

Language and place in Komnzo

Christian Döhler

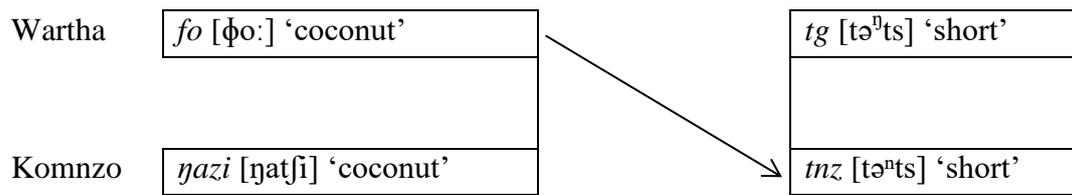
Australian National University, Canberra, Christian-Albrechts-Universität zu Kiel
christian.doehler@anu.edu.au

Komnzo is a language spoken in the Morehead District in Papua New Guinea by around 200 people. Until recently, the Southern New Guinea area has received very little scientific attention. This paper offers an ethnophysiological case study of Komnzo. I will describe and analyse the factors at work in the conceptualisation of landscape. These are geographical, socio-cultural and mythological. Below I give a short introduction to the deictic system, landscape terminology and double-language place names.

Komnzo has a four-way distinction in its deictic system: proximal, medial, distal and ignorative. While such systems are quite common cross-linguistically, for example in English (*here, there, yonder, where*) or Japanese (*kō, sō, ā, dō*), Komnzo seems to be special in the number of constructions sensitive to these categories. There are adverbial demonstratives (in neutral, allative and ablative case), demonstrative pronouns, demonstrative verbal proclitics and special demonstrative-copula-constructions. Additionally, there are directional verbal affixes. Thus, the amount of deictic reference in daily discourse is remarkably high.

Komnzo landscape terminology conceptualises small geographic details. These are of high practical importance during the annual cycle as large parts of the land are inundated by rising water during the wet season. The basic distinction is between *tōna* 'high ground' and *zra* 'swamp'. The former is that part of the land which is virtually never covered by water, whereas the latter refers to stagnant pools of water which dry up only during the height of the dry season. Beyond this two-fold distinction there is a host of specialised terms which encode vegetation type, elevation and human or animal interaction.

The cultural importance of locality in the Morehead district has been addressed by ethnographers in the past, for example by FE Williams (1936) and Mary Ayres (1983), who have described the system of sister-exchange between people of different places. This system results in quasi-linguistic exogamy fostering a high level of multilingualism. In my own fieldwork I found that this cultural feature has had an effect on place names. Many place names are composed of words from two languages. The basic principle of double-language names is shown below with the place name *foṭnz* 'short coconut', which can be parsed as one word from Wartha (*fo*) and one word from Komnzo (*tnz*).



Ayres, M. 1983. *This side, that side: locality and exogamous group definition in Morehead area, Southwestern Papua*. PhD thesis, University of Chicago.

Williams, F. E. 1936. *Papuans of the Trans-Fly*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.