

The Languages of the Village of Onei, Sandaun Province

Bobe (Nori/Nouri) and Pin (Womo [wmx])

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1. Introduction

Linguists have struggled with the linguistic situation in the village of Onei for decades. This paper describes some recent findings and previous research. Many questions nevertheless remain about the village and the languages spoken there, and a few areas that need further research have been identified.

2. The Village of Onei



Figure 1: The view of Onei about 100 meters from the ocean.

The village of Onei¹ is in a remote area of Sandaun (West Sepik) Province in Papua New Guinea. It is settled in an isolated area among the mountains, on a beach that extends well in from the ocean, about halfway between Aitape and Vanimo.

¹ The village of Onei is not to be confused with the One and Onnele languages in the same region.



Figure 2: The location of Onei is on the north coast of Papua New Guinea.

Travel to the village by road is restricted during and after heavy rains. Travel by dinghy is possible by landing the boat on the beach.



Figure 3: Pulling a dinghy onto the beach, away from the ocean tide.

According to 2000 Papua New Guinea census data, the village has a population of 190.

Unlike other villages to the east, Onei has a large number of houses with *kapa* (metal) roofs and siding.² A number of the buildings are also built on steel poles instead of wood. A generator powered a television and a DVD player during the night I was there.

Also unlike other villages in the area, Onei is inhabited by people from two other villages: Nouri (alternately spelled Nori) and Mori. The village of Nouri does not exist any longer; its people dispersed to Onei, Sumo, and Serra. The village of Mori remains to the south and a little east on the Piore River.

3. The Languages of Onei

The people from the village of Nouri settled on the east side of Onei, and the people from the village of Mori settled on the west side of the village. The two sides are divided by a narrow strip of land covered with trees. Each side speaks a language of their village, and the two languages are not mutually intelligible. People of all ages from both sides speak Tok Pisin. Therefore three languages are in use in the village: Bobe (spoken by Nouri), Pin (spoken by Mori), and Tok Pisin.

3.1. Bobe

The people from Nouri call their language Bobe. Sebby Nugia, an educated Bouni speaker, said his language is similar to Bobe; the two may well be dialects of each other. This suggests Bobe is a member of the Skou (or Sko) language family, and research by Donohue (2004, 2010) agrees with this.

The elders in the village speak Bobe among themselves, but the children speak only Tok Pisin. This likely puts the language in this village at EGIDS 7 (Shifting), trending towards EGIDS 8a (Moribund).³

3.2. Pin

The people from Mori call their language “Pin.” According to speakers in Onei, the difference between Pin and Sumararu, spoken by another village to the southwest, is “*bik nek*” (big voice) and “*liklik nek*” (small voice). One explanation of this description is the difference in tone between two dialects⁴. Further analysis is needed to determine similarities and differences. Neither Pin nor Sumararu appears in *Ethnologue*, but Donohue (2010) places Sumararu in the Sko language tree.

The elders in the village speak Pin among themselves, but the children speak only Tok Pisin. This likely puts the language in this village at EGIDS 7 (Shifting), trending towards EGIDS 8a (Moribund).⁵

3.3. Tok Pisin

As indicated above, children speak only Tok Pisin and do not know the other two languages. This is a matter of considerable concern for the elders. Members of the entire community, including the village elders, are able to converse fluently in Tok Pisin.

² One of these houses can be seen in Figure 1.

³ For more information on Bobe language vitality, see the Appendix.

⁴ But see under 5.2., More Research on Pin, for more information about differences between Womo (Pin) and Sumararu.

⁵ For more information on Pin language vitality, see the Appendix.

3.4. English

A number of Onei men were able to understand slow American English, and one had the courage to respond with a sentence in English. The men said a number of women also understand English. The language is most likely not used among themselves, but this ought to be verified.

4. Previous Research

Both Bobe and Pin have been identified above as being part of the Skou language family. The best sketch of the earliest academic work done on Skou languages can be found in Laycock (1975:849-851). A concise but thorough list of published work can be found in Donohue (2002:176). Donohue and Crowther (2005) offer empirical evidence for linguistic interaction and change in the region over time.

Laycock was the first to categorize the Skou (or Sko) language family. He recognized eight languages in 1973, and revised the list slightly two years later with a spelling change and population figures (Laycock 1975:851). He was the only one who came close to guessing at the findings presented here: “Perhaps the villagers are bilingual...” (1975:853)

4.1. Previous Research on Bobe

Bobe has been known in previous research only by the village name Nori or Nouri, where the language was originally spoken.

Laycock (1975:849-851) wrote that Ray listed Warapu/Varopu/Warupu, Nori (Bobe), and other languages together in a group in 1919. Ray in turn was working from Friederici’s work in 1912 and 1913.

Capell (1962:38) wrote that Nori (or Bobe) was a language used by a single village, with no apparent relation to the languages on the coast, such as Vanimö.

While Laycock noted Ray and Friederici’s work, he did not add Nori (Bobe) to his Skou language tree in 1975 (849-851). He did not state his reasoning for this, but his comments seem to imply that he thought the language was extinct. It is possible, then, that the village of Nouri ceased to exist between 1962 and 1975.

