

Introduction to the LLM Special Issue 2012
on the *History, contact and classification of
Papuan languages*

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The present collection of papers stems from a conference held at the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, 2-3 February 2012. The conference was held thanks to dual support from the Department of Linguistics of the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig and the Faculty of Letters of Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam. For the local organization we wish to thank Ruth Wester and Lourens de Vries.

The conference had two invited speakers and 12 presenters most of whom chose to submit full-length papers for the present proceedings. We chose to ask for a special issue of Language and Linguistics in Melanesia (LLM) as LLM promised open access, a quick turn-around, possibilities for online appendices and a highly competent editorial board. We thank Olga Temple and the LLM editorial board for their support and speedy handling.

All submitted papers were subject to a rigorous single-blinded reviewing process consisting of one anonymous internal reviewer (chosen from the conference participants), one anonymous external reviewer (a suitable person appointed by the editors) and one editorial review (by one of the editors). We thank all reviewers for their time and expertise. Those reviewers who agreed to be acknowledged by name are listed at the end of this introduction.

Owing to the freedom that the electronic format allows, the proceedings are split up into two parts – Part I includes the early submissions, while Part II, scheduled for publication at a later date, will contain those that required a little more time. The early papers are thus not unnecessarily delayed waiting for the last submission to come in, as in the traditional book format.

We are proud to have a number of contributions from a wide range of perspectives on the history of Papuan languages, all of which advance the state of the art in their niche.

Part I

Sebastian Fedden's *Change in Traditional Numerals Systems in Mian and other Trans New Guinea Languages* looks at changes in Mian numerals induced by contact with the Western world in the second half of the 20th century. Based on his own perceptive fieldwork, he is able to document the existence of an ephemeral place-value numeral system, thought to be rare among the spoken languages of the world. Furthermore, the case for body-tally numeral systems being associated with the Trans New Guinea family of languages is strengthened, providing a starting point for tracing prehistorical population movements.

Edgar Suter's *Verbs with Pronominal Object Prefixes in Finisterre-Huon Languages* is a solid analysis of object prefixes in a large subgroup of arguably Trans New Guinea languages. Through an impeccable application of the classic comparative method he shows that the forms in question have common characteristics that must derive from a common proto-language. This is a non-trivial achievement since the morphemes are short, the languages and considerations are many, and the pre-existing work to build upon from was more summaric than analytic.

Laura Robinson and Gary Holton's *Reassessing the Wider Genealogical Affiliations of the Timor-Alor-Pantar Languages* looks at proposals for external affiliation of the Timor-Alor-Pantar languages. Claims of genetic relatedness, in the past, hinged on few and flimsy surface resemblances, whereas Holton and Robinson, thanks to much improved knowledge of the Alor-Pantar languages and the Alor-Pantar proto-language, are in a position to make a systematic comparison of the potential relatives. Free from vested interests in a particular result, they conclude that the evidence is insufficient to link the Timor-Alor-Pantar languages either to the North Halmaheran,

South Bird's Head families or to relevant fractions of an assumed Trans New Guinea family (although here, the comparisons with the West Bomberai subgroup are somewhat promising).

Andrew Pawley's *How Reconstructable is Proto Trans New Guinea? Problems, Progress, Prospects* takes on the extraordinary challenge of defining regular sound correspondences between key members of an emerging core group of Trans New Guinea languages. Pawley reminds us that such a formidable task will not be quick and easy, but can be achieved through incremental series of advances and revisions – of which the present paper is one instalment.

Lourens de Vries's *Some notes on the Tsaukambo language of West Papua* delivers the first-ever published grammatical data on Tsaukambo from the very remote upper Digul basin. He is able to demonstrate the existence of a shared-morphology subgroup comprising a series of clan lects in the Becking-Dawi river area. This paper presents a significant improvement on earlier capricious inferences, based solely on lexicostatistics.

David Kamholz's *The Keuw Isolate: Preliminary materials and classification* is a heroic effort to deliver data on one of Papua's hitherto least known languages. A short period of fieldwork under challenging circumstances was enough to provide a substantial (although admittedly imperfect) vocabulary and phonological outline. Kehu shares some typological phonological characteristics with the Lakes Plain languages, but the lexicon is very different. Thus, Kehu, for the time being, appears to be yet another isolated language from the lowlands of northern Papua.

Lourens de Vries, Ruth Wester and Wilco van den Heuvel's *The Greater Awyu language family of West Papua* looks at the swampy lowland area between the Ok and Asmat languages. In this ever-changing linguistic landscape of dialect chains and loyalty shifts, shared morphology is used as the most reliable indicator of linguistic ancestry. Reconstructed morphological paradigms connected with earlier work on lexicon and phonology allow for a subgrouping based on exclusive shared innovations. Thus, a number of open questions is resolved regarding the relative positions of the Ndeiram, Becking-Dawi, Awyu and Dumut groups.

Antoinette Schapper, Juliette Huber, and Aone van Engelenhoven's *The historical relation of the Papuan languages of Timor and Kisar* is a detailed subgrouping and phonological reconstruction of the proto-language of the Timor subgroup (Makalero-Makasae and Oirata-Fataluku) and Kisar (Bunaq). The comparative method is ingeniously applied to find sound correspondences in the wake of loanwords and fossilised affixes. The position of

the Alor-Pantar group, left for future research, may be either coordinate to Timor-Kisar or a third branch of the same proto-language.

Part II

Søren Wichmann's *A Classification of Papuan Languages* describes the application of Automated Similarity Judgment Program (ASJP) to an impressively wide array of Papuan languages. ASJP takes as input lists of 40 words (written in a unified transcription system) of each language or dialect from a standardized list of basic vocabulary meanings. The languages can then be classified based on similarities in sound and meaning in the 40 words. Although painfully simplistic, this method is able to reproduce known genealogical relationships, with success rate mostly predicated on the depth of the relationship. Since the method is fully systematic and objective, it provides a uniform baseline for comparing the strength of evidence for various groupings. Although lexicostatistics is not new in Papuan linguistics, the results yield a number of new and promising relationships.

Robyn Loughnane and Lila San Roque's *Inheritance, Contact and Change in the New Guinea Highlands Evidentiality Area* embarks on the fascinating topic of evidentiality marking. After a diligent description of evidentiality systems found in a number of languages from different (sub-)families from the fringes of the Southern Central Highlands, the authors turn to the question of the origin(s) of these systems. Knowledge of evidentiality systems found in other parts of the world is factored in to sketch a scenario which explains the development of evidentiality in these languages through areal diffusion, without segmental material necessarily being borrowed along.

Harald Hammarström's *Pronouns and the (Preliminary) Classification of Papuan languages* takes up Ross's (2005) argument that pronoun similarities can be used to obtain a preliminary classification of Papuan languages. Hammarström argues that the relevant probability calculations on pronoun comparison, in fact, do not allow such an inference. On the empirical level, a large database of first- and second person pronoun forms for over 5000 languages/dialects across the world is used to check the strength of inferences based on various types of pronoun similarity. While languages in general tend to have nasals in personal pronouns (especially first-person), Papuan languages do so to an even higher degree. The overrepresentation does not necessarily stem from a large language family, but could be an effect from

smaller phoneme inventories found areally in the Papuan region. Furthermore, raw numbers on the coincidence of first- and second person forms, are not in line with the traditional hypothesis of a Trans New Guinea family with characteristic pronoun shapes.

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