



Standing Committee for the Humanities

## **OMLL: The Origin of Man, Language and Languages**

A EUROCORES (European Science Foundation Collaborative Research) programme

---

### ***Pioneers of Island Melanesia: a joint project between British, Dutch, German and Swedish teams (CRP 01-JA21)***

Project Website: <http://www.eastpapuan.ling.su.se/>

- Robert A. Foley, Department of Biological Anthropology, University of Cambridge, United Kingdom
- Stephen C. Levinson, Max-Planck-Institut für Psycholinguistik, Nijmegen, the Netherlands
- Eva Lindström, Department of Linguistics, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden
- Mark Stoneking, Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, Leipzig, Germany

#### Abstract:

In the islands of the Bismarck Archipelago (New Britain, New Ireland), Bougainville, and the Solomons chain (what we can call 'Island Melanesia'), there are currently a large number of languages spoken which belong to the Oceanic branch of the Austronesian family. Apart from these languages, there is a smaller set distributed through this area known as the East Papuan languages, which have no demonstrable relationship to the Austronesian languages, and which are difficult to relate even to each other. It is now widely accepted that the Oceanic languages spread with the Lapita culture-complex, which appears on the archaeological record between 4000 and 3500 before the present (BP). Radiocarbon dating has shown that Island Melanesia was inhabited by humans by at least 35000 BP, and it is widely thought that the East Papuan languages are descendants of languages spoken by at least some of these earlier, pre-Lapita, populations.

Our hypothesis is that these relic Papuan populations hold the key to understanding the pre-Austronesian past. There have been few waves of immigration moving through Island Melanesia; after the initial Sahul expansion there is no evidence for other influxes of people until the Lapita expansion. The special geographic situation of Island Melanesia, both its isolation and its position at the very end of a possible migration route, gives us an unusual opportunity to untangle prehistoric layers of settlement. This situation is in stark contrast to other areas of the world, such as Europe, where constant population movements have obscured this level of deep prehistory beyond hope of detailed reconstruction. An interdisciplinary approach to the area is

most likely to be revealing; we plan to combine linguistic, biological anthropological, archaeological and genetic sources of information in a methodologically well-informed manner.

The project will investigate the original settlers of Island Melanesia, and by combining evidence from different disciplines, it will build a composite picture of the settlement patterns, population structure and linguistic relationships between these pioneering peoples.

Investigation into the Papuan languages of the area can tell us much about early contact relationships between the languages and thus their speakers. In particular the project will investigate whether there is any linguistic evidence of smaller divisions or zones of intensive contact between the Papuan languages. An archaeological survey will begin to assemble a catalogue of pre-Austronesian technological features, as well as clarifying how widespread the early population of the outlier islands was. Collection of genetic and biological anthropological material from some of the outlier Papuan groups will enable us to assess levels of genetic relatedness between the populations. Through comparison of anthropological features we will situate our emerging picture of the populations in their ecological context. Methodological development in the modelling of linguistic, demographic and ecological change will place patterns found in Island Melanesia within a strong theoretical framework, which in turn will allow us to separate out layers of cultural influences.

It is envisaged that from this composite picture of deep prehistory it might ultimately be possible to show evidence of wider relationships between the East Papuan languages and peoples and the languages and peoples of mainland New Guinea, or Australia.