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**MEANING IN MELANESIA, & SOME CHANGES****Peter C Lincoln**Department of Linguistics  
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linc@hawaii.rr.com**ABSTRACT**

Several generations ago Melanesians adapted English sounding words to their own use while retaining their underlying Melanesian perspective. To a listener, they would seem to be learning English words. But we have evidence that they were applying English sounds to areas of meaning specified by a Melanesian perspective.

This paper presents evidence from Tok Pisin to highlight the Melanesian perspective. It turns out that the perspective within Tok Pisin is not static. Tok Pisin is changing the areas of meaning to shapes that seem less exotic to English speakers.

Evidence for the earlier Melanesian perspective comes from several areas of the language:

1. the pronoun system
2. the meanings of some verbs
3. translations of *with*
4. some kinship terminology

Evidence of ongoing change offers challenges for further investigation.

**Key words:** Change, comitative, instrument, kinship, pronoun, semantics, Tok Pisin.

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**BACKGROUND**

Several generations ago Melanesians adapted English sounding words to their own use while retaining their underlying Melanesian perspective. To a listener, they would seem to be learning English words. But we have evidence that they were applying English sounds to areas of meaning specified by a Melanesian perspective. To better understand what I mean by the terms perspective and area of meaning, consider an English speaker learning German. First, one learns that G<sup>1</sup>: *essen* expresses the meaning of E: eat. Later, one learns that the areas of meaning are not the same. The German perspective specifies that eating done by animals is covered by *fressen* and not *essen*, while the English perspective specified that eat covers

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<sup>1</sup> Abbreviations: 1 first person; 3 third person; E English; G German; p plural; PREP preposition; PRIOR earlier time; s singular; TP Tok Pisin; TRANS transitive. Also I would like to dedicate this paper to the memory of Otto Nekitel (1949-2001), to thank Bob Chandler, Jeff Siegel, Andrea Berez, Bob Blust, and Al Schütz for helpful comments, and to retain blame for any flaws.

both areas of meaning, eating done by humans and eating done by animals<sup>2</sup>. Now consider an English speaker learning Tok Pisin. While the verbs for eating cover much the same areas, one learns that TP **abus** covers the area of meaning of meat as food. But meat is infrequent in traditional Melanesian diets. Soon one learns that **abus** is not really the equivalent of meat, but is closer to enhancement, which would include coconut milk added to a meal of leaves and taro.

This paper presents evidence from Tok Pisin to highlight the Melanesian perspective. It turns out that the perspective within Tok Pisin is not static. Indeed, I will present evidence that the perspective within Tok Pisin is shifting. Tok Pisin is changing the areas of meaning to shapes that seem less exotic to English speakers. Interestingly, the change is to some extent unpredictable.

In this paper, first I review evidence for the earlier Melanesian perspective from several areas of the language:

5. the pronoun system
6. the meanings of some verbs
7. translations of *with*
8. some kinship terminology

Then I present evidence for changes. Finally, I suggest further investigations. Throughout, examples in **bold** are from Tok Pisin (TP).<sup>3</sup>

### PRONOUN SYSTEM

The pronoun systems in all languages have the same overall function: sorting out who one is talking about. Comparing the Tok Pisin system to the English system reveals very different details. These details exemplify differences in what I am calling perspective.

In the singular, English sounds are applied to more general meanings:

TP	gloss
<b>mi</b>	I, me
<b>yu</b>	you
<b>em</b>	he, him, she, her, it

Differences are obvious: the subject/object case distinction and the gender distinctions are ignored.

In the plural, Tok Pisin specifies more than English. The sounds are from English words but the areas of meaning are Melanesian:

TP	gloss
<b>mipela</b>	I and other(s), but not you

<sup>2</sup> Similarly, in French *mouton* refers to both the animal and its meat; in English two words are used sheep and mutton, as pointed out by Saussure (1959:115-6) a century ago.

<sup>3</sup> The data are largely based on my own knowledge of the language gained during a total of two years residence in Bougainville and on the Rai Coast. I also learned from Dutton (1973) and Mihalic (1971). For an excellent sample of well documented natural data, I refer the reader to Smith (2002).

<b>yumi(pela)</b>	you and I (and possibly others)
<b>yupela</b>	you and other(s) with you
<b>ol</b>	they, them

The most salient difference is that E *we* is disambiguated to make explicit whether the person being spoken to is included or not. The form excluding the hearer is built from the singular **mi** and the apparent plural suffix **-pela**, which also occurs with adjectives. The inclusive form is built from **yu** and **mi** and **pela**. The form **yumi** is an implicit dual, which suffices for one speaker and one hearer; **yumipela** implies more people. The plural of **yu** is **yupela** marking the singular-plural distinction (*thou-you*) that is almost completely forgotten in English. **Ol** is an irregular plural, if one expects **\*empela**.

