
Reviewed by Richard McGinn (Ohio University, Athens)

The title of this book is well chosen to capture a central concern of comparative-historical linguistics in the Pacific and Southeast Asian areas, and to honor a scholar who represents the apogee of the enterprise. Malcolm Ross’ dissertation (1988) sought to integrate principles of genetic and areal linguistics while classifying over 200 Melanesian languages, reconstructing lexical and grammatical features, identifying subgroups (over 20), and presenting selected historical phonologies. Terminology and concepts especially associated with Ross’ career include: metatypy, esoterogeny, innovation-defined vs. innovation-linked subgrouping methodology, and the importance of comparative grammatical evidence — especially pronominal paradigms — for purposes of language classification, with particular emphasis on Austronesian and Papuan languages. The book features a full-page color photograph of the honoree; a 13-page bibliography of his published works to date; an editor’s Introduction detailing his early intellectual history, his reasons for becoming a linguist, and his major contributions to the field; and 22 original papers arranged in two parts: Historical Relationships Amongst Languages and Historical Development of Languages Across Time. The geographical coverage includes 15 chapters on Austronesian languages, four on Papuan languages, and one each on Australian, Mon-Khmer, and Slavic languages. Within each section the chapters appear in alphabetical order by author.

1. On the influence of Malcolm Ross.

The first three papers reviewed below are conveniently grouped to illustrate major aspects of Ross’ influence on the field.

Alexandre François’ chapter, “The languages of Vanikoro: three lexicons and one grammar”, describes the complex language situation on Vanikoro, then focuses on three ‘aberrant’ Oceanic languages occupying the southern tip of the island. The three languages are mutually unintelligible yet share exactly the same grammar. The situation is accounted for in terms of familiar historical forces playing out in extreme ways, labeled metatypy and esoterogeny by Ross (1996, 2001). The
former is “a functionally grounded tendency to minimize language differences” via massive calquing of grammatical patterns; the latter is “a socially driven push to increase language differences” to enhance group identity and solidarity (p. 123). While linguistically satisfying, the paper avoids speculation on the larger question of what kinds of social relationships (e.g. patterns of bride-exchange) might possibly have given rise to these effects.

Laurie Reid’s “The reconstruction of a dual pronoun to Proto Malayo-Polynesian” revisits the emergence of ta “dual” < PAn *kita “1 PL. INCLUSIVE” via semantic narrowing in many Philippine and a few non-Philippine languages, and, as compensation, the emergence (variously) of tamu/taku/tayu/tada “1 PL. INCLUSIVE” by compounding of ta- and a second pronominal formative (variously -mu/-ku/-yu/-da). His proposal is to reconstruct *ta “dual” and *ta-mu “1 PL. INCLUSIVE” for the ancestral language, presumably PMP, and then to argue that *ta-mu (*ta “dual” + *-mu “2 PL.”) became semantically unstable after PAn *(ka)mu “2 PL.” became singular, an event labeled “second politeness shift” by Blust (1977). Previous investigators, including Ross (2006) and Reid himself, had explained the variety and distribution of 1 PL. INCLUSIVE pronouns as products of drift affecting Philippine languages. But as the author now points out, that leaves two problematic outcomes unexplained, namely, ta-ku and ta-mu, both “1 PL. INCLUSIVE”: under standard assumptions, -ku and -mu represent singular pronouns “I/my” and “you sg.”, respectively. But if so, then ta-ku (“dual” + “1 SING.”) and ta-mu (“dual” + “2 SING.”) do not add up semantically to “1 PL. INCLUSIVE” (unlike ta-ku “dual + 2 PL.” and ta-da “dual + 3”). To get there, the author offers two arguments. First, both ta-ku and ta-yu should be derived from *ta-kayu > *ta-kuyu “dual + 2 PL.” via loss of a syllable, yielding variously ta-ku/ta-yu, as required. Second, *ta “dual” and *ta-mu “1 PL. INCLUSIVE” must be reconstructed at the level of PMP before the politeness shift, i.e. before PAn *(ka)mu became singular. Under these assumptions, the politeness shift caused putative PMP *ta-mu to become unstable semantically. After language split, many daughter languages either reanalyzed it as a single morpheme or replaced it variously as described above. In my reading, the author’s semantic arguments raise a question whether the second politeness shift was a one-time event affecting PMP, as is standardly assumed. After all, politeness shifts affecting 2nd person pronouns are extremely common, and prone to spreading as areal features.

