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978-0-521-59926-9 - Language Shift and Cultural Reproduction: Socialization, Self, and Syncretism in a Papua New Guinean Village

Don Kulick

Excerpt

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Introduction: Papua New Guinea and the study of language shift

Papua New Guinea has the provocative distinction of being the most linguistically diverse country on earth. Packed into an area roughly the size of Sweden, or the American state of California, are approximately 760 different languages. Spread throughout a population of three million people, these languages represent about one fifth of the total number of languages spoken in the world today.

The languages of Papua New Guinea are not distributed evenly among its three million citizens. A handful of languages have 30,000 or more speakers (the largest, Enga, has about 150,000), but the majority are spoken by less than 1,000 people. Indeed, according to Sankoff's 1977 calculations, a full 35 percent of the languages spoken in the country have fewer than 500 speakers.¹

Why so many tiny languages? The most popular guess used to be that they arose out of isolation. A common assumption for quite some time was that the New Guinean landscape, with its endless rainforests, boggy swamps, and craggy mountain ranges, simply inhibited intervillage contact. Isolated and cut off from their neighbors, communities had no possibility of converging linguistically. Instead, for thousands of years, they had been diverging.²

Once the identification and classification of these languages got under way in the 1950s, however, it soon became clear that the cause of the diversity found in Papua New Guinea was not isolation. Laycock (1982: 33) points out that:

we find, typically, the largest languages (that is, the least diversity) in the most isolated areas (such as the Highlands . . .) and the greatest divergence in areas of easy terrain and extensive trading contacts (as in north coast Papua New Guinea and Island Melanesia).

This discovery, and the understanding that patterns of trade, marriage, migration, and warfare have linked linguistically distinct peoples for centuries (Allen 1982; Hughes 1977; Swadling 1984; Wurm 1975),

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has led researchers working with New Guinea languages to turn their attention to the social and cultural correlates of the linguistic diversity.

What has been realized is that the development and maintenance of 760 languages has been made possible in very large part due to particular, widespread attitudes toward language. It is now generally agreed that New Guinea communities have purposely fostered linguistic diversity because they have seen language as a highly salient marker of group identity (Foley 1986: 9, 27; Laycock 1979, 1982; Sankoff 1976, 1977). In other words, New Guinea villagers have traditionally seized upon the boundary-marking dimension of language, and they have cultivated linguistic differences as a way of “exaggerating” themselves (Boon 1982) in relation to their neighbors and trading partners.³

Linguists have found a great deal of evidence to support this view. Foley (1986: 27) reports that the people of Wombun, one of the three Chambri-speaking villages located along the shores of Lake Chambri in the East Sepik Province, speak a dialect of the language that diverges phonologically, lexically, and morphosyntactically from the dialect of Chambri that is spoken in the other two neighboring villages. “In spite of the small size of the Chambri language groups (about 1,000 speakers) and the close proximity of the villages,” writes Foley, “the Wombun people have preserved a dialect different from that of other villages. . . . This is correlated with a feeling of the Wombun people of their uniqueness within the larger Chambri-speaking group.”

Laycock (1982: 36) encountered a similar divergence in the small Usai dialect (1,500 speakers) of the Buin language (17,000 speakers) of Bougainville island. In this dialect, all anaphoric gender agreements are reversed, so that all that is masculine in the other Buin dialects is feminine in Usai, and all that is feminine in Buin is masculine in Usai. Laycock explains that “there is no accepted mechanism for linguistic change which can cause a flip-flop of this kind and this magnitude.” He therefore proposes that “at some stage in the past, some influential speaker of the Usai dialect announced that from now on his people were not to speak like the rest of the Buins. Once the change was adopted, it would become the natural speech of the community within one or two generations.”

The linguist K. McElhanon actually witnessed an instance of this kind of linguistic innovation during his research in the Huon valley. In 1978, McElhanon (personal communication) observed that the people living in the Selepet-speaking village of Indu had gathered together for a meeting. During this meeting, a decision was reached to “be different” from other Selepet speakers. It was agreed that the villagers of Indu would immediately stop using their usual word for “no,” *bia*, which was

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shared by all their fellow speakers of Selepet. Instead, they would begin saying *bujɛ*, which they did and have continued doing since that time.

