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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

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Language shift and cultural reproduction is a fascinating anthropological study of language and cultural change among the villagers of Gapun, in the Sepik region of Papua New Guinea. Despite their strong attachment to their own language as a source of identity and as a tie to their lands, people are abandoning their vernacular in favour of Tok Pisin, the most widely spoken language in Papua New Guinea. By examining village language socialization practices and drawing on Marshall Sahlins's ideas about structure and event, Don Kulick reveals how daily interactions, attitudes towards language, children, change, and personhood, all contribute to a shift in language and culture that is beyond the villagers' understanding and control.

This is the first detailed documentation of the process of language shift. It places linguistic change within an interpretive framework, and treats language as a symbolic system that affects, and is affected by, the thoughts and actions of everyday life.

'An excellent guide to the cultural logic and socio-political contradictions of language loss', *Language*

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Studies in the Social and
Cultural Foundations of Language No. 14

Language shift and cultural reproduction

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The aim of this series is to develop theoretical perspectives on the essential social and cultural character of language by methodological and empirical emphasis on the occurrence of language in its communicative and interactional settings, on the socioculturally grounded “meanings” and “functions” of linguistic forms, and on the social scientific study of language use across cultures. It will thus explicate the essentially ethnographic nature of linguistic data, whether spontaneously occurring or experimentally induced, whether normative or variational, whether synchronic or diachronic. Works appearing in the series will make substantive and theoretical contributions to the debate over the sociocultural–functional and structural–formal nature of language, and will represent the concerns of scholars in the sociology and anthropology of language, anthropological linguistics, sociolinguistics, and socioculturally informed psycholinguistics.

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Maps by Theo Baumann

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For Veronica Kulick

and

for Kruni Aiarpa and Raia Aiarpa

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Kem, a 45-year-old big man in Gapun, is talking directly to his ancestral spirits in the men's house:

You all know, a new time has come up now. Plenty of new ways have come up and we can't look after you too much. I think we're the last generation who will care for you. Our children won't care for you. And you'll vanish. Now all us fathers we care for you so you're still here with us. In the future, no. Your time is ending. You'll soon be gone forever.

Nangam, an 8-year-old Gapun girl, is sitting in a canoe with her mother, Tambong:

- | | | | |
|----------|--|----|---|
| Nangam: | <i>Mama, ol Wongan save kolim "pukpuk" olsem wanem?</i> | N: | Mamma, how do the people in Wongan say "pukpuk" [i.e., "crocodiles" in Tok Pisin]? |
| Tambong: | " <u>ɔɾɛɔ.</u> " | T: | " <u>ɔɾɛɔ.</u> " |
| Nangam: | <i>Na long tok ples Gapun ol i save kolim "pukpuk" olsem wanem?</i> | N: | And in Gapun's language how do they say "pukpuk"? |
| Tambong: | <i>Ol i save tok "ɔɾɛm."</i> | T: | They say "ɔɾɛm." |
| Nangam: | <i>Na mipela save tok "puk-puk."</i> | N: | And we say "pukpuk." |
| Tambong: | [laughs] <i>Em nau. Long tok ples bilong yupela yupela save kolim "puk-puk."</i> | T: | [laughs] That's right. In your [generation's] language, you all call them "pukpuk." |

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Preface

About a month after my arrival in Gapun, I was solemnly informed that I was a ghost. The villagers had been watching me, I was told, observing me closely as I copied down genealogies, politely tried to force down foul-tasting pink globs of sago jelly during meals with them, attempted to mouth phrases in their vernacular language. They were unsure when I first came into the village; initially they were confounded. But now, after a month, the villagers were convinced. I was a ghost.

The moment that had been chosen to impart this disclosure could not have been better timed to heighten my own anxiety. It was night, the rickety house in which we were seated on the floor seemed on the verge of being flattened by the fat drops of tropical rain that splattered down unceasingly, and the only source of light was the orange glow of cigarette tips, floating eerily around in the blackness like disembodied eyes. I wasn't sure who, or even how many people, were in the house with me. It kept thundering hard, of course, and the sudden flashes of lightning that periodically froze everything into sinister, bluish tableaux conjured forth a lifetime of cinematic horror scenes: piercing screams in the shadows, full moons and foggy graveyards, supernatural secrets too monstrous even to be whispered. In all of this, I found myself being told knowingly that I was a ghost. I didn't know what to say.

