Pacific Languages

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When I first went to see the man who has become our family doctor in Port Vila, he asked what I did, and then said that he had visited the university library here and had seen rows and rows of dictionaries and grammars of languages spoken by just a few hundred speakers. “Fascinating”, he said, “fascinating ... but bloody useless!”

Attitudes like these are held by both westerners and many Pacific Islanders, though perhaps for different reasons. Many westerners see Pacific Island languages as not being really serious subjects of study: They do not have a “literature,” they are not used in education, they have no real place in the national—let alone the international—domain. Linguists who study these languages are seen as dilettantes who should be doing something more “serious.” Many Pacific Islanders have slightly different views. For example, they often look on a dictionary as an important archive or museum piece recording “old” words that are dropping out of the language. But they feel that their language really does not have much of a future when faced with competition from international languages.

Most Pacific languages have neither been vilified to the extent that Melanesian Pidgin or Fiji Hindi have nor subjected to the extreme pressures of survival that Māori, Hawaiian, Murik, or Taiap have felt. Virtually all of them, however, have well and truly entered the twentieth century, and are spoken side-by-side with introduced languages or other recently developed lingua francas.

Rapid social changes in the Pacific have affected Pacific languages no less rapidly. This is perhaps most evident in the area of lexical borrowing, as discussed in chapter 9. Grandparents shudder when their grandchildren interlard their vernacular with English-derived terms—and are sure that their language will not survive another generation!
To a large extent, this could be construed as just the typical conservatism of the elderly: “Things were better in our time, these modern fads and fashions are no good.” But there are some cases where the grandparents may have a point. Clark (1982), in studying words of English origin borrowed into Ifira-Mele, distinguishes between necessary and unnecessary borrowings. A necessary borrowing is one where the thing or concept to which the word refers is new to the culture and, even though the possibility of a compound using existing words, a monomorphemic loan is usually simpler. Some examples of necessary borrowings are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ifira-Mele</th>
<th>Original word</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>aeani</td>
<td>‘iron’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>marsehi</td>
<td>‘medicine’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nakitae</td>
<td>‘necktie’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fooko</td>
<td>‘fork’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>laemu</td>
<td>‘lemon, lime’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>peelo</td>
<td>‘bell’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Unnecessary borrowings are those that replace an already existing word in the language. This has happened in Ifira-Mele with most of the numerals, possibly because of the constant use of English/Bislama numerals in counting money, telling time, and in mathematics classes, and partly also because the higher numerals in Ifira-Mele are longer than their English/Bislama equivalents. But there are other cases, like the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ifira-Mele</th>
<th>Original word</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>taemu</td>
<td>‘time’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>staaji</td>
<td>‘start’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>insaiji</td>
<td>‘inside’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>auji</td>
<td>‘go out’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>puroomu</td>
<td>‘broom’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wooka</td>
<td>‘work’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In discussing the replacement of wesiwesi ‘work’ by wooka, Clark (1982, 139) says that his middle-aged informants “condemned wooka as an abusive borrowing, when a perfectly good indigenous synonym existed.” In a sense, older speakers of the language have, in many cases, come reluctantly to accept necessary change. But they often also see the unnecessary incorporation of foreign words into their language as a sure sign that the language is not going to survive. As one elderly ni-Vanuatu man said to me, “My grandchildren think they’re speaking our language, but they’re really speaking Bislama.”

Change has, of course, been taking place for millennia. The Pacific region has had a long and complex history. When the first settlers came, and where they came from, we don’t really know—but we can be fairly sure that it was at least fifty thousand years ago. By the time the Anglo-Saxons were subduing
the Celtic people of Britain, virtually all the islands of the Pacific had been settled, many by successive waves of people speaking different languages.

Many westerners—and indeed many Pacific Islanders as well—hold the view that, once a particular island or area was settled, the inhabitants remained in place. Only with the coming of Europeans were their eyes opened to the outside world. But of course the Pacific region was not like this at all. Contact of various kinds—warfare, invasion, trade, intermarriage, ceremonial exchange, and so on—took place between near neighbors or between peoples whose homes were thousands of kilometers apart, between people who spoke similar or at least related languages and between those whose languages were unrelated. The European intruders who entered this region in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were really just the latest of a series of “foreigners” who contacted Pacific peoples. Pacific languages have been changing throughout this whole period as a result of external pressures and internal processes. They have survived these changes and will continue to survive others.

When the first Fiji Hindi dictionary ever published appeared some years ago (Hobbs 1985), it was greeted with howls of protest and derision from the Fiji Hindi-speaking community. “There is no such language as Fiji Hindi!” said one writer to a newspaper. “Hindi in Fiji is a sub-standard Bhojpuri which has been corrupted,” said another.

Attitudes like these toward creoles and similar languages are common throughout the world. Such languages are often seen by outsiders as “broken,” “bastardized,” or “baby-talk” versions of proper languages. Speaking of what is now known as Tok Pisin, for example, Sir Hubert Murray (1924, 10), an Australian colonial administrator, said, “It is a vile gibberish ... and should be discouraged.” Major Eustace Sanders, a British colonial official who served on Malaita in Solomon Islands, had similar views about Pijin: “The only lingua franca [is] pigeon English which consists of the English word in the Melanesian context. It is a queer sounding garbled business and not in any way satisfactory” (quoted in Keesing 1990, 156). Even the names of these languages—Pidgin, Pijin, Broken, and so on—have negative connotations.²

This could all be simply dismissed as another example of western ethnocentrism if many speakers of these languages did not share the same views—as the case of Fiji Hindi illustrates. Speaking of Solomon Islands, Keesing (1990, 162) says:

It is perhaps surprising ... that so many Solomon Islanders have accepted uncritically an ideology depicting Pijin as a bastardized form of English.... Many well educated Solomon Islanders echo the colonial
view that Pijin has ‘no grammar,’ even though in speaking and understanding Pijin, those who express this view use (unconsciously) a grammar so complex and intricate and powerful that (like the grammars of all languages) it defies formal description.

