They don’t see a problem: indifference to language loss in PNG

American ethnobotanist Ryan Huish works on his Tok Pisin with Wautogik villagers Matthew Meimam, Grace Yehaipim and Monica Nimbemia, East Sepik Province, PNG, 2023
Photo Credit: Lise Dobrin

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4 March 2026

How could language endangerment, which many scholars see as an alarming problem, be largely invisible to the people whose languages are being lost?

Discomfiting comments are sometimes tucked into descriptions of Papua New Guinea languages. Consider the following examples:

“Kuot speakers do not seem to be emotionally attached to the Kuot language. If you casually remark that ‘I reckon this language is about to die’, most people will just reply ‘it looks that way, doesn’t it’. Some express a little sadness about this fact, but there is no great concern.” – Eva Lindström’s study of Kuot

“[Speakers of Kove] know that people are shifting to Tok Pisin, but they are not concerned. They do not care whether people speak Kove or not, and they are not interested in preserving Kove.” – Hiroko Sato’s grammar of Kove

“When we [a Papua New Guinean linguist and his wife] attempt to teach Abu’ to our five [Tok Pisin]-speaking children, they do not take the lessons seriously” … Clearly, “the view that indigenous languages … play an important role in the formative years of people’s lives has not sunk in, nor the perception that one’s mother tongue is the medium through which one expresses one’s inner cultural thoughts about the world”. – Otto Nekitel, *Voices of Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*

We have heard similar sentiments expressed many times in our work in rural Papua New Guinean communities over more than three decades.

In PNG, the once-astronomical number of vernacular languages (840 at last count) is diminishing rapidly. This is a country of many small languages (one linguist estimated that 35% of them were never spoken by more than 500 people) and today, many of them are giving way to Tok Pisin, the country’s creole lingua franca. Speakers are generally aware of this, but they often regard the obsolescence of

their native languages with indifference. Even where older speakers lament about the declining use of their languages, few (young or old) seem ready to revitalise or reclaim them as part of their heritage.

This widespread attitude merits serious exploration. It contrasts dramatically with the grave concerns about language loss expressed by Indigenous communities elsewhere in the Pacific, for example in Australia, New Zealand and Hawai'i. But apart from our own work (for example, Dobrin on community empowerment in Melanesia and the cultural logic of the Arapesh roads; Kulick on language shift in Gapun and the death of Tayap), there has been virtually no engagement with this issue in the anthropological or linguistic literature on the region. And where it is noted, its significance for language research in PNG is largely invisible.

Among linguists and anthropologists who do fieldwork today, there has been a marked turn toward research that is engaged, participatory and collaborative. Within such frameworks, research goals and activities should not merely be permitted or welcomed by community stakeholders; ideally, they should be proactively co-conceived with them and jointly carried out in ways that reflect and prioritise their concerns.

Such approaches are laudable where they are a good fit. But they aren't a good fit everywhere. In many places, the concerns of the community may be far from straightforward to ascertain, and addressing them more difficult still. And with languages that are shifting or endangered, a lack of strong community interest can place a researcher between the rock of speakers' disinterest and the hard place of a professional ideology that exhorts one to engage with deference to the people's own concerns.

When Don brought Gapun villagers copies of a dictionary of their language it had taken him thirty years to finish, they dutifully paged through them and then put them aside. Arapesh villagers Lise works with have been generous in helping her learn about their language and culture but wonder why it hasn't improved their material conditions. When linguist Joseph Brooks visited Hua people offering to give back recordings of Hua speech that had been made by a researcher who had worked there years before, he was met with indifference. In two other communities, he reports being asked to provide not literacy primers, dictionaries or story books, but lessons in English. In situations like these, the collaborative ideal would seem to leave a language-focused researcher with only bad choices: neocolonial remonstrance ("Come on guys, your language is dying! You should do something about it!") or withdrawal.

But in our experience, and in the accounts of many others working in PNG, it is

never the case that Papua New Guineans oppose research on their languages. On the contrary, the opportunity to host outside researchers is often not just accommodated but welcomed, regardless of the project's specific aims. Rural Papua New Guineans are highly attuned to opportunities that might provide income or facilitate development. The foreign-financed project is a framework people understand and enthusiastically embrace.

Papua New Guineans are also deeply curious about outsiders. They are eager to form friendships with people from distant places, including people like the two of us, who come from countries that few would have the resources or even a passport to visit themselves.

This openness is not a recent development but an ethos with deep roots. It is evident in people's eagerness to travel and host foreign (including other Papua New Guinean) guests, their exuberant embrace of novel cultural forms, and the historical prevalence of widespread multilingualism. Learning other people's languages has long been part of the privilege of forging connections across social distance; it is also a mark of their success, signalling one's ability to attract others' positive attention. The Papua New Guineans we know are consummate politicians of linguistic culture.

In the past, communities' interest in forging connections with other groups was often mutual, so people became multilingual as they learned others' languages and others learned theirs. But today the language learning goes only one-way, as everyone's attention has turned up the hierarchy toward the cash economy, jobs, education and Christianity.

Papua New Guineans' lack of discomfort with the obsolescence of their vernaculars may be hard for outside researchers to relate to, given our own preservationist assumptions and ambitions. But it follows from the same outward-reaching cultural orientation that, while it is in one sense about language — accessing languages that extend one's reach and scope — is at least as importantly about the relationships that those languages enable. From a Papua New Guinean point of view, researchers may be valued less as facilitators of language-focused projects than as witnesses, friends and benefactors. Those kinds of aspirations and concerns risk being made invisible by scholars' disciplinary commitments to collaborative research and language preservation.

Perhaps scholars who are concerned about language shift in PNG should try harder to make visible not what the languages spoken in the country "are", but what Papua New Guineans understand languages to be for. Engaging with the cultural ideas that animate local practices would better enable outside researchers to respond with

insight and care to the dilemma of academics seeing a problem where Papua New Guineans seem to see an opportunity for connection.

This is an edited version of an article first published on the Society for Linguistic Anthropology blog.

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