

# A sociolinguistic sketch of New Guinea

Mark Donohue

## Introduction

New Guinea is home to the greatest number, and greatest diversity, of languages in the world. In an area only 2000 km long, over 1,000 languages are regularly spoken, belonging to at least 50 families. The largest language in the area has less than 200,000 speakers; the smallest known stable, non-endangered language situation is Masep, which is not known to be related to any other languages, and has less than 40 speakers (Clouse *et al.* 2002). Politically the region is split into two, with the eastern half the territory of Papua New Guinea independent since 1975, and the western half formerly being a Dutch territory, but Indonesian since annexation in 1961; each half has its own national language(s). In addition to the enormous 'baseline' complexity that such a linguistically diverse environment guarantees, the island has been subject to four different colonial administrations, each with their own official languages (Dutch and Malay in the west, English in the east), and has generated three pidgins/creoles that have achieved widespread use in different areas (local Malay varieties in the west, Tok Pisin in most of the east and Hiri Motu in the south half of the east), as well as the official languages.

## Language and identity

Language is very important to the establishment, and maintenance of, identity. Crowther (2001: 4), describing the One linguistic community, summarizes a typical situation:

There is a high degree of linguistic awareness among One speakers, who have a clear (though not always identical) concept of the extent of One, and a recognition of where the borders lie and what lies beyond them (linguistically). All speakers are aware of the linguistic differences between varieties and will cite them enthusiastically. For example, when taking a wordlist in Molmo village, one person who claimed to be married to a Siam woman supplied the Siam equivalents. The forms given were predictable – a substitution of Molmo [l] with [n] (a valid sound

correspondence). Upon visiting Siamia village, the wordlist was checked and numerous items were found to be completely different. For example, *wala* 'liver' in Molmo was claimed to be *wana* in Siamia, but in reality it has an unrelated form *kunjó*. Notwithstanding this awareness of differences, speakers have a very strong sense of membership to the larger One group. They believe they are speaking the same 'language', despite the fact that many of the varieties are unintelligible to one another and a lingua franca (Tok Pisin) is required for communication.

This demonstrates the use, common across New Guinea, of a prescriptive (and frequently variable) interpretation of the linguistic similarities and differences between villages to make political capital.

Despite being touted as a 'sociolinguistic laboratory' (Wurm 1977, 1979), there has been very little detailed research in New Guinea. Numerous sociolinguistic surveys of language use in local language areas, including observations on language use, code-switching and variation, have been carried out by members of SIL International (see the *Ethnologue* website), but little in the way of overall assessment other than Mühlhäusler (1975) and Romaine (1992). Schieffelin (1990) describes language socialization in a southern New Guinea community, making a major contribution to the understanding of the sociolinguistics of children's interaction with language. Kulick (1992) provides an insightful analysis of the form and function of different speech genres in a community with a highly endangered language. A much-needed research topic is the investigation of language use and code-switching between Tok Pisin and (Papua New Guinean) English in Papua New Guinea, and similarly between local Malay varieties and more 'standard' Indonesian in towns and cities in the Indonesian provinces. Work establishing the parameters that define the variation in use and spread of local Malay varieties is ongoing (Kim *et al.* 2007), and appears to be similar to those reported in Grimes (1991).

While national languages are promoted in both countries, the social cohesion of these languages varies. In the west, varieties of Malay, related to Indonesian, have been used for over 100 years along parts of the north coast, and these have developed into locally-influenced creoles (Donohue 2007), which have little or no mutual intelligibility with standard Indonesian. In more isolated areas, Indonesian has only arrived with the formal presence of the government, and so is spoken in a very standard manner, with little regional creolization (though significant first-language phonological interference), and there are reports of a variety of Indonesian or Malay being increasingly used in areas beyond government control where rebel activity is frequent.

Similarly, different dialects of Tok Pisin are found across Papua New Guinea. In addition to an urban/rural divide, with urban Tok Pisin showing considerably more English lexification (for instance, *Yumi i mas diskasin dispela problem*, vs. *Yumi i mas toktok long dispela wari* 'We should discuss these problems'), different areas show different phonologies and/or differences in details of the grammar (e.g. the instantiation of the inclusive/exclusive contrast in the first person plural). In Papua New Guinea the use of Tok Pisin is growing nationally, at the expense of both smaller local languages and other lingue franche. Tok Pisin is still strongest in its homeland along the north coast, where numerous plantations were established in colonial times. The other main lingua franca, Hiri Motu, maintains its position as an important language of interethnic communication in the south, and numerous languages promoted by different missions as the language of religious instruction maintain their functions in restricted areas (e.g. McElhanon 1979).

