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The linguistic “archaeology” of Kuot, New Ireland, Papua New Guinea

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Abstract

This talk presents ongoing work on interpreting the multiple contact influences from Oceanic (Austronesian) languages in Kuot, the only non-Austronesian language of New Ireland Province (NIP) in Papua New Guinea.

This area was settled by 40,000 years ago, and Kuot presumably derives from a language spoken by people in situ long before the influx of speakers of the Oceanic branch of Austronesian, whose arrival left a distinct imprint in the archaeological record some 3,300 years ago. Based on linguistic evidence, Ross (e.g. 1988) identifies two successive waves of Oceanic speakers through the region.

The premises of this talk is that each left its imprint on Kuot.

Both Oceanic waves are taken to have emanated from a double dispersal centre in eastern New Britain. The first spoke a very early form of Oceanic, close to what has been reconstructed as Proto-Oceanic (POc). This wave spread rapidly through the island region, and proceeded into the Pacific. The second wave did not spread quite as widely, meaning that descendents of the first-wave languages are still spoken at the periphery of the spread area; in particular the South-East Solomonic family (SES) is considered conservative and is therefore a good place to look for kindred features to Kuot items suspected of having a first-wave origin. All Oceanic languages spoken in NIP today belong to the second wave.

Kuot shares some features, such as gender and fairly rich morphology, with other non-Austronesian languages in Island Melanesia, but differs in their expression, and deviates quite clearly in features such as word order, which is VSO. It has not been possible to establish genetic relatedness to the other languages.

There are many indications of long-term contact between Kuot speakers and their neighbours. Cultural ‘isoglosses’ of various kinds extend without regard to language boundaries, as do clans, and there is a fair amount of shared kinship terminology, all suggesting a long history of intermarriage and other forms of contact. Linguistically, there are many loan words in the Kuot lexicon, and the phonemes /f/ and /s/ appear to have been acquired through loans. Syntactically and morphologically, however, Kuot is remarkably distinct from its current neighbours. This is where the first wave of Oceanic comes into the picture.

VSO is the word order reconstructed for POc, but the morphology of the oldest verb classes does not suggest this is original in Kuot, and current neighbours are all SVO. An innovation in the first wave languages is the use of morphology derived from possessive constructions to mark subjects in the verb phrase, which tallies very well with the structure of the only open verb class in Kuot. There are also vocabulary items which appear to correspond to POc reconstructions, and/or items found in the SES languages, but which are not attested in the current second-wave neighbours.

The talk will exemplify the phenomena mentioned above, and illustrate the usefulness of combining linguistic, ethnographic, archaeological and genetic evidence to reconstruct aspects of the prehistory

of a language and its speakers.