

On the negotiation of Melanesian cultural identity

The Buk Baibel translation as a linguistic milestone

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The young nation of Papua New Guinea is particularly characterised by an all-embracing social transformation and linguistic heterogeneity. Language represents a crucial factor of self-positioning in the local, traditionally complex multilingual networks. In this respect, the role model English has latterly been facing a vital, counterbalancing competitor, namely Tok Pisin.

Tok Pisin is one of the official languages of Papua New Guinea, spoken by the majority of the population. This self-sufficient mixture of mainly English and indigenous languages has its origins in the colonial era. It developed into several regional and sociolectal varieties, with an increasing number of first language speakers today. As a fully-fledged language without significant functional deficiencies, it is being used in everyday life as the most widespread lingua franca. In sum, Tok Pisin can be called the most important unifying bond of the multilingual peoples in Papua New Guinea today.

Currently, the larger cities are the principal spots where the everyday linguistic negotiation of the speakers is causing the language systems Tok Pisin and (Papua New Guinea) English to merge. In spite of this, a rural variety of Tok Pisin still is, for the time being, the most effective supra-regional medium of communication. The medium-range continuity of this language variety, which can be identified as an indigenous and home-grown 'High Tok Pisin', is currently endangered by the spreading popularity of urban varieties and, last but not least, English itself. Tok Pisin in all its forms is, however, exerting pressure on the diversity of local and regional languages which are endemic in Papua New Guinea.

The way of life on the spot is more and more shaped by influences from the so-called Western world. As these cultural influences include language, English in par-



ticular is associated with success and material wealth. English, which, though the language of the former colonial masters, has thus interestingly started to play a role as the language of elitist education and international ambitions. For many people in Papua New Guinea, competence in English represents the escape route from the 'old-fashioned' traditions which are often perceived as a dead-end street nowadays. In connection with this, Urban Tok Pisin is becoming the (oral) prestige variety of the newly forming bourgeoisie and is thus developing into a marker of social class. Rural Tok Pisin, however, remains a functional informal means of commu-

nication for the bulk of the population. What is more, this variety in particular is a fundamental cornerstone of the activity of the Christian Churches which operate all over the country. Taking this into consideration, the numerous local languages continue to be – if surviving – regionally and clan-specifically restricted.

As regards to religion, the territories of Papua and New Guinea have been gradually reclaimed by Western missionaries in the course of colonialisation. Soon, the spread of the imported set of beliefs resulted in the nominal Christianisation of almost the entire population. Nowadays, many different denominations and splinter groups are competing for the favour of the population who mainly use religion as a pragmatic means to realise their individual objectives. The evangelisation of the country entailed, among other things, the pacification of perpetually smouldering clan wars. The other side of the coin, however, which came along with missionary activity, was the destructive substitution of existing Melanesian customs and traditions. With regard to the imposition of Christian religion in Papua New Guinea, missionaries have thus played an ambivalent role. From a positive perspective, they have acted as deliverers of progress and transformers of (intra-) cultural organisation. In contrast to the contemporary profile of the Churches in Western settings, this fact renders them pivotal precursors of modernity and catalysts of the present social order in Papua New Guinea.

In the course of the structural and functional expansion of Tok Pisin, more and more Churches exploited the language for their purposes. Finally, a rural Tok Pisin replaced existing Church lingua francas and soon provided the basis for unofficial standardisation efforts in order to create a uniform, written language code. These efforts were initiated by expatriates with the final aim of an ecumenical Bible for the

whole population of Papua New Guinea. In the event, a practical, phonemic, and actually trend-setting orthography was set up. What is more, the choice of a conservative language basis was a courageous act in view of urban varieties gaining ground. However, from the perspective of intra-mission planning, this language policy was quite a logical step which systematically established a (now) written Tok Pisin as a national development factor. This status boost of the language, as it were, was backed by its supra-regional use in Church services, mission schools, and an increasing number of religious print media. This course of events culminated in the consistent utilisation of Tok Pisin in the full translation of the Christian faith code, namely the *Buk Baibel*. The first edition of this Bible for Papua New Guinea was published in 1989.

Bible translators unmistakably act in the midst of existing cultural networks. Translation, in fact, has been a primary characteristic of the Bible. This code has not only had the power to unify religious communities, but has had, by the authority attributed to its contents, a normative influence also on language development.

In this respect, it suffices to remind of the impact of Martin Luther's Bible translation on the German language. Especially with regard to target cultures without a written tradition like the Tok Pisin speech community in Papua New Guinea, a receptor-orientated theoretical basis for translations proves to be essential. In connection with this, it can be shown on the basis of many text examples, how and how successful the translator teams of the Tok Pisin Bible managed to realise the maxim of ad hoc comprehensibility to the recipients.

It is a challenging area of conflict the respective translators are in: They should,

on the one hand, be able to skilfully bridge cultural (or spatial, temporal, and social) distances, and remain, as it were, invisible for the recipients on the other. In the case of the *Buk Baibel*, the bridging effort can justifiably be called a success. In this respect, the main texts of the Bible are supported by several reading and comprehension aids which, besides a transparent usage of language, serve to demystify the (occasionally intricate) contents for the targeted audience. For instance, illustrations provide a key to relevant exegesis, not only for new readers. To include the recipients even better, publishers would do well to take indigenous (Christian) art forms into consideration, not only in Papua New Guinea. Such art forms would link the textual content directly to the spheres of life of the intended recipients.

