

Language contact and change on the Ocean(ic) highway

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The Oceanic languages form one of the largest subgroups of the Austronesian language family, spanning the entire Pacific Ocean - from Palau to Easter Island, Hawai'i to New Zealand. While the Oceanic subgroup is well-established, some lower-level internal relationships remain difficult to disentangle. In this talk, I argue that much of this ambiguity can be attributed to contact. Here, I describe how high mobility, overlapping migrations, and complex interactions have significantly impacted language development and, consequently, interpretations of linguistic affinities.

This talk focuses on two areas of Oceania with connected, however different contact histories: Vanuatu and Polynesia. In Vanuatu, contact between indigenous and exogenous languages since the settlement period has resulted in marked divergence of Vanuatu languages from other Oceanic languages, as well as language mixing. In Polynesia, intersecting and highly interactive networks of contact greatly impacted the diffusion of linguistic innovations and the structure of language relationships. Through these examples, I highlight how particular contact events effect distinct linguistic exchanges, and I address the significance of understanding contact histories for reconstructions of historical language relationships.