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# The functional load of lenition in some Oceanic and Papuan languages of Island Melanesia

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## Research Question

- In some Oceanic and Papuan languages of Papua New Guinea **lenition** has come to express meanings related to **reduced transitivity**
- **Question**: Is this functional convergence due to contact, or can it be explained otherwise?

## Target languages: Six languages of the Bismarcks

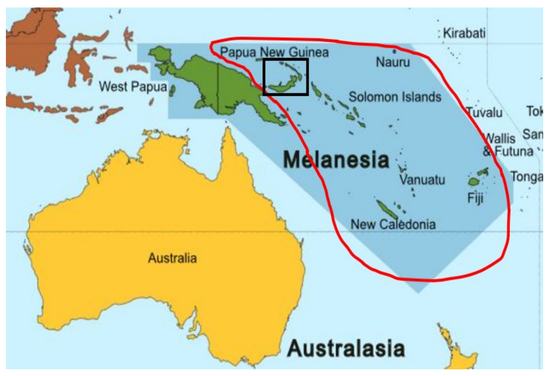


Fig 1. Island Melanesia (Source: Wikimedia)

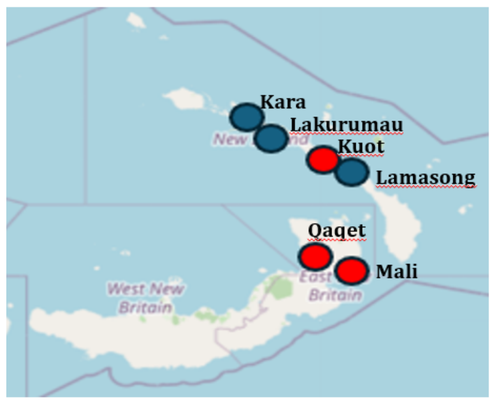


Fig 2. Target languages (Source: Google Maps)

- Austronesian > (Western) Oceanic > Meso-Melanesian
  - **Kara** (Schlie & Schlie 1983; my fieldwork)
  - **Lakurumau** (my fieldwork)
  - **Lamasong** (Ross 1994; my fieldwork)
- Papuan
  - **Kuot** (isolate) (Lindström 2002)
  - Baining
    - **Qaqet** (Hellwig 2019)
    - **Mali** (Stebbins 2011)

## Lenition in Oceanic and Papuan languages

- Although present in many Oceanic languages, **lenition is not reconstructed for Proto-Oceanic**, and is assumed to have developed independently in different daughter language groups (Ross 1988, 1994);
- It is a **common feature of the Papuan languages** of the Bismarck Archipelago (Stebbins 2009)
- In New Ireland, lenition is assumed to have spread into Oceanic languages because of **contact with the Papuan Kuot** (Ross 1994)

## Lenition types in the six languages under study

**Spirantization: Plosive > Fricative**
/p/ > /v/~/β/
/k/ > /ɣ/~ /x/

**Flapping: Plosive > Trill**
/t/ > /r/

**Voicing: Voiceless > Voiced fricative**
/s/ > /z/
/f/ > /v/~/β/

**(1) Lakurumau (Oceanic; own fieldwork)**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| (a) | *puraa* ['**p**ura] | *a=vuraa* [ə'**v**ura] |
| | 'chicken' | ART=chicken |
| (b) | *kon* [**k**ɔn] | *a=xon* [ə'**ɣ**ɔn] |
| | 'to spoil' | ART=paddle |
| (c) | *taatai* [**t**a'təi] | *a=raatai* [ə**r**a'təi] |
| | 'man' | ART=man |
| (d) | *sik* [**s**ik] | *zik* [**z**ik] |
| | 'take.INTR' | 'take.TR' |
| (e) | *faa* [**f**a] | *nu vaa?* [**v**a] |
| | 'where' | '2SG where' |

## Blocked lenition in predicates: Marking of reduced transitivity

| | Lenited stem | Non-lenited stem |
|---|---|---|
| Kara & Lakurumau: **Transitivity** | TRANSITIVE | INTRANSITIVE |
| Lamasong: **Aspect** | NON-CONTINUOUS | CONTINUOUS |
| Qaqet: **Aspect** | NON-CONTINUOUS | CONTINUOUS |
| Mali: **Tense** | NON-PRESENT (PAST/FUTURE) | PRESENT |
| Kuot: **No function** | | |

❖Lakurumau (Oceanic): **TRANSITIVITY** [own fieldwork]

(2a) *Nanga=**k**aabang* [nəŋə'**k**abəŋ]
1SG.S=help.INTR
'I help; I am a helpful person'

(2b) *Nanga=**x**abong naan* [nəŋə'**ɣ**abɔŋ nan]
1SG.S=help.TR 3SG
'I help him'

❖Lamasong (Oceanic): **ASPECT** [own fieldwork]

(3a) *È=**k**is* [ɛ'**k**is]
1SG.S=sit.CONT
'I am sitting; I sit'

(3b) *U=naa=**x**is!* [una'**ɣ**is]
2SG.S=IMM.FUT=sit.NCONT
'Sit down!'