The *Buk Baibel* is a version which is designed for the general public, not for certain elitist clerics. Now, God speaks comprehensibly to all in Tok Pisin. All recipients have – at least theoretically – the same access to the Bible. By this means, a most informed reading (and the awareness of it) can evolve, which,

at best, enables the audience to approach the Bible, and literature in general, in an individual and relevant way. This is a decisive point, particularly in view of the fact that in the course of the Tok Pisin Bible compilation, more and more members of the target group itself have been included in the translator teams in order to shape a Bible from Papua New Guineans for Papua New Guineans.

In my doctoral thesis (LOTHMANN 2006), I have conducted an extensive linguistic analysis of several books and excerpts of the *Buk Baibel*. A main conclusion is that a rural Tok Pisin is used throughout; by this means, a predominantly oral style was realised. Thus, the translators indeed included a high degree of 'natural', i.e. informal everyday language. The lexical inventory used is relatively small. Less than 800 (sic) multifunctional words serve as the basis to express the semantic range of the Biblical contents, including a register of religiously connoted terms which considerably contributes to the overall stylistic character. Further, the grammar is, as it is typical of Rural Tok Pisin, significantly influenced by characteristics of its indigenous, i.e. non-English roots. In all,

as regards the consistency of the usage of linguistic features, we can justifiably assume that the *Buk Baibel* is in adequate accordance with the communicative needs of a majority of Tok Pisin speakers in their everyday spheres.

The usage of language thus is, in all, anti-progressive. Thereby, the translators deliberately resisted the siren call of a popular, but increasingly anglicising Urban Tok Pisin. From a diachronic linguistic perspective, the *Buk Baibel* can be judged as a retarding moment. It thus receives a quasi-timeless aura – which, in fact, is in line with the self-conception of Christian ideology. Indeed, it may be seen as



St. Mary's Cathedral in Port Moresby

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an artistic accomplishment that the translators have created such a linguistically accurate and straightforwardly accessible text canon out of the raw material of a rural Tok Pisin variety. It is suited both for individual study and public use, i.e. its texts are designed to be read aloud and thus to be comprehended by the illiterate, too. What is more, on the content and function levels, the *Buk Baibel* can do justice to the original texts from antiquity as well as to its renowned contemporary source, the *Good News Bible*.

Consequently, the *Buk Baibel* represents, on the one hand, a possible sustainable cor-



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nerstone of an autonomous, indigenous Church. On the other hand, it is, from a secular perspective, an aesthetic literary reference text of general, i.e. national importance. During my fieldwork in Papua New Guinea, I was able to witness the high popularity of the *Buk Baibel*. Its contents as well as the language used in it are being perceived as prestigious and sublime. Then again, the highly conservative liturgical practice of many Churches, which is a mere imitation of Western rituals, proves to be a potential cause for conflict in this respect. As a matter of fact, the Bible's strict orientation towards the target group is thus thwarted, in particular by the larger Churches. If more (ritual) contextualisation took place in the Church services, not so many Papua New Guineans would, in all probability, turn their back on the Church as they do now. Missionary work in Papua New Guinea shows that there can only be successful preaching and believing when reference is made to cultural specificity. In this regard, Bible translators as mediators between worlds act in the midst of an ongoing paradigm shift which affects all levels of social life. This paradigm shift comprises a move from indigenous traditions to a mechanised

modernity, from orality to literacy, from clan structures to a nation-state. In all, it is a dilemma between Scylla of a nostalgic past and Charybdis of an insecure future. As builders of awareness and knowledge, translators worldwide bear a high responsibility which requires broad competence – including a certain ‘feeling’ for the cultures involved in the translation process. Their product for Papua New Guinea, the *Buk Baibel*, is thus part of the current post-colonial experimental discourse.

We can currently witness a drifting apart of the rural (traditional) and the urban (de-rooted) ‘cultures’ in Papua New Guinea, which shows, last but not least, in the individuals’ choice of a distinct language variety. The rural and urban varieties of Tok Pisin correspond to this dichotomy. By and large, the example of Papua New Guinea shows that national independence does by no means equal linguistic independence. In this respect, it can be stated that the potential of Tok Pisin – which interestingly has been given constitutional status as an official language – is not yet made fully use of in the official educational system. Instead, a lopsided emphasis on the designated motor of national economy, namely English, is currently

preventing a full development of the existing human capital (cf. UNDP 2005).

Quo vadis, Tok Pisin? Undoubtedly, it is the members of the young generation in particular who will tip the scales of cultural change during their quest for identity.

At this juncture, I can only give a momentary view of the complex and dynamic social puzzle of which the translation of the *Buk Baibel* can be identified as a possible core. Tok Pisin itself can be regarded as the epitome of (non-uniform) social change. Further, this language remains a political and emotional issue. With respect to Christianisation, the

success of the Bible translation in Papua New Guinea is the current apex of a developmental process which cultivates Tok Pisin in local, regional, and supra-regional contexts. The *Buk Baibel* exemplifies how only a rural Tok Pisin offers adequate immanent and creative resources to keep up a sustainable autonomy vis-à-vis English. However, in the same way as the mutable existence of this very language depends on the zeitgeisty attitude of its speakers towards it, the approval of the recipients is the linchpin of a successful translation, i.e. of a successful cultural mediation.

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