The Cases of Sos Kundi and Ambakich: Drawing Language Boundaries and Assigning Names

Dan Richardson
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Abstract

By focusing on an analysis of data collected during the surveys of the Sos Kundi (2007) and Ambakich (2003) languages, this report summarizes how the indigenous metalinguistic view is a key part of language surveys and other linguistic work in Papua New Guinea. We show how it is possible for linguistic research to intentionally focus on the view of language speakers, allowing their voices to shape the findings and conclusions.
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1. Introduction

1.1 Language names and boundaries

Language names and boundaries are a necessity: science requires them and our world cannot function very well without them. However, how should one attempt to define, label, and classify languages when faced with complex language situations such as those found in the East Sepik Province of Papua New Guinea (PNG)? See Figure 1 for the location of these language areas.

To further current interest in the indigenous metalinguistic view, we will demonstrate how language speakers' views can be investigated and given priority in language surveys and other research, in tandem with the collection and analysis of more traditional linguistic data. This will be done by presenting a case study of a 2007 language survey, a shorter account of a 2003 survey, and summaries of other research. The 2007 (Sos Kundi) case study will include more methodological detail, whereas the 2003 (Ambakich) case will summarise results.

Figure 1. Sos Kundi and Ambakich language areas in the East Sepik Province of Papua New Guinea.

2. The case of Sos Kundi

This study is based on a language survey in the Sepik Plains area, conducted in May 2007 (Richardson, et al. 2007). The area of the Sepik Plains, often called Sawos, has been poorly described in comparison to neighbouring language areas of the Ndu family. Laycock (1973:27) concedes “there may be at least two different languages subsumed under Sawos,” and Staalsen (1975) reports, “The Sawos region remains the last unknown pocket of the otherwise well-documented Ndu Language Family.”

We conclude that there is sufficient evidence to show that the putative language called Malinguat in the Ethnologue (Gordon 2005) should be treated as two distinct languages: Sos Kundi and Keak. This conclusion is based on speakers' perception of language boundaries, comparison of wordlists, consideration of language intelligibility, and an analysis of Sos Kundi speakers' ethnolinguistic identity.

It should be noted that, although speakers of Keak currently request their language be called by that name, discussions continue about which name they prefer. The Keak-speaking people report that keak is the word other people use when referring to them; however, because it means “no,”
they are continuing to discuss whether they wish that to be their language name (Litz Liew, personal communication).1

### 2.1 Location

The Sos Kundi language is located in East Sepik Province of Papua New Guinea and is spoken by approximately 3,300 people. Sos Kundi includes the villages of Makambu,2 Pangeimbit, Kamatogu, Weiman, Mangem, Sotange, Timbunangua, Simbangu,3 Chuinumbu, Kwaliangua, Kingaui, Simange, Nindikum, Mangijangut, Timboli, Chikinumbu, Marimbo, and Suimbo. Residents of Nangutimbit village are bilingual in Sos Kundi and Keak but identify more with the Keak language group (see Figures 2 and 3).

Border villages of the Keak language area include: Nangutimbit and Kwimba in the north, Nangusap in the southeast, and Torembi in the west. These are the boundaries given by representatives of the Keak speakers on occasions such as an Alphabet Design Workshop in 2005 (Liew, personal communication).

![Figure 2. Sos Kundi in relation to other languages in the Sawos region.](image)

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1 Liew is a SIL linguist working with the Keak language group.
2 We have followed the spelling for villages given in the Papua New Guinea 2000 National Census (National Statistical Office 2000).
3 Simbangu is part of an area called Chuinumbu, although there are two villages, one named Simbangu and one named Chuinumbu. Residents of both villages participated in interviews, which took place in Simbangu village.
4 The location of the watercourse features is approximate; “Malinguat” as defined by the Ethnologue (2005).
2.2 Previous research

The languages in the Sepik Plains have a history of different names. Glasgow and Loving (1964) subsumed them all under the name Sepik Plains language, with East, Central and West dialects. However, as Staalsen (1975) points out, their survey did not take in the eastern portion of the Sawos region, which is the area under question here.

Laycock (1965:144) used the name Sawos to refer to the languages spoken in the Sepik Plains area. At that time, he had elicited no material in the language; however, later, Laycock (1973:27) had access to more data which confirmed the existence of Sawos as distinct from surrounding Ndu languages and suggested the existence of “at least two different languages” subsumed under it. Although no real dialect surveys had been undertaken at this point, Laycock also suggested six dialects, of which the East dialect would correspond to Sos Kundi and the Central dialect may correspond to Keak.

Schanely (1965) separated off part of the so-called Sawos area and called it Gaikunti, citing evidence, including the people’s sociocultural identity. According to Schanely, the Gaikunti area extends “from five miles east of Pagwi to ten miles east of Pagwi” and is listed in the *Ethnologue* as an alternative name of Gaikundi (see Figure 2). A dictionary of Gaikundi was published by Ambuwat and Nate in 1976, two speakers of the language. The residue of the Sawos region continued to be known as Sawos, although the 14th edition of the *Ethnologue* (Grimes 2000) began using the name Malinguat, which was taken to be the name that the speakers use for their language. However, it is now known that Keak speakers agree that Malinguat refers to an area rather than a language. This area extends beyond the Sos Kundi and Gaikundi language boundaries (Liew, personal communication).