Johanna Nichols’ chapter, “Expanding character sets for phylogeny: a Slavic test case”, offers testimony that Slavic and general linguistics have something to learn from Ross’ method of integrating tree-theory and wave-theory analyses. A major problem for Slavic is that “the received family tree with its three primary branches (East, West, South Slavic) does not straightforwardly reflect the history of dispersal” because, as she asserts, South Slavic emerged not by split but by
“fusion of originally separate branches” (p. 127) owing in part to the effect of literary standard languages, and in part to pre-dispersal dialect features. The author proposes a computational technique for generating more and better data sets for comparison and to distinguish among patterns of inheritance, dialect borrowing, and drift. The result is an expanded verbal paradigm for each of twelve languages based on the stance verbs: “sit”, “stand”, and “lie”. Each verb stem yields five inflectional forms (static, dynamic-perfective, dynamic-imperfective, transitive-perfective, transitive-imperfective); and each stem can be expanded by eight derivational forms (e.g. causative), yielding a total of 120 character sets for each language — all compiled in the Appendix in paradigms available for comparative analysis.

2. **Do autonomous principles of language classification exist?**

Another acknowledged problem for the Comparative Method arises when languages are separated by more than 6000–8000 years. The next four papers raise a question whether autonomous principles of language classification exist which can be applied in all cases, or alternatively, whether all classification schemes are speculative until proven by successful reconstruction of a protolanguage.

Tonya Stebbins’ “The Papuan languages of the eastern Bismarks: migration, origins and connections” proposes a preliminary classification of a number of non-Austronesian languages using a variety of sources, both linguistic and extra-linguistic. The central problem is to differentiate native Papuan from borrowed Oceanic elements, and then to propose “a working hypothesis for the (possibly genealogical) grouping” of the former (p. 240). Models of reconstruction and change presupposing the availability of conveniently arranged data sets notwithstanding, the paper gives a rare peek behind the scenes by asking: What factors inform the data sets? The author uses published and unpublished reports as hypotheses, as it were, to be tested against the linguistic data; for example, oral histories suggest that Baining represents the original inhabitants of the Gazelle Peninsula, all other groups being recent arrivals from Southern New Ireland.

Jacinta Smallhorn’s chapter, “Binanderean as a member of the Trans New Guinea family”, complements Wilson (1969) and the author’s own work in progress demonstrating the unity of the Binandare family, which consists of roughly 80,000 speakers occupying the southeast coast of Papua New Guinea. Here the author attempts to establish an external relationship for Binandarean beyond Guhu-Samane in the north, which had earlier been linked to Binandarean based on lexicostatistical evidence. Her argument for membership within the larger Trans New Guinea (TNG) group draws from Pawley’s (2001, 2005) lexical evidence; in contrast, Ross (2005) has reserved judgment. The author concludes with a caveat
and a call for work on smaller families. After all, as she points out, the lexical evidence for Proto-TNG is incomplete, and the presumed time depth of 6000–8000 years may be “beyond … (that) which most comparativists think it is possible to reconstruct a protolanguage in any detail” (p. 220).

