

Areal and typological patterns in the phonology of the languages of Oceania

Comparing the phonological typology of the languages of Oceania reveals some intriguing similarities, as well as sounding a cautionary note for the enterprise of typology as a whole. For the purposes of this paper the relevant languages include three groups defined by a combination of geographical and 'genetic' factors — (1) the indigenous languages of Australia, (2) the 'Papuan' languages, that is, the non-Austronesian languages of Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, and (3) all the languages of the Austronesian family. In some basic aspects of their phonology these languages taken together stand out from languages elsewhere in the world. However, the three groups also show some divergences among themselves, with the Australian group being particularly distinctive. These conclusions, elaborated briefly below, are based on a survey of some 40-50 languages belonging to each group (a current total sample of 142 languages), and comparisons with about 500 languages from the rest of the world.

Although there are individual exceptions, a good case can be made that the languages of the Oceanic area are broadly characterized by what might be called reduced phonological contrast. They usually have fewer than the average number of consonants (mean around 18 for Australian and Austronesian languages, and only around 15 for Papuan, compared to a global average of about 22). Many types of 'elaborated' consonants, such as those with marked laryngeal settings are quite rare in all three groups. Vowel inventories generally also exploit only a part of the possible contrast space. For example, distinctive nasalized vowels are rare ($6/142 = 4.2\%$) compared to, say, languages of North America where 25.6% of languages have nasalized vowels or the Indo-European family where 27.5% of languages have nasalized vowels. Front rounded vowels are even more scarce ($3/142 = 2.1\%$). We also note that very few languages of the area make use of tonal contrasts.

Historical, archaeological, genetic and ethnological data (e.g. Allen, Golson & Jones 1977, Kirch 2000, Sagart, Blench & Sanchez-Mazas 2005) all indicate the long isolation of Australian indigenous populations, but very extensive contact and interaction between groups ancestral to today's Papuan and Austronesian speakers. These facts suggest that any striking typological similarities between Australian and Papuan languages cannot be due to contact. It is tempting to consider whether they might be an echo of a very ancient common origin. On the other hand, Papuan/Austronesian similarities might well be (at least in part) due to convergence resulting from long-term interaction between populations.

As is well-known, at the same time as the Australian languages show some phonological similarities to the other Oceanic language groups, they stand out from the rest of the world's languages by the extreme rarity of fricatives in their consonant inventories, and the frequent elaboration of distinctions among coronal consonants of other types. Australian languages also have fewer than average vowels (mean of basic vowel qualities around 4, compared to 6 for languages in general). They also frequently have distinct phonotactics, with extensive word-internal consonant clustering options but minimal word-marginal possibilities (e.g. single-C word onsets, no word-final C's, but 3-consonant word-internal strings). These salient divergences from patterns in the majority of languages elsewhere in the world provide one of the strongest hints that the *potential* diversity of human languages may be considerably greater than surveys of extant languages can indicate. In most other parts of the world, greater population interaction has likely led to a degree of typological convergence among the languages.