Staalsen (1975) concluded that Glasgow and Loving’s East Sepik Plains dialect (a section of the residue corresponding to Laycock’s East Sawos dialect) should be treated as a distinct language, which he called Kwaruwi Kwundi. His work was based on comparison of “lexical items,

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5 The villages are positioned according to GPS points collected during the 2007 survey. The trails are ones that the team personally used; many more exist.
6 “Sawos” is a (possibly derogatory) Iatmul word used to refer to their trade partners north of the Sepik river. Refer to Laycock (1965:144), Schanely (1967:2), Staalsen (1975:6), and Aikhenvald (2008). According to Schanely and Staalsen, the name refers to many languages, including some outside of the Ndu family.
7 Laycock left some villages unassigned to dialects, a number of which are in the Keak area.
grammatical paradigms, and subjective reactions to linguistic similarities between villages, mutual intelligibility, and multi-lingualism.” Staalsen’s conclusion is supported by our recent research. The language he calls Kwaruwi Kwundi will be described in the remainder of this report as Sos Kundi.

2.3 Language

Defining “language” and “dialect” is notoriously difficult. Haugen (1966:923) described it well when he said the terms “represent a simple dichotomy in a situation that is almost infinitely complex.” Language boundaries will always be somewhat arbitrary as languages are not inherently discrete, isolatable units. However, the concept of language and the practice of listing and counting them cannot be abandoned, especially when one is interested in language description and documentation; “It is just too useful a concept to be easily cast aside” (Wardhaugh 1986:23).

If ambiguous terms such as “language” are to be used, a definition is needed. For the purpose of this report we have used the definition given by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), the 639-3 Standard for Language Codes, which seeks to define language on the basis of both linguistic and sociological factors. This standard has also been the basis of Ethnologue definitions of language identity since the 15th edition. The standard states the following:

- Two related varieties are normally considered varieties of the same language if speakers of each variety have inherent understanding of the other variety (that is, can understand based on knowledge of their own variety without needing to learn the other variety) at a functional level.
- Where spoken intelligibility between varieties is marginal, the existence of a common literature or of a common ethnolinguistic identity with a central variety that both understand can be strong indicators that they should nevertheless be considered varieties of the same language.
- Where there is enough intelligibility between varieties to enable communication, the existence of well-established, distinct ethnolinguistic identities can be a strong indicator that they should nevertheless be considered to be different languages.

Therefore, for our purpose, the most important factors are inherent intelligibility and the local population’s ethnolinguistic identity.

2.4 Method

We visited 18 of the 19 Sos Kundi villages; at least one night was spent in 16. A reduced interview schedule was used in Sotange, Mangijangut, and Marimbo villages because of time constraints. The data collected in these villages is not included here, because topics were not covered as thoroughly as they were in the other villages; however, it should be noted that responses given followed the trends of those in the other villages.

The team employed various data-collecting techniques, including direct methods, such as wordlist collection and more indirect methods, such as questions aimed at ascertaining language attitudes. Most of the data was collected through group interviews; these are preferable to individual interviewees in the PNG context.

In order to get as close as we could to a representative sample for the group interviews, the team always tried to ensure that both men and women in each of the following (admittedly vague) categories were present: young, middle-aged, and old. “Young” was defined as older than approximately 15 years but unmarried and living at home, “middle-aged” as married with

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8 At the time of publication, the 639-3 standard had only achieved “draft” status.
9 Codes for the representation of names of languages; part 3: Alpha-3 code for comprehensive coverage of languages. 2007. Available at http://www.iso.org/iso/catalogue_detail?csnumber=39534.
10 Simange village was not visited.
11 In the PNG village setting, people are often more comfortable talking in groups, rather than alone; also, when an interviewer attempts to isolate one person, others often come to sit, listen, and contribute to the discussion anyway.
children still at home, and “old” as with married children. A “child” was defined as someone under the age of approximately 15 years.

When “interviewees” are cited, the author is referring to people spoken to during the 2007 survey. All interviews were conducted in Tok Pisin, the language of wider communication (LWC).

2.4.1 Weaknesses

There seem to be two main weaknesses to the methodology: first, this is a relatively brief, preliminary appraisal of the language situation, so the data is not as comprehensive as it could be. Second, and more importantly, although we always tried to ensure that a good sample of people were present for every group interview, the amount of group discussion, before a spokesperson responded, varied. The spokesperson would often listen well to the opinions of the group before he answered. Sometimes the views of the women were not explicitly made known. Whenever possible, a female team member would sit near the women to observe whether it looked like they agreed with responses given. If it was obvious that they were unhappy, their responses were recorded.

2.5 Ethnolinguistic identity and language name

As previously stated, language speakers’ ethnolinguistic identity and their views on language names and boundaries are vital ingredients of a good survey, alongside the more traditional linguistic data. Therefore, it is important to investigate the people’s group identity as villages, clans, and language groups. We seek to understand how much value language speakers place on their indigenous language, how their group identity is defined, and how their group and linguistic identity are related.

