

The sociolinguistics of word initial /h/ lenition in Namboland, Papua New Guinea

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This paper will present the first substantial results of an on-going sociolinguistic variationist study that is being conducted on the speech community of Namboland; a multilingual community of three villages that speak Nambo as an emblematic language in Papua New Guinea. Namboland is a small-scale swidden agriculturalist society of the South-Fly district in Western province, where the vernacular language is still successfully being transmitted to the next generation of speakers. It is part of a relatively under-described region of the world, although in the past few years there has been increasing descriptive works on the grammars of the languages in this area (e.g. Evans 2012, 2015, Siegel 2014, Döhler 2016, Evans et.al forthcoming).

The variable under investigation in this study is the lenition of word initial /h/. There is preliminary evidence to suggest strongly that young Nambo speakers (e.g. speakers around and under the age of 30) are leniting /h/ more frequently than older speakers do. That is, words such as /herge/ ('life') are being realised as [erge], or /hakar/ ('boy') as [akr]. This is despite /h/ being a shibboleth phoneme of sorts: The Nambo /h/ often corresponds to /s/ in Nen and /ɣ/ in Nama, it's sister languages immediately to the east and west respectively. Cognate words such as /hamba/ ('village') come out as /samba/ in Nen and /ɣamba/ in Nama, and there is anecdotal ethnographic evidence that speakers of Nambo and Nen (and presumably Nama) are sensitive to the emblematic function of these phonemes. There is a strong social correlation of who lenites this phoneme (i.e. age), but what is not known is whether there are any other social conditioning factors. Are there other social factors of the speakers that are conditioning word initial /h/ lenition, such as clan or village affiliation? This study aims to answer this question. Data are in preparation and pending analysis at the time of this abstract submission.

There are good reasons to hypothesise that there are indeed other social factors conditioning this variable. It has been hypothesised in the literature that in Melanesian societies there are strong identity and cultural pressures that affects speech, so much so that it contributes to the maintenance of linguistic differences across languages (Thurston 1987, 1992, Ross 2001) as well as a possibly driving language divergence (Laycock 1991). A multivariate analysis will be conducted on a speech corpora consisting of approximately 6 hours of speech, with speakers sampled across three villages, three age groups, two clans, with notes on their multilingual repertoire. This will be one of the few variationist sociolinguistic studies to be conducted on a vital Papuan language, and will contribute some empirical weight one way or another to the oft-heard hypothesis of 'culture' as a significant factor in Melanesian language variation and change.

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