

PART 2.3.

THE NATURE OF PAPUAN LANGUAGES

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2.3.1. THE NATURE OF PAPUAN LANGUAGES: INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

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A discussion of characteristics of Papuan languages as a whole is really only possible in terms of a contrastive approach involving Papuan languages of several of the unrelated groups, or of such groups and Austronesian and Australian languages. The reason for this is evident when considering that structural and typological differences between members of the various unrelated Papuan language groups can be so extensive that only few, and very general, features can be found which are typical of Papuan languages as such. Even in this, great care has to be exercised in looking for features shared by the 'majority' of the Papuan languages only, i.e. not by all or almost all of them, because the great majority of the Papuan languages belong to the Trans-New Guinea Phylum, and if this particular majority is taken as representing the Papuan languages as a whole, the often considerable typological differences between Trans-New Guinea Phylum languages and other Papuan languages would defeat the purpose of the exercise.

In the light of this, only a few very general characteristics typical of most Papuan languages will be given first and some general remarks made, to be followed by a discussion of some of the major Papuan language types and of the highly important substrata problem in Papuan languages. A contrastive statement of some of the most important features of languages of the Trans-New Guinea and Sepik-Ramu Phyla as the two largest Papuan groups, and of Australian and South-Western Pacific Austronesian languages will conclude that section. In this, it will have to be kept in mind that the features of member languages of other Papuan groups such as the Torricelli Phylum etc. are, in detail, sometimes quite different from those shown for the two large Papuan phyla

included in this contrastive statement. A more detailed discussion from a New Guinea-wide point of view of some features of importance to Papuan linguistics will be given after that, to include features such as the distribution of personal pronoun forms, and of number systems and semantic domains.

It may be mentioned that Schmidt (1920, 1926), Ray (1927) and Capell (1933, 1941) gave descriptions of the characteristics of Papuan languages in contrast to Austronesian languages of Melanesia. These were later summarised and systematised by Boelaars (1950) and Wurm (1954). The great progress in Papuan linguistics since those summaries were written has rendered them obsolete in many ways.

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

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