Pre-contact pidgins were found in numerous areas (e.g. Donohue 1997; Foley 2006), and some are still used as languages of wider communication.

## Multilingualism

The populations of New Guinea are overwhelmingly multilingual, traditionally in several local languages (a home or community language, one or more additional local languages, and perhaps a local trade language, if there is one), though in recent years proficiency in national languages, or varieties of national languages, has grown dramatically, replacing the earlier multilingualism with a simple local + national bilingualism in many areas.

At its most extreme, particularly in townships and cities, this tendency has led to the rise of a significant number of people, mostly younger, who do not speak the village-language of their parents, but only the national language of the area they are in, or a variety thereof. In many cases, as is true elsewhere in, for instance, Indonesia, parents are deliberately not transmitting their local languages to children in a deliberate attempt to give their children an advantage in school. Areas in which church-sponsored schooling, in the local language, is prevalent predictably show less of this tendency.

Away from this discussion of loss of varieties, the traditional sociolinguistic environment sponsored not only great bilingualism, but also great variety within the one language, with distinct special speech styles being employed in particular socio-cultural circumstances (e.g. Franklin 1972), or when talking or referring to particular kin relations. The distinction between 'language' and 'dialect', and between 'subgroup' and 'language' is a blurry one at best in the linguistic minds of many New Guineans, with speakers in some cases claiming understanding of what are clearly separate languages on the basis of one or two prominent shibboleths, while in other cases non-comprehension will be reported on the basis of a different (and proscribed) intonation pattern. Crowther (2001) discusses the interaction of social factors that shape the construal of ethnolinguistic identity in the eastern Bewani mountains.

This said, even today, speakers of the Vanimo coast languages often, when they find it advantageous to their argumentation, refer to the different villages from Skou to Vanimo, and Leitre, as speaking the 'same language'. Crowther (2001) documents the use of linguistics terminology by New Guineans to refer not to an individual language, as a linguist would define it, but to a linguistic sub-group, and this appears to be the case for Skou and its relatives as well. When questioned on actual intelligibility, I have found that interviewees usually back-pedal on their claims of linguistic unity, saying that, while they are the same languages, it is true that 'the words are different', 'the sounds are different', or 'the other villages mangle the language'. In the absence of extensive experience of surveying language attitudes in New Guinea, the kinds of information that would be acquired by questioning speakers of languages that one is not familiar with would not be overly helpful in determining language extent.

## Language planning and language development

Language policy in Papua New Guinea is enthusiastically supportive of local diversity, but the government basically lacks the skilled workers and the funds to incorporate any languages (other than the main *lingue franche*, Tok Pisin and Hiri Motu, as well as

English) into the curriculum at school. Local radio in most areas makes only minimal efforts to be linguistically diverse, and television has little, if anything, that is not English.

In western New Guinea, as with other regions inside Indonesia, the official policy that is very supportive of local languages is combined with *de facto* indifference at best, and violent suppression at worst. Various church- or mission-initiated programmes promote local languages, but officialdom obstructs many of the advantages of these initiatives.

Literacy in national languages is developing in cities, but remains minimal in the more numerous rural areas. Literacy in local languages can only be described as being in its infancy. Schieffelin (1995, 2000), and Walker (1987) describe the uptake, and impact, of literacy on traditional societies in New Guinea.

## Language in use

Very little work has been done on pragmatics and stylistics in New Guinea. A notable exception is Rumsey's work on the genre of chanted tales (Rumsey 2001, and ongoing work), Goldman (1984) on Huli disputes, and Merlan and Rumsey's ([1991] 2006) work on the role that language, and the manipulation of language, play in a number of conventionalized public, political exchanges in the eastern highlands of New Guinea.

One pervading characteristic of language use in New Guinea is the use of head-tail linkages (as noted by Longacre 1972). This is apparent in examples such as Tok Pisin *em i rauniin ol dispela brata, nau ol i raun i kam i stap antap long Wutung. Nau ol i stap long ples Wutung* 'he chased up all the cousins, and they all came to stay in Wutung. So they were all in Wutung ...', or in Papuan Malay *Dong nae jalan pi sampe di pondok. Sampe di pondok dong duduk isterihat. Selese isterihat dong ambe barang* 'They follow the road to the hut. Arriving at the hut, they sit down and rest. After resting, they take their things ...'. In these examples the end of each clause is repeated as the beginning of the next. That this feature has permeated into the *lingue franche* of both Indonesian New Guinea and Papua New Guinea is an indication of the prevalence of the construction in numerous local languages.