The explanation that I had given the villagers for my presence in Gapun – that I wanted to write a book about their language – had been brushed impatiently aside. Why, they wondered among themselves, had a white-skinned man chosen to live among *them* and not some other village? What was my *real* reason for coming to Gapun? Who was I *really*?

What I did not understand at the time was that these questions and the way the villagers answered them were grounded in a context in which skin color had acquired a fundamental metaphysical significance. As I came to know the people of Gapun during the fifteen months I spent in the village in 1986–7, I slowly discovered that much of their thought was given over to trying to make sense of the white presence

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in their world and of their own place in the world of white people. The importance of this project escaped me at first. I had come to Gapun to study language shift, and I was prepared to analyze the decline of the vernacular and the expansion of Tok Pisin, the most widely used of Papua New Guinea's three national languages, in the usual ways, applying concepts like ethnicity, social prestige, and the desire for socio-economic mobility. It took me some time to appreciate that these concepts had little relevance for what was happening in Gapun. Instead, it gradually became apparent that what was most central in understanding why the villagers were abandoning their vernacular was precisely those ideas that led them to identify me as a ghost.

The perspective developed in this book is the result of that insight. Had I been more courageous, the book's title might have been "The Power of Culture," because that is, in essence, what it is about: the impact that the conceptions and understandings held by a group of people – about personhood, language, children, interpersonal relations, and change – can come to have on their language.

While being written, this book has traveled the globe. Parts of it have been written, ventilated, revised, or discarded in Ukarumpa, Canberra, Palo Alto, Linköping, and Stockholm. The original draft of Chapters 1 and 2 was even stolen in Kuala Lumpur. Because of this geographic spread, I have a large number of people to thank (in every place except Kuala Lumpur). I take great pleasure in finally being able to do so here.

First, I gratefully acknowledge funding from the Swedish Agency for Research Cooperation with Developing Countries (SAREC) and the Swedish Council for Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences (HSFR). Modest grants from the *Svenska Sällskapet för Antropologi och Geografi*, and from the Department of Social Anthropology, Stockholm University, enabled me to conduct a three-month reconnaissance trip to Papua New Guinea in 1985, which included a one-month stay in Gapun.

Before entering the field, I benefited from a visit to Oxford University, where Peter Mühlhäusler kindly took the time to listen to my research plans and explain to me the sorts of things one should know before attempting to carry out linguistically oriented fieldwork in Papua New Guinea. During my stay in Papua New Guinea, I came to owe debts of gratitude to many people. In Port Moresby, Dicks Thomas took it upon himself to teach me the rudiments of Tok Pisin. In the East Sepik provincial capital of Wewak, Tony Power and John Alman were extremely kind in helping me to arrange transport to and from Gapun the first few times I traveled there. Steve Thomas and Christine Howes graciously opened their home to me during several of my stays in Wewak, and the Christian Mission in Many Lands in Wewak kindly allowed

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me to stay in its beautiful flats whenever one was available. Ralph Stuttgen always made me feel welcome in his guest house in Wewak, and was always willing to share with me some of his thorough knowledge of Sepik societies. Janice Blackwell and I had many enlightening conversations about schooling, and she kindly put me up in her Angoram bungalow a few times. At the Marienberg mission station, Fr. Piotr Zarzecki shared with me his insights about the Catholic church in Papua New Guinea, his knowledge of Sepik mythology, and his sherry. Also at Marienberg was Marianne Peer: no-nonsense nurse, crocodile breeder, connoisseur of Bavarian yodeling, and *personnage extraordinaire*. “Sista Mariana,” as she is affectionately known, has been providing medical services virtually single-handedly to the entire lower Sepik area for more than three decades. Her hospitality and generosity always made it a great pleasure to travel to Marienberg.

In late June 1987, I left Gapun and spent two weeks doing linguistic research at the Summer Institute of Linguistics’ Papua New Guinea headquarters in Ukarumpa, Eastern Highlands Province. I thank Mary Stringer for orchestrating that visit, and for being a delightful and gracious host.

