

Multilingualism in Southern New Guinea: A description and an attempt to reconstruct its past.

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In this paper, I describe the multilingual world of the speakers of Komnzo in Southern New Guinea (Döhler, 2018). Like many areas in which we find small-scale multilingualism today, Southern New Guinea is located in the periphery. European colonialism with its homogenising effects is a relatively new experience in this part of the world. Bruce Knaft concluded that “the nonAustronesian south coast of New Guinea appears to have remained effectively outside the purview of state political economies for longer than any other major non-arctic coastal population” (1993: 26). This fact gives us the chance for a synchronic description of a highly endangered multilingual ecology. At the same time, the absence of a written record makes it difficult to investigate the past of this multilingual ecology.

The paper will be divided in two parts. In the first part, I describe multilingualism in Rouku village, where Komnzo is spoken by around 200 people. I address language ideology, the role of place and locality, traditional marriage patterns, and the impact of colonialism over the past century. This part draws on my own fieldwork experience, on socio-linguistic interviews as well as recordings of public meetings. In the second part, I want to address the problem of reconstructing an earlier stage of the multilingual ecology. I discuss two examples of naming strategies, which involve words from another language. The first example is bilingual place names, which are descriptors built from a Komnzo word and a word from a neighbouring language. An example is the place name *fo¹tnz* ‘short coconut’, where *fo* ‘coconut’ is from Wartha Thuntai and *tnz* ‘short’ is a Komnzo word. The second example is a group of birds, whose names involve a word meaning ‘vulva’, which is taken from different languages. The reference to ‘vulva’ in the names of these birds establishes a link to a secret story about the origin of menstruation and the origin of the bullroarer.

I will show that for both examples we have to assume a deliberate act of coinage and, thus, we have to assume a multilingual setting in the past. While place names are public knowledge, the bird names make reference to esoteric knowledge that is only meant for initiated men. This difference in the two examples allows us to set outer boundaries on the multilingual ecology at the time of coinage. In other words, whoever coined them must have been aware and must have taken into account which languages were known to the majority of Komnzo speakers. A comparison of the examples with respect to which languages are involved or not involved in the naming strategies allows us to reconstruct the extent of multilingualism in the past.

References

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