During group interviews, speakers’ perceptions of linguistic boundaries were ascertained by asking the following questions:

- What villages speak exactly the way you speak?
- What villages speak your language, but a little different from the way you speak it?
  Informants were asked to put these villages into groups, based on which ones speak exactly the same as each other. We will call these groups perceived “dialects.”
- Clarify the status of villages that were not mentioned in the discussion of the previous two questions: What do they speak in village X?

2.5.1 Language name and boundaries

Sos Kundi speakers interviewed were unanimous in their opinion that people in the Keak language area speak a different language. When asked about the Keak language, the most common response was, *Em i narapela tokples olgeta* (‘It’s a totally different language.’). This contrasts with responses given when asked about varieties inside the Sos Kundi area, which typically varied between: *Ol i tanim liklik, senis em i liklik, ol i save toktok kranki liklik, and em i narapela nek* (‘They change [the language] a little, there’s a small change, they talk a little strangely,’ and ‘it’s a different accent/they sound slightly different.’). Similarly, during the Keak survey (MacKenzie et al. ms), conducted in 2005, Sos Kundi villages were never mentioned when interviewees listed villages in their language area.

It was the consensus, in all of the villages visited, that Sos Kundi is either the name or one name of their language. Sos Kundi was given as the first choice language name in most of the villages, while the rest accepted it as an alternate name. While some spell it as one word, “Soskundi,” many speakers spell it as two words, including the team nominated by their fellow Sos Kundi speakers to work on developing vernacular literature.

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12 In Tok Pisin: 1. *Wanem ol ples i stap insait long tokples bilong yupela na ol i spikim tokples wankain streit olsem yupela? Ol i no save senisim tokples; ol i spikim wankain tasol.* 2. *I gat sampela ples we ol i spikim tokples bilong yupela, tasol ol i senisim liklik / ol i tanim? Yupela kolim nem bilong ol, na bai mi raitim.* 3. *Ol i gat wanem tokples long ______?*
Interviewees in three villages also stated that Sos Kundi is the name that others use to refer to them. One of these villages identified the “others” as Iatmul speakers. It is possible that Iatmul speakers use the name Sos Kundi with derogatory connotations. Some Sos Kundi speakers interviewed by Correna Janzen\textsuperscript{13} dislike the name for this reason; however, the vast majority seem to be satisfied with it. Kundi means ‘language’ or ‘talk’. The meaning of Sos is less clear; it may mean ‘bush’ in the Iatmul language (Janzen personal communication, 2008). Other names proposed were Gai Kundi, Nana Gai Kundi, Agbane (or Agbane Kundi), and Akbana.

However, only one or two villages accepted each of these names; they were explicitly rejected in other villages.

Although there was widespread agreement on the Sos Kundi language boundary, varieties within the Sos Kundi area were defined differently in most villages. Likewise, there was no consensus on the names of these dialects. The names and boundaries shown on Figure 4 were the ones most often given.

Dialects of Sos Kundi most often identified were: Sota Kundi (or Sota), Kwaroi Kundi (sometimes pronounced Kwaroi Kwundi or Kori Kundi), and Nyanda Kundi; see Figure 4. Other dialects identified include: Wayu-Banga, which includes Sotange, Mangen, Weriman, and Belmo villages and Baltu-Kamatogu Kundi (or Kamatogu Kundi), which includes Kamatogu and Timbunangua villages. Additionally, a number of interviewed groups reported that both Pangeimbit and Kamatogu residents speak varieties unique to their respective villages.

\textbf{Figure 4. Some perceived boundaries of Sos Kundi dialects.}

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure4.png}
\caption{Some perceived boundaries of Sos Kundi dialects.}
\end{figure}

\textbf{2.5.3 Language attitudes}

Interviewees were asked a series of questions in an attempt to gain insight into the Sos Kundi speakers’ attitude towards their language, its varieties, and other languages.

The language of stories can give good insight into language attitude. One of the questions was “What language do you like to hear stories in?” Responses were interpreted as positive, negative, or neutral. When asked whether they like to hear stories in neighbouring languages, 57 out of 68 responses were negative. This contrasts with attitudes towards perceived Sos Kundi dialects, where over two thirds of the responses were positive (not including responses to interviewees’ own variety, which were always positive).

\textsuperscript{13} A linguist now working with the Sos Kundi speakers for SIL.
As we were interested in language choice and attitudes in the religious domain, and the vast majority of Sos Kundi people reported to be Christians, we asked “If there were a Bible in __ [X language], would you use it?” Although responses to this question are only an indication of potential language choice, they do convey something about the interviewees’ language attitudes. Sos Kundi speakers consistently reported that they would not use the Bible if it were produced in neighbouring language varieties: out of 74 responses, only one was positive. Interviewees in all villages reported they would favour their own village’s dialect and most (43 responses out of 50) reported that they would be happy with other Sos Kundi dialects. English and Tok Pisin were also very popular.

