

Restocking the Shelves

Tracking the Reintroduction of Aspirated Plosives into Vamale (South Oceanic)

phonology, historical linguistics, language contact

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Northern New Caledonian languages have diverse and consonant phoneme inventories. Their development from Proto-Oceanic to today has been reconstructed (Ozanne-Rivierre, 1995), though allophony remains understudied and a lack of descriptions has prevented more fine-grained analyses. This contribution will explain the presence of aspirated plosives in Vamale, a Northern language from the Voh-Koné group, using unpublished data from the field.

We will show how Vamale replaced historically lost phonemes through contact with its neighbors, with a special focus on /k^h/. By comparing the Vamale inventory to that of other Voh-Koné languages, Nemi, and Proto-North New Caledonian, we track innovations and propose an order of sound changes and possible contact scenarios.

The re-stocking of the phoneme inventory followed a system of fortis and lenis consonants, where a regular lenization of consonants left gaps that needed refilling. General multilingualism and intensive contact between languages meant that Voh-Koné speakers were aware of the fortis-lenis contrast in other languages and readily borrowed words from them without adapting the new material to the established system.

While this explains voiceless sonorants and fricatives, aspirated plosives must be a later addition. Firstly, while Proto-Oceanic dental */t/ became /t^h/ in modern Vamale, no other plosive developed aspiration. We suggest that since the aspirate manner of articulation already existed in the system it was expanded to include other places. Secondly, almost all other aspirated plosives in Vamale precede nasal vowels. We argue that the former were initially treated as allophones of non-aspirated counterparts, and that the conditioning aspect of vowel nasality was later lost.

Nemi is almost the only language nowadays using associating fortis consonants with nasalization, in its post-nasalized plosives (Haudricourt & Ozanne-Rivierre, 1982). Former contact of Vamale and Nemi is thus a likely source of the Vamale plosives: Northern Vamale and southern Nemi were historically only 6km away from each other as the crow flies.

Tracking sound changes before a ecolinguistic background provides insight in a relative history of this highly diverse language area. As New Caledonian pre-colonial history largely remains a black box, complementary data such as this is all the more important.

References

- Ozanne-Rivierre, F. (1995). Structural Changes in the Languages of Northern New Caledonia. *Oceanic Linguistics*, 34(1), 45–72.
- Haudricourt, A.-G., & Ozanne-Rivierre, F. (1982). *Dictionnaire thématique des langues de la région de Hienghène (Nouvelle-Calédonie)—Pije—Fwâi—Nemi—Jawe*. Peeters Publishers.