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Sinasina Sign Language (Chimbu, Papua New Guinea) – Language Snapshot

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Language Name:	Sinasina Sign Language (SSSL)
Language family:	unknown
ISO 639-3 Code:	none
Glottolog Code:	sina1273
Population:	approximately 50
Location:	-6.111251, 145.034981
Vitality:	Endangered

Summary

Sinasina Sign Language (SSSL) is used by both deaf and hearing people in the Kere and neighboring communities in Sinasina valley, Chimbu province, Papua New Guinea (PNG). It is one of only a handful of sign languages that linguists have reported in PNG (Reed & Rumsey 2020). In this language snapshot, I present early findings from our research on SSSL, highlighting: (i) past and present deaf members of these communities; (ii) vitality; and (iii) the label 'Sinasina Sign Language'. I conclude with an overview of our ongoing documentation and description.

Samari

Sinasina Sign Language (SSSL) em i aksen ol yaupas lain, na sampela husait yau stap gut, save mekim. Ol lain Kere na arapela lain long Sinasina, Chimbu, Papua Niugini (PNG) save SSSL. Nau, ol linguist save wanwan aksen stap long PNG (Reed & Rumsey 2020). Insait dispela pepa mi presentism nupela rises bilong mipela long SSSL. Bikpela tok save em tripela: (i) manmeri yaupas long Sinasina (tumbuna na nau); (ii) lusim SSSL; na (iii) dispela nem 'Sinasina Sign Language.' Mi pinisim wantaim tok save long dokumentasen na stadi bilong mipela.

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1. Overview

While working with the spoken language of the Kere community (Kere, ISO 639-3 sst) in Papua New Guinea in 2016, I met a deaf Kere woman for the first time. That meeting led to the identification of a small sign language used by both deaf and hearing people in the Kere and neighboring communities in Sinasina valley, Chimbu province, Papua New Guinea (PNG) (Rarrick & Asonye 2017). Sinasina Sign Language (SSSL) is the primary language for deaf Kere people, and is the first sign language documented in Chimbu province. It is used by approximately four deaf and 50 hearing people in three neighbouring rural villages in the Sinasina valley (Figure 1, see also Rarrick & Asonye 2017; Rarrick 2019a). SSSL does not have a close genetic relationship to any other language, but this is a direct result of the limited research on signing in PNG. Currently, fewer than 10 sign languages have been reported for the country, and only two others are known in the highlands: a language of the Lagaip Valley (Kendon 1980); and Kailge Sign Language (Reed 2019; Reed & Rumsey 2020). Neither of these is in contact with SSSL. However, similar situations of indigenous 'micro-community' sign languages with relatively high numbers of hearing signers have been reported around the world, including: Bank Khor Sign Language (Nonaka 2004), San Juan Quiahije Chatino Sign Language (Hou 2016, 2018), and signing systems in Mali (Nyst et al. 2012).

Word order in SSSL is frequently Subject-Object-Verb, but topic-comment structures are common in narratives. This language is endangered due to low user numbers and a lack of transmission; documentation and description efforts are ongoing (see Rarrick 2019b and Section 2).

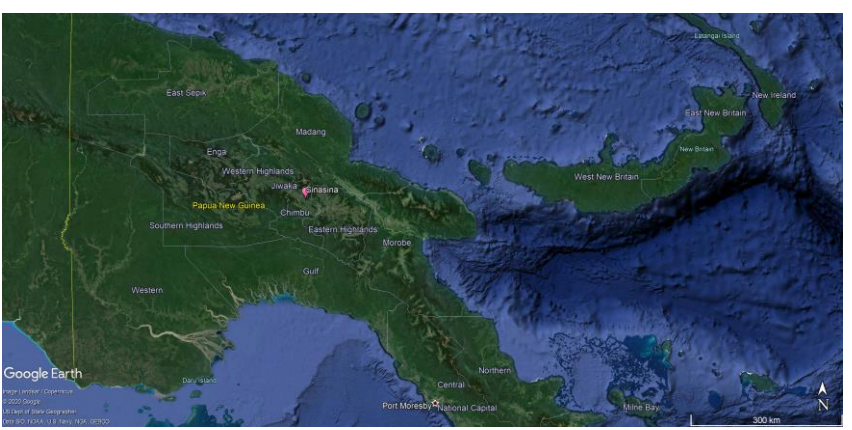

Figure 1: Location of villages where Sinasina Sign Language is used.

