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Linguistics More Robust Than GeneticsJonathan Friedlaender, Keith Hunley, Michael Dunn, Angela Terrill, Eva Lindström, Ger Reesink, and Françoise Friedlaender
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Geography Is More Robust than Linguistics

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J. Friedlaender *et al.*, ("Linguistics more robust than genetics," *Letters*, 24 April 2009, p. 464) claim that "linguistics [is] more robust than genetics." It is not surprising that linguistic typological signals correlate with groupings based on linguistic origins better than do human genetic signals. Geography is the common factor shared by these two variables, with linguistic phylogenies dispersing across new territories the same way that typological features diffuse in space (1, 2, 5). Rather than linguistic typology being a mirror of cultural origins, it is largely a mirror of residency (3, 4), more than is true for human genetic signals (at least in Island Melanesia).

Linguistic origins are conventionally established through the comparative method, evaluating sound–meaning pairings for regular correspondences, such as the sense and sound that form the word "two" in different languages. Compare the first consonant in English two with Dutch twee, German zwei, Spanish dos and Greek dhuo, and the same t:t:z:d:dh matches in ten, tien, zehn, diez and dhekadha (5). Unlike correspondence sets, typological features and individual words are subject to horizontal transmission, over greater distances in the right social circumstances (6, 7). Geography corresponds better to a typological tree than does linguistic affiliation (for instance, 4, 5, 6), following from the fact that ethnic groups can switch linguistic affiliation and yet retain traces of their earlier language. This is true also of the Island Melanesia area that K. Hunley *et al.* report, where phylogenies based on typological features do not separate languages of different families (7, 8).

The existence of convergence areas is long-established, and phylogenies based on typological features model contact more than inheritance (1). This is relevant for history, but not for Darwinian–model evolution (9), given that horizontal transmission is rampant.

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