

C.L. Voorhoeve *The Asmat languages of Irian Jaya*. *Pacific Linguistics*, B-64, 1980. Canberra: The Australian National University, x+177pp (incl 5 maps).

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The Asmat languages are members of the Asmat-Kamoro language family within the Central and South New Guinea Stock, located along the Arafura Sea on the south coast of Irian Jaya. The purpose of Voorhoeve's study is to "fill out and partly correct the picture of the linguistic situation as sketched by Drabbe". Drabbe, in a study published in 1963, distinguished five main dialects within a single Asmat language.

Voorhoeve clearly delineates the method he used. He drew samples from 44 separate points (as opposed to five for Drabbe); he covered the interior and upper As River areas in addition to the coastal areas (areas which were unexplored at the time Drabbe carried out his research); and he used mutual intelligibility and other formal criteria on which to base his classification, in addition to lexicostatistics (Drabbe's classification was largely impressionistic).

His results are: four separate languages, eight dialects and six subdialects, spoken by 40,000 people in 95 villages.

The report is divided into eight parts, with two appendices. In the introduction the author states his purpose, his method, and a summary of his conclusions: Part 2, Lexicostatistical Survey, relates how the many and varied lists were compared to give a suitable conclusion; Parts 3-6 discuss linguistic features of each of the four languages; Parts 7 and 8 give reconstructions of Proto-Asmat Phonology and Vocabulary, respectively. In the Appendices are an index of English glosses to the Asmat words listed in Part 8 and an index of all the words in Asmat and related languages.

The problem Voorhoeve faced in comparing his wordlists — a wide variety of lists, in terms of both length and composition — was solved by devising two lists. List 1 consisted of 204 items (141 from the Swadesh 295 list and 63 supplementary items), using the fullest lists

on hand. Since 31 of the items on List 1 were not included in any of the shorter wordlists, he devised a List 2 consisting of 193 items (173 of which it shared with List 1; 20 were new; 143 were from the Swadesh 215 list). His results, using these 2 lists, showed 4 closely related languages, sharing between 69-79% cognates. The study also revealed 4 dialects within the Central Asmat language sharing with each other 84-90% cognates.

In his description of the Central Asmat language, Voorhoeve provides information on syllable and word structure, the sound system (including stress and tone), and some features of grammar - mostly notes on verb morphology. Then each dialect is discussed in turn. Lexicostatistically, the North Asmat language seems to be a separate language closely related to the other 3 Asmat languages. In terms of intelligibility, however, North Asmat appears to be a dialect of Central Asmat. Phonologically, there seems to be no break between North Asmat and the Keenok dialect of Central Asmat. Lexically, it often shows more similarity to Sempan, another of the languages in the Asmat-Kamoro Family, than to any of the other Asmat languages. These observations point out the difficulty generally encountered on the New Guinea island in trying to make judgments on language/dialect boundaries. Different criteria are often in conflict. It is clear that Voorhoeve gives more weight to lexicostatistical evidence, as only lexicostatistics indicates North Asmat to be a language separate from Central Asmat.

Casuarina Coast Asmat shows an archaic character in its lexicon which may indicate that its speakers have lived in relative isolation from other Asmat people for a long time. In the section on Proto-Asmat phonology, a system of 11 consonants and 5 vowels is reconstructed. The reconstructed vocabulary includes 418 items.

Voorhoeve is the most qualified person to carry out such a study as this and comparativists will not be disappointed with what he has done. It is somewhat of a shame that he couldn't have used more reliable and/or firsthand information. But then, perhaps his most valuable contribution will turn out to be his explanation of the way he sorted out all the myriad lists, to come up with a reasonable means of making his lexical comparisons.