

Abstract – WLP

## The Yelmek-Maklew family – A picture of (un)expected diversity

It is a well-known fact that the island of New Guinea still holds many languages we know very little about. Even on the level of language families there are still many unsolved puzzles, because sufficient data has just not been available. Based on data from recent fieldwork, this talk will deal with the internal structure of one of those little known families, the family of Yelmek-Maklew, in south Papua, Indonesia.

To place Yelmek and Maklew in the wider context of Papuan languages has been a matter considerable disagreement. In Wurm (1975) it is placed with the Trans-New-Guinea languages, but this view has already been challenged by Ross (2005) and currently it is believed to be an independent family (Evans et al. to appear). What has never been questioned before however, is the view that the group, or indeed, family of Yelmek-Maklew consists of two closely related languages Yelmek and Maklew. This goes back to Peter D. Drabbe, a Dutch missionary-linguist, who wrote a 12 page paper about the two languages sixty years ago. He claims that Yelmek is spoken in the four villages of Ilwayab, Bibikem, Woboyu and Dudalim to the right of the Marianne Strait, whereas Maklew is spoken in Welbuti further inland, close to the Bulaka river (Drabbe 1954). This however, seems to be an overly simplistic view of things.

In his ethnographic sketch from 1952, Nevermann is postulating an ethnic group called Jabga, which includes Yelmek and Maklew alongside 5 other groups: Jabga (proper), Galum, Dibga, Mópoko and Gónek. He gives a detailed account of settlements attributed to those groups. What is of particular interest here is that he mentioned all the villages found in Drabbe (1954) except Woboyo. However, every of these settlements is associated with a different group. Wanam (where the Ilwayab people were moved to) belonged to the Gónek, Ilwayab to the Yelmek, Bibikem to the Jabga, Dudalim to the Galum and Welbuti to the Makleuga (Nevermann 1952: 49). This indicates that much more diversity could be found in this language group, if data from all villages is taken into account.

In this talk, I will do exactly that. I will present a more detailed account of the internal structure of the Yelmek-Maklew family based on lexical comparison. During my fieldwork in 2015 and 2016 I collected extensive word lists from the villages in question. Based on the comparison of these wordlists I will argue that there is indeed a far greater diversity within the family than Drabbe's account suggests. This will add another valuable piece to the puzzle of language families in Papua.

## References

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