



# Semantic Shifts

Porquerolles  
14-25 Sept. 2020

Semantic Shifts: From lexicon to grammar. Diachronic and typological perspectives

## Lexical semantic typology of Melanesia

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Linguistic Melanesia is a world hotspot of linguistic diversity and is home to around 1500 languages across between 20 to 40 language families. Located to the north of the Australian continent, the area is centred on the island of New Guinea, extending eastward from the island of Sulawesi in Indonesia to the western fringe of Polynesia and stopping just of the islands of Fiji, Vanuatu and New Caledonia. At its core Linguistic Melanesia is dominated by Papuan languages, but also takes in a large number of Austronesian languages. While Austronesian languages form a genealogical unit, Papuan languages do not. A language is said to be Papuan, if it is spoken on or near New Guinea, and is not Austronesian or Australian. Melanesian languages are among the least well-described in the world, but have, as their description increases, consistently produced challenging data for linguistic typology.

Melanesia is a complex convergence zone characterised by concentric circles of isoglosses clustering around New Guinea and into its interior. On the highest level, these circles represent changes in broad typological profiles and define large regions in which Austronesian languages incrementally converge on the linguistic norms of Papuan languages the closer they are to New Guinea. At the same time, Papuan languages in extensive contact with Austronesian languages often lack linguistic features typical of Papuan languages that are not in contact with Austronesian languages. We also find features shared between Papuan and Austronesian languages that are not typical of either group, but nonetheless define a convergence area, such as is the case with the “maritime” Melanesian area, a coastal and insular ring around New Guinea. In numerous other parts of New Guinea, such as the Bird’s Head, central Highlands or southern New Guinea, we also find smaller areas of typological similarity between languages arising out of more localised processes of convergence.

In this course, we will consider where lexical semantics fits into larger models of Melanesia as a linguistic area. The area has been characterized as one in which there is widespread convergence in structural features of language but divergence in lexicon (see different descriptions of this setting in, e.g., Foley 1986: 283, Ross 2001, Thurston 1987, 1989). Laycock (1982), for example, writes that because many adjacent languages in Melanesia have very similar morpho-syntactic structures, learning another language is largely a matter of learning new lexicon— “that is, the two languages involved are very close to being the same language with a different set of labels”. This situation is thought to have arisen out of documented patterns of language contact whereby long-term, stable multilingualism between speech groups leads to similar structural features being used in both languages, while the emblematic function of words, as the most salient markers of identity for speech groups, acts as a brake on adoption of foreign word-forms. In addition to a simple prohibition on borrowing lexemes, there appears to also have been processes in Melanesia whereby speech communities in frequent

contact with one another deliberately enacting changes to their languages, such as spontaneous innovation of distinctive word-forms or complex language structures to mark their identity as distinct from their neighbours. It is not clear where lexical semantic features would fit into this picture; we will attempt to construct a broadly applicable model of lexical semantic convergence for Melanesia.

In this course, we will look in detail at processes of convergence in lexical semantic structures in the Melanesian Linguistic Area. The course will take a broad view of lexical semantics as anything from the sense ranges of individual lexemes through to the organisation of entire semantic domains. Topics to be covered include (i) intricate areality of numeral and counting systems as well as complex expressions for certain numerical values pointing to different Melanesian convergence zones; (ii) diffusion/non-diffusion of colexification patterns between Papuan and Austronesian languages and what this tells us about stability of certain lexical semantic contrasts; (iii) commensurability in cross-linguistic comparison of the lexicon, with illustration of the problems on the basis of the metaphor BONES ARE STRENGTH, which is widely present in Melanesia but in greatly varied linguistic expressions; (iv) lexical semantic patterns and what they tell about cultural history and change in Papuan-Austronesian contact scenarios inside Melanesia.