Andrew Pawley’s “Greenberg’s Indo-Pacific hypothesis: an assessment” is negative, but ultimately fair, and likely to be influential. In the Introduction (p. 9), Bethwyn Evans asserts: “The question of what are reliable diagnostics of relatedness are still debated in the literature”. But that does not necessarily imply an open mind with respect to macro-linguistic comparison as practiced by Joseph Greenberg. Pawley argues that Greenberg’s (1971) Indo-Pacific Hypothesis (IPH), which recognizes a single language family comprised of all non-Austronesian and non-Australian languages from the southern Andaman Islands off the coast of Thailand to Tasmania off the coast of Australia, is unproven, and surmises that it will never be proven, because the evidence for it — which Pawley outlines with considerable care — is either attributable to chance or obviated by the fact that much of it was taken from what he regards as a single family, Trans-New Guinea (TNG). Pawley’s subgrouping argument has some (if not overwhelming) empirical support, but his arguments that most similarities are attributable to chance are mathematical and unconvincing. After all, if so much of Greenberg’s evidence for IPH is due to chance resemblances, then there ought to be equal ‘evidence’ for incorporating Australian and Austronesian languages — or Indo-European, for that matter — under the IPH. But apparently, on Pawley’s own reckoning and that of others, including Steven Wurm (1977), Greenberg’s evidence was far better than that, and warrants a better explanation. (Wurm had suggested an explanation in terms of substrate borrowing.) Pawley’s critique is especially valuable as a methodological check on the scope and limits of language classification itself. It is likely to be widely accepted, and will probably deter many students from exploring the IPH as their primary research interest. However, like other such critiques of Greenberg’s work (e.g. Campbell 1988), Pawley’s is based on a convenient assumption, namely, that language classification and the Comparative Method comprise a single (recursive) heuristic. Further, the argument goes, since the CM has an upper time limit of around 6000–8000 years, it follows that not only the IPH but any Greenberg-style classification, which admits of no time limits, must be speculative and beyond the reach of science. Although Pawley’s evaluation of the evidence is thorough and reasonable, given his assumptions, his style of argumentation exhibits incommensurability effects (ten Hacken 2007: 18), e.g. the attribution of unflattering motives (hubris, deference to Greenberg’s eminence) to researchers working in a competing research programme.

Hypothesis, and of Mon-Khmer as an innovation-defined subgroup. Given the tentative status of the higher branches of the alleged family tree, the author takes the rational step of concentrating on a group of languages clearly related to one another, and considers their subgrouping relationships as determined by rigorous application of the Comparative Method (see also Evans, this volume). He revisits an earlier paper and the problem of classifying Cua, a Bahnaric language ultimately related to Khmer (Cambodian). Sidwell (2002) had grouped Cua and Kotua within the Central Bahnaric group; here he argues instead that Cua represents a primary split from Proto-Bahnaric with Cua as the only member, called East Bahnaric, alongside West Bahnaric, Central Bahnaric, and North Bahnaric. What little evidence there had been to support subgrouping Cua together with Kotua, namely two shared features of word-final ‘nasal hardening’ (denasalization) conditioned by a prevocalic consonant, and lenition of *ts- → /s/, is now explained by borrowing or parallel development “or some other non-genetic mechanism” (p. 202). The more rigorously he applies the Comparative Method, the less evidence he finds for subgrouping Cua as anything other than an independent branch of Bahnaric.

3. Three stages of the Comparative Method.

The papers by Harold Koch, Bethwyn Evans and Paul Geraghty are reviewed together to exemplify a founding idea of linguistics as a science, namely, that the Comparative Method is a unified, recursive heuristic for the study of linguistic divergence. The three papers exhibit clarity and methodological soundness to such a degree as to be suitable for classroom use to teach the principles of comparative-historical linguistics, with the added benefit that each one treats a different language family.

Harold Koch’s “On reconstructing pronominal proto-paradigms: methodological considerations from the Pama-Nguyan family of Australia” demonstrates that a group of languages, previously grouped together on the basis of lexical evidence, indeed constitutes an innovation-defined family, as indicated by the successful reconstruction of the pronominal paradigm and complete case system of the protolanguage.