A full scale version of this map is on page 86.

1.1 Current and past signers

Currently, about 50 hearing and four deaf SSSL signers[1] have been identified (Rarrick 2019a). The youngest primarily-hearing signers are close in age to the youngest deaf signer (born around 2000). The oldest living deaf person identified is Yogml, a woman who was born before 1950. Yogml was the last-born child in a family with two hearing parents and three deaf children. Community members report that Yogml's parents only had deaf children because her father was a great warrior (Rarrick 2019a). There are similar reports for other families and knowledge that some deaf Kere people married hearing people and some married other deaf people. This suggests that deafness may have been more common in the past, and that SSSL has been transmitted through the community over time. However, the history of this language and the people who use it is not well documented or researched at this time.

No deaf signer is currently married or has more than three years of education. This is not unusual for deaf or hearing people in the area. The living deaf signers are not closely related and only one has biological children. These children, now adults, whose parents were both deaf, are hearing non-signers because they were raised by hearing members of their extended family (a common pattern in villages where SSSL is used), and intergenerational transmission of SSSL did not occur within that family. Another deaf signer is currently raising one of his nephews. It is unclear whether that nephew is a signer, whether intergenerational transmission is occurring, or what his fluency in SSSL might be.

Peer-to-peer transmission seems more common for SSSL, as evidenced by the social relationships between deaf and hearing signers. While the four living deaf signers know each other, they do not appear to be in regular contact. All of them are subsistence farmers who primarily spend time with hearing people of their same gender and similar ages. Women typically tend to pigs, children, and gardens where food and coffee are grown; men typically build new gardens, houses, and other structures like churches and enclosures for pigs. Deaf people probably use SSSL in all of these activities. Their signing may be modified when using tools, but more research is needed. Of the approximately 1,500 hearing people who live in the villages where SSSL is used, there are about 50 individuals who seem to be highly fluent in SSSL. Highly fluent signers typically have life-long relationships with a deaf signer of the same gender and close in age. Other hearing people tend to be non-signers or less fluent. However, hearing signers and non-signers use a handful of moderately standardized co-speech gestures, especially for culturally

[1] A 20 year old Male, a 40 year old Male, a 45 year old Female, and a 70 year old Female.

salient nouns like ‘pig’, and ‘white pandanus’. The effect this has on an ability or willingness to sign is unclear, but there may be a positive correlation between use of these gestures and fluency in spoken Kere.

1.2 Issues in vitality

SSSL’s endangerment is complicated by factors not present for spoken Kere. SSSL is primarily threatened by low user numbers (<100) and disrupted intergenerational and peer-to-peer transmission (the youngest signers are around 20 years old). Like Kere, SSSL is also threatened by the trend of young adults moving away from their villages for job opportunities. However, while Kere use has declined due to language shift to Tok Pisin and English, and reductions in domains of use (Rarrick 2018), this is not the case for SSSL. There is no evidence of larger sign languages in Chimbu, even in towns like Kundiawa, which might trigger language shift away from SSSL (Rarrick 2019b; Braithwaite 2019). For several years, one deaf SSSL signer has lived in a diaspora Kere community near Goroka town, far from Sinasina. This signer continues to participate in subsistence farming and interacts primarily with hearing SSSL signers. This is unlike other small languages where urbanization and integration into larger communities has clearly led to language shift (Braithwaite 2019; Nonaka 2014). SSSL is currently used in a variety of contexts, including local markets, church services, and occasionally village court cases. SSSL is not presently used in local schools because there are no deaf school-aged children. Signers report that historically it was not used in schools either. This is almost certainly related to deaf signers’ lower levels of education, but it is unclear if SSSL was not used in schools because deaf signers did not attend, or if deaf signers did not attend school because SSSL was not used. There have never been specialist deaf schools in the area.

