Is pronominal cognacy necessary for establishing families?
A view from Papuan languages

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Most historical linguists would probably agree that, in the absence of other evidence, formal resemblances among sets of pronouns in different languages would be insufficient to establish genealogical relatedness. The more notorious examples of pronominal similarities being used to support long-range hypotheses include "Amerind" (e.g., Greenberg 1987; cf. Campbell 1994, 1997 for criticism), "Altaic" (e.g., Castrén 1850; cf. Janhunen 2013 for criticism), and "Nostratic" (e.g., Dolgopolsky 1984; cf. Nichols 2001, 2012 for alternative explanations). However, there is no principled reason to avoid using resemblances in pronominal paradigms as a *first step* in identifying possible families, especially in linguistically diverse regions that have enjoyed comparably little attention from historical linguists. It is largely in this spirit that Ross (2005; cf. 1995, 2001) has proposed using "pronouns as a preliminary diagnostic for grouping Papuan languages". To be sure—especially considering the fact that pronominal forms tend to consist of relatively few segments and that Papuan languages typically have small phoneme inventories—we would expect this approach to generate some otherwise unsupportable long-range hypotheses, simply due to chance (as has been proposed by Hammarström 2012). Nevertheless, we could still possibly use this pronoun heuristic as a starting point from which to pursue more rigorous analyses. Given the realities of chance and diffusion, resemblances among pronouns are certainly not sufficient for establishing families.

But are they necessary? This paper investigates two instances in which Ross's (2005) tentative classification of Papuan languages accepts the validity of a proposed family despite a lack of pronominal evidence: (1) the "Lower Sepik-Ramu" family and (2) (some branches of) the "Trans New Guinea" (TNG) family. Of course, it is always impossible to disprove relatedness (or to prove unrelatedness), and it is not my intention to attempt this here. Rather, I wish to cast a healthy skepticism on these two proposed families, which have been accepted in otherwise fairly conservative classifications (e.g., Campbell 2020; Hammarström et al. 2021). Thus, while there are interesting arguments to be made in support of both proposals, I argue that neither contains the quality or quantity of evidence typically required by historical linguists for accepting the validity of a family.

The "Lower Sepik-Ramu family" was first proposed by Foley (1999, 2005, 2018), almost entirely on the basis of what he considered to be cognate sets of bound nominal number markers found in members of both the Lower Sepik and Ramu families. While the Lower Sepik languages exhibit a nominal class (gender) system involving multiple plural allomorphs, the Ramu languages are devoid of such gender distinctions. I argue that the plural allomorphy found in the Ramu family is mostly explainable in terms of phonological conditioning, and any remaining similarities found between Lower Sepik and Ramu nominal plurals are best explained by chance (or, possibly, diffusion). The "Trans-New Guinea Phylum" was first proposed by McElhanon & Voorhoeve (1970) and has witnessed several iterations (cf. Pawley 2005). Here I will focus on the inclusion of the Madang family, arguing that many alleged Proto-TNG reflexes found in Madang lexical items are in fact merely reflexes of Proto-Madang. Thus, it is circular to use them in support of Madang's membership to TNG.

Although it is *a priori* possible for related languages to lack cognate pronouns and for the comparative method to demonstrate such a relationship in spite of such a deficit, it may be the case that demonstrating this is, in practice, rarely if ever possible (at least not in the Papuan context). This is perhaps because the sociolinguistic conditions (or time depth) that would result in apparently non-cognate pronouns among distantly related languages would also obscure other potential lines of evidence to the point of the protolanguage being irrecoverable. Therefore, we should exercise caution when approaching proposals of families made in the absence of pronominal evidence.

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