

TOK PILAJ, TOK PIKSA NA TOK BOKIS
(Imaginative Dimensions in Melanesian Pidgin)

Elton Brash, University of Papua & New Guinea

(Revised version of paper given at a meeting
of the Linguistics Society of Papua and New
Guinea in May 1969 - Received April 1971)

Over the past few years there has been a good deal of debate over the value of Melanesian Pidgin. Contributors to this debate have included linguists, academics, educators and politicians as well as a number of people who have little claim to authority. In the popular press the debate has degenerated into a series of assertions and counter-assertions often coloured by a surprising degree of emotion. The issue seems to touch some deep-seated feelings. There are those who hotly reject Pidgin as "corrupt" and "undignified" and those who reject it as a vestige of colonialism, unacceptable in an emergent nation. On the other hand there are those who support it because of its usefulness or its "colour". There are of course those expatriates who uphold Pidgin as it provides evidence of their own "successful" adaptation to the local environment. A study of the speech habits of expatriates in the Territory reveals the common use of a number of Pidgin words (e.g. "kalkai", "maski"), apparently marks of the true Territorian.

This debate may have some value as an indication of the diversity of existing belief and feeling that clusters around the language, but it can have little value as an accurate indication of the chances of survival of the language, or of the nature of its future evolution. The most likely indication of the chances of Pidgin's survival is its current "state of health", and here the prognosis is good. Three features of the language promise well for its future life and development:

Its syncretic capacity and its resultant incremental growth.

The imaginative life it embodies and the new forms of figurative expression it is rapidly evolving.

The successful use of Pidgin by New Guineans as a creative medium.

Before proceeding to the elaboration of these three features, it is worth noting that Pidgin has always existed in a multilingual context. It has always been a second language and often a third or fourth.

The linguistically lazy Australian seems reluctant to give recognition or credit to the greater linguistic versatility of the New Guinean. He comes from a society where English is not seriously challenged by any other language. The foreign immigrant and the foreign visitor are expected to know and use English but the Australian visitor overseas usually doesn't consider it necessary to learn the language of his hosts. Our school system still largely ignores the languages of our South-East Asian neighbours and only recently has it made belated efforts to produce students who can not only pass school exams in French and German, but actually hold conversations in them as well.

With this background it is perhaps understandable that the Australian, confronted by the multiversity of New Guinean languages (a) makes little or no effort to learn any one of them, (b) in discussing the "problem" persists in dealing in mutually exclusive alternatives in an attempt to come up with an answer to the question, "What is the right language for New Guinea?" Surely the answer to this question is already with us in the speech habits of an increasing number of young New Guineans who are fluent in a vernacular, possibly a second vernacular, a lingua franca (Pidgin or Motu or both) and English. The ease with which New Guineans move between these languages indicates that a multilingual society poses little difficulty for them.

Melanesian Pidgin then should be seen as one of a number of languages, coexistent with them and not in any sense a threat to them. It should be remembered that, although more and more New Guineans use English adequately, they do not as a result allow their Pidgin to fall into disuse. On the contrary, Pidgin seems to gain new life and colour as it is used by people who can use other languages including English quite well but find Pidgin appropriate to many situations.

In an earlier paragraph I referred to three features of the use of contemporary Pidgin. The first of these, its syncretic capacity and resultant incremental growth is easily illustrated by reference to a large number of terms (technical, political, medical etc.) that are continually finding their way into the working vocabulary of the language. For example, as motor vehicles are in common use in many villages, a wide variety of mechanical terms are now used in Pidgin. To illustrate, here is an approximate reconstruction of a speech made by a Goroka councillor at the opening of the Highlands Highway.

Mipela plis tumas long dispela nupela
rot Mr. Hay nau tasol i bin olim.
Long bipo i gat wanpela rot ol man

We are very pleased with the new
road Mr. Hay has just opened. There
was an earlier road made by village men

I wokim long spet, tasol dispela em i rot nogut. Em i save bagerapim ol spring na sokabsoba bilong Lanrova bilong mipela.

with spades but it was very rough. It broke the springs and shock absorbers on our Landrover .

