

THE CYCLE OF LINGUISTIC DIVERSIFICATION IN OCEANIC ISLAND GROUPS¹

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This paper is about the non-linguistic processes which governed linguistic speciation in the Austronesian-speaking regions of Oceania. Under what conditions did an originally unified language community maintain its linguistic unity, diversify into a dialect chain, or split into discrete language communities? An explanation is sought for the patterns of language distribution found in the island groups of Melanesia, Polynesia and Micronesia. Of particular interest is the striking variation between Polynesia, where the norm is one language per island group, and Melanesia, where the norm is many languages per island group. Scholars have long been puzzled by such regional variations and have put forward a number of different hypotheses to explain it.

After briefly reviewing some widely received hypotheses I will present an alternative explanation of the contrast between Polynesian and Melanesian patterns of language distribution. In this alternative reconstruction, Polynesian homogeneity and Melanesian diversity are seen as part of a single scheme of things, as representing different stages in a sequence of cultural and linguistic developments that has recurred in many island groups inhabited by Austronesian speakers. It has often been assumed that the contrast between Melanesia and Polynesia is due largely to their having been occupied by peoples bearing cultures of originally different types; that the ancient Melanesian language communities diverged in technology, political structure, and in other features of life style from the seafaring, socially stratified Polynesians. The facts provided by linguistics and archaeology are, however, more consistent with the view that the various Austronesian communities who established themselves on the high island groups of Melanesia and Polynesia shared a similar culture, at first - a culture

inherited from the Proto-Oceanic speech community. Proto-Oceanic speakers had a maritime-adapted technology with a horticultural base and a social structure in which inherited rank was important, in short, a culture whose essential characteristics have been preserved in a number of Polynesian and Micronesian societies, and are more widely reflected in Melanesia than has been allowed in some accounts. The greater linguistic diversity found within island groups in Melanesia, as opposed to the other two regions, is attributable mainly to the effects of two variables on the distribution and communication patterns of local populations. (a) Time and (b) geographic conditions provided the basis for a constellation of demographic and socioeconomic changes which were repeated in the high island groups settled by Austronesian speakers. These changes underlay the cycle of linguistic diversification which has recurred in different regions. Regional variations are explainable, at least in part, in terms of differences in geography and in time depth available for local diversification. Thus, most Melanesian island groups contain larger land masses than most Polynesian groups, and have been settled much longer by Austronesian speakers; they are, therefore, further along in the diversification cycle.

In the course of discussing the fit between the diversification cycle hypothesis and the evidence for specific island groups we will be led to suggest that some previous estimates of the geographic location and extent of the Proto-Oceanic and Proto-Polynesian language communities need to be revised. The argument will be that these communities were spread over a larger area than has commonly been supposed.

N O T E

1. A summary only of the Conference paper is given here, as the paper is basically intended to become a chapter of a forthcoming symposium on Pacific Islands biogeography, as yet untitled.