

PLANNING IN A MULTI-LINGUAL COUNTRY: THE CASE OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA:

Sakarepe Kamene, Willie Juduo and Lucy Nakin

Introduction

Papua New Guinea (PNG) consists of the eastern half of the island of New Guinea, in the Southwestern Pacific, and several islands or island groups, such as New Britain, New Ireland and Bougainville.

PNG became independent in 1975, and its capital is Port Moresby. In July 2005, its population was estimated at 5,670,544,⁹ mostly Melanesians and Papuans. The literacy rate is a little under 65%, with a ratio of 91 literate women for every 100 men.

Over 800 indigenous languages are spoken in PNG, as well as the lingua francas Tok Pisin and, in Papua, Hiri Motu. In 2001, there were 98,848 students attending 1,416 elementary schools, 296,281 in 1,639 primary schools, 77,451 in 161 secondary schools, and 14,333 in 138 vocational schools. There were about 1,400 teachers (elementary: 3,449; primary: 7,858; secondary: 2,187; vocational: 908).

Papua New Guinea does not have any explicit statement or guideline in the National Constitution on language policy. Instead there are some random and covert statements on this subject in different documents. The National Constitution makes an inference about using certain languages to achieve universal literacy in the country. It says: “all persons and governmental bodies [to] endeavour to achieve universal literacy in Tok Pisin, Hiri Motu, *tokples* or *ita eda gado*” (National Constitution, p.4). Nekitel (1984), meanwhile, notes that Papua New Guinea indirectly promotes what he calls “silent trilingual language policy”. Also, Dutton (1976) claims that Papua New Guinea has an “assumed” language policy, which tends to give the impression that

⁹ <https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/ne.html> CIA The World Factbook

English is the national language, when in fact it is not. Behind this assumption is a strong belief that English somehow would foster unity in the country. The sentiment is echoed in the National Policy on Information and Communication of Papua New Guinea (NPIT 1994). This policy also encourages and respects rights of community-based language choice for information and communication. A similar but more comprehensive report on a community-based language choice and education is contained in the ministerial committee report *A Philosophy of Education for Papua* headed by Sir Paulias Matane. In the report it is strongly recommended that vernacular languages be used at the elementary and lower levels of the education system in Papua New Guinea. This is one of the core reports that brought about change and reform in our national education system.

The National Government has realised the importance of a national language policy, and has tasked the National Education Department with formulating a proposal for a national language policy framework for further discussion, debate and consultation with various stakeholders concerned with language development. This proposed national language policy framework is in its infancy but, as we can begin to see, the Government is shifting its paradigm from emphasising economic development, which appears to have little impact on the bulk of the population, and focusing instead on promoting social issues in the country.

The preceding comments all indicate the implicit nature of language policy in Papua New Guinea. For a country like Papua New Guinea, with complex cultures and a multitude of languages, this could allow greater freedom to develop a suitable language policy that caters for and respects the rights of the speakers of various languages. There are signs that point to this trend in Papua New Guinea.

PNG is the biggest and also the largest island nation in the Pacific. It has over 5,000 village communities and a landmass of 465,000 square kilometres. This consists of the 85% landmass of the eastern half of New Guinea with another 15% coming from 700 offshore islands, which

are spread over an expanse of three million square kilometres of ocean (Ranasinghe 2002). This poses great difficulty because it limits easy access, interaction and mobility within the country. Added to this is the geo-physical and topographic tyranny of the terrain, which combines spectacular scenery with some of the most inhospitable geo-physical conditions. Conditions involve frequent volcanic threats, tidal waves, landslides, large rivers, swamps, high mountains, steep gorges and ravines that severely hinder progress. Also, the cost involved in trying to get things done under these conditions must be borne in mind when dealing, in our case, with the language policy in education.

Population

Forty per cent of the population is below the age of 15. This represents about two million people. They are mostly unemployed and vulnerable to all sorts of abuse, particularly the girls. This age group also poses a potentially dangerous socio-political problem in the country. It is a real challenge, which requires immediate attention. Having realised this challenge, the government has now in place a national population policy (2000-2010) to address the issue.