Bethwyn Evans’ chapter, “Beyond pronouns: further evidence for South Bougainville”, is designed to prove the relatedness of a group of Papuan languages on the basis of a sufficient number of high-quality shared innovations in phonology. Earlier studies had identified four languages in southern Bougainville as comprising a language family based on lexical and grammatical evidence (e.g. Ross 2001, 2005); this paper removes all possible doubt. The author concludes with a list of residual problems, including apparently irregular phonological developments and possible contact issues which remain to be accounted for.
Paul Geraghty’s “Nasal strengthening in the Fijian languages” approaches the most refined stage of the Comparative Method, namely, the investigation of irregularities in the evolution of the sounds of a single language — or in the author’s case, a chain of communilects. At issue are two irregular sound changes in Fijian, one more ancient: POc *ŋ > g [ŋg]; and one more recent: *m > b [mb]. (There was no evidence found of parallel changes POc *n > d [nd] and POc *ñ > z (pre-nasalized palatal stop) in Fijian). Conditioning factors are investigated in detail, including the possible effects of prosodic, morphological, and word structure conditions. The author’s thorough analysis and open-ended conclusion (“the conditioning factors are as yet undetermined”, p. 313) should perhaps evoke the classic Vernerian admonition to seek regularity not in further comparison of languages, but in deeper investigation of individual dialects.

4. Morphological and syntactic change.

The next four chapters describe relatively recent morphological and syntactic changes exhibiting a variety of mechanisms and results.

Zeitoun and Teng’s chapter, “From ki-N ‘get N’ in Formosan languages to ki-V ‘get V-ed’ (passive) in Rukai, Paiwan and Puyuma”, proposes that independent, parallel changes offer the best explanation for the fact that inherited PAn prefix *ki- “get N” developed into a passive verb “get V-ed” in three contiguous languages of southern Formosa, namely Rukai, Paiwan and Puyuma.

I Wayan Arka’s chapter, “On the zero (voice) prefix and bare verbs in Austronesian languages of Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia”, outlines several cases of morphological leveling which have consequences for contemporary syntactic theory. The comparative data involve two types of languages. On one side is Balinese, a stereotypical Active/Split-S language which features an analytically warranted zero prefix representing Undergoer Voice which contrasts with other prefixes including ka- (Passive) and N- (Actor Voice). The contemporary Balinese zero prefix can be explained uncontroversially in terms of morphological simplification of a Philippine-type protolanguage (cf. Ross 2002 and many others). But some neighboring languages, including Sumbawa, Bima, Manggarai and Rongga, have taken the leveling process further, so much so that they exhibit syntactic ambiguity between bare active and bare passive verbs. Such a result should be impossible, according to Lexical-Functional Grammar and the Minimalist Program, which require a morphological reflex for passivization. The solution, suggested but not demonstrated by the author, is to adopt the Construction Grammar framework, which permits active and passive structures to be distinguished by word order independently of morphology.
Robert Early’s “Deictic to relativizer in Oceanic” notes a universal tendency of languages to recruit relative pronouns from the set of deictic pronouns, and proposes this as the process of grammaticalization explaining the isomorphism between deictic pronouns and relative pronouns (or relativizing particles) in a number of Oceanic languages, i.e. the latter have their historical origin in the former.

Frantisek Lichtenberk’s chapter, “Proprietives in Oceanic”, revisits a class of proprietives (de-nominal adjective suffixes), e.g. Samoan wai-a (water prop) “watery”. Previous researchers, notably Ross (2000) and Lynch et al. (2002), had posited near-perfect orderliness for POc which is not always reflected in the contemporary data, i.e. POc *-ka ~ *-a were phonologically conditioned allomorphs (*-ka following vowels, *-a following consonants); and their distinct syntactic functions — postnominal (“watery N”) and predicative (“the N is watery”) — were non-distinct morphologically. The problem is to reconcile the orderliness of POc with the rather messy contemporary evidence. The author’s conclusion is similar to Zeitoun & Teng’s (above): POc proprietary suffixes have undergone so many drift-theoretical changes that purely bottom-up reconstruction is impossible.

