

2 Introduction

Oksapmin is the name given to the 8,000 people living just west of the Strickland river and south of the Ok Om river in the Sandaun Province of Papua New Guinea. It is also the name given to the language they speak. The name was given by the Telefomin people to the west and it means “The bush people of the water.” The name is misleading as it suggest that the Oksapmin language is part of the Ok family of languages, which it is not. It is considered a language isolate.

Bimin, an Ok family language, is spoken by the people just to the south of the Oksapmin language area. There is a lot of intermarriage between the Bimin people and the Oksapmins who live in the closer villages to the north. Although most Bimins are bilingual with Oksapmin, usually only the Oksapmin women who are married to Bimin men and live there are bilingual with Bimin.

In the Oksapmin villages nearest Bimin villages, the number of shared words with Bimin is about 17%. In the villages furthest away, the number of shared words is about 13%. It is not easy to determine which words are truly cognates or are due to borrowing.

Oksapmin has two main dialects (see map on page 207). Dialect 1 has only minor changes throughout the dialect. It is spoken by about half of the language group. Dialect 2 is a dialect chain, with differences becoming greater with greater distance between two villages.

The two main dialects show some general and consistent differences. There are word differences, such as **imäh(ä)** ‘pig’ (dialect 1) and **täp** (dialect 2). A flapped /r/ sound in dialect 1 is consistently replaced by a flapped /l/ sound in dialect 2. There tends to be more contracting of words in dialect 2 than in 1. Thus **napotiproh** ‘will tell you’ of dialect 1 is **naptiproh** in dialect 2.

The grammar notes and dictionary here represent the Oksapmin language as it is spoken in dialect 1, and specifically as it is spoken by Guhyem, a man now in his mid-fifties, from the census area of Divanap. These notes represent what he and many other Oksapmins have taught me as we have lived among them about a third of the time since May, 1968.

The grammar notes give a brief overview of various aspects of Oksapmin grammar. Some of the notes give information which has not been published before. A great deal of the notes, however, summarize fuller descriptions given in the papers and manuscripts listed in the bibliography.

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