

The Mekong-Mamberamo Linguistic Area

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New Guinea and its satellite islands are sometimes thought of as constituting a linguistic area. This paper presents an alternative perspective on the linguistic geography of New Guinea and its neighboring regions, arguing for the existence of a *Mekong-Mamberamo* linguistic area, named after the two eponymous rivers at its two extremities. The Mekong-Mamberamo area encompasses Western New Guinea (the Bird's Head and Bomberai peninsulas plus the Cenderawasih Bay and Bird's Neck regions), most of the Indonesian Archipelago (to the exclusion only of northern parts of Borneo and Sulawesi), and the entirety of Mainland Southeast Asia.

Languages of the Mekong-Mamberamo linguistic area characteristically exhibit the following linguistic properties:

(1) *17 Mekong-Mamberamo Properties*

1. passing gesture
2. repeated dental clicks expressing amazement
3. 'where' in conventionalized greeting
4. 'eye day' > 'sun' lexicalization
5. d/t place-of-articulation asymmetry
6. numeral classifiers
7. verby adjectives
8. basic SVO word order
9. iamitive perfects
10. 'give' causatives
11. low differentiation of adnominal attributive constructions
12. weakly developed grammatical voice
13. isolating
14. short words
15. low abstract concept articulation
16. absence of case marking
17. optional TAM marking

The Mekong-Mamberamo linguistic area cross-cuts the island of New Guinea: the above 17 properties are more closely associated with languages in western parts of New Guinea than with other languages in central and eastern regions. However, some of the properties do exhibit "leakage" into central and eastern New Guinea, suggesting that, prior to the expansion of the large and intrusive Trans-New-Guinea family, Mekong-Mamberamo properties might have been prevalent over a much larger part of New Guinea.

Within the Mekong-Mamberamo area, the above 17 properties are characteristic of Austronesian and non-Austronesian languages alike. However, both Taiwan, the Austronesian homeland, and the Philippines, into which Austronesian languages first spread, lie outside the Mekong-Mamberamo linguistic area, with the contemporary languages of those regions tending to exhibit fewer of the above properties. Thus, it can be safely assumed that when Austronesian languages spread south, into the Indonesian

archipelago and Western New Guinea, they picked up many of the characteristics of the Mekong-Mamberamo area. Some of the properties in (1), most notably basic SVO word order, isolating word structure, and various other aspects of structural simplicity, have been argued to be typical of creole languages. Accordingly, the adoption of Mekong-Mamberamo properties by intrusive Austronesian may potentially have followed either of two alternative scenarios: assimilation to a typological profile already present in the pre-Austronesian languages of the area, or simplification due to massive imperfect second-language acquisition (Donohue and Denham to appear, Gil to appear).

The linguistic patterns that constitute the Mekong-Mamberamo area are consistent with other archaeological evidence for extensive contacts between New Guinea, the Indonesian Archipelago and Mainland Southeast Asia, dating back to pre-Austronesian times. Bananas and sugarcane were brought from New Guinea to Mainland Southeast Asia, while pigs and chickens traveled in the other direction (Donohue and Denham 2010); an "arc of vegeculture" is said to have connected NE India with Melanesia (Blench to appear). Mainland Southeast Asia, in part or in whole, is traditionally referred to as Indochina, acknowledging the presence of a confluence of cultural traits associated with the two major civilizations of India and China respectively; however, the results of this paper suggest that with regard to a range of linguistic properties, at least, Indochina and the surrounding region may be less Indian or Chinese than it is Papuan.

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