In the future, if another sign language is introduced, language shift or language mixing could occur quickly (Zeshan & Dikyuva 2013; Bickford & McKay-Cody 2018; Braithwaite 2018), and SSSL could rapidly become critically endangered. Currently, attitudes towards signing and deafness are neutral or slightly positive, which may not significantly influence SSSL’s vitality (Rarrick 2019a), but the introduction of a larger sign language could also lead to an increase in negative attitudes (Nonaka 2014; Braithwaite 2019). Genetic deafness does not presently seem to be common in the area and only the youngest deaf signer is likely to have biological children in future. Without deaf children, we are less likely to see future increases in SSSL user numbers (Nance & Kearsey 20014; Mufwene 2017; Braithwaite 2019). Given the current low user numbers, lack of intergenerational transmission, wide domains of use, and lack of language shift, SSSL is endangered. Because SSSL could become critically endangered very quickly, we will continue to document future events that could impact its vitality.

1.3 'Sinasina Sign Language'

I use the term 'Sinasina Sign Language' (and SSSL) because there does not seem to be an autonym for this sign language. Deaf signers seemingly do not have a sign that means 'sign (language)' or refers specifically to their manual communication system. Hearing people in the area refer to all signing and gestures with the Tok Pisin word *aksen* 'action(s)' (Rarrick 2019a). If we used *aksen* as the label for SSSL, our corpus and descriptive works may not be discoverable in a way that is useful for signers, and aligns with best practices in linguistic research. 'Kere Sign Language' may not be appropriate either because at least one deaf signer living in the Sinasina valley is not a member of the Kere community, and there is noteworthy variation between the oldest and youngest signers. We are still investigating whether there is a single sign language in Sinasina or possibly as many as three distinct varieties. Signers are enthusiastic about working with their language, but they also seem neutral about language labels, so there is no clear answer for what this sign language (or these sign languages) should be called based on signers' knowledge or linguistic analysis. As a hearing outsider, I chose 'Sinasina Sign Language', but this label is flawed in many ways (Palfreyman 2015). For now, I will continue to use 'SSSL', but I also acknowledge that it could become obsolete, and that signers should be the ultimate authority for establishing an appropriate language name.

2. Current research

Our documentation and description of SSSL is ongoing, and the focus of the research has evolved, based on the goals and participation of individual signers. From 2016-2018, the first identified deaf signer was unavailable to work with SSSL, so from 2016 I worked with hearing signers to collect preliminary lexical data, and to identify deaf signers and invite them to participate in the research. By late 2017, three more deaf signers had been identified and agreed to participate in documentation, primarily as language experts. We started to collect narrative data and offer training. Currently, all four deaf signers continue to be involved in data collection to varying degrees, depending on their personal circumstances. Initially, one deaf signer, Mailan, expressed significant interest in the project and engaged in training. He still collects narratives and conversations from other deaf and hearing signers. Another deaf signer is unable to commit to more in-depth participation in the project due to advanced age, but offers narratives to be recorded on occasion. A third deaf signer participates intermittently, seemingly based on interest. The signer who started participating in 2018 has since had some narratives recorded.

With these recordings, we started building a corpus[2] and creating a paper trilingual dictionary (SSSL-Tok Pisin-English) and sketch grammar. Since most signers do not have access to reliable electricity or internet, outputs are more accessible in paper formats. In 2017, deaf signers suggested we modify the goals of the project based on their interests in becoming fully literate in Tok Pisin and English. This reshaped our work to focus on developing accessible educational materials (Rarrick 2019c). In 2019, signers expressed enthusiasm with a draft of the trilingual dictionary, so we are working to significantly expand it. They have been invited to contribute to the sketch grammar, but have chosen to limit their involvement to answering questions and correcting my errors.

Since SSSL was first reported, our documentation and description of it has evolved to adapt to signers' needs. The early stages have been slow to start due to low signer numbers and shifting goals, but our efforts will continue with the hope that the opportunities for SSSL signers will broaden, and that SSSL will continue to be used by future generations.