Immediately upon leaving Papua New Guinea in August 1987, I spent three months at the Australian National University, where I was received as a visiting scholar at the Department of Linguistics, Research School of Pacific Studies. For their help, hospitality, and willingness to share their immense knowledge about Papua New Guinea, I thank Lois Carrington, Tom Dutton, Malcom Ross, and Darrell Tryon. In addition, I wish to acknowledge a special, very deep debt of gratitude to the late Don Laycock. It was Don Laycock who suggested that I go to Gapun – almost nothing was known about the village or the language spoken there, but, he reasoned when I told him I was interested in language shift, “it’s such a small language, something must be happening to it.” Throughout my stay in Canberra, Don and I were engaged in a running conversation about the linguistics and sociolinguistics of Gapun and other Sepik societies, and much of what I know about Papuan languages I learned from him.

The bulk of this work was completed at the Department of Social Anthropology at Stockholm University, Sweden. I am particularly grateful to Tomas Gerholm, Lenore Arnberg, and Kenneth Hytlenstam for their comments on individual chapters, and to Per Linell and Karin Aronsson at the University of Linköping for inviting me to present parts of this work to their departments. In addition, I have benefited from brief but intensive lunchtime conversations with Bruce Kapferer, Henrietta Moore, and Marilyn Strathern as they passed through Stockholm.

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Others I would like to thank are Nancy Dorian and Suzanne Romaine, for kindly reading through and commenting on the manuscript, and Michael Prenter and Karen Teel, for their fun and inspiring teaching, still fondly remembered. Shirley Brice Heath deserves special thanks as an important source of inspiration throughout the writing process. Her thorough comments on an earlier draft of the manuscript have been very influential in shaping the final form the book has taken. I also want to thank Bambi Schieffelin, whose encouragement, wisdom, and advice have been and continue to be important in inestimable ways.

I wish to give special recognition to Christopher Stroud, who has been deeply involved with this work from the outset. It was with Christopher's encouragement that I first decided to go to Papua New Guinea, and the vast bulk of the interpretations in this volume were originally developed in conversations with him. Some of these interpretations have already been presented in a number of published works coauthored with him, and I am thankful to him for allowing me to use parts of that material in this book. Christopher worked with me in Gapun for a three-month spell in early 1987, and that visit not only permitted a period of intensive work on the grammar of the Taiap language; it also saved me from an existential distress of almost Malinowskian proportions. Without Christopher's help, insights, bibliographic knowledge, and critical sting, this book could never have been written.

And now, the villagers. Short of metamorphosing into a deity and delivering to them myself the cargo they all anxiously await, I will never be able to repay the debt of gratitude that I owe the people of Gapun. As an outsider and intruder into other people's lives, an anthropologist has no right to expect anything from the people that he or she wishes to study. So expecting nothing, but hoping, of course, for quite a lot, I suddenly turned up in Gapun one day and asked, through my guides there, to be allowed to stay. The kindness and generosity with which the villagers responded to that request still overwhelm me. If I must single out any individual villagers for special thanks, then those would be Kruni Aiarpa and his stern brother Raia, who befriended me and taught me and opened their lives to me, to the point that they even shared what they sometimes considered to be painful and embarrassing memories of the "ways of the ancestors." I also remember with great fondness Kem Masambe and his wife, Wandī Ekwapi, always gracious and generous, and concerned that I was eating properly; Mukar Raia, Raia's adolescent son, who was an absolute wiz at explaining vernacular speech and helping me to transcribe it; Ambuli Waiki, who also initially helped me with Taiap; and those women and men with whom I worked most intensively gathering and transcribing caregiver-child language

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data: Sopak Waiki and her husband, Mone Banang; Paso Yuki and her husband, Ariba Amani; and Tambong Umba and her husband, Marama Kruni. I am especially grateful to my adoptive *mama na papa* in the village, Sake Kruni and Allan Kasia. Without their care, concern, and daily meals of sago jelly or rice, I don't know how I would have managed.

In the village of Wongan, Joe Sumur and his wife, Tundu Kwanga, put me up for two weeks and fed me wonderful meals of fish and flying fox while I studied what went on in the school there. Tundu's old father, Kwanga Ondeng, was a master storyteller and an invaluable source of information about traditional lifestyles and beliefs in Wongan and Gapun. I also thank the headmaster and two teachers at Wongan Community School, partly for allowing me to sit in on classes and observe, and partly for picking up my mail and buying a few occasional supplies for me during their biweekly trips to Angoram to pick up their pay. My visits to the village of Sanae were always made pleasurable by the hospitality of Mapis Demoi and his wife, Rondi; Philip Yakas and his wife, Mbgat Ekwapi; and John Awopia and his wife.

