

Fieldwork in Southern New Guinea: a little-known hotspot of linguistic diversity

Nicholas Evans

(Australian National University / ILCAA Joint Researcher)

This talk will examine the linguistic situation in Southern New Guinea, an unexplored hotspot of linguistic diversity, and talk about what it is like to do fieldwork in this remote but fascinating region.

The distribution of diversity through space is highly informative, about history, social configurations, and ideologies of language use. New Guinea's is famous for being the most linguistically diverse region on the planet, but deep-time diversity is not evenly distributed across the island. The largest group - the Trans-New Guinea phylum -- centres on the Central Cordillera - and the most famous diversity zone is the Sepik.

Southern New Guinea has not yet figured prominently in assessments of where the most diversity lies, but I will argue that Southern New Guinea in fact represents much higher deep diversity than has hitherto been realised, with somewhere between five and eight unrelatable families taking in forty or so languages in an area about the size of the Netherlands. This diversity is even more astonishing given that the region did not even exist in its present form until recently and large parts of it were underwater following mid-Holocene sealevel rises until rebuilt by progradation from sediments brought down by the Fly and Digul rivers. I will summarise the main typological characteristics and diagnostic paradigmatic forms of languages from the various families, and sketch what sort of research program is needed to make sense of this puzzling region.