

## The sociolinguistics of divergence? Qualitative and quantitative data on Nmbo, a multilingual Papuan speech community

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Socio-cultural factors have often been invoked by Papuanists to explain the high levels of linguistic diversity found in New Guinea (e.g. Laycock, 1991, 1982; Thurston, 1992, 1987; Foley, 2000; Ross, 2001). In this talk, I will present the results of qualitative and quantitative studies from a remote community in southern Papua New Guinea to investigate whether these socio-cultural hypotheses have empirical support.

The results are based on eight months of fieldwork in the Nmbo speech community. The qualitative data come from sociolinguistic interviews, and ethnographic observations corroborated with prior publications. The picture to emerge is of an “egalitarian multilingual” speech community of vital local languages (François, 2012), in part supported by inter-language marriages across villages. Languages are expressed as a property of tribal and locational identity. The most significant “others” are peoples of other locales, meaning people of other language groups, as well as other Nmbo speakers of different locales. The Nmbo speech community can broadly be described as “a society of intimates” (Givón & Young, 2002; Trudgill, 2011), but with a few added nuances. The quantitative study is based on a natural speech corpus of Nmbo, investigating the variable realisation of word-initial [h]-drop in nouns. The results suggest strongly a change in progress scenario, where the “more multilingual village” is analysed as the origin of the innovation. Women who have married out of their village of origin pattern closely with their peers who continue to live in Nmbo speaking villages. Gender was not found to have an effect.

The nascent linguistic variation within the Nmbo speech community, combined with the qualitative data, suggests there are indeed socio-cultural factors that could be employed by speakers for rapid linguistic differentiation between other Nmbo speakers, should the social imperative arise.

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