The attitude of many speakers of Melanesian Pidgin toward their language could be described as schizophrenic. On the one hand, they use it frequently, in all kinds of situations; on the other, they see it as not a “real” language.

This schizophrenia is perhaps most pronounced in Vanuatu. Bislama has higher constitutional status in Vanuatu than any nonmetropolitan language in any other Pacific country. It is the language of parliament, of churches, of government offices, and of social functions. Because half the educated population is English-educated and the other half French-educated, Bislama is the linguistic cement holding the nation of Vanuatu together. Highly educated ni-Vanuatu from different islands prefer to speak to each other in Bislama rather than in English, and there is a distinct feeling of national pride in the public use of Bislama.

But Bislama is not used in the school system, either as a medium of instruction or as a subject, and attempts to introduce it have met with the kind of attitudes expressed in Keesing’s description of the Solomon Islands situation: “it’s not a real language,” “it has no grammar,” “it’s only a language for casual conversation.” Vanuatu may be unique among the countries of the world in allowing a child to be punished for speaking the constitutionally recognized national language on school grounds!

Yet another aspect of this complex issue concerns the replacement of vernaculars by Melanesian Pidgin in parts of Melanesia. People in some parts of Papua New Guinea are abandoning their vernacular in favor of Tok Pisin. They see Tok Pisin as the key to the future, rather than as a “rubbish” language to be used only where no other can serve.

The situation in Fiji is somewhat different. Fiji Indians grow up speaking Fiji Hindi at home. At school, they are exposed to two prestige languages, Standard Hindi and English. Unlike Melanesian Pidgin, Fiji Hindi is never written. Literacy is taught in Standard Hindi, and the association of the standard language with the sacred books of Hinduism gives Standard Hindi great prestige. English too is obviously a prestigious language in Fiji—the language of higher education, the international language, the language of business, and, increasingly, the language Fiji Indians need to know to emigrate from post-coup Fiji. The result has been that Fiji Hindi has very low status in Fiji, especially among its native speakers.

Pacific Islands languages, whether indigenous or more recently developed, are worthy subjects of study in their own right. A language represents
a culture of a people. Even if that people is numerically small and does not play an important part on the world stage, its culture and, by implication, its language, are no less worthy of study than the languages of larger or more influential peoples. It is true that the usefulness in a global sense of even languages like Fijian or Samoan pales into insignificance beside the usefulness of English or French. But that does not mean that these languages should be discounted altogether.

Change in the languages of Pacific Islanders, as in all languages, is inevitable, natural, and not something to be universally deplored. Certain changes may be undesirable for all sorts of reasons, but it is in the nature of language to change, and resisting change is counterproductive.

What of the future? Dixon (1990, 230–231), in suggesting that every language with fewer than ten thousand speakers is at risk of extinction, rather gloomily predicts that 80 percent of the languages in the Pacific and Asia may have died out by the end of the twenty-first century. Even languages like Melanesian Pidgin are seen by some as being under threat from English: “It would seem that in the future Tok Pisin has nowhere to go but down…. This does not mean that Tok Pisin will die a rapid, or even an easy, death…. But it does mean that, in perhaps 50 years’ time, Tok Pisin will most likely be being studied by scholars among a small community of old men” (Laycock 1985, 667). Although the potential for language death is a serious one for some Pacific languages, I feel that Dixon and Laycock are unnecessarily pessimistic. The vast majority of Pacific languages are not, or not yet, moribund. As long as a community is sufficiently viable to remain a community (irrespective of absolute size), and as long as such a community has pride in its language as part of its overall cultural heritage, the language will survive. It will change, as internal and external mechanisms cause it to develop different words, pronunciations, and expressions, and these changes will be rued by the older generation—as they always are. But change is endemic to language and is an element of its vitality.

There are, of course, languages that have died out or are currently under serious threat. For some threatened languages, there are programs of reinvigoration and resurgence: Hawaiian and Māori are probably the best known of these. Both involve serious attempts to teach young children the language in a structured or semistructured environment, in the hope that, unlike their parents, they will become fluent in the language of their ancestors.

Arguments rage, of course, about the worth of such programs. At one end of the spectrum are those who feel that all languages should be preserved and, if possible, used more widely than they are now, and who propose programs to encourage—and even almost to force—young people, and often adults, to learn their “own” language. At the other end are those who
say that languages should be left alone. If people want to shift to another lan-
guage that they think is more useful, it is their right to do so. Very often this
debate is held in the rarefied circles of academe, without much input from
the speakers of the languages themselves. Those speakers will, of course,
have the final say (and perhaps the last laugh) by choosing the course of ac-
tion that seems most sensible and practical from their perspective.

The Pacific area has probably seen more change taking place in its lan-
guages than any other part of the world—certainly than any other region
with a comparable population. The multiplicity of different languages and
language types, with different histories, has always been one of the intrigu-
ing features of this region for both Pacific Islanders and outsiders alike. As
long as Pacific Islanders continue to recognize that their languages are both
their past and their future, the unity in diversity so characteristic of the Pa-
cific will continue to make this region unique.