

○ **G.P. SMITH *GROWING UP WITH TOK PISIN: CONTACT, CREOLIZATION AND CHANGE IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA'S NATIONAL LANGUAGE***

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The author, Geoff P. Smith, provides an in-depth analysis of the status and development of Tok Pisin, or Melanesian Pidgin, amongst one group of the population of Papua New Guinea (PNG). Having lived in the country for 22 years, beginning in the early 1970s, he has been exposed to two decades of Tok Pisin, during which time he has noted its development and more common use, especially amongst the young people of PNG. As he rightly states, 'Tok Pisin is widely used as a lingua franca to communicate across linguistic boundaries' (p.1).

The specific nature of the research, whilst drawing attention to the use of Tok Pisin by 'people aged from about 10 to late adolescence who spoke Tok Pisin as a first language' (p.1), is acknowledged as being applicable to only a subsection of the demographic population, and therefore not easily representative of the total population. Given the rapid changes which have occurred in PNG since independence in 1975, the subject group has been exposed to a plethora of different influences. In a country which is known as 'the land of the unexpected', and in a time of political, educational, social and cultural change, it is difficult and dangerous to generalise regarding any trends.

My exposure to Melanesian Pidgin in various parts of PNG over the last ten years has taught me to appreciate the fact that it can be spoken in different ways in different places, as it is primarily an oral language. According to the *Ethnologue* (Grimes 2000), PNG has over 800 language groups, and 'the language distribution in PNG is the most complex in the world' (Dorney 2000, 20). Moreover, illiteracy is high, a factor which further complicates attempts to standardise Tok Pisin:

A wide range of figures is available on the national literacy rate; for example, the 1990 census found it to be 45.1 percent (National Statistical Office 1994: 131, cited in Department of Education, 2000b: iii), whilst Sir Paulias Matane (1998), a leading entity in education, quoted the rate as 25 percent.

Again in the *Ethnologue* (Grimes 2000) the literacy rate is recorded as being between 32 and 43 percent' (Scoble 2001, 1)

The author acknowledges the 'extreme indigenous linguistic diversity' (p.13) of PNG and surrounding areas of Melanesia. He also describes in detail the development of Tok Pisin to its present status as one of the national languages, despite the fact that 'the predominant attitude of successive governments in independent Papua New Guinea to the development of Tok Pisin has been one of *laissez-faire*' (p.21). I find his analysis of the contexts surrounding the development of Tok Pisin to be both refreshingly honest and accurate.

In the research, the author is especially interested in the effect of Tok Pisin being spoken as a first, rather than a second language; hence the use of 'young, mainly adolescent, first-language speakers' (p.22) to obtain data. The second aim, 'to investigate the degree to which regional variation could be observed in the speech of first language speakers' (p.22) was addressed through visiting primarily provincial high schools, and interviewing students aged 12–16, 'as secondary school administrations proved to be particularly helpful in assisting the research' (p.30).

With regard to the subject group, I have two serious reservations. Firstly, the 21 areas from which subjects were selected to gain data are located in what was formerly known as New Guinea, because, from 1884 to World War I, it was controlled by Germany. The German influence on the development of Tok Pisin to the north of the mainland was substantial, in contrast to the southern Papuan region, which was governed by Australia, and where English is more commonly spoken today. In my experience, there are large areas of the southern mainland of PNG where Tok Pisin is not spoken at all. So, the subject samples are representative of young people in the northern areas of PNG only.

Secondly, my understanding is that most provincial high schools and primary schools provide education primarily in English (Smith acknowledges this on page 199). There is therefore a confounding variable influencing the collection of Tok Pisin data, where subjects are living and studying in a school environment where English is the basis for education. Surely the importance of English in high school education must bias the language they use, and probably distort their use of Tok Pisin as a 'first language', or *lingua franca*. Perhaps this explains my initial reservations, when reading the story written in Tok Pisin on page one of Smith's book, and encountering some phonemes which are based on English, rather than Tok Pisin. For example, the word 'teach' is usually written in Tok Pisin as 'tis', whereas Smith records it as 'tich'. 'Ch' is generally not a phoneme in Tok Pisin. Other words, such as 'lenggwidj' for 'language', reflect the English influence; typically, Tok Pisin would use 'Tok Ples' for 'language'.

Despite the above reservations, the results are based on a large number of informants; over 500 individuals. There is no break-down according to the sex of the subject. However, there is usually a majority of males in the secondary school system, and one might assume that a majority of males have been interviewed. Yet one is forced to ask, how representative are the subjects of the population? According to a survey that was conducted by Waters and others in 1994, Hiri Motu had 120,000 speakers, and English and Tok Pisin had 50,000 each, whilst most local vernacular languages had less than 10,000 speakers (Waters et al. 1995, 67). If the population of PNG is close to four million, Tok Pisin is not the first language of most of its population. According to Smith, it is the first language of many high school students. But what about the number of adolescents and young people in PNG who do not attend school? Whilst I do not have access to current figures, in 1983 only eleven percent of children attended secondary school. My experience is that a lot of adolescents do not attend school, and either live in villages or settlements where the vernacular or mother tongue is more commonly spoken.

However, if we acknowledge the above limitations of the research in terms of the restricted subject group from whom data was obtained, we can move on to examine the results, which are both interesting and detailed. The author looks at the phonology, morphology, lexicon, syntax and discourse processes of the data. In discussing his findings, he examines the superstrate, substrate and universals in Tok Pisin's development, and notes the close relationship between Tok Pisin and English in the data collected. He concedes that language mixing can occur, but is usually corrected by the speaker. He notes that, whilst there can be regional variations, he found a high degree of underlying uniformity.

In his concluding remarks, Smith acknowledges the limitations of his data sources: 'The present study did not touch on the Southern (Papuan) Region or the National Capital District' (p.213). However, future research would also need to take into consideration gender balance, as well Tok Pisin use amongst adolescents and young people apart from secondary school populations.

Review by Gillian A. Scoble, Literacy consultant with the Summer Institute of Linguistics (Papua New Guinea)

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