

Linguistic traces of the social past: reconstructing language histories in the Mount Bosavi region of Papua New Guinea

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The comparative method and Bayesian phylogenetic analyses are widely accepted as robust ways of reconstructing shared ancestry among languages and modelling diversification over time. However, it is also well documented that with certain comparative linguistic patterns, establishing genetic relatedness and reconstructing the complexity of language histories is challenging (see Miceli 2019). Thus, these approaches need to become just one key element in our interpretations of the linguistic past.

In this talk, we explore the challenges of reconstructing unattested language histories through a case study from Papua New Guinea: the non-Austronesian languages of the Mount Bosavi region. The fifteen to twenty languages spoken in the highlands around Mount Bosavi have been argued to be part of the large Trans-New Guinea language family (Pawley & Hammarström 2018; Ross 2005) and have been categorised into three groups based on linguistic, cultural and geographic similarities: (a) Strickland Plain; (b) Papuan Plateau; and (c) Bosavi Watershed (Shaw 1973, 1986).

The starting point of our study is the first application of the comparative method and Bayesian phylogenetic analyses to these languages. Since there is more lexical than phonological diversity across the languages of the Mount Bosavi region, these approaches are complementary and present different perspectives on the linguistic past. The results of these analyses also raise questions about the linguistic and sociocultural processes that have shaped the synchronic comparative linguistic pattern found with these languages. The second part of our study investigates likely explanations for this linguistic signal by drawing on other models of language continuity, contact and change, as well as on ethnographic records of language use and ideology. Placing our analyses of linguistic relationships within these broader contexts leads to a more nuanced reconstruction of the language – and thus social – prehistories of the Mount Bosavi region.

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