

BILINGUALISM-BICULTURALISM: Where Is It Going In The Pacific?

Rodney F. Moag
University of the South Pacific

European contact in the Pacific, and the subsequent introduction of European religions, languages, cultures, and finally education have brought about fundamental and far-reaching changes in the patterns of life of most Pacific societies. In the majority of the islands where this journal will find its readership, bilingualism, and in some cases multilingualism, is a fact of everyday life. This article will attempt to look at bi-multilingualism, from several points of view: 1) in terms of its relationship to bi/multiculturalism, 2) the particular type of bilingualism found in the Pacific; 3) its implications for the educational systems in the Region, and 4) its directions in the Pacific over the ensuing couple of decades.

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

It is common these days to hear language referred to as the vehicle of culture. A few scientists have cited scientific English as being totally free of any culture, but in the main linguists and cultural anthropologists working in this area agree that language is inextricably bound up with culture. Examples can be cited from around the world showing how both material and social culture are reflected in the language of those whose way of life it is. The Eskimos have some thirty words for the different types of snow so important to their hunting, travelling, home-building, etc. while some Pacific Islanders have differing names for shellfish or conditions of the sea. Social distinctions are even more strikingly mirrored in the languages of the Pacific with special forms of language for addressing persons of chiefly rank (as in Fiji) or noble and royal rank (as in Tonga). Samoa has seven grades of chiefs with special ways of addressing each of them.

If language and culture are so closely linked, then it's a logical step to infer that the person who uses two or more languages also functions in two or more cultures. For the sake of simplicity, I shall use 'bi' in relation to both languages and cultures to refer to any number of two or more. Thus, bilingualism, for purposes of this discussion, also includes multilingualism. Indeed, the connection between language and culture is seen by the term now used to describe a recently accepted sub-discipline within education of bilingual/bicultural education. Universities in the U.S.A. now award both M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in this specialization.

BILINGUALISM/BICULTURALISM IN THE PACIFIC

Traditionally, scholars have distinguished two types of bilingualism, **balanced** versus **skewed** (these are my own nontechnical terms). In the former, the

speaker can operate with equal ease in either language across the total range of human activities and is fully steeped in the lore, traditions, arts, etc. of both cultures. In the latter type the scales are tilted in favour of one language or the other in varying situations so that the speaker can function across a limited range of activities in one, or both of the languages. I presume it will be immediately plain to most readers, that most Pacific islanders are skewed bilinguals. English or French is used in certain activities nearly exclusively, i.e. education, government activities, big business, while a local language is used in homelife, informal social activities, religion, and so forth. Because of the interplay of language and culture, this also tends to result in skewed biculturalism. Islanders do not learn about the high traditions of their own culture because this area of activities is now occupied by a different language (English) with different traditions. Similarly, they do not absorb the homespun aspects of English culture because this area is dominated by the vernacular.

The notion of skewed bilingualism/biculturalism, however, must be viewed in perspective. For some years theorists held a rather compartmentalized view of bilingualism, holding that each language and culture was an independent system which functioned in an almost schizophrenic fashion within the same individual. This view fails to take account of two significant factors, the relative ranking of languages and their influence on one other.

In general when two or more languages operate within the same society, they do so in a hierarchical way. Charles A. Ferguson¹ has talked about 'high' versus 'low' languages. Aziz² adds the category of 'mid' for the multilingual society of Tanzania. Typically in Third World or former colonial nations it is an outside language which occupies the 'high', or most prestigious position with the 'mid' and 'low' languages of indigenous origin. This also means that the cultures associated with these languages tend to be similarly ranked. In the Pacific, for example, people devote the majority of their energies to the learning of metropolitan languages and their cultures, and pay only lip service to the study of vernacular language and culture.

The dramatic changes to indigenous cultures as the result of contact with outside cultures has long been recognized. It was frequently the case, as well, that the outsiders who came in learned new customs and ways of doing and thinking. It has been also recognized that languages, operating in close contact, can dramatically influence each other. English was greatly altered as a result of contact with Norman French after 1066. Swahili on the East African coast became modified through contact with Arabic-speaking traders, and Persian speaking invaders in North India had such an impact on the local language that two distinct varieties, Hindi and Urdu, resulted.