❖Qaqet (Baining): **ASPECT** [Hellwig 2019: 307]

(4a) ***k**ut* [**k**ut]
'dig.CONT'

(4b) ***q**ut* [**ɣ**ut]
'dig.NCONT'

## Contact-induced convergence, or coincidence?

- In all languages **except Kuot**, the **blocking of lenition** in expected environments serves to the expression of some notion linked to **reduced transitivity** (Hopper & Thomson 1980): **intransivity** itself in Kara and Lakurumau; **continuous aspect** in Lamasong and Qaqet; **present** (**continuous**) **tense** in Mali

? What are the **causes** of the transitivity-related functions of lenition?

? Is the **functional overlap** between the Baining languages of New Britain and the Oceanic languages of Northern New Ireland due to **contact,** or is it a **coincidence**?

## Reduplication is the culprit!

- There is **no evidence of direct contact** between the Baining languages and the Oceanic languages of Northern New Ireland
- In all languages, the blocking of lenition may be explained by **a now-lost reduplicated syllable**, which fell but left as a trace the non-lenition of the stem consonant (Hellwig 2019: 398; Ross 1994)

(5) **Qaqet** *pes/ves* 'burn': **pes~pes* 'RED~burn' > *s-pes* 'burn.CONT (here, the final reduplicated consonant is preserved)

(6) **Lamasong** *kis/ xis* 'sit'*: *kis~kis* 'RED~sit' > **k~kis* > *kis* ' 'sit.CONT'

(7) **Lakurumau** *kaabang/xabong* 'help': **kaa~kaabang* 'RED~help' > **k~kaabang* > *kaabang* 'help.INTR'

## Does it make sense synchronically?

- **Yes. Reduplication is semantically linked to reduced transitivity**: reduplicated predicates in Lakurumau, Kara and Lamasong are typically **intransitive**; and the aspectual meanings expressed by reduplication are semantically **less transitive** than perfective ones
- Moreover, reduplicated stems also synchronically show a **non-lenition of the root consonant** (own fieldwork)

(8) **Lakurumau** *tun/run* 'cook'→ *tu~**t**un* 'RED~cook.INTR'
(9) **Lamasong** *pas/vas* 'walk' → *pa~**p**as* 'RED~walk.CONT'

## Evidence from other Oceanic languages

- A similar phenomenon in **Vanuatu languages** is also explained invoking a **now-lost reduplicated syllable** (Barbour 2012: 271)

(10) **Ahamb** (Vanuatu; Rangelov 2020): *kan/han* [kan/ɣan] 'eat.INTR/TR'
(11) **Neverver** (Vanuatu; Barbour 2012): *kkil/khil* [kil/ɣil] 'dig.INTR/TR'

## Conclusion: Not contact, but universal tendencies

- The emergence of lenition in the Oceanic languages of New Ireland is due to contact with the Papuan language Kuot (where lention has no grammatical function)
- The functional convergence between the Baining languages of New Britain and the Oceanic languages of New Ireland is probably **NOT due to contact** – no evidence of contact between them
- Instead, the cause is to be found in **reduplication** (kown to be cross-linguistically linked to reduced transitivity): this also explains why the same alternation (TR lenited – INTR unlenited stem) occus also in genetically distant Oceanic languages.

**REFERENCES:** Barbour J. 2012. *A grammar of Neverver*. De Gruyter Mouton; Hellwig, B. 2019. *A grammar of Qaqet.* De Gruyter Mouton; Lindström, E. 2002. *Topics in the grammar of Kuot*.Stockholm University PhD diss.; Rangelov T. 2020. *A grammar of Ahamb.* University of Waikato PhD diss.; Ross, M. 1998. *Proto Oceanic and the Austronesian Languages of Western Melanesia*. Pacific Linguistics; Ross, M. 1994. Areal phonological features in Northern Central New Ireland, in T. Dutton and D. Tyron (eds) *Language Contact and Change in the Austronesian World*. De Gruyter Mouton, 551-572. Stebbins, T. 2009. The Papuan languages of the Eastern Bismarcks: Migration, origins and connections. In B. Evans (ed) *Discovering history through language. Papers in honour of Malcolm Ross.* Pacific Linguistics.Stebbins, Tonya N. 2011. *Mali (Baining) grammar: A language of the East New Britain Province, Papua New Guinea*. Pacific Linguistics, 223-243.