The language(s) parents encourage their children to learn is important both for language vitality issues and in investigations of language attitude; therefore, another question was, “How would you feel if your children forgot your language and only spoke __?” Generally, there were very negative reactions to shifting, especially to varieties outside of Sos Kundi: 100 out of 102 responses were negative regarding shifting to another language; 30 out of 38 (79 percent) responses were negative regarding shifting to a different Sos Kundi dialect.

This data (presented in section 2.5) indicates that Sos Kundi speakers have a clear concept of which speech varieties are part of their language and which are separate languages. This is evidenced by how they easily labelled varieties as “totally different” or “part of our language.” Their view of Sos Kundi as a language in its own right is reinforced (and possibly defined) by their sense of group identity as distinct from neighbouring languages. One manifestation of this is their negative attitude toward hearing and using neighbouring languages.

### 2.6 Intelligibility

Intelligibility of neighbouring languages was assessed primarily by collecting reported data from interviewees, but also by considering Janzen’s observations of the interactions between Sos Kundi and Keak people. Intelligibility testing between Sos Kundi and the neighbouring Keak, Boikin, and Iatmul languages was deemed not necessary because Sos Kundi speakers almost unanimously agreed that they can understand “nothing” to only “a little” of these languages.14

#### 2.6.1 Reported intelligibility

After interviewees had isolated the language varieties that constitute Sos Kundi and those surrounding it, they were asked to explain how well they understand them. They were asked how well they themselves understand them, and how well children in their village understand them. Responses were interpreted on a scale of 1 to 4: 1= understand everything they hear, 2= understand most of what they hear, 3 =understand a little of what they hear, and 4= understand nothing of what they hear.

Interviewees in all 14 villages reported that adults, at most, understand only a little Keak and children do not understand it at all. Regarding adult comprehension of Keak, a typical response was Wan-wan samting olesem “kokonas” o “saksak.” (“[We understand] the occasional word such as “coconut” or “sago”.”) This contrasts starkly with their understanding of the Sos Kundi dialects. The vast majority reported that both adults and children fully understand all Sos Kundi dialects. Typically, the response was Olgeta (“Everything”); and, when prompted, Tokhait tu (“Even when they try to hide things from us’ or ‘Even secret/hidden speech too.’”).

Based on the difference of comprehension between children and adults, it is likely that Sos Kundi speakers’ comprehension of Keak is acquired through contact, rather than inherent intelligibility. As interviewees in Belmo village reported when asked how well children understand Keak, Nogat. Ol i no save raun long ples bilong ol (“No [they do not understand it]. They do not go to their [the Keak speakers’] villages.”). Similarly, in a number of villages, adults reported that, only if they learn Keak, for example, by marrying into a Keak family, are they able to understand it; these factors suggest that the two are separate languages.

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14 The only exceptions were middle-aged and older residents of the border villages of Suimbo, Makambu, and Chikinumbu, who reported being able to understand the closest neighbouring language.
2.6.2 Observed intelligibility

Unfortunately, the survey team was unable to directly observe any interaction between Sos Kundi speakers and residents of other language groups. However, Janzen (personal communication, 2007) reported Sos Kundi and Keak speakers always switched to Tok Pisin when addressing each other during language-development workshops held in 2004 and 2005; on the other hand, Keak and Palimbei speakers sometimes conversed with each other in their own languages. Also, initial research (Janzen, personal communication, 2007) suggests Sos Kundi word order is significantly different to that of Keak and Palimbei. This observed behaviour and Janzen’s tentative word-order data are additional indicators supporting the conclusion that Sos Kundi and Keak are not mutually intelligible.

2.7 Lexical similarity

Wordlists were elicited in 14 of the Sos Kundi villages and also in Namuk, a Iatmul village. Lexical similarity between Sos Kundi, Keak, and Iatmul was determined using the WORDSURV program (Wimbish 1989). Where it could be identified, only the root word was compared. Words were considered to be lexically similar, according to the 50-percent criteria described in Blair (1990:31–33).

Between 140 and 150 words were used for comparison in Sos Kundi and 133 to 150 items between all wordlists, from 170 possibilities. Exclusions were made mainly because the same form was given for other items on the list. Twenty phrases were also collected.

2.7.1 Lexical similarity between Sos Kundi and neighbouring languages

The average percentage of lexically-similar items between the languages is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Average lexical similarity percentage between languages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Sos Kundi</th>
<th>Keak</th>
<th>Iatmul (Namuk village)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>68</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to the International Language Assessment Conference (ILAC) conference recommendations (1991:28), when lexical similarity is less than about 70 percent, the two speech forms should generally be considered separate languages. Sos Kundi is less than 70 percent lexically similar to both Keak and Iatmul; however, since these figures are close to the threshold, factors such as intelligibility and ethnolinguistic identity should also determine whether they are classed as distinct languages. As the previous discussion has shown, these factors also point to Sos Kundi being a separate language.