It is only recently, however, that linguists have tied all this together and articulated the fact that bilingualism and biculturalism result in modifications to both languages and to both cultures concerned. In fact, it is now recognized

that the interaction of two languages and cultures results in the creation of a new composit language and culture. Sibayan³ reports on the mixture of Tagalog (the national language) and English in the Philippines, which he refers to as 'Mixmix'. It is reported to be the favoured form of language in the media and in social communication. When I was in India in the early 1960s, people were somewhat derisively using the term 'Hinglish' for the Hindi-ized English and Anglicized Hindi becoming current there. I feel sure that my reading audience from the various islands can think of local examples of English words, phrases, and concepts which enjoy common use in the vernacular. It is, perhaps, not so quickly recognised, how localisms have also come into English in the various islands, but I have given examples from Fiji English in a paper written jointly with my wife available from the Fiji English Teachers' Association. Purists in both indigenous and metropolitan language and culture try to resist these reciprocal linguistic and cultural influences with great vigour, but I submit that once bilingualism/biculturalism passes from an elitist phenomenon to a mass one, permeating the society as a whole, some degree of mixing of the languages and cultures is inevitable.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION

Educators must always wrestle with the question of whether an education system should lead or follow the trends in its society. As with most questions, the answer lies somewhere between the two extremes. It is clear that firm policies can influence patterns in society as with the 'English only' policy of the New Zealand education system bringing about the virtual abandonment of the Maori language. At the same time, the dropping in response to public pressure of the Indian government's three language plan demonstrates that policies too far out of step with the wishes of the populace are doomed.

In the Pacific, people will surely continue to bring English words, phrases, and concepts into the local languages and to flavour their English with local thoughts and expressions. It is my opinion that any educational system which fails to recognise this, runs the risk of getting too far out of step with accepted practice within the society. In an age when relevance is the watch-word in education, such a system would have to change, or perish to give way to a more responsive one. Popular influence on education can be somewhat more direct where schools are under the control of local committees, as is the case with the majority in Fiji, but this control is generally moderated by central government which seems often to be a haven for ardent purists who frown on any mixing of the languages.

One area in which the education systems in the Pacific should engage in active attitude re-shaping is that of bringing about a levelling of the relative status of the two languages, enhancing that of the vernacular and laying aside the mystique of English. Though the educational systems in several island nations are at least nominally bilingual, their bilingualism, like that of the societies

they serve, is presently skewed rather than balanced. Even in the vernacular medium classes, restricted to the lower classes, the vernacular is given minimal status, since there are by and large no textbooks for the various subjects in it, and the teacher translates from an English text. There is a similar denigration of local languages at the secondary level. Though a pass in English is required for a school leaving certificate in most nations (though the required marks are inordinately low), I believe Tonga is the only nation in the Region requiring a pass in the vernacular language as well.

Besides texts and required passes, it should also be recognised that there are certain customs and concepts in the local culture and language which are central to people's lives, though they have no equivalents in English or Western culture. Therefore, the terms representing them must be made a part of the English used within the country.

Once it is realised that the primary function of English is to facilitate communication within the society, rather than communication outside the country, then English becomes just another local language. The small number who will use it in international communication does not justify every child in the nation being forced to learn a brand of English stripped of those very localisms which make it relevant in their lives.

I have written at greater length elsewhere on the essentially local nature of English in ESL nations and of the switchover to a local model of performance in the post-colonial or emerging period. (Moag and Moag, 1977)⁴ A research project presently in progress by the English staff at the University of the South Pacific will help in delineating those localisms which should be permitted in the English of the South Pacific. This does not preclude or obviate the need for those working in English curriculum and teaching in the individual countries to do their own research and work out guidelines for their own particular situations.

DIRECTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

In general, one can take emerging patterns in urban areas as the harbinger of future general trends in the society. The tendency toward blended rather than compartmentalized bilingualism-biculturalism will continue, though I do not see a 'Mixmix' type language developing in most Pacific nations for some time to come. A more localised brand of English will continue to play the dominant role in certain areas of activity, but with vernacular language and culture playing a larger part in the school curriculum and, hence, its status adjusted upward in the eyes of most people. This will foster greater creative activity in vernaculars, writing of poetry, plays, and stories, but the form of the language used will reflect the integration of English and Western culture within the basic fabric of society.

The average person will be able to read books and follow speakers from outside in English, but his own English will bear the Pacific stamp.

Given new attention to the vernaculars, and some flexibility with respect to the role of English, the future looks challenging and bright.

REFERENCES:

1. Ferguson , Charles, A. (1959), "Diglossia" in **Language and Social Context**, Penguin Modern Sociology Readings.
2. Aziz, M.H. (1972), "Triglossia and Swahili — English Bilingualism in Tanzania" in **Language in Society**, 1, 2.
3. Sibayan , B.P. (1977) "Language and Identity" — SEAMEO Regional Language Centre, Singapore: Twelfth Regional Seminar, April, 1977.
4. Moag , Rodney F. and Louisa B. Moag (1977) "English in Fiji: Some Perspectives and the Need for Languages Planning," in **Fiji English Teacher's Journal**, Vol. 13. September, 1977, pp. 2-26.