

WLP Abstract

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The sociolinguistics of language variation and change in Nmboland, Papua New Guinea

The origins of linguistic diversity, in terms of language diversity, and structural diversity, has been of recent research interest (Evans 2014-2019, Bickel 2015, 2014, Nettle 1999). As a region that is known for its linguistic diversity, the languages of Papua provide fertile ground to investigate how this diversity might emerge. This paper will present the results of a Labovian style variationist sociolinguistic study which offers empirical data from a Papuan speech community in support of previously made claims about language change (Cheshire, Kerswill, Fox, and Torgersen 2011, Mufwene 2002). A preliminary version of this paper was presented at the last WLP (2017), and this paper will present the final findings.

The linguistic variable under investigation is the lenition of /h/ by Nmbo speakers of Southern New Guinea. 38 speakers from two villages of Nmboland were sampled to determine the social and linguistic conditioning factors of word initial /h/ lenition. Age is the most significant conditioning factor suggesting strongly that this is a change in progress. Gender is not significant, bucking a well-recognised pattern in variation and change studies where speaker gender is significant. Village also came up as a marginally significant factor, with the more multilingual village being the candidate community where this variation originated.

This study overall shows that quantitative studies of small speech communities provide additional data points that enrich current understandings of language variation and change, and linguistic diversity more broadly.

References

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