Clearly, this kind of conscious manipulation of language could, over time, lead to significant divergence. Such a stress on divergence has been feasible in practical terms, because even as they have fostered a “difference” through language, many Papua New Guinean communities simultaneously have placed a high value on multilingualism. The public display of knowledge of foreign speech varieties has been one important means of gaining prestige in traditional society (Salisbury 1972; Sankoff 1977; Taylor 1968). The situation throughout most of the country has been one in which “each group was ethnocentric about its own variety, but since such groups were all very small, since people knew that other people thought their own was the best, and since within a region there was no consensus that a particular variety was the best, the situation was certainly an egalitarian one” (Sankoff 1976: 10). So language used as a boundary-marking device, coupled with “egalitarian” bi- or multilingualism, has for centuries worked to sustain a momentum that has generated and perpetuated linguistic diversity.

This momentum came to be interrupted in the latter half of the nineteenth century. In 1884, Great Britain, prompted by Australian colonists who worried over Germany’s interest in New Guinea, claimed the south-eastern portion of the island (later known as Papua) as a British protectorate. Soon afterward, German marines raised the Imperial flag on the island of Matupit in east New Britain, thus proclaiming their dominance over New Britain (which they called Neu Pommern), New Ireland (Neu Mecklenburg), and the other islands of what to this day is called the Bismarck Archipelago and, over the northeastern mainland, New Guinea (Kaiser Wilhelmsland). (The entire western half of the island had been claimed, and subsequently ignored, by the Dutch in 1848.)

At the time, these puffs of European hegemony had no consequences for the vast majority of people living in New Guinea and Papua. Most of these people were to have no contact whatsoever with Europeans until the 1920s or later. But for those villagers living on the islands or near the coasts, encounters with European missionaries, police, and labor recruiters now became intensified, and the consequences of such encounters were far-reaching. Villagers who attempted to defend their land from European confiscation were imprisoned or shot, and entire villages were routinely burned to the ground at the whim of a visiting Patrol Officer.⁴ The European presence dramatically altered traditional balances of power between different villages and clans. In their discussion of early consequences of colonialism in Papua New Guinea, Griffin et al. (1979: 15) have observed that:

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The death of five or more adult men could permanently damage the power of a clan; it would be less able to defend itself, form alliances or acquire wealth through work, marriage and trade. By using local communities in alliance with the police MacGregor [the first Lieutenant-Governor of British New Guinea (later Papua) 1888–1898] increased the prestige of one group, while humiliating another. MacGregor's patrols did not merely kill a few people in a total population of perhaps two or three thousand; they transformed relationships between groups which normally lived and acted separately.

Although Griffin et al. here exemplify their argument with colonialism in British Papua, their remarks apply even more emphatically to the Germans in their territory of New Guinea, who “used more force than the British or Australians in Papua, and they killed more people” (ibid: 42).

But although killings and the destruction of villages had a great impact on villagers in areas under European influence, the single most significant disruption was the massive programs of labor recruitment carried out by the colonial governments. Even before the colonial flags had been hoisted, several thousand men from New Ireland, northern New Britain, and southeastern Papua had been taken away to Queensland, Fiji, and Samoa to work as laborers on plantations (Griffin et al. 1979: 7; Siegel 1986). After 1884, the recruitment of plantation laborers intensified, particularly in German New Guinea, where large copra and tobacco plantations had been established. The German governor of the territory, Albert Hahl, estimated that 100,000 New Guineans had been recruited as contract laborers up to 1913. After Australia assumed control of the German territory in 1914, the number of New Guineans under indenture continued to grow – from 17,500 in 1914 to over 41,000 in 1939 (Griffin et al. 1979: 54).

New Guinean men were cajoled, threatened, and sometimes even forced to “sign on” as laborers. They were then taken from their villages and most often transported to faraway plantations, where they would work for at least three years. At the end of that time, they could return to their villages. Arriving back home, these men brought with them steel tools, cloth, fabulous stories, and a new language – a language that has come to be called Tok Pisin.

Tok Pisin is known variously in the earlier anthropological and linguistic literature as Pidgin English, neo-Melanesian, and New Guinea Pidgin. It is called Tok Pisin by the people who speak it, and since 1981 Tok Pisin has been the language's official name in Papua New Guinea. Tok Pisin arose as a pidgin language in the mid- to late 1800s on the plantations that had been established by the colonial powers, where the men transported there from scores of different language groups had to live together and find a common basis for communication. The lan-

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guage's primary lexifier language has been English, but other languages, in particular the Austronesian language Tolai, spoken on the island of New Britain, have contributed up to 30 percent of Tok Pisin's lexicon. Although there is still vigorous debate about the precise genesis of Tok Pisin and about the relative contributions to its grammar of the superstrate and substrate languages (i.e., English and the various Papuan and Austronesian vernaculars of the first generations of plantation laborers),⁵ it is clear that the formal structure of Tok Pisin is very different from Papuan languages, in that Tok Pisin is rigidly verb medial and largely isolating in its verbal morphology (Mühlhäusler 1985a, b).

