

The multiple causes of Split Inalienable Coding in northwest New Guinea: Contact meets drift

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In this paper, I discuss the interaction of contact and drift in the development of Split Inalienable Coding (SIC) in northwest New Guinea. SIC is a little-known phenomenon in which two or more possessive-marking strategies are largely or exclusively associated with the expression of inalienable possession (Arnold forthcoming). Here I focus on semantically conditioned SIC, whereby the choice of inalienable construction is predictable from the semantics of the possessed noun.

As an example of semantically conditioned SIC, Hatam [hata1243] makes a syntactic distinction between alienable and inalienable possessive constructions: in the former, the possessor is marked on a prenominal particle, and in the latter, the possessor is marked with prefixes directly on the possessed noun. There is then a further split in the prefixing inalienable construction, in that there are two possessor-marking paradigms conditioned by the semantic class of the possessed noun. One set of prefixes (with a thematic consonant /t/) is used when the possessed noun is a kin term (1a), and the other (without /t/) is used when the possessed noun is a body part (1b). These examples show that the split is not phonologically conditioned.

(1) **Hatam (Hatam-Mansim; Reesink 1999):**

- | | | | |
|----|-------------------|----|-----------------|
| a. | dit -ngyon | b. | di -ngon |
| | 1SG-grandfather | | 1SG-heart |
| | ‘my grandfather’ | | ‘my heart’ |

Semantic SIC, like that found in Hatam, is attested in 11 languages of northwest New Guinea: eight are Austronesian (AN), and three are non-Austronesian (NAN). A lack of cognate forms and systems prevents reconstruction of SIC to any stage of AN above the attested languages—in other words, SIC is a recent development in the AN languages, postdating the splits from their closest sisters. Furthermore, semantic SIC is a rare phenomenon cross-linguistically: outside of northwest New Guinea, only around half a dozen independent innovations are attested.

This cross-linguistic rarity, coupled with the genealogical diversity of the languages with SIC, points to contact as a mechanism for its development in northwest New Guinea. I argue that SIC first developed in a contact zone involving the three NAN languages and the AN language Biak. This scenario is supported by ethnographic accounts showing a close relationship between these groups, including extensive intermarriage; as well as other linguistic correlates of contact, such as shared syntactic structures. Once Biak developed SIC, it then acted as a vector of spread to the other AN languages with the distinction, facilitated by its role as the local lingua franca.

However, contact is not the whole story. AN languages with semantic SIC are found outside of northwest New Guinea: two are attested in the Lesser Sundas, and one on Fiji. Again, these systems are not inherited, but are recent independent developments. This wide geographic distribution suggests that drift has also played a role in the

development of SIC in the AN languages. Specifically, I argue that the AN languages have inherited a robust, structurally defined class of kin terms, which is marked in various areas of the grammar—for example, with dedicated morphology (Blust 1979), or in differential treatment by the alienability distinction (e.g. Florey 2005); and that this inherited structural pressure facilitated parallel developments of SIC in AN languages. Indeed, the combination of contact and drift neatly accounts for the relative density of AN languages with SIC in northwest New Guinea: while the AN languages were predisposed to develop SIC, Biak provided a conspicuous model for the change, thus galvanising the innovations in these languages.

References

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