

Communiqué from the Linguistic Society of PNG

Promoting Unity in Diversity: Celebrating the Indigenous Languages of the South Pacific

This year, 2019, has been declared by the United Nations to be the “International Year of Indigenous Languages”, and this week in Port Moresby the Linguistic Society of PNG met for a conference to discuss the languages of Papua New Guinea. The conference was organised by the Linguistic Department of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of PNG, and took place at the Laguna Hotel. At least 60 people gathered there from around PNG and from overseas – from the USA, Australia, New Zealand, and even Russia. They were teachers, university lecturers and students, missionaries, community leaders, and government stakeholders.

At this year’s meeting, researchers reported on special features of the different indigenous languages they have been studying, on the effect of language and language policies on education, on dictionary work being carried out for various indigenous languages and for Tok Pisin, and on survey work to find out how many languages are spoken in our country, and how many languages are being lost. Of particular interest, the SIL language survey team reported that the latest language count for PNG is 851 languages, but 11 of those have already disappeared – the speakers have all died out, and their children are speaking Tok Pisin or another language instead. They also reported that 211 of the remaining 840 languages are in danger of disappearing in our lifetime, especially as parents speak to their children only in Tok Pisin, failing to pass on their language heritage to the next generation.

LSPNG 2019, themed ‘Unity in Diversity,’ addressed the seemingly conflicting interests of promoting linguistic and cultural preservation, while also ensuring that Vision 2050 becomes reality.

Researchers emphasised the crucial role of education, and particularly *early childhood language* education, in achieving both these goals. A detailed report on the findings of current research into the use of language in education, including evidence-based recommendations (particularly regarding the urgent need for massive investment in teacher training), will be released shortly.

This year’s conference was kindly sponsored by Kumul Petroleum Holdings, the PNG Science and Technology Secretariat, the Ministry of National Planning and Monitoring, the Oil Palm Industry Corporation, the National Literacy and Awareness Secretariat of the Department of Education, the Conservation and Environmental Protection Authority. Next year’s Linguistic Society conference will be organised by SIL at Ukarumpa in the Eastern Highlands.