Despite official and nonofficial colonial attitudes that branded it as gibberish and baby talk and discouraged its usage,⁶ Tok Pisin spread rapidly in the territory of New Guinea as a contact language and as a lingua franca among indigenous populations. In Papua, this role was fulfilled largely by a pidginized version of the Austronesian vernacular Motu, called Hiri Motu (Dutton 1985). The English language began to be seriously promoted in Papua New Guinea only after World War II. Today English is the language of education in all schools, but it remains more of an elite language than a lingua franca.

The spread of Tok Pisin, Hiri Motu, and English in Papua New Guinea has had a number of positive consequences, not least of which has been the facilitation of communication between speakers from geographically distant parts of the country. But the expansion of these lingua francas has also had at least one very poorly documented and, in the view of many, less positive consequence, namely language shift. Since the spread of the colonial lingua francas from the beginning of the 1900s, and especially since World War II, it seems as though the momentum for linguistic diversity and egalitarian bilingualism referred to above has halted and even reversed. A qualitative change in language use and attitudes may be currently under way in a large number of Papua New Guinean communities. Throughout the country, there are a growing number of reports that indigenous vernaculars are entering phases of obsolescence.⁷

One of the first researchers to draw attention to language shift in Papua New Guinea was the linguist Otto Nekitel, who in 1984 published a short paper asking, "What is happening to our vernaculars?" Later, in his dissertation at the Australian National University, Nekitel sketched the language shift occurring in his own community, a village of about 320 people called Womsis, located in the West Sepik Province. Children are no longer learning the village vernacular, Abu', he writes. And even among adults, Tok Pisin is increasingly replacing the vernacular in everyday interaction:

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Tok Pisin is predominantly used in most speech situations by Abu' speakers. . . . Thus although it is sad to have to recognize this it is a fact that even though Abu' is the vernacular of the community, it is no longer the primary language of the Abu' [people]. (1985: 251–2)

Nekitel notes as well that a similar situation exists in a number of other nearby villages (*ibid*: 247).

The same phenomenon is reported in Bradshaw's brief 1978 article on language death among the Numbami. The Numbami, a group of 300 speakers living near the coast in Morobe Province, are now shifting from their vernacular. The language most widely known in the small community is not Numbami – it is Tok Pisin. There are in fact no remaining monolingual speakers of Numbami. When it is spoken, Numbami remains confined to topics concerning village life. But even in these domains, the language is becoming increasingly relexified due to heavy borrowing from Tok Pisin and Yabem, an Austronesian language adopted as a missionary and church language by the Lutheran mission. Bradshaw reports that “there is a definite feeling among Numbami speakers that their language is an endangered species” (*ibid*: 31), and that “many children of Numbami-speaking parents speak only Tok Pisin” (*ibid*: 28). Given the small size of this group and these current trends, it seems likely that Numbami will disappear completely within the next several generations.

A number of other articles and short descriptions point to similar processes occurring elsewhere in the country. Dutton has recently reported that the Koiari language (spoken in the 1960s by 1,800 people living in villages inland from Papua New Guinea's capital, Port Moresby) seems to be “losing its vitality and dying” (Dutton and Mühlhäusler 1989: 10), being replaced by Hiri Motu. Erima Nambis, formerly the language of 410 people living in three villages in the Madang Province, was in the late 1970s no longer spoken actively by children under 10. Indeed, “for most people under twenty, New Guinea Pidgin [Tok Pisin] is the language of everyday communication (Mühlhäusler 1979: 176; cf. Colburn 1985, a more detailed report on this language). And Hooley observes that while the Buang language of the Morobe Province (4,600 speakers) cannot be said to be dying out, it is under “external pressures” from processes of modernization and urbanization. He writes that “unless some change of attitude occurs among the Buangs themselves, or some other factor emerges, the language will eventually disappear” (1987: 283).

