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Bunak: Genealogy and Geography.

Bunak is an SOV language spoken in the central mountainous region of Timor, surrounded on all sides by Austronesian languages. Bunak has had a chequered history of classification: initially grouped among the Papuan languages by Capell (1943a; 1943b; 1944), the language was then described as of “mixed” Austronesian stock (Berthe, 1963), before being confirmed as non-Austronesian (NAN) and ascribed to the West Papuan Phylum (Cowan, 1963) and later to the Trans-New Guinea Phylum (Wurm, 1975-1977). This latter classification has stuck and Bunak has been placed in a TNG subgroup together with the other NAN languages of Timor as well as those of the islands of Alor and Pantar, north of Timor. More distant links for this subgroup have been claimed with the languages of the South Bird’s Head (Voorhoeve, 1975).

Comparison of lexical items has revealed no close relationship between Bunak and the other languages of the subgroup, an unsurprising result considering the discontinuous geography between languages and the high rate of lexical turnover typical of NAN languages. Recent comparison of pronominal paradigms by Ross (2005) has suggested a closer affiliation of Bunak with the languages of Alor and Pantar than with the other NAN languages of Timor. In this paper, I explore possible interpretations of this pronominal evidence in conjunction with evidence from place-names and oral history, challenging the traditional account of the settlement of Timor and questioning the current sub-grouping of Bunak.

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