Two more categories are common in the Pacific Languages and therefore in Tok Pisin but are not expressed in English: Dual and Trial

TP	gloss
<b>mitupela</b>	I and one other, but not you
<b>yumi(tupela)</b>	you and I (the two of us)
<b>yutupela</b>	the two of you
<b>tupela</b>	the two of them

TP	gloss
<b>mitripela</b>	I and two others
<b>yumitripela</b>	you, I and a third person
<b>yutripela</b>	the three of you
<b>tripela</b>	the three of them

The forms are quite regular. The adjective form of the numeral is suffixed. **Pela** regularly occurs at the end of adjectives:

TP	gloss
<b>bikpela,</b>	big
<b>yelopela</b>	yellow
<b>wanpela</b>	1
<b>tupela</b>	2
<b>tripela</b>	3
<b>popela</b>	4

Use of the dual and trial forms depends on the background of the speaker. One continues the habits of other languages one speaks. In other words, dual and trial forms are little used in areas where none of the local languages make the distinction.

### MEANINGS OF SOME VERBS

Readers of Mülhäusler (1979; and Lincoln 1979) already know that many verbs in TP can have more inchoative meanings compared to similar sounding source words that have a more resultative meaning in English: Thus TP **painim** sounds like E *find him* but actually means look for. The word focuses attention on the beginning of the process. The E *find* focuses attention on the conclusion of the process. English

speaking learners of TP have made progress when they no longer hear **Mi bin painim, painim, painim, tasol nogat.** as I found and found and found, but it wasn't. In parallel fashion, the meaning of TP **dai** is not die but unconscious [perhaps starting to show signs of being dead]; **kilim** is not kill him but hit him, strike him [a blow that may well prove fatal]. These differences in areas of meanings again reflect the Melanesian perspective.

### TRANSLATIONS FOR *WITH*

Perhaps the most striking conceptual contrast between English and Tok Pisin involves two grammatical meanings – instrumental [using] case and comitative [accompanying] case – that are covered by the single word *with* in E, but by two different grammatical structures in TP. The instrumental sense is covered by the preposition **long**:

**Mi kat-im diwai long naip.** I cut the wood with a knife.  
1s cut-TRANS wood PREP knife

The comitative sense is covered by adverbial noun phrase **wantaim**:

**Mi bin go wantaim Sir Paul.** I went with Sir Paul.  
1s PRIOR go accompany Sir Paul

The only prepositions in Tok Pisin are **long** and **bilong**. **Bilong** usually marks possession. **Long** marks everything else.

**Mi bin go long Mosbi.** I went to Port Moresby.  
1s PRIOR go PREP Port Moresby

**Em samting bilong ol.** That is their business.  
3s something PREP 3p

With such a limited choice, is no surprise that **long** marks instruments. The surprise is that it doesn't also mark comitative<sup>4</sup>.

### WAN- IMPLIES SOLIDARITY

The logic of **wantaim** < one-time is that it means at the same time. If one accompanies another person, they both go at the same time. But structurally it is an adverbial noun, and not a preposition at all.

**Wantaim** is part of a very productive pattern in Tok Pisin in which **wan** implies unity.

Melanesia is socially very diverse, some 854 languages are spoken within Papua New Guinea. People in towns and cities come from many language areas. Chances are that a stranger will speak a different

<sup>4</sup> As Mihalic(1971: 123) points out: "**long**... This word is used in Melanesian Pidgin for nearly all the prepositions known in European languages including: in, on, at, to, from, with, by, about, because of, during, for"

language -- indeed a very different language. Encountering someone who speaks the same language is likely a happy reunion. Thus **wantok** literally one-language means friend. There are numerous words in TP that built on this pattern of one-X implies sharing X implies a social bond or solidarity:

**Wannem** < one-name = namesake (an important bond in Melanesia)

**Wanpisin** < one-bird = clan mate, respecting the same totemic bird.

**Wansospen** < one-sauce pan = messmate, sharing the same cooking pot.

The pattern is so productive that I once got away with **Yumi wansu** to mean you and I have the same shoes and express solidarity with another barefoot party-goer who like me had left his footwear at the door. At first, he balked at my wording, but as I explained the intended solidarity he complimented me on my grasp of the language. In Mihalic's dictionary there is also **wanpis** < one-piece meaning orphan, alone. But I find the derivation reflecting isolation rather than sharing so in conflict with the Melanesian perspective that I suspect that it may have been coined by an outsider rather than a Melanesian.

