

## **From Linguistic Elicitation to Eliciting the Linguist: Lessons in Community Empowerment from Melanesia**

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The goal of community empowerment can be difficult to achieve in endangered language documentation and development projects, particularly where such projects falter or fail under a community's control. If it is true, as linguists often say, that "only the community can save its language," then program failure implies an absence of ability or commitment on the part of the community that can reflect on it negatively, reinforcing the feelings of powerlessness that feed language shift. While a handful of cases of language program failure have been described in the literature, endangered language linguists have yet to fully absorb the consequences of this phenomenon for the field. This seminar examines the case of a traditionally Arapesh-speaking community in the linguistically dense Sepik region of Papua New Guinea, where language shift to Tok Pisin is advancing rapidly, even in rural areas where extensive multilingualism was the historical norm. When understood within the community's own moral framework, a failed vernacular schooling project and local responses to foreign linguists reveal a concern that has not been discussed in the contemporary endangered languages literature: an intense desire to elicit the involvement of powerful outsiders in the life of their communities. This study suggests that what is empowering in one cultural context may not be so in another. In Melanesia, outside linguists have a beneficial role to play in empowering local communities when they engage in the kinds of ongoing personal relationships that recognize and reciprocate the communities'—and by extension, their languages'—value.