Object prefixing verbal subclass as a diagnostic of TNG affiliation

Suter (2012) reconstructs pTNG as having a lexical subclass of transitive verbs that agree with their objects via a prefix: one example is (1). The prefixes Suter reconstructs are in Table 1. This class exists alongside another subclass of transitive verbs without agreement prefixes, for example (2).

(1)   *na-tu* 'hit' (Suter 2012:52)

(2)   *na-* 'eat' (Pawley 2012:115)

na-	1SG
ga-	2SG
wa-, *Ø*	3SG
ya-	3PL

Table 1: pTNG object prefixes (Suter 2012)

This was an unusual state of affairs. The transitive verbs divide into two conjugation classes according to the number of cells in the object agreement paradigm: one cell for non-prefixing verbs or a many more for prefixing. Should the non-prefixing class be radically syncretic or the prefixing class massively overdifferentiated? It is unknown whether such verb classes exist elsewhere in the world though it is clear that it is not common.

The Timor-Alor-Pantar (TAP) languages were identified as part of TNG as early as Capell (1969) and more recently by Ross (2005). However, since study of the TAP family has intensified researchers have been more tentative about any link, one going as far as to suggest that the hypothesis is "unfalsifiable" (Schapper 2014:5).

Nevertheless, they do both have a set of object prefixes that are largely cognate. This in itself was used by Ross (2005) to group the TAP languages into the TNG family. This is not enough. But more significant is the fact that these prefixes are confined to a lexical subclass of the transitive verbs. These two facts together make the likelihood of these being independent developments very small.

Thus it is being proposed that existence of two lexical classes of transitive verbs, one object prefixing and the other not, is an indicator of an TNG language.

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