2.7.2 Lexical similarity between Sos Kundi villages

Lexical similarity between Sos Kundi villages ranges from 88–98 percent, with most being above 95 percent. Table 2 shows similarity data between dialects, as perceived by the speakers. The figure in parenthesis is the variation within the ‘dialect’ group named above it.

15 A dialect of Iatmul (Ethnologue 2005).
16 Eleven wordlists were elicited in the Keak language during a language survey in October 2005 (MacKenzie et al. in progress). Wordlists were elicited in the following villages: Nangusap, Sarum, Yamuk, Marap, Miambe, Yagiap, Torembi, Slai, Nimangwa, Aurimbita, and Nangutimbit; this constitutes the Keak data. The Iatmul wordlist was collected during the Sos Kundi survey, when the team visited Namuk village.
17 Namely, half of the phones of a word must be identical, or very similar, and half of the remaining phones must be similar.
Table 2. Average lexical similarity percentage between perceived dialects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sota Kundi</td>
<td>(96%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kwaroi Kundi</td>
<td>(96%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nyanda Kundi</td>
<td>(96%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Judged only on lexical similarity, the two most distinct varieties are Nyanda Kundi and Sota Kundi; they are 91 percent lexically similar. Sota Kundi and Kwaroi Kundi are lexically very similar. From the data we have, it is not clear on what basis the Sos Kundi speakers make the distinction between these seemingly very similar varieties.

2.8 Conclusion

If ISO’s definition of language is used, Sos Kundi should be treated as a distinct language to Keak. This is because speakers themselves consistently labelled them as two distinct languages; both reported and observed data also indicate that the two languages are mutually inherently unintelligible.

From the group interviews conducted in each village, there is no overall consensus regarding perception of Sos Kundi dialects. A number of varieties were identified, but names and boundaries often differed. From the data collected on this survey, we are unable to say on what basis they are being distinguished. Further research is necessary to clarify this point.

The data presented here is not exhaustive; relatively short wordlists were collected and no in-depth grammatical comparison, intelligibility testing, or historical-comparative comparisons were done to complement the conclusions presented here. Only long-term contact with both the Sos Kundi and Keak communities will underpin these findings. However, the data collected reflects definite ethnolinguistic differences between the Sos Kundi and Keak speech varieties, differences which are large enough to warrant the recognition of a language boundary between them.

3. The case of Ambakich

The second case study presented here is of the Ambakich language, also located in East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea. The aims of the Ambakich survey (Potter et al. 2003) included identifying dialect boundaries and investigating intelligibility between dialects. The survey team also investigated what, if any, name speakers use for their language. Most of the team members were not involved in the Sos Kundi survey, however methods were similar. The intent of this short summary of the Ambakich survey is to give an overview of how dialect boundaries were investigated and to briefly outline the results. The full report is available through the SIL website (see the References section).

Ambakich speakers live in the Angoram District, primarily along the Porapora (Bien) River, a tributary of the Sepik River, southeast of Marienberg. There are seven Ambakich villages (Pangin, Arango, Akaian, Ombos, Oremai, Aguran, and Yaut), with a total population of approximately 1,686 (Census 2000). Six of the seven villages were visited. The team spent four nights in Pangin and Yaut, two in Ombos and Oremai, and one in Arango and Aguran. Wordlists were taken in five villages. Intelligibility testing was done between the Yaut and Pangin varieties.

3.1 Previous research

Until this survey, the Ambakich language was primarily known as Aion. The government of PNG also refers to the language as Porapora, presumably after the river. Capell (1962) mentioned Aion, and later Z’graggen (1971:88) tentatively included it in the Ramu Phylum; however, the only material collected up until this point was “a very short wordlist.” Laycock (1973:39)
classified Aion as part of the “Grass Family,” along with the Kambot, Adjora, and Gorovu languages.

The 2003 survey ascertained that Ambakich speakers call their language Ambakich (‘no’), but their land and ethnic group Aion (‘good’). Following the preference of the native speakers, we will refer to the language as Ambakich.

3.2 Reported dialect groups

In all villages visited, except for Pangin, the Ambakich speakers divided themselves into two dialect groups: the two northern villages of Pangin and Arango and the five southern villages of Akaian, Agurant, Oremai, Ombos, and Yaut. Pangin residents differed in their grouping by saying that the variety spoken in Yaut sens gen long ol fopela komuniti antap... Yaut bihainim ol Keram (‘changes again from the four upriver communities... Yaut follows the Keram’18 [varieties]’.

No dialect names were found that were recognised and accepted throughout the Ambakich-speaking area. Although some people in Pangin and Agurant call the northern variety “Antanau,” everyone else referred to the varieties by the names of the villages in which they are spoken.

3.3 Reported intelligibility

Almost all interviewees reported to be able to easily understand the varieties spoken in all other Ambakich villages. The only exceptions were the adults in Oremai, who reported that it is hard for the young people to understand the northern dialect.

