

They whatevered the what's-that: Placeholders, recognitionals and light verbs in two languages of New Guinea

In Papua New Guinea, one often overhears phrases such as *what's that* in people's English or *wanem ia* in their Tok Pisin. These kinds of placeholders are often filled in after a short lapse, for example: *They returned to the what's that ... to the house*. However, in many instances there is no repair and these elements function like English *whatchamacallit* (or *what-d'you-call-it* or *you-know-what*) with no apparent hindrance of communication. I follow Enfield (2003) who analyses them in terms of "recognitional deixis", whereby the speaker assumes that her interlocutors will understand what she is referring to.

Vacuous expressions of this kind have been reported in languages across the island of New Guinea ranging from the Sepik region in the north – as in Manambu (Aikhenvald 2008) and Awiakay (Hoenigman 2015) – to the Trans-Fly region in the south – as in Komnzo (Döhler 2018). In the paper, I will present corpus data from two languages of Southern New Guinea, namely Bine (Eastern Trans-Fly) and Komnzo (Yam). I will discuss the syntactic status of the elements in question, their semantic/pragmatic function and their statistic distribution.

- Aikhenvald, A.Y. 2008. *The Manambu language, from East Sepik, Papua New Guinea*. Oxford: OUP.
- Döhler, C. 2018. *A grammar of Komnzo*. Berlin: Language Science Press.
- Enfield, N.J. 2003. The definition of what-d'you-call-it: semantics and pragmatics of recognitional deixis. *Journal of Pragmatics* 35. 101–117
- Hoenigman, D. 2015. *'The talk goes many ways' : registers of language and modes of performance in Kanjime'i, East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea*. Canberra: Australian National University PhD dissertation.