The coastal areas are sparsely populated compared to the high density in most highland areas (sometimes as high as 55 persons per square kilometre, as in Chimbu). But on average, density is around 11 persons per square kilometre. This poses even greater problems and serious challenges for educators and educational planners. Tables 1 and 2 give more information about the languages and population of PNG.

Literacy in Papua New Guinea

Compared with other Pacific Island states which enjoy high rates of literacy, Papua New Guinea seems to be plodding along slowly but steadily. The government understands the challenge, and has developed a national literacy policy. There is also a provincial literacy policy for all nine provinces. The 2000 census shows the overall literacy rate as 56%. This is an increase of 10% since the last census in 1990. The

literacy rate is higher in urban areas than in rural areas, and higher among men than among women. (See Table 2.) Slow rates of increase could be due to a number of variables, one being the multiplicity of languages involved compared to the monolingual situation in many other Pacific countries.

Table 1: Languages of Papua New Guinea: some basic statistics

	Number of languages	Population	Existing orthography	Existing vernacular education projects	Literacy materials	Other literature
Total for PNG	837 including 20 extinct	5,545,268*	362 languages	170 languages	269 languages	249 languages
% of languages			44%	20%	33%	30%
% of population (including English, Tokpisin and Hiri Motu)			88%	56%	74%	78%
% of population (excluding English, Tokpisin and Hiri Motu)			87%	53%	72%	77%

* <https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/ne.html> CIA Fact book

The ethno-linguistic situation in Papua New Guinea

Papua New Guinea is home to over 854 distinct vernacular languages, along with innumerable dialects, which are spoken by 5,190,786 people (National Census 2000) within the mainland and on the island (Nekitel 1998). This represents something like 14% of the world's 6,528 languages (Grimes 1992; Nekitel 1996; Kamene 1996).

The languages in Papua New Guinea fall into two major groups: the Austronesian and the non-Austronesian languages (NAN), sometimes referred to as Papuan. Austronesian languages constitute the biggest language family in the world, with over 800 languages spreading from Southeast Asia to Easter Island, New Zealand and Madagascar. They

show strong evidence of lexical, phonological and structural similarities, which suggest they may have a common origin or ancestor.

Table 2: Literacy rate (%) of citizen population aged 10 years and over by language, gender (M~males, F~females) and sector

Literacy	Total			Urban			Rural		
	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F
Total	56.2	61.2	50.9	86.2	88.6	83.3	51.7	56.8	46.3
Literate in English	40.4	45.4	35.0	74.6	78.3	70.2	35.2	40.1	30.0
Literate in Pidgin	45.2	51.0	38.9	76.6	80.5	72.0	40.4	46.3	34.2
Literate in Motu	5.0	6.0	4.0	17.0	18.2	15.7	3.2	4.6	2.4
Literate in Tokples	41.7	45.4	37.7	62.5	65.2	59.4	38.5	42.3	34.6

Source: PNG, 2000 National Census

In Papua New Guinea most Austronesian-speaking communities are located in the island areas and a few in pockets of the mainland. Most are found in East and West New Britain, New Ireland, some parts of Bougainville, New Hanover, Mussau, the Admiralty Islands, Manam Island, Umboi Island, Trobriand Island, Woodlark Island, Goodenough, Fergusson, Normanby, Misima, and Sudest Islands. There are a few located in pockets of the mainland, mostly on the coastal fringes.

The NAN language family is the largest linguistic group in the country. It comprises more than 854 distinct local languages. They are unrelated but are grouped for linguistic convenience. They form eight major phyla or groups and many different families. Like other Melanesian countries, Papua New Guinea has been described as one of the most linguistically diverse and culturally complex countries in the world. In

the interior of the country (the highlands) we have a small number of languages with a large number of speakers whilst in the coastal areas we find many languages which are quite small in terms of the number of speakers. Most of these are found in the MOMASE (Morobe, Madang and Sepik) region. The ‘largest’ language in the country is Engan (in the highlands) with 200,000 speakers, while the ‘smallest’ language is Laua/Labu (Central) with only one speaker. The national average of any one language would be around 2,000 speakers. This sort of linguistic situation raises some linguistic, cultural and communication issues.

