THE LANGUAGES OF NEW CALEDONIA

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Among the languages of New Caledonia we may distinguish two, or preferably three, main groups: a northern, a central, and a southern one. The northern group, in a survey of which I was engaged during the 1959 expedition, embraces a number of languages distinct from one another, but possessing similar phonological systems, characterized by five vowel qualities with a length distinction, and the presence of final consonants. It is to be noted that the three persons of the singular have a pronominal suffix: -η (-ŋ), -m, -n for the first, second and third persons respectively.

These languages are amenable to comparative treatment inasmuch as they exhibit regular correspondences. I have in fact published a preliminary account of the group in the Bulletin de la Société de Linguistique. Dempwolff’s Common Austronesian *t has three possible reflexes in three distinct sub-groups:

(1) It corresponds to a dorsal in the north-western sub-group, which consists of two languages, that of the villages of Poum, Koumac, and Bondé, and that of Gomen.

(2) The second sub-group is that of the district of Hienghène on the east coast, in which the Austronesian dental is preserved. This sub-group includes two languages and a third one which is divided into two dialects. Of these latter the hill dialect of Némi, as my observations show, has preserved a type of consonant which is rare enough and which had not, I think, been recorded previously: postnasalized voiceless consonants of the type $p^m$, $t^m$, $k^\theta$—each one a phoneme. I do not wish to overemphasize its importance.

(3) The remaining languages of the northern group show a palatal development of the old Austronesian dental. Such are, in the extreme north, the language of Arama and Balade, recorded by Cook and La Billardière; further south the Jave language; and on the west coast Pwapwa and Pwamei, the latter having two dialects. It is a characteristic of the group of languages we have been discussing that there is another phonological division, affecting the voicing of intervocalic consonants, which cuts across the boundaries of the three sub-groups mentioned. On the west coast in the neighbourhood of Voh there is a final group of seven distinct languages or dialects in which, instead of the intervocalic consonants becoming voiced spirants, initial *k and *p have developed into ‘ and ‘ respectively, while intervocalic k and p have remained voiceless. Thus we have two contrary developments.

The central group consists of two quite dissimilar languages, which may be said to have been comprehensively studied. To the north lies Camuki, described

1 'Les variations parallèles en mélanésien', BSL, 47, 1951, pp. 140 ff.
by the Catholic missionaries under the name of ‘language of Wagap’ or ‘Tokas’, which generally resembles the languages of Voh mentioned above, but is distinguished from them in that it appears to possess only one series of voiceless plosives. So far there were two series, aspirated and unaspirated; but from this point onwards only unaspirated ones are found. It has yet to be determined whether there are other relevant features, whether the aspirated/unaspirated distinction is replaced by one of tone, and this will be the object of my impending field tour.

The southern half of the central group is occupied by Patyi /paai/ct/, which is a tonal language, but which requires further investigation.

To the south of Patyi lies Houailou, the northernmost of the languages of the southern group, which was first described by Maurice Leenhardt,¹ and there are five or six related languages between there and the south of the island. It may be mentioned that in one of them, Tyiri, the distinction between unaspirated and aspirated plosives again occurs. I had an opportunity of hearing this language spoken by the descendants of the deportees of 1878 on the Île des Pins in the extreme south.

In conclusion I must recall the three languages of the Loyalty Islands, that of Mare, of Lifu, and the Melanesian language spoken in the central parts of Uvea, whereas the two ends of the island use a Polynesian dialect of Wallis Island origin. This completes the survey of the New Caledonia archipelago.

Comparison of the languages of an island group such as New Caledonia ought where possible to precede wider comparisons. Until we know whether all these languages go back to one source or whether several must be postulated, these reconstructions based on comparing one or two of them, which are supposed to be representative, with others similarly selected are apt to be misleading.

Classifications must be based on the whole system of a language and not on the distribution of a single feature, because of the possibility of independent parallel development in languages not in contact. This was the point of emphasis in my article, referred to above, ‘Variations parallèles en mélanésien.’ It is a commonplace of classical linguistics that the fact that, for example, Indo-European *s > h in both Welsh and Greek offers no grounds for asserting a special relationship between them.

The problem posed by the labiovelars which occur especially in various Melanesian languages is a case in point. Dempwolff notably failed to account for.

for this phenomenon, preferring to assume a Papuan 'substratum' where labiovelars were attested, although no substratum ever created a whole new series of phonemes. It is likely that labiovelars arose by parallel development in the context of close back vowels, and this should be reflected in our reconstructions; it is not necessary to assume that they are survivals of an ancient feature. In this connection we must repudiate Fox's contention that Melanesian is 'archaic' or 'primitive'; there is no such thing as an overall archaism, and to select certain features as special criteria, to call English 'archaic' because it alone among the Indo-European languages has preserved *w, is unacceptable. The complicated consonant systems of some of the languages of New Caledonia are innovations, even if of long standing.