Here is a clear example of the syncretic capacity of Pidgin. Rather than make an effort to describe the parts of the vehicle by some devious circumlocution, the speaker chose to use the European technical terms, knowing that they would be understood by his fellow highlanders.

Although such terms enter Pidgin at the literal level as labels for particular objects, they often come quickly into figurative use. For example, an exhausted player in a football match who slows down and stops when he should be "up with the play" is commonly referred to by the expression -

Em i no inap ron - benzin i pinis.

He can't run - he's run out of petrol.

A limping man with a bandaged leg could be discussed in terms of a vehicle with a punctured tyre -

Taia i flet na man i wokabout isi isi tasol.

He's got a flat tyre and walks slowly.

Again a man having difficulty in walking through thick mud can be advised to -

Putim long foa wil

Engage four-wheel drive.

Not only are such expressions used flippantly in casual conversation, but they are quickly carried over into serious speech. For example, the word "guidance" in the context of Australia guiding New Guinea towards independence is rendered by the use of the word stia "steer", as in -

Sapos Gavman bilong Australia i givim gutpela stia long Nugini i ken kisim independens kwiktaim.

If the Australian government guides New Guinea well, the country will achieve independence quickly.

One could choose many other areas of expression and quickly discover words that have recently been adopted into Pidgin and given both literal and figurative connotations.

The second feature of Pidgin to which I referred - the imaginative life it embodies and the rapid evolution of new forms of figurative language, is best discussed through the identification of some common varieties of imaginative speech.

1. Coinage of Nouns

A common criticism asserts that Pidgin involves far too much circumlocution. This is not always so, for the language is being regularly expanded by the adoption of new words. Many of these are coined and often show a great sense of economy. For example, the locally accepted label for the Boeing 727 jet planes which now fly in and out of Moresby is simok balus "aeroplane which smokes". Again the new ANG building in Port Moresby is commonly referred to as twelv storl "12 storey".

2. Coinage of Verbs

A second indication of both colour and economy in Pidgin can be found in the use of coined verbs like aigris "eye grease" used in the sentence -

John em I aigris long ol meri John makes eyes at girls.

Similarly, airaun "eye round" is a verb meaning "to wander round in a leisurely manner to see what's on".

3. Use of Similes (Tok Piksa).

The comparing of one person or object with another has been common in Pidgin since the language was first used. The frequently used word olsem enables comparisons to be made as in -

Pita I olsem sak Peter is like a shark.

Shark here denotes a predatory nature and is most commonly used to refer to behaviour between sexes. Observers watching Peter making "advances" to a girl could make this statement.

4. Metaphor

When the speaker wants to add force to his comparison the word olsem is dropped in favour of -

Pita em I sak tru Peter's a real shark.

If the speaker wishes to give even greater force to his comparison he may express the metaphor even more concisely. In this case as an observer watching Peter successfully escorting the young lady away, a man might exclaim

Sakman Ia! A sharkman!

Metaphors need not always belong to the realm of the colloquial. They often help provide literal firmness of meaning, for example, the branch of a tree is expressively labelled han bilong diwai "the tree's hand".

A metaphor can be kept up in light-hearted conversation to extend a conceit that is understood by both speakers. For example :

A: Yu wok we?

B: Mi wok long Masta Raun.

A: Gutpela wok long en?

B: Wok i oraif tasol pei i no gut.

A: Where do you work?

B: I'm working for Mr. Stroll Around.

A: Is it interesting work?

B: The work's OK but the wages are poor.

This kind of conversation can be labelled tok pilal and speakers enjoy taking such light-hearted conversation to great lengths.

