The Yap Language: Whence and How?

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The Yap language is so strange and different that its position within Malayo-Polynesian (MP) has been a mystery. It is not closely related to any of its neighbors. It is a member of the Austronesian (AN) language family and descends from the hypothetical Proto-Austronesian (PAN). It belongs to the majority subfamily (MP), and descends from the hypothetical Proto-Malayo-Polynesian (PMP). All the AN languages agreed to be non-MP are on Formosa, which is generally accepted as the ancient homeland of PAN. The Oceanic (OC) group, descended from Proto-Oceanic (POC), a sub-sub-division of MP, is the essentially Melanesian group and includes some very well-studied languages of Fiji and Polynesia in the Central Pacific group, and the (nuclear) Micronesian languages. Geographically, the term Micronesian includes three major groups whose language is not Micronesian (Yap, Palau, Chamorro).

Yap, in the western Caroline Islands, is best known for its stone money. To its west, before the Philippines, is Palau; to its north, Chamorro; and to its east (roughly) the linguistic Micronesians.

If Yap is an Oceanic language, here is a plausible prehistory of its people.

The Yap settlers separated early from the main body of Proto-Oceanic speakers who lived on the north coast of New Guinea (and/or islands off the north coast) and at the time still had mostly Malayan genes. They went directly north and settled Yap. They had no further contact with other Oceanic speakers till many centuries later, when the (nuclear) Micronesians completed a long counterclockwise movement from the Solomons to the Gilber's to the Marshalls to Ponape to Truk to Woleai and Ulithi. The small population and the absence of any neighboring mutually-comprehensible dialects allowed some rapid and radical changes to take place in the Yap language.

At the time of separation, Proto-Oceanic *-ia words had formed the five lenition levels, and, most importantly, the dra-
matic formation of the -ee demonstratives, which are spelt "-ea" in Yap today. So the Yap settlers took with them the words ea, nea and ngea (beside nia and nya -> nga), rea, and kea, and may have innovated bea. They may (or may not) have lacked a *tea form, which may (or may not) show that POC was late in developing *tia and leniting it. Note the cha- forms mentioned later in this paper, which may be from *tia, avoiding the regular change to *tea.

It was in isolation from other Oceanic speakers that the Yap language, by grammaticalization and reanalysis, developed the greatly altered and specialized uses of the words ea, nea, ngea, rea, kea, and bea. They also developed preposition riw/roo from the POC casemarked demonstrative *ria, and continued with the lenition and grammaticalization of forms from POC *nia. They had PCM ko in the same form as Central Pacific ko but with uses more like Central Pacific and Oceanic ki.

In or around their new home, the Yap speakers encountered speakers of Palau or Chamorro or both, and conquered them. The lower castes on Yap may descend from such conquered peoples.

After Ulithi was conquered and settled by (nuclear) Micronesian speakers, the Yap people conquered Ulithi (or re-conquered it) without resettling it. That explains why the people of Yap today regard the Ulithians as members of the lowest castes of Yap.

Evidence examined in this study suggests that Yap is an Oceanic language, though an odd one. Robert Blust, perhaps the leading expert on PAN, is inclined to agree (oral communication).

The sources used for this study were Yapese Reference Grammar (1977) and Yapese Dictionary (1979), both by John Thayer Jensen. My only two days of field work in Yap were the 4th and 5th of June, 1963, when my informant was a member of the fifth of the nine castes.

The present essay is part of an ongoing investigation centering on the ancient casemarking of AN. The prepositions and casemarkers (PCMs), in AN as in other families, tend to be fairly conservative, persisting for thousands of years. All four of Yap's prepositions have cognates throughout the AN family.
1. Prepositions / Casemarkers

The central focus of my research now is the study of true prepositions and casemarkers (PCMs) throughout the Austronesian (AN) language family. Excluded are preposition-like words derived fairly recently from locative nouns, from possession-classifying nouns (such as o and a in Polynesian), or from serial verbs. The goal is to trace the diachronic development of PCMs from Proto Austronesian (PAN) down. Almost all the attested forms are monosyllabic, even monomoraic, of CV form. There is a surprising degree of consistency and conservation of such particles throughout the AN family.

These monosyllables all begin with members of a small set of initial consonants: zero, n, k, s, t, and (not in Formosa) d. Though PCMs are notorious for having multiple meanings and for shifting meaning, each of these initials has kept an old core meaning to a remarkable degree. Those with zero initial serve as the unmarked Case 1, often called nominative, absolutive, subject, or focus. There is also a locative with initial zero. Those with initial n- (Case 2) are typically genitive ("of"), and in many languages serve also as the marked agent, the Doer that is not the syntactic subject, in constructions called passive or ergative. The particles with initial k, t, d, and s may all have originated as allatives ("to", "toward"), and we'll call them Case 3. Also note si, Case 1 for persons in some languages. The Case 3 forms compete with one another in various languages, and survive in niches. In Tagalog, for example, the official language of the Philippines, for Case 3, impersonal nouns are marked with sa, personal names with kay, personal pronouns with kan, and demonstrative pronouns with d(i)-.

Yap prepositions show four initials: zero, n, k, and r < *d.

The vowels of the PCMs are most commonly -i, and next most commonly -a. One Oceanic language, Arosi on San Cristobal Island in the Southeast Solomons (Fox, 1978), shows all six initials with the -i vowel, if we accept *ti merging into either *i or *si, a sporadic form of sa. Some Formosan languages show PCMs in -a for impersonal nouns and -i for personal nouns and perhaps personal and demonstrative pronouns. For such pronouns, in Phil-
ippine as well as Formosan languages, the -i PCMs meld with the pronouns (especially those from PAN *-iya, third person and demonstrative pronoun) to form left-sided case inflections.

In many Western Malayo-Polynesian languages, and more so in Oceanic, the distinction between impersonal -a and personal -i forms breaks down, and -i tends to be used for both. That’s true of Arosi, where all five -i forms occur and all the -a PCMs are lost.

In Paiwan, a Formosan language (Ferrell, 1982), we find three n- forms glossed “of”: nu, ni (for persons only), and na or nua (for things only); and na or nua is explained as nu + a. Likewise, in Chamorro, a (possibly) Western MP language (Topping, 1973, 3), the n- PCM occurs as nu, nu i, and ni, and Topping says clearly (and correctly) that ni is a contraction of nu i. So it’s clear that the oldest identifiable PAN genitive PCM was nu, and it was contracted later with a (surely an article for non-persons) and i (surely an article for persons). Blust, who earlier surmised the same thing, confirms this (personal communication). It is possible that the same process occurred and caused the vowel alternations with other initial consonants.

Yap has only four prepositions, and they show four of the five classical initials, though with differing vowels, as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PAN / PMP</th>
<th>Intermediate</th>
<th>Attested Yap</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“n” case 2:</td>
<td>*nu + i + *iya</td>
<td>*nia &gt; *nya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“k” case 3 allative:</td>
<td>*ku + *a/*i</td>
<td>*kua/*ku</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“d” case 3 locative:</td>
<td>*du + *a/*i</td>
<td>*dua/*di</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>zero case 3 locative:</td>
<td>*u ( + *i ?)</td>
<td>*u</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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