Baron (1985?:3) said the people of Nori joined Puindu, a village of Serra, but he and Steve Whitacre could find only three elderly speakers of Bobe there at that time. Bobe speakers are said to live in Serra now in 2016.

Donohue and San Roque (2004:6-7) wrote, “Nori [or Bobe] is a language originally the western-most member of the Piore River family, which under strong pressure from the adjacent Serra Hills languages has moved so far in their direction that it is now appropriate to refer to it as a mixed language.”

However, six years later, Donohue amended this, referring to the language as extinct: “Note that there is no clear subgrouping for Nouri, an extinct language of the south-eastern Serra Hills. The limited material available shows Nouri sharing some traits with the Serra Hills languages, and some with the Piore River languages.” (Donohue 2010:1). He further added, “Nouri appears from a phonological and morphological perspective to be liminal between these two categories [of Serra Hills and Piore River (=Warapu)], and may provide a link between these two major subgroups, though questions of its ‘best-fit’ affiliation in one or the other of these two groups remain uncertain” (Donohue 2010:6).

4.2. Previous Research on Pin

Pin speakers originally came from the village of Mori. Laycock (1973a:19) said the people of Mori speak Fas [fqs]. However, Donohue conducted language testing in Onei in 2000 and discovered that monolingual children do not understand Fas or the neighboring language Puare. Donohue's data was not published.

Based both on Donohue's work and correspondence with Donohue, Ian Tupper submitted a request to ISO for a new code for a previously unidentified language. ISO 639-3 subsequently adopted "Womo" for the language name, with a code [wmx] (ISO 639-3 Change Request 2008-032). *Ethnologue* now uses Womo as a result. Tupper cited Donohue (2002) and Donohue and San Roque (2004), both of which note only passing references to Womo.⁶

Sebby Nugia⁷ said that "womo" is the Pin word for "village," or Tok Pisin "ples." The children Donohue tested may well have been Pin speakers. This needs more research.

Hope (2015:4) reported that "In 2001, [Donohue] wrote a grammar sketch of Womo, which was never published, but is available in manuscript form at the Department of Linguistics, University of Sydney."

As noted previously, speakers of Pin indicate their language varies with Sumararu by "big neck" and little neck", which was interpreted to mean a difference in tone, but Donohue (2004:645-686) noted other differences. More research needs to be done to determine differences and similarities between the two languages.

Appendix: Initial Language Vitality Assessment

An instrument called the "Wheel of Vitality" was used to make an initial determination of language vitality for both Bobe and Pin. The Wheel of Vitality uses a participatory technique, allowing a group of people to provide input. Basically, a photo of a person, such as an elderly man, is put in the middle of other photos. Arrows point outwards from the central photo to the other photos. Markers such as stones or leaves indicate what language or languages the person speaks with other groups of people, such as with middle-aged women.

I used the Wheel of Vitality in Onei in January of 2016, with both Bobe and Pin speakers. While Bobe speakers live in Sera, Sumo, and Onei, the assessment was done only in the village of Onei. It was not done in the other two locations⁸.

After six iterations of the assessment, the group seemed to be growing bored. They were guessing outcomes even before I asked for them. Further iterations of the exercise were abandoned.

In general, the elderly of both languages speak their vernacular languages to each other. The middle-aged generation, including parents, speak a mix of the vernacular and Tok Pisin. The children know only Tok Pisin. The results are tabulated below.

⁶ Tupper (p.c.) was aware that only passing references were made to the language. He noted that the name of Womo was given per Donohue's recommendation.

⁷ Mr. Nugia is a Bouni speaker from the village of Sumo who is married to a Pin speaker from the village of Onei.

⁸ A middle-aged, male Bobe speaker was found in the village of Sumo, but he was unable to complete very much of the word list, possibly indicating that the language may already be at EGIDS 8a there.

Table 1: *Bobe and Tok Pisin use.*

	Elderly Men	Elderly Women	Middle-Aged Men	Middle-Aged Women	Fathers	Mothers	Children
Elderly Men		Bobe	<u>Tok Pisin</u>	mix	Bobe	<u>Tok Pisin</u>	<u>Tok Pisin</u>
Middle-Aged Men	Bobe	Bobe		mix	mix	mix	<u>Tok Pisin</u>
Middle-Aged Women	Bobe	Bobe	mix		mix	mix	<u>Tok Pisin</u>

Table 2: *Pin and Tok Pisin use.*

	Elderly Men	Elderly Women	Middle-Aged Men	Middle-Aged Women	Fathers	Mothers	Children
Elderly Men		Pin	mix	Pin	mix	mix	<u>Tok Pisin</u>
Middle-Aged Men	Pin	Pin		mix	mix	mix	<u>Tok Pisin</u>
Middle-Aged Women ⁹							

⁹ The exercise was run to determine who middle-aged women speak Pin to, but the photograph documenting results did not take, and that was not discovered until much later. However, the results were much the same as other results, as expected.

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