

L2

Aksen Tasol:
Identifying & Documenting Sign Language Use in Papua New Guinea

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ABSTRACT

Papua New Guinea (PNG) is widely-known as the most linguistically diverse country in the world. It is commonly cited as having over 800 languages and there have been numerous publications of grammars, dictionaries, genetic classifications, and documentation efforts for these languages. Despite this, the research on these ‘800 languages’ has almost exclusively addressed spoken languages. In this presentation, I discuss existing research on the signed languages of PNG including my ongoing documentation and research with a language of the highlands of PNG, Sinasina Sign Language (SSSL). Here, I focus on 1-what we know about sign languages in PNG; 2-what we can learn from them; and 3-possible reasons it has been difficult to identify and document such languages, including the idea that sign languages of this area are *aksen tasol* ‘just gesture’.

SSSL was initially identified in 2016 and is currently one of a handful of sign languages and signing systems reported in PNG, alongside Papua New Guinean Sign Language (PNGSL), Kailge Sign Language (KaSL), Mehek Sign Language (MeSL) and a signing system used in Enga province (EnSL). Despite the small amount of sign language research in PNG relative to the amount of spoken language research, many of existing documentation and description of these sign languages demonstrates typologically unusual features. Further identification and documentation efforts will likely lead to the recognition of many other sign languages and the resulting analysis and descriptions could reshape linguists’ understanding of sign language typology. Relationships between spoken languages has historically been a major focus of research on Papuan languages. Early comparison of SSSL, PNGSL, EnSL, and KaSL suggests that some of these sign languages are closely-related but not fully mutually intelligible; additional comparative research could contribute significantly to this topic and lend further insight to both a-our understanding of human history in PNG; and b-the historical relationships between the users of spoken and signed languages here.

Finally, drawing from my experience identifying and documenting SSSL, I address obstacles to identifying and documenting similar languages. Over time, logistic difficulties like accessing remote areas in PNG are diminishing as roads are built and cities develop. Widely-available lightweight video recording and computer equipment now make sign language documentation and research possible in places like the Kere village where SSSL is used. Logistic obstacles are less problematic today, but negative attitudes towards Deafness and signers are still prevalent in PNG. In many places, sign language use is often dismissed as *aksen tasol* ‘just gesture’ and community members often don’t perceive value in documenting them, unlike spoken languages. Hearing signers are often reluctant to self-identify or introduce Deaf their friends, which suggests

that there is some amount of stigma or ambivalence towards sign languages and their users. These negative languages attitudes can contribute to the ongoing difficulty of sign language research in PNG, but they can become less prevalent through maintaining documentation efforts and discussing local Deaf history, as has been the case with our work with SSSL.