Another pressing issue involves our knowledge of the exact status of different languages in the country. We have some valuable linguistic data. We know, for example, that seven languages have already become extinct (Nekitel 1998). Kamene (1999) reported that Yarawi is dead. There are also numerous cases of moribund languages in the country. This is a worrying situation. We also know of about eight languages that have five or fewer speakers. We have four languages with ten or fewer speakers. When considering the total number of languages, (854) half that number have a thousand or fewer speakers. This sounds like a linguistically crazy country but this is not at all the case. There are some general linguistic maps that show that the situation is not as messy as it sounds. It becomes clearer when we look at what we have and use at national, regional, and community levels.

Generally, it is evident that many smaller languages are becoming increasingly threatened by some major metropolitan and international languages. In PNG, English appears to exert great pressure on local vernacular languages. But we also see pressure from one of our own lingua francas—Tokpisin. It is the language of wider currency and use among the middle and lower socio-economic strata and is fast becoming the first language of many Papua New Guinea children. We know that about 10,000 – 12,000 children speak it as their mother tongue.

There are also what we call ‘church lingua francas’. These are local languages chosen, promoted and used by various church denominations in the country, basically for evangelism. Some examples are: Kate and

Jabem (Morobe), Kuanua (New Guinea Islands), Dobu and Suau (Milne Bay), Kuman (Chimbu), Toaripi (Gulf), Motu and Sinagoro (Central). They too exert enormous pressure on other local languages at the community level.

There are some regional languages which also constitute a danger for smaller local languages at the regional level. These are languages like Engan and Kuman in the Highlands, Kuanua in the New Guinea Islands, Motu in the Central Province and Kate in Morobe Province. Many are church lingua francas, and many are written but their roles and functions extend well beyond the church domain, thereby affecting other areas of community life.

Languages of Papua New Guinea – their roles and functions

English

Papua New Guinea has English as an official language. Introduced as an official language, it occupies a privileged position in the country. However, it is spoken with varying degrees of proficiency, from near-native competence to a mere smattering (Nekitel 1998). It is purportedly used in major public domains, such as government, law and justice, education, the media, business, commerce and the like. And, according to the 2000 national census, about 40% of the population claim that they can read and write in English. But the same census also shows that the literacy rate in rural areas, where the bulk of the people (80%) live, is quite low, suggesting that English is not widely used. This implies that education in rural areas may be conducted in a language or languages other than English.

Tokpisin and Hiri Motu

Tokpisin and Hiri Motu are our two national lingua francas. Tokpisin is a pidgin language with English, German and Kuanua as its main sources. While English contributes about 80% of the lexical items, grammatical structures come from these three as well as other local vernacular languages. Both Tokpisin and Hiri Motu developed around the middle

of the nineteenth century as a result of external contact and subsequent entrepreneurial activities and administrative control over indigenous populations of diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. Tokpisin is a language of wider currency in the country, commonly used for entrepreneurial activities, for inter-ethnic communication and in contact situations involving people with no common language, such as in plantations and large forestry, mining and fisheries projects.

A weekly Wantok newspaper is published in Tokpisin. Most church denominations use Tokpisin to spread the gospel and most government materials are written in it. There are also guide materials for visitors. It is a widely researched language, and has a grammar, a dictionary and much socio-cultural information. It seems over two million people use Tokpisin for national, provincial, community and daily affairs.

Tokpisin is also widely used in elementary schools in areas with children of mixed ethnic backgrounds. Many urban training programmes in settlements are also basically conducted in Tokpisin. Most of the 19 provincial radio stations broadcast in Tokpisin.

Tokpisin is the most dynamic language used for major developments and disseminating vital government information to the community. Though it is widely used, it does not enjoy the status it deserves.

Hiri Motu

Hiri Motu is local pidgin language derived from the Motu language of the Central Province in the Southern region, known as Papua during colonial times. It was during these times that a simplified Motu became the unofficial language for administration. It became associated with police and prison administration, thereby acquiring its name of Police Motu. But, as Dutton (1995) points out, simplified Motu existed long before the advent of colonial administration in Papua. This simplified Motu was the language used by local people with different linguistic backgrounds when they came in contact with one another, such as on a long trading voyage like the *Hiri* trading expeditions along the Gulf of

Papua. This, together with colonial contact, gave rise to what is now known as Hiri Motu. With the rapidly spreading Tokpisin taking over areas where traditionally Hiri Motu was spoken, there is a real danger that Hiri Motu could gradually decline, which would be unfortunate.