A great, warm hug of thanks must go to my mother, Veronica Kulick, for her indefatigable supplies to the field of unnecessary necessities like chocolate, cookies, and small packets of corn nuts; and for her ability to always make me laugh by expressing horror and incomprehension whenever I mention Papua New Guinea. And finally, I thank Jonas Schild Tillberg, for *divertissements*.

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Note on transcriptions

In transcribing the vernacular language of the people of Gapun, I have used the phonetically based orthography that is presented in Kulick and Stroud (in press b). Only a few of these symbols may be unfamiliar to some readers. These are:

ŋ	velar nasal; like <i>ng</i> in <i>sing</i>
ɔ	rounded back vowel; like <i>o</i> in the Italian <i>cosa</i>
ɪ	unrounded central vowel; like <i>u</i> in <i>put</i>
ə	schwa; like <i>a</i> in <i>about</i>
ɛ	unrounded front vowel; like <i>e</i> in <i>pen</i> and <i>get</i>

To facilitate easy and comfortable reading, I have not used this orthography in the main text to transcribe the names of people and places.

In a few of the texts appearing in this book, morpheme-by-morpheme glosses of Taiap speech appear immediately underneath the Taiap. The following abbreviations are used throughout to specify grammatical information about Taiap utterances:

A	actor, subject of transitive verb
ALL	allative
CONJ	conjunction
CONSEC	consecutive
DL	dual
ERG	ergative
fem	feminine
FUT	future
HAB	habitual
IMPER	imperative
INTENT	intentional mood
IRR	irreal status
LOC	locative
masc	masculine

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NEG	negation
PL	plural
POSS	possessive
S	subject of intransitive verb
S1	first element of discontinuous subject marker
S2	second element of discontinuous subject marker
SG	singular
U	undergoer, object of transitive verb
v	vowel

Speech in Tok Pisin is transcribed in the standard way according to the conventions outlined in F. Mihalic's (1971) *Jacaranda Dictionary and Grammar of Melanesian Pidgin*. Where the spelling of words differs from the spellings more commonly used in Papua New Guinea, the difference reflects the pronunciation of the villagers of Gapun.

Because one of the most characteristic features of speech in Gapun is the villagers' tendency to switch between languages, it has been necessary to devise transcription conventions that make very clear which language is being used when villagers speak. This is done in the transcribed texts through italicization and underlining. Words in italics are words in Tok Pisin. Taiap speech is signaled through italicization *and* underlining. In the translations, which are not italicized, talk that occurred in Taiap is underlined; Tok Pisin speech is not. In addition, the texts in this book contain several examples of switches to vernaculars other than Taiap. Words in vernacular languages other than Taiap are marked through italicization and double underlining.

The villagers' speech has been translated into a colloquial form of American English. The formal, stilted literal translations that characterize so much of ethnographic writing and that generally work to create an impression that non-Western peoples speak in an abstruse and archaic manner have been avoided. Instead, my goal in translating has been to convey the sense and tone of the villagers' speech. I have also been concerned with accurately reproducing the structure of village talk, which is heavily repetitive and influenced by a syntactic convention known as "tail-head linkage," in which the final verb phrase of an utterance is repeated as the initial verb phrase of the following utterance (Haiman 1979, Reesink 1990). In order to highlight the rhetorical structure of village speech, I have represented some examples in a nonblock form, basing the structure of these representations on considerations derived from the field of ethnopoetics (e.g., the articles in Sherzer and Woodbury 1987).

All transcribed texts and some lengthier passages of quotation are numbered in order of their appearance in the book to facilitate cross-

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reference. Notes on situational context and nonverbal actions are given in square brackets in the body of the texts/quotations. In addition, the following transcription conventions are used for passages of texts:

- = Contiguous utterances (used when there is no break between adjacent utterances, the second latched onto, but not overlapping, the first)
- [Overlapping utterances
- / Interruption (between utterances, used when speaker is interrupted by following speaker; within an utterance this indicates self-interruption or false start)
- * Ungrammatical utterance