3.4 Lexical similarity

The average percentage of lexically similar items between the varieties is shown in Table 3. As with the Sos Kundi figures, no claim about cognicity is made as the historical-comparative method was not employed; also, the northern and southern dialect groupings are based on speaker perceptions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Southern dialect</th>
<th>Yaut</th>
<th>Agurant</th>
<th>Ombos</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>94</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>90</td>
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<td></td>
<td>87</td>
<td>87</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>86</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern dialect</td>
<td>Pangin</td>
<td>Arango</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>96</td>
<td>90</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is evident that the percentages of lexical similarity, as assessed by researchers, support the speakers’ perceptions of the existence and boundaries of the northern and southern dialects. Whereas the average percentage of lexically-similar items for all Ambakich varieties is 90.3 percent, that between Pangin and Arango, the northern varieties, is 96 percent and the average figure between the southern varieties is 93.3 percent.

Additionally, the reasonably high level of similarity between all varieties tested suggests that, linguistically speaking, they are all part of the same language, in line with speaker perception. With lexical similarity so high, one would expect intelligibility to be reasonably high as well, as reported by Ambakich speakers.

3.5 Intelligibility testing

Intelligibility between the northern and southern dialects was examined by recording a personal story in both Yaut and Pangin village and testing how well those in the other village understood.

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18 Yaut village is located on the Keram River, southwest of the other villages.
If participants have had no contact with the dialect being tested, inherent, rather than acquired, intelligibility is being tested. However, because of the high levels of contact between Ambakich-speaking villages, all potential participants had been exposed to at least some of the dialect being tested. This means that the figures reported in Table 4 cannot be taken as an indicator of inherent intelligibility, but should be understood as a reflection of how well Pangin residents understand Yaut residents, and vice-versa, whether as a result of inherent or acquired intelligibility.

Inherent intelligibility is a feature inherent to the language itself, irrespective of the individual speaker. A high standard deviation (higher than 12–15 percent)\(^{19}\) generally indicates that what is being measured is, at least in part, acquired comprehension, not inherent intelligibility.

The Pangin text of the southern dialect was tested in the northern Yaut village, and the Yaut text was tested in Pangin. Seven men and three women were tested in Pangin. Eight men and two women were tested in Yaut.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean score (%)</th>
<th>Standard deviation (%)</th>
<th>Sample size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>For the southern dialect RTT, as tested in Pangin</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For the northern dialect RTT, as tested in Yaut</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Given mean scores of 95 and 92 percent, it appears that intelligibility is at a level where speakers of both dialects can understand each other. Grimes (1995:22) states that, at 85 percent or above, “it is reasonable to speak of the dialect cluster as a single language from the linguistic point of view…. In between, 70 to 85 percent is an area of marginal intelligibility where some communication is satisfactory and some is not.”

3.6 Post-RTT discussion

After the test was completed, the interviewer asked follow-up questions to gauge the attitude of the test taker to the reference variety. Three of the questions were as follows:

- Does the storyteller speak your language well or not?
- Was the whole story clear to you or was some unclear?
- Is the speech in the story the same as the way you speak or is it different?

Responses to these questions indicate the perception of what we will call a dialect boundary between the two varieties. Only six of the 20 interviewees said the speaker of the other variety speaks “the same” as they speak, however, 16 perceived the speaker as someone who speaks their language well. Although 14 of the interviewees viewed the two varieties as clearly different, they mostly described the difference as small, often saying Ol i pulim (‘They pull it [the language]’).

It is possible that the southern dialect is more prestigious. No northern interviewee said that the southern storyteller speaks their language poorly; only one said that he was hard to understand. On the other hand, four southern test takers disapproved of the form of speech used by the northern storyteller; six said that his story was unclear. However, although this could indicate prestige, the northern speaker may have just been a poor storyteller.

\(^{19}\) Defined by Blair (1990).
3.7 Conclusion

The Ambakich-speaking people divide themselves into two dialects: 1) northern, consisting of Pangin and Arango; 2) southern, consisting of Yaut, Ombos, Akaian, Oremai, and Agurant. The lexical similarity percentages support the speakers’ perceived dialect groupings, although the two dialects are very similar. Based on the intelligibility test score, lexical similarity and stated opinions of speakers, it is reasonable to speak of the northern and southern varieties as dialects of the same language.

4. Language names

How have other linguists tried to incorporate language speakers’ views? It was not unusual for early linguists and other outsiders to assign language names with little research into who used the name, what it meant, and if it was widely used. Sometimes names were given to languages with no input at all from the speakers. Often this was because data was collected on many languages in a relatively short space of time. This method resulted in good overviews of large areas (such as Z’graggen’s surveys of Madang Province), but did not allow for investigation into speaker opinions.

Identifying one name for a language is rarely easy, and is sometimes impossible. This is certainly the case in PNG where the only “name” speakers of some languages all agree on is a phrase meaning “our language” (see the Siar language in a following paragraph). In the various attempts to identify language names in cooperation with, or at least consultation with language speakers, the results have varied. Following is a short selection of cases.

The case of I’saka is typical of PNG, where the widely accepted language name is really a village name. Initially, Laycock (1973) named the language Krisa, after the village where it is spoken. Donohue and San Roque (2004:1), however, found that “The language of the people who live in Krisa village is more properly known as I’saka, the name preferred by the native speakers... In this report, both terms will be used, but for different senses: the language shall be referred to as I’saka; the people and their village as Krisa.”

