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New Guinea: Keystone of Oceanic linguistics

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NEW GUINEA: KEYSTONE OF OCEANIC LINGUISTICS.

The object of this paper is to give the reader an outline of the various theories concerning the linguistic position of New Guinea¹⁾ and to discuss in addition the interest of linguistic research in this area and its special attractions. For it is not going too far to assert that the languages of New Guinea, in fact of the whole insular area surrounding it, offer a very interesting linguistic constellation, not only by their peculiar features but particularly by the unusually intricate phenomena of their mutual relations. Moreover there are farreaching changes going on in the linguistic situation owing to interlingual contact. Such changes must also have been of frequent occurrence in the past and many theories have been framed to explain the problems resulting from these events. It is not my intention to add a new theory to those already existing, but only to show why these languages deserve special attention, and to discuss some questions which may be found to be of vast concern for future research.

It is of no use to enter at length into the older theories on the relationship of the languages which we are now used to call Austro-nesian. When that relationship had become apparent, about the beginning of the nineteenth century, it received more attention than the question of the limitation of the group. Indeed it was impossible to define the boundaries as only scanty data were available about some languages. Any idea about a possible special position of the languages of New Guinea only arose on reason of the different physical characteristics of the inhabitants of that island.

As more data were gathered, again and again the conclusion was drawn that, from a linguistic point of view, New Guinea belonged to Austronesia. Sometimes the data gave cause for that conclusion, but in other cases the interpretation was not free from prejudice. Such statements are found in some books of travel in addition to ethno-

¹⁾ This article is meant to be a complement to that published in the preceding issue (p. 231 sqq. of this volume). The numbers placed between brackets refer to the Bibliography.

graphical descriptions. Thus Latham discussed in 1847 in an appendix to the "Narrative of the surveying voyage of H.M.S. Fly" by J. Beete Jukes, the relation of the languages of Oceania (1). As he had probably seen data of Melanesian languages only, he supposed that New Guinea (the "Papuan languages") would not show a "fresh class of languages".

But towards the end of the nineteenth century the linguistic position was becoming clearer as a number of languages was discovered entirely different from the well-known Austronesian type. As late as 1885 the famous Dutch scholar Kern supposed that the languages of New Guinea would all turn out to belong to the Austronesian group in the same way as the Numfor language he had studied in a profound comparative analysis (2). But in 1892 Ray established the existence of non-Austronesian languages in the eastern part of New Guinea (3). After that more such languages — for which Ray coined the name "Papuan" — were pointed out in New Guinea, but also in other isles: in New Britain by Schmidt (4, 5), in western New Guinea by Meyer (6), and in Bougainville in the Solomons by Schmidt (7). A general account of these languages was given by Ray in 1907 (8), by Schmidt in 1926 (19, p. 148—154), and a year later by Ray again (29). Ray was in doubt whether the languages of the northern part of Halmahera (in eastern Indonesia) should be classified with the Papuan languages. Van der Veen who established the non-Austronesian character of this group (9) did not venture an opinion on this question, though he stated some similarities with the Papuan languages. The same view is held by the article on this group, probably written by N. Adriani, in the "Encyclopaedie van Nederlandsch-Indië" (10). But still the discovery of non-Austronesian languages did not come to an end. In 1941 Capell pointed out the existence of such languages in Timor (11).

Seen in the light of these publications it is rather surprising to find a complete disregard to these facts in a recent paper in which it is said that all languages of New Guinea "principally belong to the Austronesian family of languages" (15).

After the establishing of the Papuan group more and more languages were classified into it or with the Austronesian group so that the boundary between these groups was marked in great parts of the islands, by Ray himself for the Territory of Papua, in the Territory of New Guinea by Schmidt (21), and in the western half of the island by Held (12), Boelaars (13), and Cowan (14).

