

Robert A. Blust, *The Proto-Oceanic Palatals*. Wellington: The Polynesian Society, 1978. Pp. x, 183, tables, map, bibliography.

Proto-Oceanic (POC) is the reconstructed language ancestral to most of the languages of Oceania and is itself derivable from Proto-Austronesian (PAN), the ancestor of all the Austronesian languages that span the globe from Malagasy to Easter Island. The palatals are those consonants pronounced with the tongue against the hard palate, and Blust's monograph is concerned essentially with determining how many palatals were distinguished by speakers of Proto-Oceanic, and what their reflexes are in contemporary daughter languages. Combining published data with the results of his own survey of languages of the Admiralty Islands, Blust concludes that, contrary to what has generally been accepted, Proto-Oceanic did not merge PAN *n and *ñ, and *j with *s, *c, and *z/Z, but retained *ñ and *j as distinct segments. The claim is justified in minute detail, and its ramifications explored, all of which leads to some stimulating thoughts on the concept of linguistic drift.

The first section deals with the reconstruction of POC *ñ (palatal nasal). Dempwolff--the scholar whose works of fifty years ago laid the foundations for the historical reconstruction of Austronesian languages--cited the merger of PAN *ñ and *n as one of the innovations shared by all

Oceanic languages, and the claim subsequently gained general acceptance. More recently, however, doubts have been expressed by a number of scholars, who noted that Bugotu (Solomon Islands) appears to preserve the distinction between the two nasals. Now Blust presents data from his own survey of the languages of the Admiralty Islands and Wogeo (off the north coast of New Guinea), and refers to data from Epi (Vanuatu), all of which point to the *n/*ñ distinction having been retained in Proto-Oceanic. The argument is entirely convincing, and finds independent support from my own work on Fijian Languages, as *ñ remained distinct also in Western Fijian. Blust points out, incidentally, that Dempwolff was aware that the distinction was maintained in at least one Oceanic language, and takes Dempwolff to task for ignoring it. The criticism is justified, but perhaps a little harsh. In view of the general uneven quality of the data available at the time, Dempwolff would have been rash to base a distinction of a couple of lexical items from one or two poorly documented languages, when not one of the better known languages offered support. But, as Blust notes, a footnote at least would have been in order.

While it could be said that *ñ had been waiting in the wings before its entry on the Proto-Oceanic stage, the appearance of *j is rather unexpected, and is not likely to be accepted immediately by Oceanic linguists. Again, Dempwolff is shown to have been in possession of--and fully aware of the implications of--data which was incompatible with his claim that all the palatals merged in Proto-Oceanic, and attempted to tidy up the data by arbitrarily excluding the offending languages from the Oceanic subgroup. Blust's own survey of the Eastern Admiralty Islands shows that the *j in PAN *n ajan "name" and *(CtT)-Sua(n)ji "sibling of like sex" is reflected differently from the other PAN palatals (merging with the reflex of PAN *d). Dismissing alternative solutions with exemplary thoroughness, he concludes that Proto-Eastern Admiralties--and, by implication, Proto-Oceanic--retained *j distinct from the other palatals. His search for supporting evidence elsewhere in Oceania, however, met with little success, the only glimmer of hope emanating from linguistically intractable Nauru. But, as with *ñ, my own work in Fiji led me to suggest, independently of Blust, the possibility of *j being reflected distinctly in a language ancestral to the Fijian languages.

The more evidence, however, is accumulated in support of POC *ñ and *j, the more we are obliged to accept the notion of linguistic drift. If the Proto-Oceanic inventory included these two phonemes, then, under any current subgrouping hypothesis, they must have been lost independently in a large number of separate subgroups. Blust accepts the conclusion, but points out that drift, although hardly discussed in linguistic

literature, is found in many language families, and cites some Austronesian examples. All of this, Blust admits, serves to weaken the argument for an Oceanic subgroup, by reducing the number of shared innovations by two, and by opening up the possibility that other apparent shared innovations are the result of drift.

I would take issue with two minor points. First, contrary to Blust (p. 89), I believe that there is strong evidence for the reconstruction of another palatal, at least at Proto-Eastern Oceanic level (labelled *j in *The History of the Fijian Languages*, to appear as Oceanic Linguistics Special Publication, University Press of Hawaii), approximating to the *nj proposed by Milke. The fact that it has no obvious Austronesian antecedent should not deter us from reconstructing it on internal evidence, as indeed Blust did when he reconstructed its Proto-Central Pacific reflex *c in 1976 ("A Third Palatal Reflex in Polynesian Languages," *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 85: 339-58). Second, while it is useful to have a convention to distinguish between segments reconstructed entirely on internal evidence and those reconstructed with the help of external witnesses, "from the top down," the notation proposed by Blust--the preferred segment in parentheses--only shows that segment of an internally indeterminate pair which is indicated by external evidence; it does not show which other segment could be reconstructed on internal evidence alone. I would prefer giving both segments in parentheses and underlining the one supported by external evidence.

Nevertheless, Blust's "Palatals" is a major achievement, a rare instance of mastery of data combined with the ability to relate findings to wider issues. Obviously, it is not intended for casual reading: heavy on data, footnotes, and references, it is a work for specialists. But even specialists welcome aids to easy reading, and it is regrettable that only one type-face has been used throughout, and that there is scant marking of internal organization: each paragraph, be it introduction, summary, digression, or whatever, is simply numbered serially. Austronesianists, however, having been weaned on the likes of Dempwolff, Milke, and Dahl, will still find Blust's work considerably more "palatable."

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