## Language endangerment

As will have been gathered from much of the preceding discussion, language endangerment is a serious issue in New Guinea. Traditional languages are being lost rapidly in the urban context, and also in their more traditional domains. Especially in villages that have increasing contact mediated via a national language, that language creeps into village-internal domains, including use at home. This is most prevalent in coastal villages, but is also true of more interior locations that have regular outside contact. A number of church groups, notably the Seventh Day Adventists, actively campaign against the use of local language. Other churches which are not actively opposed to the use of local languages also provide a domain in which local languages are not thought to be appropriate, thus speeding their endangerment. This is the result of having church workers who do not attempt to learn local languages, or work with translators, either local or overseas.

Mühlhäusler (2003) presents an overview of the issues involved. It should be noted, however, that a quick sociolinguistic survey that shows the failure of children to speak the local language does not necessarily indicate that language loss is imminent. For instance, although children attending school in the Skou villages in north-central New

Guinea do not speak the language, it is apparent that they do understand it, as they are frequently addressed in it by their parents and other elders. Indonesian, while the main language of the school-attending cohort in the village, appears to be, perversely, an 'insider language', actively used in opposition to the language of the village to establish the identity of the teenagers. The fact that Indonesian is also used by the older people who travel to the markets in Abepura and Jayapura seems not to be a problem in its being appropriated by another age group for another purpose. The health of Skou, even when not spoken, can be gauged by the fact that on leaving school these same teenagers are suddenly speakers of Skou, even if only a few months have passed since their final Junior High School exams. This reflects their status now not as wards of the state educational system, immune from prosecution for any violations of village conduct because of their requirement to fulfil governmental requirements, but as members of the village community. As such, in the absence of any significant employment, Papuan school graduates now adopt a more traditional lifestyle, including gardening, hunting, fishing, and speaking the language of their ancestors. This pattern of sociolinguistic comeback in each generation is not unique to the Skou, but has been observed by this writer elsewhere along the North New Guinea coast, on Yapen island (in both Ansum and Saweru), and in Warembori (Donohue 1999). Janet Bateman (pers. comm.) reports a similar sociolinguistic environment among the Iau of the western Lakes Plains, a more traditional society. Amongst the Iau young people below marriageable age (which corresponds roughly to the age that Skou teenagers graduate from Junior High School, roughly 14–15 years old) are not traditionally expected to fit into the highly prescriptive sets of rules and behavioural regulations that characterize society on the Van Daalen river. They are permitted a significant degree of freedom, including that of the language they use, which is denied more 'grown' adults. Youngsters in Korodesi commonly speak in Elopi, a trade language of the lower Tariku river, at least as commonly as they speak Iau, but on reaching societal maturity they make the transition to being mainly Iau speakers, and Iau is no more an endangered language than is English.

On the other hand, different areas show the encroachment of the national language at an alarming rate. Kulick (1992), discussing the situation in Gapun, observes that, despite the remote location, the younger generation are no longer learning the indigenous language Taiap. Furthermore, Taiap and the intrusive Tok Pisin have established different domains of use, all within the bounds of traditional society, even for those people who can speak Taiap.

## Conclusion

What work has been carried out in New Guinea reveals that, as a result of having any imaginable combination of factors present in some area or another, it really is a 'sociolinguistics laboratory', waiting to be used as a testing ground for theory, and as a source of empirical data that will change our perception of the issues involved. Despite this potential, almost all aspects of the sociolinguistic ecology of New Guinea are awaiting more detailed investigation.

## Acknowledgements

Thanks to Alan Rumsey, for discussion of many of the issues raised here.

