

# Where are the Papuan languages?

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The easternmost province in Indonesia is Papua, but not all of the languages within its borders are Papuan, according to most linguists. While the languages of most of Indonesia belong to the Austronesian family, most (but not all) of the languages of Papua (and Irian Barat) are not members of this family. At the same time, not all of the languages located west of New Guinea are Austronesian: there are pockets of languages in north and south Maluku, Nusa Tenggara Timor and (historically) Nusa Tenggara Barat, that cannot be assigned to the Austronesian family.

The term ‘Papuan’ is often used to refer to these languages that are not Austronesian, but (almost) everyone who uses the term in a linguistic context acknowledges that it is a negative category, not a positive one: a language is said to be ‘Papuan’ if it is spoken in the area near New Guinea, and is neither Austronesian nor Australian.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, there is common (albeit mistaken, to at least some degree) agreement about the existence of a ‘Papuan’ linguistic type: a number of features have been proposed as ‘typical’ of ‘Papuan’ languages, such as SOV word order, a predominance of serial verb constructions and switch reference morphology; agglutinative morphology and case marking; and a reduced number of phonemic liquids, with complex syllable structures and phonemic tone or stress. Haiman (1980), Reesink (1987, 2000), de Vries (1993, summarising them), Donohue (1997, 2005a, 2006), and especially Foley (1998, 2000) all discuss some range of grammatical properties that are found in a number of languages of New Guinea, especially in the highlands (and middle Sepik). But many of these features are not (even in a south-west Pacific context) unique to New Guinea, and many of them do not cover the entire New Guinea area; at the same time, many of the properties that can be shown to be ‘typical’ of Papuan languages are also shared with the languages to the west (Donohue 2004, 2005b, 2007).

The question then arises, where are the Papuan languages? Examining a range of data from languages of New Guinea and of the islands to its west,<sup>2</sup> and drawing on knowledge of world and areal trends in grammatical typology (eg., Dryer 1988, 1992, Haspelmath et al 2005, Nichols 1993, I propose that the term ‘Papuan’ be openly acknowledged as a typological label, which means that it should be applied to some Austronesian languages as well as some non-Austronesian ones.

<sup>1</sup> ‘Non-Austronesian’ is no better a term, since Austronesians are in geographic contact with six other families: Sinitic, Tai-Kadai, Hmong-Mien, Tibeto-Burman, Austroasiatic, Indo-European (and arguably Australian languages, though only recently).

<sup>2</sup> Looking east, and possibly even north is likely to be fruitful as well, but (my) work in that direction is not yet so advanced. Looking south has already proved to be fruitful, but the results there are not yet solid. Looking west also looks back on the migration path that humans took on their way to Sahul (Bellwood 1985), and so is especially interesting in any case. Hence work in that direction is more advanced than in the others.

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