5. Ambiguity or Double Talk

Figurative language can be used in a deliberate attempt to exclude outsiders from the conversation. This type of speech is well recognised in Pidgin and is variously labelled as tok haid, tok baksalt or tok bokis. In a society in which identification with a group by the sharing of a common language is so important, it is not surprising that Pidgin is sometimes used as a substitute. When a person stays in his own language area surrounded by his wantoks he is in no danger of losing his sense of belonging even when foreigners arrive and disrupt the normal way of life. However, when he moves to the town or to a distant place of work and finds himself in company with men who do not speak his language, he may wish to use Pidgin as a substitute means of identification with his work mates. The workmen on a particular plantation may evolve a system of speaking in Pidgin which enables them to communicate among themselves to the exclusion of the overseers and the boss. Pidgin may be spoken as a kind of pig Latin with deliberately distorted pronunciation and extraneous suffixes used to hide the meaning from the uninitiated. Or, a series of nouns will, by common agreement, be selected as substitutes for other nouns with the same intention.

For example, the "boss" could be labelled "pumpkin" or "pawpaw", or in a more sophisticated way, "ABC Radio". His actions and words can then be described in terms of his new identity. If the radio station label was used, men could, in hearing of their boss, discuss what he had done, what he had said and what they thought of him without his being any the wiser.

- e.g. A: Yu harim ABC nius long morning? Did you hear the ABC news this morning?
 B: Nogat, em i tok wanem? No, what did it say?
 A: I nogat gutpela tok - tok win bilong krankl man tasol. Nothing important - a load of rubbish.
 B: Tru ah, atink yumi no ken harim tok long dispela nius - yumi inap sekim tok bilong en. Is that so? Well I don't think we have to worry too much about what it says - we can ignore it.

This type of double talk was very useful during the days when New Guineans were forbidden to buy liquor. Unscrupulous traders had no hesitation in supplying it, and a special vocabulary was evolved to refer to the desired items. Some of the more common words were kunai fala and buka meri.

Ambiguity and double talk can of course be used in normal conversation without any concern for cutting out a third party. Naturally, a large percentage of the double talk arises when simple expressions have a secondary humorous meaning. For example, a simple statement like -

MI hangri; mi laik kaka! rais. I'm hungry; I want to eat some rice.

can have a second meaning when accompanied by meaningful glances towards a passing "beauty". In this case it refers to a man's sexual appetite. Similarly, the statement -

Abus bilong mi stret! That's my meat!

can be used to apply to a woman.

The important feature of all of these kinds of figurative expressions is the high level of imaginative enterprise they display. The process of adoption of new expression on the following expansion of their connotations is a rapid one, and one must be continually in touch with fluent Pidgin speakers to keep up with the changes.

The rapid evolution of connotation, in Pidgin, can be illustrated by reference to the phrase mauswara which literally means "mouth water". For years a person wishing to refer to his hunger would do so by reference to his salivary response as in the phrase -

MI hangri tru. MI smelim kaka! i tan pinis na wara i kamap long maus bilong mi. I am really hungry, I can smell the cooked food and my mouth is watering.

More recently, in its shortened form, mauswara, this expression has taken on two other

distinct meanings, the first denotes a person's keenness to take part in some conversation or activity (not necessarily a feast). The second denotes a person's conceit - he thinks he knows the answers and wants to tell everyone about them but in reality knows nothing. In this last meaning someone's detailed opinion can be dismissed as mauswara - empty talk.

A similar evolution of meaning surrounds the expression Asua: "As you were" - a corruption of the army command meaning "disregard the preceding order". In its current form it can be used to correct or recall a statement one has wrongly made, but it can also be used when playing cards to denote a faulty deal and the need for a redeal or a reshuffle. It is possible to find many other examples of this kind of speech.

Many of the most enterprising examples of figurative expressions in Pidgin are being provided by educated New Guineans. Their fluency in English does not reduce their enjoyment in the use of Pidgin, particularly the kind of expression to which I am referring here. The University of Papua-New Guinea can provide many examples. One of the most popular expressions was the use of the word misinari "missionary" which has appeared regularly in student conversation and campus graffiti during the last few years. The connotations are legion and depend on the manner in which the word is applied. Perhaps the most common implications are derogatory as the term was applied to people who interfered on moral grounds with the student's life. Visiting speakers and performers were also labelled misinari presumably because of their intention to "do good" for the students. Other mutations of meaning quickly followed. Here are two of the most common:

1. A student who pushes into a queue or seeks some form of special consideration may justify his action to his fellow students with the phrase -

Mi misinari ia!

