

Paper for the 2nd Workshop on the Languages of Papua

“Realis” and “Irrealis” in Wogeo: A Valid Category?

Finite verb forms in Wogeo, an Austronesian language of New Guinea, are obligatorily marked with a portmanteau prefix denoting person and number of the subject on the one hand, and a grammatical category that is conventionally glossed in the literature as *Realis/Irrealis*, on the other. In similar languages, the latter category is usually described as modal, with a certain range of meanings that is, in many cases, only vaguely defined. Such a system, with verbal morphosyntax being organized around a central, *modal* category that is binary in nature, is unusual from a European perspective; however, the growing body of descriptive literature on the languages of the New Guinea area shows that such systems are quite common in the region – so common, in fact, that one might argue they constitute an areal feature.

A more in-depth investigation of the verbal system of Wogeo and the functional distribution of the respective categories shows, however, that the language is quite different from a postulated prototypical realis–irrealis language. Central attributes of the supposed realis–irrealis semantics are not realized by the obligatory prefixes, but by other morphosyntactic means, while the prefixes are restricted to a small part of the assumed realis–irrealis domain.