Judging from the scattered reports such as these that have emerged so far, the process of language shift seems to have progressed furthest among coastal and island peoples (Colburn 1985; Dutton and Mühl-

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häusler 1989; Hollyman 1962; Hooley 1987; Lithgow 1973; Mühlhäusler 1979: 176–8, 1989; Sankoff 1980: 24–7; Smith in press; Wurm 1986). But shift may be taking place elsewhere as well, and there are brief mentions of it for the middle Sepik region (Foley 1986: 28) and even for the Highlands, where, the linguist John Haiman (1979: 40) remarks, “some Hua [3,000 speakers, Eastern Highlands Province] people predict that their grandchildren will grow up speaking only Pidgin [Tok Pisin]. If mass emigration to Goroka and other urban centers should weaken the structure of village-based social life, their predictions may come true.”

This book is about one such community where language shift is under way. The community is called Gapun. Gapun is a small village with a population that in 1986–7 fluctuated between 90 and 110 people. The village is located about ten kilometers from the northern coast of Papua New Guinea, roughly midway between the lower Sepik and Ramu rivers. It is an isolated village, surrounded on all sides by rainforest and sago swamps, connected to other villages (the nearest of which is about a two-hour journey away) and to the outside world only by narrow, choked waterways and slim bush paths subject to flooding.

The villagers in Gapun speak a language they call *Taiap mer* (Taiap language). The language exists only in Gapun and is spoken actively and fluently by exactly eighty-nine people.⁸ Even by the somewhat extreme standards of Papua New Guinea this is a small language. Since the late 1970s, however, the number of people who speak Taiap has been getting even smaller, despite the fact that the village population is the largest within memory. As of 1987, no village child under 10 actively used this village vernacular in verbal interactions. These children either speak or, in the case of the 1- to 3-year-olds, are clearly on their way to acquiring Tok Pisin. Many children under 8, especially boys, appear not even to understand much Taiap.

The adult villagers are at a loss to understand why their children are suddenly no longer learning the vernacular. Knowledge of Taiap is seen as a self-evident attribute of all villagers. Taiap is the language of the ancestors, and it has strong associations with the “ground.” It is what most strikingly sets one apart from one’s neighbors. Several villagers described it as “sweet.” Taiap, others explained, has a foundation, a deep-rootedness (*i gat as bilong em*), and the capacity for nuance and subtlety (*i gat ol liklik liklik mining*) that Tok Pisin lacks. Every villager wants his or her child to learn the vernacular. There has been no conscious effort on anyone’s behalf not to teach their children Taiap.

So to what do villagers attribute the shift? Before elaborating an answer to that question, it will be useful first to contextualize it by

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considering how scholars from a number of academic disciplines have attempted to explain the phenomenon of language shift in speech communities throughout the world.

Approaches to language shift

Since the mid-1960s, linguists, sociologists, and sociolinguists have become increasingly interested in the process of language shift for a variety of reasons. Linguists have generally been concerned with understanding the internal dynamics of obsolescent linguistic systems, and they have wondered whether structural attrition in dying languages can in any way be considered the reverse of processes like creolization or first-language acquisition.⁹ Sociologists have viewed the question of language shift in relation to processes of migration, assimilation, national identity, and ethnic revival. In these studies, the tenacity of minority languages has been regarded as an indicator of ethnic group viability and boundary maintenance.¹⁰ Sociolinguists, finally, have tended to concentrate on how social structure affects a group's language attitudes, and on how these attitudes, in turn, cumulatively affect language choice in such a way that one of the group's languages eventually becomes abandoned.

Despite these somewhat different approaches, students of language shift have identified a number of factors that seem to be significant in accounting for why people's attitudes change and why shift occurs. These include migration, industrialization, urbanization, proletarianization, and government policies concerning which languages can and cannot be used in schools and other institutions. But although there is general agreement that these factors somehow are important in explaining language shift, there has been, as Fasold (1984: 217) points out in his summary of research, "very little success in using any combination of [these factors] to predict when language shift will occur." There is, "in fact, . . . considerable consensus that we do not know how to predict shift."

In addition to their lack of predictive power, macrosociological factors such as those listed above have also been criticized for their limited explanatory power. "What is of interest to know," writes Gal in the preface to her monograph on Hungarian–German language shift in Austria, "is not whether industrialization, for instance, is correlated with language shift, but rather: By what intervening processes does industrialization, or any other social change, affect changes in the uses to which speakers put their languages in everyday interactions?" (1979: 3; see also Dressler 1988: 190–1; Sankoff 1980: xxii).

