PART III

LINGUISTIC APPROACHES
The term ‘Oceania’, as used here, refers to the islands and seas of the southwest and central Pacific, specifically to the regions widely known as Melanesia, Polynesia and Micronesia. It includes New Guinea but not the island groups that lie close to Asia on the western and northern margins of the Pacific, such as the Indo-Malaysian archipelago, the Philippines, Taiwan, and the Japanese and Aleutian archipelagos, nor does it include the almost landless expanses of the eastern Pacific, beyond Easter Island. Oceania extends over 70 degrees of latitude and spans a third of the world’s circumference east-to-west.

When European voyagers began to explore the Pacific systematically in the 1760s and 1770s they were astonished to find that almost every habitable island and island group they visited was peopled, even those that lay a thousand kilometres or more from their nearest neighbour. The Pacific Islanders grew crops and kept animals but had neither metals nor writing. By the 1780s scholarly debate over their origins was well under way in Europe. Initially, it was language that provided the strongest clues. From the reports of James Cook and other explorers it was already known that the inhabitants of the islands in the vast area that we now call the Polynesian Triangle, whose apices are Hawaii, New Zealand and Easter Island, all spoke closely related languages. It had also been established that the Polynesian languages were related to Malay, Javanese and Tagalog, of Island Southeast Asia, and to Malagasy, of Madagascar, and theories to account for the wide distribution of this family of languages were being debated.

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