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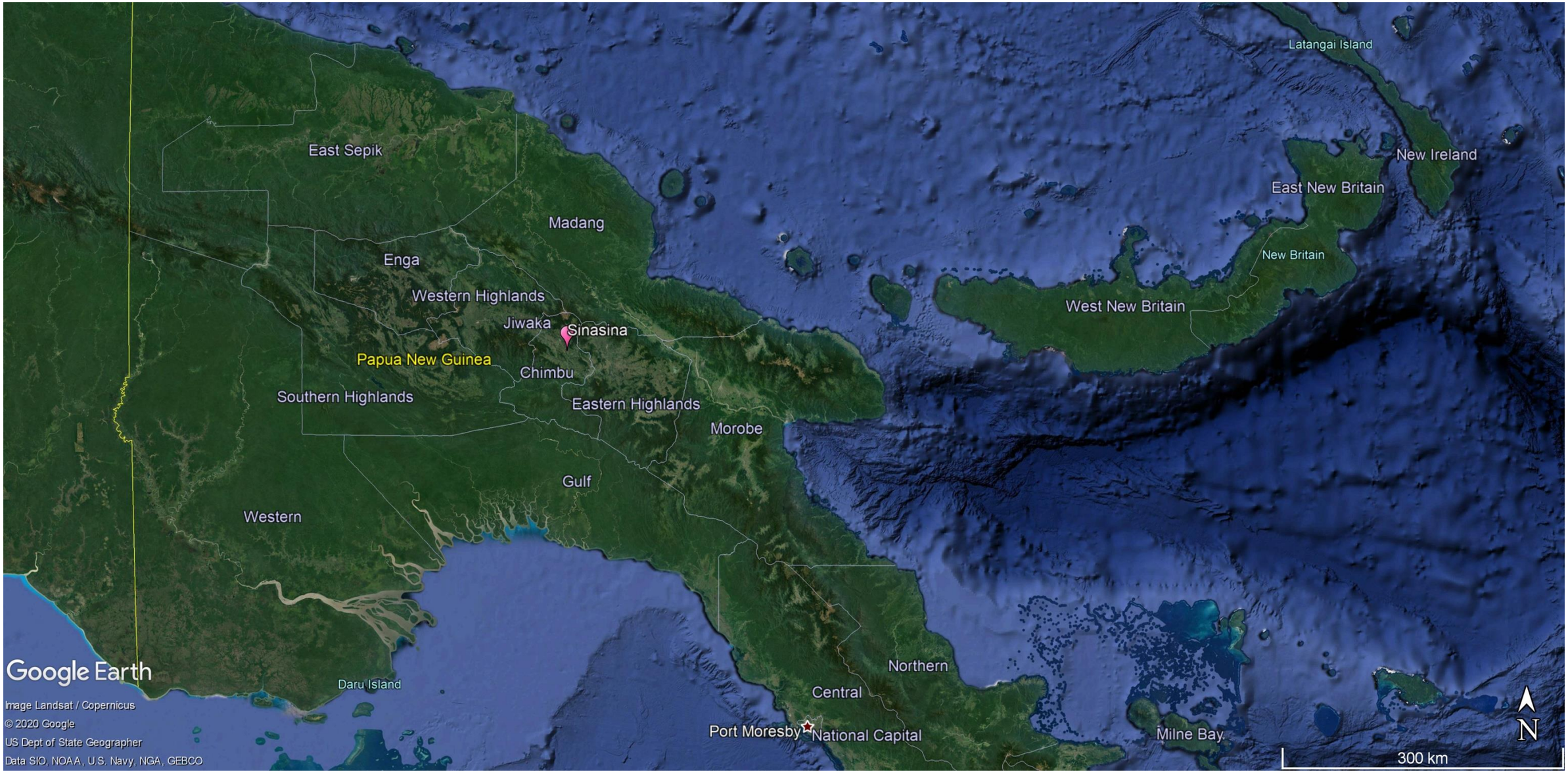

Figure 1: Location of villages where Sinasina Sign Language is used. This is a full scale version of a smaller map on page 80.