I am a special kind of a person
requiring special consideration.

2. The second mutation is sometimes used by a student who, in the company with a number of girls, finds himself being teased by his friends. He would dismiss their insinuations of his sexual opportunism by the phrase -

Mi misinari ia!

I am celibate (or impotent) -
the girls are safe in my company.

Further examples of student slang that illustrate the popularity of Pidgin among educated New Guineans are not hard to find. A girlfriend can be labelled dingi "dinghy"

and going steady becomes tromwe anka "cast an anchor". On the same subject a young man who is looking for sexual experience without marriage can describe his activities in terms of katim kona "cut the corner - take a short cut - sex without marriage." On other subjects a student might warn a fellow student of the consequences of failing his exams by referring to the mental work he would be forced to find. A common expression of this kind is as follows -

Lukaut nogut yu lus long exam na
bai yu sutim kolta.

Be careful, if you fail, you will
end up spreading the road with
bitumen - coal tar.

Many of the expressions that give Pidgin its popular appeal seem however to spring from the uneducated man about town. Two sources of activity seem to have provided more of their share of colour. Firstly, card-playing and secondly, drinking. The word for "cards" in Pidgin is kas. This word carries not only the literal meaning but a figurative meaning of "luck", for example, kas bilong yu means "you are lucky" and conversely, kas no gut means "bad luck".

The word spak provides an interesting example of the evolution of a word in Pidgin. It was originally used as a term describing a person under the influence of alcohol. It seems to have been derived from the English word "spark" or "spark-up" meaning "bright" or "lively". The expression tu glas spak is a local equivalent of the Australian expression - "a two glass roarer", i.e. one who is too easily affected by alcohol. Recently, the word spak which achieved very common and popular use and covered all levels of inebriated behaviour has taken another shift in meaning to include high-spirited, violent and voluble behaviour by a person not necessarily under the influence of alcohol. An outspoken political radical can therefore be described as a spakman as can a man who likes to get drunk.

The process of evolution of this word has seen its introduction into Pidgin first at the figurative level, followed by its common use to the point where it became a literally accepted term, followed in turn by its figurative use in a different sense. This again illustrates something of the innate energy of the language.

The first indication of the "state of health" of Pidgin to which I referred earlier is its use by New Guineans as a creative medium. Such use is in addition to its wide use, in written form, as a means of religious, political and agricultural education.

To date there have been two collections of Pidgin Poems, Wiliwil and Nansel (I)

and a number of plays The Good Woman of Konedobu, Rot Bilong Kago and Manki Masta (2) The first New Guinea Arts Festival included an evening of poems, songs and stories in Pidgin. The work of students associated with Theatre 6 at Goroka Teachers College has also illustrated the potential of Pidgin as a popular dramatic medium in this Territory. The strongest advocates for the use of Pidgin are those who are successfully using it for creative art.

I have referred to three features of the language which seem indicative of its continuing growth and development. I am unable to negate this promising growth by the identification of any features within the language that suggest a possible decay. Its great flexibility and the wide variety of situations in which it finds use, combine with the features I have mentioned in this paper to provide strong evidence of its future potential.

FOOTNOTES

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| (1) Leo Hannet (ed). | <u>Williwil</u> , Papua Pocket Poets, Port Moresby, 1970 |
| Kumulau Tawali (ed). | <u>Nansef</u> , Papua Pocket Poets, Port Moresby, 1971 |
| (2) Raabi Namaliu | "The Good Woman of Konedobu", <u>Kovave</u> 1/2. |
| Leo Hannett | "Em Rot Bilong Kago", <u>Kovave</u> , Pilot Edition |
| Kumulau Tawali | "Manki Masta", Unpublished play, University of Papua and New Guinea. |