It is estimated that over 250,000 people speak Hiri Motu. Like Tokpisin, it has written grammars, is used in elementary schools and for evangelism. Vital community information on topics like HIV/AIDS is presented in Hiri Motu to the local people. Also the radio station, FM Central, broadcasts in Hiri Motu. But it is not widely used, being restricted to the southern part of the country.

Apart from these three languages we have other, mostly regional, languages, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Regional languages and their speakers

Language	Number of Speakers	Type	Province	Region
Enga	238,000	NAN	Enga	Highlands
Dobu	108,000	AN	Milne Bay	Southern
Melpa	130,000	NAN	W. Highlands	Highlands
Kate	86,000	NAN	Morobe	Momase
Kuanua	80,000	NA	E.N. Britain	Islands
Kuman	71,000	NAN	Simbu	Highlands
Yabem	60,000	NA	Morobe	Momase
Angal Heneng	55,000	NAN	S. Highlands	Highlands
Kamano-Yagaria	50,000	NAN	E. Highlands	Highlands
Ambulas	44,000	NAN	E. Sepik	Momase
Hamtai	40,000	NAN	Gulf	Southern
Buin	18,000	NAN	N. Solomons	Islands
Kiwai	15,800	NAN	Western	Southern

Source: Nekitel (1998), Voices of Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow

Vernacular languages in education

The National Education Reform commenced in 1995. It created five levels of education, starting with Elementary (Prep to Elementary 2), Lower Primary (Grades 3 to 5), Upper Primary (Grades 6 to 8), Lower Secondary (Grades 9 to 10) and Upper Secondary (Grades 11 to 12).

Table 4: Vernacular Literacy and Tok Ples Pri Skul (TPSS) Programmes in Papua New Guinea (1994): totals for each province

Province	No. TPSS programmes	Province	No. TPSS programmes
Bougainville	68	Milne Bay	141
Central	29	Morobe	69
Chimbu	152	New Ireland	61
East New Britain	104	Northern	54
East Sepik	28	Sandaun	82
Eastern Highlands	64	Southern Highlands	102
Enga	132	West New Britain	30
Gulf	35	Western	65
Madang	151	Western Highlands	23
Manus	9		

The use of vernacular languages is strongly recommended. This introduces a language education policy that includes all languages in Papua New Guinea at the elementary school level. Under this scheme, local communities are given the responsibility of developing and planning their own schools. This has resulted in about 1416 registered elementary schools. With this, comes the pressure of training teachers,

developing materials, designing syllabi, curricula and writing systems for all languages.

The Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) based in Kainatu, Eastern Highlands, assists with designing writing systems for all the vernacular languages. Since becoming involved in 1958, SIL has worked on over 285 languages and is currently working on more than 180, a total of around 465 languages, so about half of the 854 languages have or will soon have a writing system. Also, the Language Department at the University offers some formal and informal training programmes to assist both students and community members to develop and design their own materials, writing systems, primers and storybooks. This has assisted 100-160 communities to design their own writing system and train local people to introduce and run their own *tokples* schools. The University programme also facilitates community-based training where the communities themselves initiate and manage their own programmes using the resources they have. The University also assists communities with the basic skills of writing, and they write their own stories. The results are encouraging, and many requests are received to conduct such programmes in remote rural areas.

The education reform increases the retention rate in schools, thereby creating a huge demand on the existing educational infrastructure—another area of concern—but research by the National Research Institute indicates positive signs in this respect. In spite of that, more schools, in particular rural schools, suffer greatly from the absence of physical infrastructure development.

Summary

Papua New Guinea is a large country with a large population with complex and unique cultures, and different epistemic and cosmic systems. In these lie mysteries of understanding humanity, and its psycho-emotive elements. This remains the challenge of our time in Papua New Guinea.

Recommendations

- That more assistance be made available to promote literacy in rural areas where the rate is still low, among women especially.
- That assistance be provided to undertake surveys to check which languages do not have a writing system.
- That more teachers be trained in their own vernacular language to enable them to develop materials for teaching and learning.
- That local government be responsible, as stipulated in the Organic on Provincial Governments, for funding elementary education.
- That traditional and knowledgeable elderly community members be recognised as important sources for maintaining and promoting local cultures.