## References

- Clouse, D., Donohue, M. and Ma, F. (2002) 'Survey report of the north coast of Irian Jaya', SIL Electronic Survey Reports 2002-78. Online. Available at: [www.sil.org/silest/abstract.asp?ref=2002-078](http://www.sil.org/silest/abstract.asp?ref=2002-078).
- Crowther, M. (2001) 'All the One language(s)', thesis, University of Sydney.
- Donohue, M. (1997) 'Some trade languages of insular South-East Asia and Irian Jaya (including Map 78: Precolonial contact languages of Irian Jaya, and Further contact languages of Irian Jaya)', in S. A. Wurm, P. Mühlhäusler and D. T. Tryon (eds) *Atlas of Languages of Intercultural Communication in the Pacific, Asia, and the Americas*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, pp. 713-16.
- (1999) *Warembori*, Languages of the World/Materials 341, München: Lincom Europa.
- (2007) 'Variation in voice in Indonesian/Malay: historical and synchronic perspectives', in Y. Matsumoto, D. Y. Oshima, O. R. Robinson and P. Sells (eds) *Diversity in Language: Perspectives and Implications*, Stanford, CA: CSLI Publications, pp. 71-129.
- Ethnologue* (nd) Online. Available at: [www.ethnologue.org](http://www.ethnologue.org). See also [www.pnglanguages.org/pacific/png/index.asp](http://www.pnglanguages.org/pacific/png/index.asp) for links to many downloads of material relevant to Papua New Guinea.
- Foley, W. A. (2006) 'Universal constraints and local conditions in Pidginization: case studies from New Guinea', *Journal of Pidgin and Creole Languages*, 21, 1-44.
- Franklin, K. J. (1972) 'A ritual Pandanus language of New Guinea', *Oceania*, 43, 66-76.
- Goldman, L. (1984) *Talk never dies: the language of Huli disputes*, London and New York: Tavistock/Methuen.
- Grimes, B. D. (1991) 'The development and use of Ambonese Malay', in H. Steinhauer, (ed.) *Papers in Austronesian Linguistics*, vol. 1, Canberra: Pacific Linguistics A-81, pp. 83-123.
- Kim, H., Shon, S., Rumaropen, B., Scott, G. and Scott, E. (2007) 'A description of some linguistic and sociolinguistic features of Papuan Malay', paper presented at the Workshop on the Languages of Papua, Manokwari, 8-10 August, Manokwari, Indonesia.
- Kulick, D. (1992) *Language Shift and Cultural Reproduction: Socialization, Self and Syncretism in a Papua New Guinea Village*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Longacre, R. E. (1972) *Hierarchy and Universality of Discourse Constituents in New Guinea Languages: Discussion*, Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.
- McElhanon, K. A. (1979) 'Some mission lingue franche and their sociolinguistic role', in S. A. Wurm (ed.) *New Guinea and Neighbouring Areas: A Sociolinguistic Laboratory*, The Hague: Mouton, pp. 277-89.
- Merlan, F. and Rumsey, A. ([1991] 2006) *Ku Waru: Language and Segmentary Politics in the Western Nebilyer Valley*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mühlhäusler, P. (1975) 'Sociolects in New Guinea pidgin', in K. A. McElhanon (ed.) *Tok Pisin i go we? Proceedings of a Conference Held at the University of Papua New Guinea, Port Moresby, P.N.G., 18-21 September 1973*. Kivung special publication, 1, Port Moresby: Linguistic Society of Papua New Guinea, pp. 59-75.
- (2003) 'Language endangerment and language revival', *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 7, 232-45.
- Romaine, S. (1992) *Language, Education and Development: Rural and Urban Tok Pisin in Papua New Guinea*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rumsey, A. (2001) 'Tom Yaya Kange: a metrical narrative genre from the New Guinea highlands', *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, 11, 193-239.
- Schieffelin, B. B. (1990) *The Give and Take of Everyday Life: Language Socialization of Kaluli Children*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- (1995) 'Creating evidence: making sense of written words in Bosavi', *Pragmatics*, 5, 225-44.
- (2000) 'Introducing Kaluli literacy: a chronology of influences', in P. Kroskrity (ed.) *Regimes of Language*, Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, pp. 293-327.
- Walker, R. (1987) 'Dani literacy: explorations in the sociolinguistics of literacy', *Irian*, 15, 19-34. Online. Available at: [www.papuaweb.org/dlib/irian/index.html](http://www.papuaweb.org/dlib/irian/index.html).
- Wurm, S. A. (1977) *New Guinea Area Languages and Language Study*, vol. 3, *Language, Culture, Society, and the Modern World, Fascicle 1*, Canberra: Pacific Linguistics C-40.
- (ed.) (1979) *New Guinea and Neighboring Areas: A Sociolinguistic Laboratory*, The Hague: Mouton.