** [distinguished by voicing, at three to four points of articulation (bilabial, alveolar, velar and glottal)], some **fricatives**, two **nasals** (m, n), a **tap/flap** and **lateral approximant** and two **semivowels**.
- There are usually the five cardinal **vowels**.

- Some languages are **tonal**, and **stress** is ‘important’ and related to **intonation** which can be rather complex.
- **Morphophonemic rules** are complex.
- The first and second person **pronouns** ‘generally’ follow Wurm’s (1972) Set I type; the pronouns do not distinguish gender and seldom clusivity. In some families dual forms are derived from other forms and most add a suffix to a pronoun to indicate possession.
- **Verb suffixes** may indicate S/A and/or O person and/or number and TAM.

- **Medial verbs** indicate same or different subject; in some such as Koiarian they are quite simple.
- In some languages/families, verb stems change to indicate **pluractionality**.
- **Plurality of nouns** is not indicated in the morphology except in some kinship terms or through limited reduplication.
- **Noun classes** are rare, but when they do occur they are limited to distinctions of alienability.
- **Numeral systems** are limited to 1, 2, 2+1, 2+2, 1 hand or 1, 2, 3, 2+2, 1 hand. Use of body parts in counting has only been reported in the Yareban family (Ray 1907:364).

- The languages have S/A O V **constituent order**.
- The **subordinate clause** precedes the **main clause** and there is an absence of **conjunctions**.
- There is no **passive**. (Dutton 1975b:622–623)

Many more specific and objective details are needed, to also address discrepancies, which hopefully the newer research will provide.

Variances with TNG:

- **Pronoun forms** do not consistently belong to one pronoun set (cf. Wurm 1972).
- There are no **complex consonants** or **complex syllable patterns**.
- There is not a wide range of **allophonic variation**.
- **Noun classes** are rare (as already mentioned as a typological feature above).
- SE Papuan languages have differing forms of **negatives**.
- There are no changes or affixes to indicate **interrogative**.
(1975b:623–624)

- SE Papuan families are between 10% and 40% cognate (Dutton 1975b:624)
- Linking languages:
 - “...**Binanderean** languages...act as a link between them (other TNG languages) and the remaining South-East Trans-New Guinea Phylum languages.” (Dutton 1975b:627)
 - “...**Koiarian** languages seem to act as a link between the others (SE languages).
 - **Kunimaipa** is seen as a bridge language between the northern (Weri and Biangai) and southern (Tauade and Fuyug) Goilalan languages (Dutton 1975b:631).

Comparison of SE Papuan grammatical features (Dutton 1975b:629-30)

Family	Subj. mrkrs	Obj. ref. no./ form	S/A/TAM O or O S/A/TAM	Plur- actionality	Negatives: <i>me,</i> <i>bebe, meme</i> or <i>ida,</i> <i>da/ya</i>
<i>Goilalan</i>	?	?	?	-	<i>me, bebe, meme</i>
<i>Koiarian</i>	+	No.	O S/A/TAM	+	<i>me, bebe, meme</i>
<i>Kwalean</i>	+	form	S/A/TAM O	?	<i>me, bebe, meme</i>
<i>Manubaran</i>	+	form	S/A/TAM O	?	<i>ide, da/ya</i>
<i>Yareban</i>	-	No.	- obj. ref.	-	<i>ide, da/ya</i>
<i>Mailuan</i>	+	form		?	<i>ide, da/ya</i>
<i>Dagan</i>	-	form	O S/A/TAM	+	<i>ide, da/ya</i>

“In short there is a conflicting pattern of relationship evident at different levels of structure in South-East Trans-New Guinea Phylum languages which **does not allow for them being subgrouped further in any one way on the present evidence.**” (Dutton 1975b:630-631)

This sets the initial foundation.

Dutton provided further research (all Koarian: 1996, 2003 and 2010) in addition to all the others research:

2.3 Newer SE Papuan research

Family/ languages	Linguistic research	Family/ languages	Linguistic research	Family/ languages	Linguistic research
Goilalan	51	Namiae	0	Laua	0
Biangai	14	Kwalean	8	Magi/Mailu	1
Amam/Weri	5	Mulaha	0	Morawa	0
Kunimaipa	4	Humene	0	Bauwaki	1
Tauade	7	Uare	8	Binahari	1
Fuyug(e)	21	Manubaran	41	Dagan	44
Koiarian	36	Doromu-Koki	40	Maiwa	8
<i>Koiaric</i>		Maria	1	Daga	3
Biage	2	Yareban	8	Dima	0
Mt. Koiali	6	Bariji	1	Mapena	0
Koita(bu)	1	Yareba	2	Turaka	1
(Grass) Koiari	5	Nauwaru	1	Umanakaina	10
Baraic		Moikodi	2	Onjob	0
Ömie	10	Aneme Wake	2	Ginuman	1
Ese/Managalasi	5	Mailuan	4	Kanasi	21
Barai	7	Domu	1	Total	193

2.3.1 More recent research findings

- **Research above, plus more:**
 - **Literacy** work (307 items, plus many more...)
 - Bible **translation**: 15 languages from 1973-2024
 - Grammar **sketches**: 13 languages from 1975-2012
 - PhD **dissertations**: Five from 1964-2022
 - **Dictionaries**: 13 from 1935-2021
 - Ethnographies, sociolinguistic surveys and wordlists, etc.

3. Preliminary conclusions

- Foundation: 1970s research
SE typological features and variances with TNG
(Brief comparison in present paper)
- Future goal:
 - Collect resources found, but not yet accessed.
 - Fill gaps (ten languages): Koiarian: **Namiae**; Kwalean: **Humene**; Manubaran: **Maria**; Mailuan: **Domu, Morawa, Bauwaki** and **Binahari**; Dagan: **Mapena, Onjob** and **Dima/Jimajima**
 - Continue comprehensive comparison.
A very large task ahead...

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Namo!

‘Thank you!’

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