

Reevaluating Papuan diversity: the unsuspected multiplicity of Southern New Guinea language families.

The distribution of diversity through space is highly informative, about history, social configurations, and ideologies of language use. Over the last four decades of scholarship, New Guinea's position as the most linguistically diverse region on the planet has not changed, but received views of where the most deep-level diversity lies within New Guinea have moved substantially. Various versions of the Trans-New Guinea hypothesis have led to hundreds of languages centred on the cordillera being joined into a single phylum of (sometimes only distantly) related languages, whereas the progression of research on the Sepik has largely found a mosaic of small families and isolates – a pattern taken to be more representative of New Guinea as a whole before the spread of Trans-New Guinea languages.

Southern New Guinea has not yet figured prominently in assessments of where the most diversity lies. Though it has sometimes been mentioned (e.g. Pawley 2007) as 'a smaller region of high diversity', assessments tend to lump together several families on little evidence: both Pawley (2007) and Ross (2005:30-31) essentially reproduce Wurm's earlier lumper classification of what I will argue are several distinct families in the Trans-Fly region.

In this paper I will argue that Southern New Guinea in fact represents much higher deep diversity than has hitherto been realised, with somewhere between five and eight unrelatable families taking in forty or so languages in an area about the size of the Netherlands. This diversity is even more astonishing given that the region did not even exist in its present form until recently and large parts of it were underwater following mid-Holocene sealevel rises until rebuilt by progradation from sediments brought down by the Fly and Digul rivers. I will summarise the main typological characteristics and diagnostic paradigmatic forms of languages from the various families, and sketch what sort of research program is needed to make sense of this puzzling region.

Pawley, Andrew. 2007. Recent research on the historical relationships of the Papuan languages, or, what does linguistics say about the prehistory of Melanesia? In Jonathan Friedlaender (ed.), *Population genetics, linguistics and culture history in the Southwest Pacific*. Oxford: OUP.

Ross, Malcolm. 2005. Pronouns as a preliminary diagnostic for grouping Papuan languages. In Andrew Pawley, Robert Attenborough, Jack Golson and Robin Hide (eds.) *Papuan pasts: cultural, linguistic and biological histories of Papuan-speaking peoples*. Canberra: Pacific Linguistics. Pp. 15-66.

The northern third of New Guinea, from the Bird's Head to the Sepik-Ramu basin, is probably the most linguistically diverse part of the planet (figure 3.5).

According to Ross' classification, no fewer than 16 unrelated language families, along with several isolates are found in this area, which is no larger than Great Britain. The south central region of New Guinea, which contains perhaps four families, is a smaller region of high diversity.