Similarly, the language which has sometimes been referred to as Uvol is better named Lote (Pearson with van den Berg 2008:1). “Uvol is actually the name of one of the main rivers that run through the language area and also the name that was given to the airstrip, which was built before World War II. When asked what their language name is, the people prefer the name Lote (or Lohote), which literally means ‘to hang out to dry’, suggesting ‘to be created’.”

Dol (2007:6–7) investigated the use of language and people group names by speakers of Maybrat (a language of West Papua) during a two-year stay in the language area. She concluded that, “The people who speak Maybrat refer to themselves as “rae ro Maybrat”... ‘the people who speak Maybrat’. These people are subdivided into groups according to the area where they originate, for instance, the people in Ayawasi are referred to as “rae Hapeh”, those of the East Ayat as “rae Asmaun”, those of Fef as “rae Karon”, and those of Suswa as “rae Mare”. In Ayawasi, it was agreed that these people all qualified as “rae ro Maybrat”, since everyone spoke the same language, although the dialects differed.”

Gallagher and Baehr (2005:2–3) investigated the preferences of speakers of the Bariai language with regard to the name of their language. As a result, anthropologists and linguists who had previously promoted the use of another name, “Kabana,” agreed, instead, to use “Bariai,” as that is the language speakers’ preferred choice. They state:

The name Bariai, which literally means ‘at the mangrove (bare ‘mangrove’ plus –eai ‘at’), is the most common name for the people, the language and their geographic area. The language and people have also been referred to as Kabana by Amara speakers; this name is acceptable and preferred by a moderate number of Bariai. However, those Bariai who are aware of the derogatory connotations of the name Kabana, which in the Amara language means ‘foreigner,’ are not willing to use it. Several anthropologists and linguists who did fieldwork in West New Britain [Thurston, Goulden and Scaletta]...had opted for the name Kabana... However, since the name Kabana is unacceptable to many of its speakers, and because of its derogatory connotation in Amara, we recommend that the name Bariai be retained as the language name and that Kabana be dropped.
from the literature. Thurston, Goulden and McPherson [was Scaletta] ... are no longer favouring
the name Kabana.

However, should the name outsiders use always be changed to reflect the habits of language
speakers? Even though the name Kwomtari (which refers to a local airstrip) is not what speakers
call their language, Honsberger, Honsberger, and Tupper (2008:11) have decided to keep the
name for linguistic papers. This is because, firstly, the name speakers use “is one of the few
lexical items with different variants in each of the six major villages,” which means choosing one
name is problematic; and secondly, the name Kwomtari was also given to the language family
(by the original surveyors) and is now well-known by linguists. For these reasons, “it seems best
to retain it [Kwomtari] when describing the language for the outside world.”

Finding one name to refer to the whole language is often difficult. When Rowe (2005:1)
investigated the preferences of the speakers of the language previously named Siar, she found
that some favour Siar and some Lak. Those who reject Siar do so because “it refers to only one
village on the east coast.” To reflect both views, Rowe used the compound form Siar-Lak in the
title of her paper, while retaining the name Siar in the body. Interestingly, Siar-Lak speakers
seem to make a distinction between the name they themselves use to refer to their language and
the name they would like others to use. Rowe notes, “When speaking about their language, the
people refer to it as ep warar anun dat, literally, ‘our language’.”

Easton (2007) encountered a different problem in Milne Bay. First, she asked speakers attending
an Alphabet Development Workshop from a number of communities to group themselves
according to ‘who speaks the same as you’ which was done without difficulty. However, one of
these groups did not agree on a language name. As Easton (2007:225) states, “The Wamira argue
that the language belongs to them as they were the original inhabitants of the area. They state
that, when the inhabitants of Wedau moved into the area, they began speaking the Wamira
language with their own variations. Consequently, they argue that the language should be called
‘Wamira.’ The people of Wedau use 115 years of mission history and adaptation of the ‘Wedau’
speech variety as a mission lingua franca to support their claim for the name ‘Wedau’.” For her
PhD thesis, Easton used the name Wedau/Wamira to represent this disagreement.

5. Mühlhäusler reconsidered

So far, this report has attempted to show how linguists incorporate a study of the indigenous
metalinguistic view into language surveys and other work in PNG. Against our view that more-
and-more this is common practise and has been for a number of years, at least in PNG, Peter
Mühlhäusler (2006), referring especially to PNG, asserts that, “The names and boundaries of
languages reflect expatriate practices, not local knowledge” (34) because, “Linguists have largely
ignored indigenous metalinguistic views” (25).

Mühlhäusler’s underlying concern is certainly valid: that the perspective of language
communities is crucial and should not be ignored. It is also acknowledged that distinguishing
discrete language boundaries is no easy task and can sometimes border on the impossible,
regardless of the definition of “language” one uses. Nevertheless, Mühlhäusler overstates his
case. While the practices of some linguists in the past are not beyond reproach, his criticisms of
linguists “overriding” the indigenous view do not generally correspond to current practice, as he
claims they do (31). In his criticism on past and current practice, Mühlhäusler lumps together
many attempts at naming languages and drawing language boundaries without regard for how
much speakers’ views were taken into consideration.

