

A typological overview of Dèm, an isolate of the West Papuan highlands

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Dèm, also known as Lèm, is an under-documented unclassified language spoken in the upper reaches of the Rouffaer River in the western highlands of Papua. Larson's (1977:8) figure of about 750 speakers is based on primary data and is likely to be reasonably accurate at that time. Despite early outside contact by standards of the region (Bijlmer 1922, Le Roux 1926), very little documentation has taken place, prompting Hammarström (2010:179-180,187) to include it in his listing of the world's least documented language families.

The only primary documentation collected on the language comprises a short wordlist collected by Bijlmer in 1920 (published with typographic errors by Stokhof (1983:219-221)); words and sentences collected by Le Roux in the 1920s (Le Roux 1950)); and short wordlists gathered separately between the 1950s and 1970s by Bible translators Gordon Larson and John Ellenberger, some published by Larson (1977). All other published material (Galís 1955; Stokhof 1983; Voorhoeve 1975) are drawn from these sources. What original material does exist has not previously been investigated other than for lexical subgrouping purposes.

Several speculations and attempts to classify Dèm have been made. Le Roux (1950) considers links with nearby Ekari and Moni. Bromley (1967:300) links it distantly with Dani. Larson (1977) links it with Dani, Damal, Ekari, Moni and Wodani, effectively placing it in Trans New Guinea, and Voorhoeve (1975:46) and Silzer and Heikkinen-Clouse (1991) treat it as a stock-level isolate. Reviewing the lexical evidence, Hammarström (2010:187) concludes no proposed genetic links can be supported, with similarities resulting from borrowing.

This paper presents a typological overview of the language, based on careful analysis of all existing published and unpublished primary materials. It presents a description of aspects of the language, focussing on: the structure of the NP, including the postposed position of adjectives and numerals, as well as possessive constructions with preposed possessors; independent pronouns; basic structure of verbal and non-verbal clauses; the phoneme inventory, including relationships between the 10 attested vowel phones; and several key elements of the morphology including noun class suffixes and tense/aspect morphology on the verb.

The paper concludes by briefly canvassing previous theories on the phylogenetic relationships of the language, in the light of the pronominal and morphological facts presented.

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