### SOME KINSHIP TERMINOLOGY

As with pronoun systems, all languages share the overall function of kinship terminology, which is to sort out who is related to whom. Here again, English sounds and Melanesian perspective lead to some strikingly different details. For example, when speaking of siblings: *E brother* refers to a male sibling and *E sister* refers to a female sibling. TP **brata** refers to siblings of the same sex, while **susa** refers to siblings of the opposite sex. In other words, **brata** means a woman's sister, a man's brother and **susa** means a woman's brother, a man's sister. Among men this difference in perspective is moot, but a woman saying **brata bilong mi** to introduce another woman, highlights the contrast.

The same sex vs. different sex perspective affects meanings in words referring to the parental generation: **papa** father includes all of one's father's brothers but not mother's brothers; **mama** mother includes all of one's mother's sisters but not father's sisters. The same sex vs. different sex perspective extends further, such that children of one's father's brother's and one's mother's sister's are treated like siblings. Thus **brata** includes parallel cousins of the same sex, i.e. the children are the same sex, and they are children of siblings of the same sex. These extensions can go on and on, so that for example the grandchildren of **brata**, parallel second cousins are treated as siblings.

Nuclear family status of actual siblings can be asserted with the terms **wanmama** same mother and **wanpapa**, same father.

**Mitupela wanpapa na wanmama.**

We two are true siblings, same mother, same father.

### NEW WAYS

The description above is the TP that I found some thirty years ago when I first lived in Papua New Guinea. On brief visits starting in 2000, I am finding that the language is changing. Some of the data mentioned to support the idea of Melanesian perspective is no longer current, particularly in the sibling terminology and the translations of *with*.

## SIBLINGS

In mid 2003 during a party thrown by East West Center students, I explained at some length TP kin terms to a young acquaintance. She had recently visited her mother's village in Papua New Guinea, but before that visit had heard little if any Tok Pisin. As she began to catch on to kinship system I was describing, we were joined by Kenneth Sumbuk with better credentials than mine for this tutorial. He grew up speaking TP and has graduate degrees in linguistics from Oxford (UK) and Waikato (NZ). He very gently let me know that younger people no longer use the same vs. different sex pattern for sibling terms. For them **brata** means male sibling and **susa** means female sibling, while older people cling to earlier usage.

Later that year on a visit to Bougainville, I was to some extent able to confirm this change. During my stay, a brother and sister were expected for a visit home after living in Manus for more than a decade. When speaking of them, I used the woman's name and **wantaim brata blongen**. My deliberate "mistake" went uncommented upon. I had hoped to be corrected to **wantaim susa blongen**.

Presumably, the change in TP meaning from sibling of same sex to male sibling and from sibling of the opposite sex to female sibling is due somehow to knowledge of the English meanings. In my review of the Lonely Planet *Pidgin Phrase Book* (Lincoln 2001) I criticized the glossing of **brata** as brother and **susa** as sister. My critique was based on my earlier experience. Those remarks are themselves now open to criticism and revision. Interesting questions remain: Does the kinship system as whole retain the older Melanesian perspective? Does the extension of sibling terms to cousins persist?

## TRANSLATING WITH

On a trip in 2000, I found that some of my friends were using the comitative case to express the instrumental case, both in TP and in their village language: **Katim wantaim naip** cut with [accompanying] a knife rather than **katim long naip** cut with [using] a knife. They were making the same "mistake" in their language Banoni: *kotsi mea naipi* cut (greens) with [accompanying] a knife rather than the older "correct" Banoni: *kotsi ghenai naipi* cut (greens) with [using] a knife (Lincoln 2002).

Another example was available on a web page credited to Edward Etepa at Unitech in Lae, Papua New Guinea, that featured a picture of a woman putting on traditional face paint. Just below the picture is the caption: "**Meri hilans i karamapim het wantaim bilas. Meri i redi long kalapkalap long haus singsing** Women from the highlands cover their heads with decorations.<sup>5</sup> This change is puzzling. Convergence toward English only explains the fact that the two translations are simplified to one. Why change to the inherently Melanesian structure, **wantaim**? Why not extend **long** to cover both meanings of *with*?

<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, the URL for the web page with this interesting picture and caption is no longer valid. The caption may be analysed as follows:

<b>Meri</b>	<b>hilans</b>	<b>i</b>	<b>karamap-im</b>	<b>het</b>	<b>wantaim</b>	<b>bilas.</b>	
woman	Highlands	3s	cover	-TRANS	head	ACCOMPANY	decoration
<b>Meri</b>	<b>i</b>	<b>redi</b>	<b>long</b>	<b>kalapkalap</b>	<b>long</b>	<b>haus</b>	<b>singsing</b>
woman	3s	ready	PREP	dance	PREP	house	feast

The woman has put decoration on her head. She is ready to dance in the feast house.

My brief comments on these changes are intended as a challenge to others to revise and extend my observations. I look forward to reading other reports on these changes.

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