Mühlhäusler cites a number of cases where, in his opinion, outside linguists were unhelpful in
their work on language names and boundaries. However, in at least three of the cases he
considers, the linguist’s aim has been to represent the views of the language speakers.

Mühlhäusler cites Reesink, who changed the name Wanuma to Usan (27–28); however, Reesink
(1987) justifies the change from Z’graggen’s Wanuma, which “now stands for a government
patrol post, Lutheran church station, and a small airstrip” to Usan because “it is the name by
which a number of social groups identify themselves” (my italics).

Hepner is also cited (28) as having changed a language name; however, Hepner (2002) explains
why the name previously assigned to this language is inappropriate: “Mugil is simply the ground
name where a large Catholic-run plantation and clinic is located. The people themselves (my italics) refer to the language primarily by the name Bargam.” It is interesting that Hepner first noted that speakers refer to their language as Bargam during a short initial language survey (Hepner 1989), an indication that short surveys can provide good insights into language speakers' views.

Mühlhäusler (29) highlights how some of Seiler’s language names differ from the Ethnologue. This case is confusing, especially as the Ethnologue lists Punda-Umeda once as a dialect of Sowanda, but also lists Umeda as a separate language. Moreover, Seiler (1985:3) does admit to “arbitrarily” assigning the language name “Punda.” This is unfortunate; it would be good to conduct another survey of that area. However, it seems that Seiler did not favour arbitrarily assigning names. Regarding Imonda and Waris, the languages he focused his studies on, the first reason he gives for splitting Waris into these two languages is, “Imonda and Waris are indeed considered to be two different languages by the speakers of both languages.” This is in contrast to Laycock’s (1973:46) categorisation: he classified Imonda as a dialect of Waris, even though he acknowledged Imonda speakers at that time regarded them as two distinct languages.

The examples cited by Mühlhäusler are not representative, in any case. Other examples do not support his contention that, “the names and boundaries of languages reflect expatriate practices, not local knowledge” (34). Claassen and McElhanon (1970:47) state, “It was found that the borderline between language and dialect as judged by native speakers (my italics) generally coincided with 70–75 percent shared vocabulary.” Thus, in case of any doubt resulting from statistical data, speaker judgements were consulted. Similarly, Z’graggen (1975:5), whom Mühlhäusler cites as an example of imposing outsider names on PNG languages, did consult speaker opinion where it was available. Although he proposed names where there was no agreed-upon name, he also said, “the speakers of a language themselves are invited to give their own language name to replace the proposed name.” Additionally, Z’graggen made his decision between dialects and languages “based on the informant’s opinion (my italics) and an inspection of some data.”

6. Aitape West Translation Project

The views of indigenous speakers are not only being investigated and given priority in research, such as language surveys and grammar papers, they are also of key importance in language development. The Aitape West Translation Project (AWTP) has been running for seven years and involves 11 language varieties in the West Aitape area of PNG. A few times a year committees nominated by people of their language variety meet together with expatriate linguists to work on language development. In this project, language speakers themselves are the final decision makers on key issues.

For example, if community leaders decide their language variety needs its own literature and the community is willing to support nominated translators from their area, they are accepted into the program. AWTP has been working with this policy since its inauguration. As Nystrom (2007), the project team leader puts it, “All languages and dialects in the region are welcome to join the project. All dialects of each language are welcome to join as well. We believe it is not an outsider's place to tell local people which dialects are ‘close enough’ to their vernacular for them. There are too many non-linguistic factors for us outsiders to ever hope to understand.”

7. Conclusion

Significant insights into language speakers' linguistic views are being gained. Gone are the days when a surveying linguist would draw boundaries and assign names on the basis of minimal information collected from a single person during a one-hour stop in a neighbouring village. For example, not only do we have traditional survey data for the Sos Kundi language, such as wordlists, we also know a little more about their ethnolinguistic identity, including their

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20 Ben Pehrson, a linguist working in AWTP, describes AWTP's language development as “including orthography development, literacy materials production, training of local literacy teachers, composition of vernacular songs, translation of literature, and checking of translated materials for accuracy and naturalness” (personal communication, 2008).
perception of language and dialect boundaries, their preferred language name, and attitudes toward their own and neighbouring languages. Similarly, we now have good data on Ambakich speakers’ perceptions of dialect boundaries and intelligibility and their possible perceptions of prestige.

More important than simply knowing more about language speakers’ views, these views are being promoted: language names and boundaries in line with native speaker opinion are being proposed and, in cases such as the Aitape West Translation Project, language-development policy is being made that prioritises the speakers’ views.

However, we still have a long way to go in developing this area of linguists. Although the methods outlined in this report have been used for a number of years, we look forward to seeing them, and those used by others around the world, constantly critiqued and developed. The metalinguistic view of indigenous speakers will, no doubt, continue to be a central aspect of language documentation, maintenance, and development.
References


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