Speaking like your neighbour does: clause linking and language contact in Papua New Guinea and Amazonia

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How do clause-chaining patterns and mechanisms of switch-reference evolve, and what is their fate in language history? In many instances, the emergence and demise of clause chains and of switch-reference is an outcome of language contact in multilingual situations. Languages in contact tend to share pragmatic patterns, ways of saying things, discourse organization and genres (see, for instance, Aikhenvald 2006: 27-8, and chapters in Aikhenvald and Dixon 2006). This is what underlies the diffusability of clause chaining techniques and switch-reference systems (and also of the expression of subordination and coordination: see, for instance, Stolz and Stolz 1996, Mithun 1992). Switch-reference patterns are often shared by neighbouring unrelated languages. This was pointed out by Jacobsen (1983), Mithun (1999), McKenzie (2015), for North America; Roberts (1997, 2017) and Ross (1987, 2013) for the New Guinea region, Austin (1981) and Dixon (2002: 89-90, 527-9) for Australia, Aikhenvald (2012: 338-43) for Amazonian languages, Ciccone and Nercesian (2015), for a selection of South American languages, and also Aikhenvald forthcoming). Development of switch-reference marking as a technique may involve reinterpretation of heterosemous case-markers (used as clause linkers), as is the case in Australian and Papuan languages (Austin 1981, Dixon 2002). We also encounter instances of grammaticalization of bound verbs or adverbs which develop into clause linkers (as is the case in some Amazonian and New Guinea languages: Aikhenvald forthcoming). Areal diffusion of clause chaining, and also bridging and summary linkage, as a means of organizing discourse go together with sharing ways of presenting information and telling a story, especially within those genres which are specifically influenced by contact (as shown for some Amazonian languages by Aikhenvald 2019).

The presentation focuses on contact-induced changes in two regions of the world characterized by extreme linguistic diversity — New Guinea (especially the Sepik area) and north-western Amazonia. We investigate the linguistic, and also social and cultural mechanisms behind contact-induced development of clause chaining mechanisms and switch-reference marking. We also address the combined impact of language contact and language obsolescence on clause chaining.

Keywords: switch-reference, clause chaining, linguistic diversity, Amazonian languages, Papuan languages

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