5. Contact issues.

For migrating populations such as the Austronesians in the Pacific, contact issues include not only the identification of loaner languages, but also their location in geographical space. The next four papers exemplify totally different contexts in which linguistic borrowing can occur.

Ger Reesink’s chapter, “A connection between Bird’s Head and (Proto-) Oceanic”, proposes to explain how a small set of post-verbal adverbs managed to be included in Proto-Oceanic alongside the regular pattern of pre-verbal adverbs. The explanation is that the discrepant set was borrowed by pre-Proto-Oceanic speakers during a significant pause 4000 miles to the west, in the location of the Bird’s Head. Called the ‘Cenderawasih rest’, the pause preceded their migration eastward to the homeland of Proto-Oceanic in the Bismarck Archipelago. The argument is consistent with archeological evidence (Gray et al. 2009), which also suggests that the Bird’s Head-to-Bismark transit was fast — between four to fifteen generations at most.

Anna Margetts’ chapter, “Spread of the Saliba-Logea plural marker”, explores how a primary grammatical split originated and spread. The author rejects the possibility that the motivation was generational; instead the innovating dialect (Saliba) was possibly influenced by contact with English. The issues are complicated by morphophonemic variation (cf. Lichtenberk, this volume), and by semantic selection restrictions governing the use of the plural suffix.
Roger Blench’s “Remapping the Austronesian expansion” extends the Austronesian map to include locations the Austronesians probably once occupied, including Indochina, India, Arabia, west Africa, southern Australia, and the west coasts of the Americas. The author provides a useful survey of unsupported speculations before introducing the comparative evidence, which includes shared lexical items, non-native plants and animals, the distribution of blowguns, and several other categories, all of which are plausibly claimed to be more readily explained by borrowing than by independent invention.

Mark Donohue’s contribution, “Dental discrepancies and the sound of Proto-Austronesian”, is part of a larger research program outlined by Donohue & Denham (2010) which challenges standard assumptions about the nature of the Austronesian diaspora. In this chapter, the author surveys hundreds of languages for evidence of a phonetic contrast between /t/ (lamino-dental) and /d/ (alveolar), and notes that it has been reported for Austronesian languages representing “two widely separated primary subgroups, Malayo-Polynesian and Thao (or Pazeh)”. Since the pattern appears in roughly 1% of the world’s languages, but in roughly 3% of Austronesian languages, the spike is unlikely to be due merely to chance. Previous researchers, including Haudricourt (1965) and Ross (1992: 44), had reconstructed the pattern for the protolanguage, and explained its contemporary distribution as retentions. In contrast, astonishingly, Donohue proposes substrate borrowing. The author’s proposal is likely be taken seriously because it offers new directions for research. For example, the word for “sugar cane” (with its referent) apparently originated in New Guinea yet *tebuS has been reconstructed in PAn. Furthermore, linguists supposing that their work has involved the original inhabitants of an area now have a reason to question that assumption, especially if they find evidence of the nasal discrepancy pattern — but even if not. In short, the Donohue-Denham hypothesis is richly capable of challenging standard assumptions. And that matters a great deal.

6. Other papers

The last four papers offer analyses and conclusions that are not readily grouped with the previous sets.