Considerations such as these led Gal to conduct an "ethnographic description" (1979: 1) of the process of shift among farmers and workers

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in one community on the Austro-Hungarian border. Gal's study was a harbinger of a greater ethnographic orientation in studies of language shift. From having been based on census data, questionnaires, or surveys covering large populations, studies of shift since the end of the 1970s have increasingly come to concentrate on the intensive analysis of a limited community or area. The most widely read monographs on language shift all make heavy use of participant observation as a means of gathering and evaluating data on shift in such communities (Dorian 1981; Gal 1979; Hill and Hill 1986; Schmidt 1985).

These monographs represent a growing tendency to eschew mechanical theories of shift and to turn away from earlier attempts to find universal patterns of causality. Increasingly, investigators are realizing that shift in language is caused, ultimately, by shifts in personal and group values and goals. Social changes such as urbanization or industrialization certainly may lead people to revise their perceptions of themselves and their world. And these revisions may eventually be responsible for a group's giving up its vernacular language. But this is not necessary or predictable. And, as Gal makes clear, to say that urbanization or other social change "causes" shift is to leave out the crucial step of understanding how that change has come to be interpreted by the people it is supposed to be influencing. Most significantly for the perspective to be developed in this book: To evoke macrosociological changes as a "cause" of shift is to leave out the step of explaining how such change has come to be interpreted in a way that dramatically affects everyday language use in a community. If the investigation of language shift is modified to include such steps, the question that then must be answered is: Why and how do people come to interpret their lives in such a way that they abandon one of their languages? Viewed in this way, the study of language shift becomes the study of a people's conceptions of themselves in relation to one another and to their changing social world, and of how those conceptions are encoded by and mediated through language.

The analytical tool most commonly used in elucidating these types of relations is the concept of ethnicity. From this perspective, the process of language shift is one in which a vernacular language becomes closely linked to a stigmatized ethnic identity. Once this link becomes salient, the possibility opens for members of the stigmatized group to signal their abandonment of their ethnic identity by giving up their minority language in favor of that spoken by the dominant groups. This option appears to become especially viable and successful during periods in which a certain amount of social mobility becomes possible.

The work of linguist Nancy Dorian on language death in Scotland illustrates this process clearly. In the early nineteenth century, Gaelic-

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speaking farmers in the Scottish Highlands were forcibly “cleared” from their small holdings by large landowners, who wanted the farmers’ land for sheep herding. Those tenants living on the lands of the Earl of East Sutherland were moved to the coast and told to take up fishing to support themselves. These people, who previously had been farmers and who knew nothing whatsoever of the sea or of fishing, had no choice but to learn to become fishermen. With great hardship, the farmers and their descendants eventually learned to earn their living from the sea. But these fisher communities became socially ostracized from the surrounding population, and even came to live in a special part of town called “Fishertown.” Because the surrounding population was predominantly English-speaking, the Gaelic of the fisherfolk was seized upon as a symbol for that segregation and ostracism.

This situation began to change following World War II, when a steep decline in the East Sutherland fishing industry forced the fisherfolk to move into other jobs. This slight social mobility combined with a certain amount of in-migration from other areas of Scotland gave rise to a higher number of exogamous marriages. All of these factors contributed to a local shift away from the stigmatized “fisher” status. And that shift involved and was evidenced by a shift from Gaelic to English:

Since Gaelic had become one of the behaviors which allowed the labelling of individuals as fishers, there was a tendency to abandon the Gaelic along with other “fisher” behaviors. As [one] woman said: “I think, myself, as the children from Lower Brora got older they . . . were ashamed to speak the Gaelic, in case they would be classed as – a fisher.” (Dorian 1981: 76)

The concept of ethnicity has proven to be very important in understanding language shift because it throws a conceptual bridge between macrosociological factors seen to bring about social change and the ways in which those factors come to influence people’s perceptions and strategies. Ethnicity is not, however, always relevant. Certainly it is possible for a group to shift languages without substantially shifting its ethnicity, as the Irish have demonstrated. And although the situation seems to be changing rapidly (Mühlhäusler 1989), it would probably be misleading at present to describe language shift in any rural Papua New Guinean community in terms of ethnicity. Unlike the East Sutherland case described by Dorian, socioeconomic differentiation between groups in contact throughout this area has not yet become so significant that it invites the ranking of those groups in relation to one another. The only distinction of hierarchical salience at present among rural villagers is not expressed in terms of ethnicity. Rather, the crucial difference seems to be between people who are regarded as capable of participating in the modernization process and those who are seen as unable to partic-