The border between the Papuan and the Australian languages offered some difficulties. Ray found this border in the middle of the Torres Straits islands as, in his opinion, the western language belonged to the Australian group (8). A different view is held by Milewski who points out that isolated Papuan languages are spoken in the northern part of Australia as far as the Walsh River (16). And indeed Schmidt thought a mutual affinity possible between the Papuan and Australian languages (17). Just because of the difficulty of marking the boundary between the Australian and Papuan languages Ferrand called Ray's classification "worthless" (18).

The most striking characteristic of this area is the great number of languages and the correspondingly small number of the people speaking them. So these languages present a general picture of astonishing multiplicity. With the Melanesian languages this is just the same as with those belonging to the Papuan group. Some sixty years ago the assumption that in the then German territory of New Guinea there should exist more than hundred different languages, was called "of course an overstatement" (20). Now we know that it was not so wide of the mark.

The establishing of the non-Austronesian character of the Papuan languages raised two new interdependent problems: the first question was whether these languages were related to one another, and the second one was whether they showed any affinity to one or more other families of languages. As to the first question it may be observed that the first definition given was a negative one: non-Austronesian. In discussing the contrasts between Papuan and Austronesian languages Schmidt adhered to this negative definition and considered the relationship of the Papuan languages problematic, but nevertheless he spoke of common characteristics (21). Capell on the one hand denied the relatedness between the Papuan languages of New Guinea, the Solomons, New Britain, Halmahera, and Timor (11), but on the other hand drew up a list of Papuan characteristics (22). The question of the possibility of establishing the common features of the Papuan languages was also discussed by Fortune who, indeed, remarked — and very properly — that "the main work of a systematic linguistic classification of Papuan languages remains yet in its earliest phase" (37). In face of the similarities in structure there remains the diversity in vocabulary of all these languages.

Attempts to prove an affinity between the Papuan languages and other groups are not wanting. The thought of a relationship with the

Australian languages lay at the door and it is also quite understandable that the languages of the Andaman Islands were taken into consideration. Indeed there is no real limit to such assumptions as long as the term "Papuan" is defined in negative sense only.

A lengthy discourse was held by Gatti who tried to prove a real historical relationship between Papuan, Australian, and Andaman languages (23). Trombetti even went so far as to uphold the affinity with African languages (24). Tagliavini summarized both theories without commentary (25), but the way in which Gatti and Trombetti handled the data withdraws all effect from their statements. Indeed Ray had expressed an opinion quite opposite to these theories (8). It only can be said that this question must remain open as long as the research into the individual languages is still in its initial stage.

About the surrounding languages²⁾ which have already been studied during a long time much more data are available. But here too we find problems similar to those we met with the Papuan languages, for during about a century the borders of this group and its affinity to other groups have been the object of many different theories.

H. C. von der Gabelentz who collected data of many Melanesian languages, was puzzled at the striking physical differences between Melanesians and Polynesians. Therefore he thought any conclusion as to the linguistic relatedness between these two areas premature. The close relation between the Melanesian languages was clear to Von der Gabelentz, but he wondered whether it was caused by genetic relationship or by mutual influence, though he held relationship probable (53).

Friedrich Müller was obviously inspired by arguments of physical anthropology when he supposed that the "Papuan" should have languages originally different from those spoken by the "Malayan" peoples and that the Melanesian languages should have arisen from a mixture of these two groups (26). But some years later, in 1885, Codrington expressed the opinion that the Melanesian languages were only a special group of Austronesian languages (27). Kern, however, held a more cautious view. In his opinion the close relation of the Melanesian languages was still to be proved (28). In 1892 Ray assumed a group of mixed languages — which he called "Melano-Papuan" — in addition to the (Austronesian) Melanesian group and the (non-

²⁾ I would have written here "Melanesian" languages. Why his was not possible, is shown below.

