

Towards the documentation of Saliba-Logea – an endangered language of Papua New Guinea

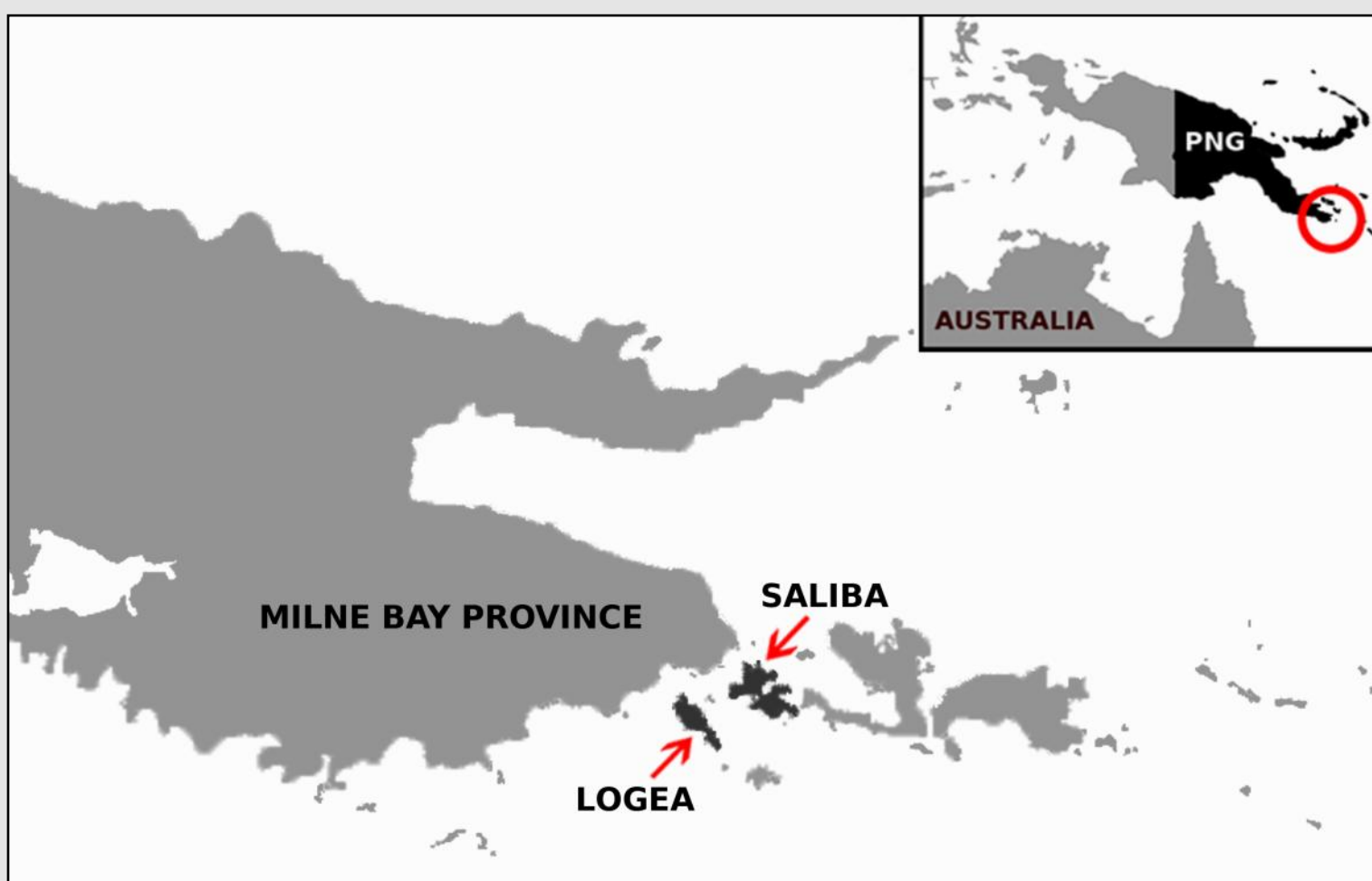
The project

The project aims at a multimodal documentation of the language in its cultural context. It focuses on the creation of a spoken-language corpus which links audio/video material with texts, translations and annotations on grammar and cultural knowledge. The focus of the data collection is on recordings of cultural practices, including feasts, plant use and the revival of sailing canoes. Where possible, younger speakers are engaged as interview partners of community elders.

The resulting database provides a basis for further research and also aims to be of practical value to the language community, as a source for teaching materials and a record of traditional knowledge for future generations.



The corpus features a broad variety of text types, ranging from legends, oral histories about first contact with white people and memories of WW2, through descriptions of traditional technologies such as fish traps and garden construction, to soccer and canoe race commentaries. In the annotation process, lexical items are 'harvested' from the text data and compiled in a lexicon database, supplemented with elicitations on specific domains, such as seafaring terms, plants and their uses, and marine fauna.



The language

Saliba-Logea is an Oceanic language of Papua New Guinea with a number of dialects, spoken by about 2,500 people across several islands in Milne Bay Province. Languages of this area are of special linguistic interest as they show grammatical features not found elsewhere in Oceanic. These features may be due to prehistoric contact with Papuan languages. The project has been contributing to the linguistic documentation of the language through grammatical analyses on the basis of text data from the DoBeS archive.

The community

Most Saliba-Logea speakers live a traditional life style centred around fishing and subsistence farming. People use paddling and sailing



canoes to travel between islands but also motor dinghies and workboats. Traditional staple food items are yams, taro, sweet potato, sago and seafood. People live in hamlets of extended family groups in houses built from bush material, but many villages also have timber houses with iron roofing. Several households now have access to electricity through generators and solar panels and in recent years mobile phone coverage has reached the islands and increasing numbers of people have phone access.



There has been substantial loss of traditional knowledge, e.g. many cultural activities were discouraged by colonial authorities. But certain ceremonies are still practiced, including wealth exchanges and traditional feasts. Ancient techniques of fishing, gardening, sago making, and canoe building are still current and the project has been documenting many of these practices.



Endangerment

Papua New Guinea is home to over 800 languages and is known for its great linguistic diversity. Most language communities are small and the encroachment by English and Pidgin is marked. Throughout much of Papua New Guinea, a shift to these dominant languages is well under way and many languages are severely threatened.

While the degree of endangerment is serious, the potential for documenting Saliba-Logea is still strong and the project has been able to work with the last generation of older speakers who have essentially no knowledge of English.



The language community is increasingly aware of the threat of language loss and there is keen interest in teaching materials and the long-term conservation of the language. There are pre-school programs promoting mother-tongue literacy before children join the English-language school system. The project has published pre-school readers and a mono-lingual story collection based on edited recordings in the DoBeS archive.

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