

Revisiting the ‘Western Oceanic hypothesis’: new evidence from pronominal morphology

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 subgroup of Oceanic (Ross 1988). It is still unclear, however, whether this group of languages descended from an ancestor other than Proto Oceanic 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 will offer a concise review of the so-called ‘Western Oceanic hypothesis’ (Ross 1988: 351), trying to provide clearer evidence for the classification of these languages, and, consequently, the reconstruction of their ancestor: Proto Western Oceanic. As pronouns play a major role in the traditional method of language reconstruction, I will present a preliminary reconstruction of the Proto Western Oceanic (personal) pronominal paradigms, in order to find new elements that may tell us how different they were from their counterparts in Proto Oceanic. Attention will also be drawn to the methodology of morphological reconstruction in historical linguistics (Koch 1996, 2003).

Koch, Harold. 2003. Morphological reconstruction as an etymological method. In Blake, Barry J. & Burridge, Kate & Taylor, Jo (eds.), *Historical linguistics 2001. Selected papers from the 15th International Conference on Historical Linguistics*, 271-291. Amsterdam: Benjamins.

Koch, Harold. 1996. Reconstruction in morphology. In Ross, Malcolm & Durie, Mark (eds.), *The comparative method reviewed: regularity and irregularity in language change*, 218-263. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ross, Malcolm, D. 1988. *Proto Oceanic and the Austronesian languages of western Melanesia*. Canberra: Pacific Linguistics.