

Reconstructing early Western Oceanic: what do preverbal subject markers tell us?

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With the exception of St. Matthias and the Admiralty Islands, the Oceanic languages spoken in the western portion of the Melanesian region, both mainland Papua New Guinea and offshore islands, have been grouped within the Western Oceanic (WOc) subgroup of Oceanic (Ross 1988). It is still unclear, however, whether this group of languages descended from an ancestor other than Proto Oceanic (POc) itself, as the patterns of genealogical relations in Western Oceanic are complex and often symptomatic of dialect differentiation rather than innovation-defined subgrouping.

In my presentation, I aim to provide clearer evidence for the classification of these languages, and, consequently, the reconstruction of their putative ancestor: early Western Oceanic. Since pronouns play a major role in the traditional method of reconstruction, I will look at the morphology of preverbal subject markers (PSM): one of the most characteristic features of WOc languages.

With the main exception of Ross & Lithgow (1989), left-headed (verbal) morphology in Oceanic has received relatively little attention. All the same, PSM are relevant grammatical forms, as not only serve to index the subject on the verbal complex (VC), but may also convey other functions, such as the expression of TAM categories. Quite a few WOc languages have two and, in fewer cases, even more, sets of PSM, according to the mood they express. This is exemplified in (1) and (2) below, where PSM forms are differentiated in Realis (REAL) vs. Irrealis (IRR).

(1)

ani nora i-mat (Medebur)
3SG yesterday 3SG.REAL-die
“He died yesterday”

(2)

ga-pit-ke
3SG.IRR-come.from-FUT
“He will come from there”

(Ross 1976-82)

These portmanteau forms may play a crucial role in reconstructing early WOc, as they witness multiple layers of grammaticisation of “formerly unbound morphemes into the VC” (Ross 1988). PSM, indeed, appear either as prefixes, clitics or free words, and point not only to different degrees of grammaticisation, but also different sources (e.g. independent pronouns, possessive pronouns, articles, TAM markers, etc.). In my presentation, I will provide (i) a detailed typology of PSM, according to both their formal

and functional features, and (ii) a full reconstruction of these forms in early WOc. After a comparison of the latter with Ross' (1988) POc reconstruction, I will show that WOc languages may have had a period of shared development, setting them apart from the rest of Oceanic, and that early WOc may have been distinct from POc.

References

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