Paul Li and Shigeru Tsuchida’s chapter, “Yet more Proto-Austronesian infixes”, proposes to reconstruct non-productive PAn infixes, *-al-, *-ar-,*-aN-, and probably *-in-, alongside productive *-um- and *-in-, based on new data from fourteen Formosan languages plus Tagalog (Philippines) and Javanese (Indonesia). Other candidates for PAn status (-ar-, -ag-, -a-) are rejected as incompatible with subgrouping assumptions proposed by Blust (1999) and Ross (2009). The chapter
is somewhat misleadingly titled, since the authors propose merely to eliminate one infix (‘-ar-’) and add one (‘-aN-’). On the question of the putative meaning of the nonproductive PAn infixes, the authors are ambivalent about Dempwolff’s (1934–1938) assertion that they were already fossilized in the protolanguage (now called PMP). Overlooked is the well known fact that the overwhelming majority of nonproductive infixes cooccur with reduplicated monosyllabic bases which, by definition, violate phonological contour principles. For example, Tagalog *h-al-akhak “laughter” and *h-al-akhak-an “laugh at” are based on *hakhak, and Kavalan (Formosa) *t-r-aqitaq “talkative” is based on *taqtaq plus an extra vowel (which conceivably has as much right to be called an ‘infix’ as does -r-). Since discussion of the lexical-phonological pattern goes begging, one is left to wonder whether it ever had morphological motivation in PMP or PAn. Recall that Dempwolff’s *estarrte Infixe were reconstructed for an extra-Formosan family some of whose daughters have undergone morphologization, e.g. Sundanese -al- ~ -ar- “plural”. Such cases would be consistent with the suggestion that the original pattern was merely phonologically motivated.

John Lynch’s chapter, “At sixes and sevens: the development of numeral systems in Vanuatu and New Caledonia”, explores two hypotheses to explain the appearance of quinary numeral systems in several Oceanic languages: borrowing vs. independent invention. The data involve the recruitment of words for body-parts to express numbers, e.g. “hand” = 5; “two hands” = 10. Blust (2005: 556) had suggested an explanation in terms of substrate borrowing from Papuan languages that later disappeared. Finding no evidence for this idea, the author turns to the possibility of independent invention; but in the end, he finds little to choose between the two hypotheses. An overlooked possibility consistent with the borrowing theory may be suggested by Reesink’s paper (this volume): the quinary systems may have been borrowed from Papuan languages located elsewhere, before the Oceanic speakers arrived in their contemporary homes.

Meredith Osmond and Andrew Pawley’s “Verbs of perception in Proto Oceanic” proposes a method, building on Evans (2003), that generates new comparative data based on inherently linked lexico-semantic concepts (cf. Nichols, this volume), and calls for their inclusion in dictionaries of Oceanic languages. At issue is the reconstricatability of five basic sense verbs (see, hear, taste, smell, touch) and their extensions. Potential lexical linkages include transitive vs. intransitive (see/look at/appear); voluntary vs. involuntary modalities (touch/feel); and recruitment of secondary meanings such as “see” ~ “understand” and “hear” ~ “obey”. The paper is framed by discussion of lexico-semantic universals. After a brief comparison of evidence from Oceanic, Australian, and European languages, the authors indicate they “do not have a large enough sample to draw a conclusion” in the theoretical domain (p. 458).
Robert Blust’s chapter, “The historical value of single words”, is appropriate in the context of a book titled *Discovering History Through Language*. Blust demonstrates that the comparative study of single words can yield important inferences about the distant past. He uses words referring to marsupials to infer the date when Austronesians first crossed the Wallace line; words for “crocodile” and “pangolin” to infer the geographical distribution of these animals 3000–5000 years ago; the word for “typhoon” to suggest not only a homeland for Chamorro (Northern Philippines) but also an event of radical leveling affecting remaining Philippine languages; and a patterned irregularity in the reflexes of the word for “nine” to support a primary split between PAn and PMP. The author concludes that “the vocabulary of a language is a repository of history that can be mined for far more insights than we are generally apt to notice or appreciate” (p. 70).

7. Concluding remarks

The book is well edited; errata are few and inconsequential. Its reach touches over a quarter of the world’s languages. Each chapter is valuable in itself, and in the aggregate, thematic coherence is achieved through the many references to the career contributions of Professor Ross. As Johanna Nichols aptly points out in her chapter, his achievements deserve to be better known beyond Southeast Asian and Pacific linguistics. That is reason enough to recommend this book as deserving a place on every linguist’s bookshelf.

References


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