Austronesian) Papuan languages (3). But in 1927 he abandoned this view and assumed only Melanesian and Papuan languages (29). Schmidt who in 1899 strongly spoke against Müller's view mostly on the strength of Codrington's arguments (30, 31), three years later made a volte-face and showed himself a strong believer in the substratum-theory (32). He pointed out that Müller had reached the right conclusion, though his arguments were wrong and the Papuan languages were not yet known in his time. Ray accepted the substratum-theory and supplemented it by the supposition that it was the Austronesian (he said "Indonesian") element that brought about the unity of the Melanesian languages (33). In this connection the theory must be mentioned set out by Kroeber on account of the substratum hypothesis as evolved by Ray (57). Kroeber supposed that the usual dictum, that words can be borrowed freely between distinct languages, but grammar with difficulty if at all, is in contrast with Ray's conclusions. For according to Ray the Melanesian languages — which show the general Austronesian grammatical pattern and even specific grammatical elements but only a minority of Austronesian words — have arisen from the contact between the autochthonous, Papuan, languages and the penetrating Austronesian languages. From this Kroeber concludes that, if Austronesian influence on Papuan languages had such strange effects, the established assumption is not right, or the Melanesian languages are exceptional, or again Ray's analysis is invalid. Apparently Kroeber overlooked the other possibility. If the Melanesian languages are originally Austronesian and influenced by Papuan languages, they are by no means exceptional. And it is not inconceivable that for any social reason a population speaking a Papuan language should adopt an Austronesian language and also that that Austronesian language should not come off unscathed.

The next thing to do was an inquiry into the Papuan elements to be found in the Melanesian languages. The first steps in this direction were made by Capell who took the substratum-theory as a base for further research (22, 34). Though in his comparative studies he turned to account the results of Dempwolff, Capell refused to accept Dempwolff's "Ur-Melanesisch" theory (35) as this ignored the question of the substratum (36).

In the same way as the relation in which the Melanesian languages stand to each other the demarcation of the boundary between them and the other Austronesian languages gave rise to different theories. In 1884 the Dutch scholar Brandes stated the differences between the

languages of western and eastern Indonesia, especially in their phonological evolution and the word-order in the "genitive"-construction (38). The languages of Melanesia proper Brandes did not take into account. But in 1913 his compatriot Jonker spoke strongly against this classification (39). In his opinion Brandes' arguments were not sufficient to establish a division between the two halves of the Indonesian area, although he admitted the existence of similarities in some languages of eastern Indonesia to the Melanesian group. According to Schmidt, however, the languages of eastern Indonesia consist of a mixture of Papuan and Austronesian elements (19, p. 145). In this connection it may be observed that Adriani classified some languages of New Guinea together with those of southern Halmahera into one group (40). The substratum-theory for eastern Indonesia was further developed by Kanski and Kasprusch who pointed out that this area constitutes the transition between the Indonesian and Melanesian languages and that here the influence of the Papuan substratum was stronger than in Melanesia (41). In his discussion of the relation of the Waropen language to the surrounding languages Held seemed to have some sympathy for Schmidt's view, but he said that he did not know a definitive test for the limitation of the Melanesian group (12). Just the question of such a test, particularly in connection with the position of the languages of New Guinea, was amply discussed by Cowan who considered the "reversed genitive-construction"³) to be an important criterion (43, 44).

The eastern border of the Melanesian languages and their relation to the Polynesian languages were discussed by Schmidt (31), Ray (45), and Fox (46). Of course these authors devoted special attention to the question of the Polynesian "outliers" in Melanesia. According to Kähler the Polynesian and Indonesian languages are to be classified into one group. In his opinion — i.e. from a purely historical point of view — there are no essential differences between these two groups. Any special relationship between Melanesian and Polynesian languages, as stated by Schmidt, Kähler denies persistently (56).

³) By this term is designated the special word-order found in Melanesia (and many languages in the eastern part of Indonesia) with the construction of a noun qualified by a noun. In this construction the order is: qualifier-qualified. In the languages of western Indonesia it is just the opposite: qualified-qualifier. It is understandable that the Dutch scholars being accustomed to the "Indonesian" order called the Melanesian construction "reversed". It is to observe, however, that in connection with this "genitive-construction" problems were often wrongly stated, especially by Jonker (39).

