

# Ideology and Language Change in the Sepik

William A. Foley

Within his pioneering work on the theory of signs, C. S. Peirce argued that personal identity was itself just yet another sign: humans appear to themselves as signs. In keeping with the pragmatic maxim, the signs through which we signal our identity are nothing other than the effects we believe our identity to accomplish. Because these effects are mainly accomplished through our interactions with others, the idea of a personal individual autonomous identity is an illusion in his view, generated by our misplaced tendency to identify ourselves with our will, the control we can exercise over our animal body. Within indigenous Papuan cultures remarkably similar conceptions of identity have been developed, and this has been explored in an important article by Roy Wagner (1991) entitled "The Fractal Self", which encapsulates well this Papuan understanding: the person is not an individual, but very much a dividual, an intersection of the various lines of his multiple exchange relationships, and these exchange relationships are nothing but a system of signs, the effects their performance of identity can accomplish. Within the Sepik region this understanding of identity is further articulated through a fundamental opposition of Care versus Will: the passive act of hearing is associated with the former, but active speaking, getting one's way through language, with the latter. In Yimas the verb *malak-* "talk" is polysemous, with a second meaning "quarrel"; an identical polysemy has been reported in the unrelated and geographically non-contiguous language, Manambu. Sepik thought fixes upon the active, speaking, doing role of language, transparently, its performance, rather than the more passive listening, comprehending side, as a site for ideological formation. Understanding, care, empathy is linked to the ear, but assertion, will, autonomy, in essence "penetration", is tied to the mouth, and masculinity. These ideological stances about personhood and language have been determining forces in the complex picture of language diffusion in the Sepik region and the pronounced role that linguistic borrowing on all levels has played in the region. However, convergence has also been resisted, as witnessed by the very high degree of linguistic diversity here. This paper will investigate where these ideological beliefs have played both a facilitating and a blocking role to language convergence in the region.