

Proto Oceanic Speakers' Categorization of Health and Disease

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This paper is an attempt to view the health and diseases of POC speakers as depicted in the lexical categories of the language. Although ethnographic descriptions indicate that these people considered sorcery to be the main cause of illness and death, I do not intend to deal here with this aspect, but rather with reconstructing the linguistic categories denoting the physical manifestations of disease and healing. For instance, many bodily disorders are simply labeled by behavioral verbs, terms for e.g. cough, shiver, vomit, scratch, or verbs describing states--be hot, cold, swollen, itchy, sore, giddy, have diarrhea. We have reconstructed a handful of words that refer to disorders that appear as visible conditions in themselves --terms for an ulcer or boil, for some of the manifestations of yaws, for various fungal skin diseases like ringworm and scabies, and for elephantiasis.

Although this suggests the range of diseases present in POC society, linguistics alone gives little idea of their impact (frequency, severity, spread). To answer questions concerning the possible incidence of malaria, tuberculosis and leprosy (to choose three of the oldest diseases known to humans) we must depend on research from other disciplines.