On the linguistic position of Micronesia opinions also differ. Thalheimer in his discussion of the pronominal system of these languages classified them with the Melanesian group with the exception of Chamoro and Palau which he grouped with the Indonesian languages (47). More recently the linguistic position of Micronesia was discussed by Matthews whose classification does not differ principally from Thalheimer's (54). How intricate the linguistical situation can be is shown by the language of Rotuma in which Papuan, Melanesian, and Polynesian elements are profoundly fused, as is pointed out by C. Maxwell Churchward (48). But it is doubtful whether this author stated the problems rightly and whether his method to solve them was appropriate.

It would not be relevant to the matter in hand to enter into detail on the attempts to retrace the various migrations in this area from linguistical data (55, 49, 50, 36) or on the theories about the origin of the languages in question (51, 52, 42).

Having reviewed the various theories outlined above we have to think over the problems presented by the linguistic situation in this area. As to the question of relationship, it is clear that a cut-and-dried classification is not yet possible. In some cases it appears to be possible to discern groups limited in range as was already suggested by Schmidt (21) and Capell who attached great value to regional linguistic types (11). But it can not be urged too strongly that only *linguistic* grouping can be a sound basis for the research of such limited areas as was shown by Voegelin (59). The sum of the attempts at broader classifications mostly was a simplistic, and therefore incomplete, picture of the facts. The first requisite for solution is a clear understanding of the problem of linguistic relationship in general. Besides, in addition to the existing methods of comparative linguistics, new theories may be put to test. In this connection must be mentioned the time-depth theory of Swadesh. This theory provides a means to gain an insight into historical relations of cognate languages. It is based on the assumption that changes in the basic vocabulary of each language show a constant quantity, if measured over long periods and that the amount of loans in this vocabulary never exceeds a certain limit (58). Now the most favourable circumstances are found in the case of closely related linguistic groups, e.g. the Eskimo languages analyzed by Swadesh (60). Such favourable circumstances are probably also found in the case of the Polynesian languages. This group was analyzed by Elbert on the principals pointed out by Swadesh (61). Elbert made a useful addition in comparing

the results of his vocabulary-research with other linguistic and also non-linguistic data. In this way it was possible to draft a family tree of the Polynesian languages.

But not in all cases the circumstances permit such conclusions. Swadesh stated that if the percentages of vocabulary agreement are low the possible error becomes greater (62) and also that in such cases it may be difficult to discover the cognates as the examples of each phonetic correspondence are not sufficient (63). Another difficulty is presented by the fact that, if the percentage of vocabulary agreement approaches the maximal possible rate of borrowing (15 %), loan-words may be a disturbing factor of great importance.

In view of these facts it seems probable that a research on this method into the relationships of the Melanesian languages will meet with great difficulties. From another point of view this very area is of great interest. For here borrowing and even creolization appear to be important factors. That means that we will meet here with problems arising from bilingualism. Haugen who recently devoted important studies to bilingualism and its role in the process of linguistic borrowing, emphasized the importance of social factors. In this connection an investigation into the influence exercised on a language by a substratum may spread light over the cultural background of these processes (64, 65).

Moreover, this area may prove to be of special interest from the point of view of general linguistics also. Hall, who gave considerable attention to Pidgin languages, stated "that pidgin and creolized languages occupy an almost central position in our understanding of those aspects of linguistic change which have as yet remained unexplained" (66). Now it is clear that Melanesian Pidgin English can not be studied without taking into account the Melanesian languages. And again the study of Melanesian languages needs the background of both Papuan and Austronesian linguistics.

From all this it is clear that linguistic research in this area is still in an initial stage. It is not even sure that its problems were ever stated correctly. But these facts can only stress the need for more interest in this field. Of course no spectacular results can be expected in the near future. But as the analysis and description of these languages will progress, it will be possible to raise further problems. And then it is not beyond possibility that remarkable findings will get into our hands. For the time being the most important requirement is that close connections with general linguistics are formed and kept alive and

that the greatest amount of benefit will be constantly derived from the experience acquired in other fields. For this is the only way in which our efforts can bear good fruits.

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