

Endangered languages listing: AMBAKICH [aew]

Number of speakers: 770; Total population of language area: 1,964 (2003).

Ambakich (also called Aion or Porapora) is a language spoken in the Angoram district of East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea. Ambakich is classified as one of the “Grass” languages (Laycock 1973); these languages are now regarded as members of the “Lower Sepik-Ramu” family (Foley 2005). Ambakich speakers mostly live in villages along the Porapora River, which flows northward into the Sepik River. One village (Yaut) is located on the Keram River, southwest of the other villages. Speakers call their language “Ambakich”, whereas “Aion” is the name of the ethnic group. The population in 2003 was probably greater than the 1,964 reported. The language has SOV structure.

An SIL survey in 2003 (Potter et al, forthcoming) found that Ambakich has very low vitality. While most adults were able to speak Ambakich, both children and youth spoke and understood Tok Pisin far better than Ambakich. Ambakich speakers report positive attitudes toward their language, stating they value it as an important part of their culture. However, parents use more Tok Pisin than Ambakich when speaking to their children. Communities verbally support the use of Ambakich in schools and teacher attitudes are positive; however teachers feel that the children are not learning the language because it is not being used in the home. Tok Pisin is used in all domains, including home, cultural, religious, social, legal, trade and other interactions with outsiders.

Ambakich speakers are close neighbours to the Taiap language studied by Kulick (1992). Cultural factors in the two groups are very similar, as is illustrated by the myth of the two brothers Arena and Andena told by both groups. Both groups share similar material factors, such as a subsistence economy based on processing sago, and similar remoteness from centres of commerce and education. It is therefore likely that language shift is being driven by similar sociocultural motivations to those documented by Kulick.

Language Resources:

Parallel word lists from five Ambakich-speaking villages (170 entries): appended to survey report (Potter et al, forthcoming).

References:

Ethnologue (15th edition). 2005. Ed. Raymond G. Gordon. Dallas: SIL International.

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Foley, William A. 2005. Linguistic prehistory in the Sepik – Ramu basin. In Andrew Pawley, Robert Attenborough, Jack Golson and Robin Hide, eds. *Papuan pasts: cultural, linguistic and biological histories of Papuan-speaking peoples* (Pacific Linguistics 572). 109-144. Canberra: Australian National University.

Kulick, Don. 1992. *Language shift and cultural reproduction: socialisation, self and syncretism in a Papua New Guinean village*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Laycock, Donald C. 1973. *Sepik languages – checklist and preliminary classification* (Pacific Linguistics B-25). Canberra: Australian National University.

Potter, Margaret, Philip Lambrecht, Laura Alemán, Correna Janzen, Vivian Ochoa and Elvira Corbolán. Forthcoming. The sociolinguistic situation of the Ambakich language. Ukarumpa: SIL.