

**From areal linguistics to historical sociolinguistics:  
identifying and diagnosing contact events in northwest New Guinea**

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In this contribution to the panel, I extend the discussion of historical work to consider language change stimulated by contact between different speech communities. When studying the effects of contact, languages without a written record pose several challenges. The best practice when identifying contact-induced change is to begin with a scenario in which multiple languages are known to have been in contact, and then proceed to identify similarities that were present in one of the languages, but not the other, prior to the contact event (e.g. Thomason 2001). However, for languages without a historical record, it may be difficult—in some cases, impossible—to confirm whether a feature was present before the onset of a contact event. In addition, there is often no direct evidence (written or otherwise) for a contact event having occurred; rather, contact events are inferred from the geographic, typological, and genealogical distribution of features. Similarly, the sociolinguistic nature of the contact event may be ‘diagnosed’ from the putative outcomes of contact (Ross 2013).

These issues are compounded in northwest New Guinea (NwNG). This is a region of high genealogical diversity, with multiple branches of Austronesian and as many as 16 unrelated non-Austronesian families and isolates. Here, a collateral lack of local archaeological and genetic studies means that we currently rely almost entirely on spoken linguistic data to infer information about prehistoric population movements and contacts.

In this talk, I highlight some methodological issues for contact studies in this context via a case study of a feature with a local areal distribution: split inalienable coding (SIC; Arnold forthcoming). Languages with SIC have two or more semantically conditioned coding strategies associated with the expression of inalienable possession: typically, one strategy is used for possessed body parts, the other possessed kin terms. SIC is cross-linguistically rare, but attested in three different families in NwNG: Austronesian, East Bird’s Head, and Hatam-Mansim. In lieu of confirmatory written records, I infer that this distribution is due at least in part to contact between the languages. As SIC is not reconstructable in Austronesian, I assume that SIC originated in either East Bird’s Head or Hatam-Mansim; and as the change led to structural complexification in the Austronesian languages—a new nominal class was added to the system—I also hypothesise that contact was prolonged, intense, and involved early childhood bilingualism (based on e.g. Thomason & Kaufman 1988, Ross 2013). However, this explanation for the distribution of SIC is speculative. For some languages, scattered ethnographic accounts, oral folk traditions, and linguistic and cultural correlates provide some supporting evidence for contact. For others, no such evidence exists.

I conclude with a word of caution. When studying contact between languages without a written tradition, we rely on theoretical models to identify and diagnose the nature of contact events. However, studies from elsewhere in the world highlight the need for localised models of language contact, to account for variable sociolinguistic contexts, ideologies, and practices (e.g. Epps 2012 on the Amazon Vaupés region). Some preliminary studies (e.g. Donohue & Crowther 2005, Evans 2019) suggest similarly localised models of contact may be necessary for New Guinea.

## References

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