

What is it to be Papuan?
Bunak: a non-Austronesian language of Eastern Indonesia.

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Bunak is a so-called ‘Papuan’ language spoken in the central mountainous region of Timor, surrounded on all sides by languages of the Austronesian family. Initially described as being of ‘mixed’ Austronesian and non-Austronesian origin (Berthe 1959, 1963), Bunak was then classified as belonging to the West Papuan family (Cowan 1963), before being reassigned to the large Trans-New Guinea family (Capell 1975; Wurm 1975). Bunak’s distance from the New Guinea mainland, its isolation from other languages subsumed under the label ‘Papuan’, and its chequered history of classification all beg the question of our ability to identify a ‘Papuan’ language and, in particular, of the validity of speaking of such a group of languages as if they share something in common, even (relative) geographical proximity.

In this paper I examine the use of the term ‘Papuan’ as a typological classification, and determine how well it can be applied to Bunak. As the label ‘Papuan’ is essentially negative, being recognised as a descriptor of languages in the New Guinea region that are not demonstrably members of the vast Austronesian family, the contrast between Papuan and Austronesian languages (as per Foley (1986; 1998; 2000) supplemented by Haiman (1980), Reesink (1987), de Vries (1993) and Donohue (1997)) will provide a convenient starting point from which to assess the language’s typological profile. It is shown that Bunak falls far wide of this standard picture of a ‘Papuan’ language, although it is claimed to be related to the highlands languages of the Trans New Guinea family which in much of the literature, either implicitly or explicitly, are taken as ‘typical’ exemplars of the Papuan linguistic stock. Similarly, Bunak cannot be seen to conform to the standard picture of an Austronesian language despite the claims of extensive Austronesian influence and mixed genealogy.

In fact, some of the most salient grammatical features of Bunak belong to neither the typical typological profile of Papuan nor Austronesian languages. Tracing these features over wider Eastern Indonesian reveals that they are not just the properties of a single divergent language, itself distant from New Guinea, but that they are widely present in both Papuan and Austronesian languages of the region. This suggests that Papuan substrate influence cannot, as often previously, be considered to be the property of merely a few aberrant Austronesians spoken near or on eastern New Guinea. Instead it speaks of a larger western maritime area of Papuan influence in insular eastern Indonesia extending from the Timor-Alor-Pantar island group to Halmahera in the north and encompassing the Bird’s Head of the New Guinea mainland as far east as the the islands of Yapen and Biak. Establishing the existence of such an area points to the necessity of going beyond the simple dichotomy of Austronesian versus non-Austronesian, and of recognising that the linguistic history of the region is complex and multilayered such that is not captured by current genealogical labels and convenient typological benchmarks.

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