

Abstract

A North Papuan Linguistic Area

Many of the languages and language groups on the northern coast of the island of New Guinea, from the bird's head in the west to the central north coast of Papua New Guinea, share a number of typological similarities which could be considered to be areal characteristics. This study examines these characteristics, presents data from languages in this area which exhibit these features, and discusses some of the possible causes of these similarities.

The Papuan languages which share these features, to a greater or lesser extent, include the West Papuan languages, the East Bird's Head languages, the Torricelli languages, the Sko languages, the Warembori language, and possibly the Geelvink Bay languages. Other lesser-known languages and groups in this geographical area might also be included. In addition, these features are found in Austronesian languages in the same geographic area.

Three key features which are indicative of this linguistic area which can serve to illustrate this group are a tendency to SVO word order (in contradistinction to the more prevalent SOV word order found in most Papuan languages), a tendency to less morphology (less synthetic languages), and the occurrence of subject prefixes on the verb. Although not all of these features are found to the same extent in each language or language group, there is a general tendency toward these features which sets these languages apart from other languages of New Guinea, and, most notably, the Trans-New Guinea languages.

Examples:

Abun (West Papuan; Berry & Berry (1999))

men gwa Isak
1PL hit Isak
'we hit Isak'

Sougb (East Bird's Head; Reesink (2002))

Dan d-obogough sansun.
1SG 1SG-tear clothes
'I tore my clothes.'

Bukiyip (Torricelli; Conrad & Wogiga (1991))

Nobat t-a-wak heh.
Dog cl1.1SG-REAL-eat fingers
'The dog ate fingers.'

Some observers have posited that the presence of these features in Papuan languages of the region is evidence of Austronesian influence. This position may be mistaken, and this study discusses other possibilities for the source of these features, relating to various theories of language contact and substratum. Furthermore, the typological similarity of these languages to the Austronesian and non-Austronesian languages of eastern Indonesia is examined, with the possibility of a larger linguistic area.