

A REPORT ON WORLD ENGLISH VARIETY – TOK PISIN

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Abstract

Tok Pisin, one of the official languages of Papua New Guinea, has evolved into a lingua franca spoken by over six million people in the country. This study aims to analyze the history, sociolinguistic context, as well as the morphological and syntactic features of Tok Pisin, one of the official languages of Papua New Guinea. The research is qualitative descriptive in nature. The population includes Tok Pisin speakers in Papua New Guinea, with a sample of 15 Papua New Guinean students in Melbourne selected using purposive sampling. Data were collected through literature analysis and surveys. Data analysis was conducted thematically with triangulation. The findings highlight the significant role of Tok Pisin as a lingua franca connecting more than 800 language groups in Papua New Guinea, despite the diverse opinions among its speakers. Morphologically, the language exhibits strong English influence through the use of affixes "-im" and "-pela," while syntactically, it maintains an SVO word order. The conclusion of this study emphasizes the value of Tok Pisin as a cultural identity and a unifying tool, although a small number of speakers perceive it as a barrier to English proficiency. This research provides critical insights into the dynamics of contact languages in multilingual societies.

Keywords: Tok Pisin; Papua New Guinea; lingua franca; morphology; syntax; sociolinguistics

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INTRODUCTION

In this report, I will first explain the historical, cultural, and sociolinguistic situation of Papua New Guinea, the country where Tok Pisin is spoken. This explanation will serve as the background for the report, leading to the description of the morphosyntactic features of Tok Pisin (Benitez et al., 2020; Stevens et al., 2016). Next, I will present the universal grammatical features found in Tok Pisin, and finally, I will share some interesting views on the attitudes of Papua New Guineans towards Tok Pisin that I obtained from my survey in April 2017 (Goddard & Wierzbicka, 2021; Rarrick, 2024).

Tok Pisin, as one of the official languages of Papua New Guinea (PNG), has become a symbol of linguistic diversity and an essential tool for cross-cultural communication. With over six million speakers, Tok Pisin serves as a lingua franca amidst the linguistic richness of more than 800 local languages. Although initially regarded as a pidgin, it has evolved into a creole with complex morphological and syntactic structures (Ansaldo & Szeto, 2020; Mufwene, 2015).

The urgency of this study lies in understanding Tok Pisin's role in connecting various cultural communities in PNG (Bolinga, 2023; Hazenbosch et al., 2022). Despite its official status, Tok Pisin continues to receive polarized perceptions from its speakers. A comprehensive analysis of its social function and linguistic evolution is crucial to supporting inclusive language policies in PNG.

Several theories underpin the importance of studying contact languages. The creolization theory highlights how pidgin languages transform into creoles through intense community contact (Bakker, 2020; Knörr, 2018). Furthermore, the concept of 'vernacular

universals' reveals common patterns across contact languages, including morphological features such as reduplication and substrate influence. This study contextualizes Tok Pisin within these frameworks to illustrate its linguistic dynamics (Jackson, 2021; Schieffelin, 2018).

Previous research has explored the history and linguistic features of Tok Pisin, such as the work of Smith and Siegel (2013), which examines its development as a trade language in the Pacific (Thow et al., 2015; Yang et al., 2021). However, studies focusing on societal attitudes toward Tok Pisin, particularly within the framework of globalization, remain limited. This presents an opportunity to delve into broader perspectives among Papua New Guineans.

A research gap exists regarding the linguistic dynamics of Tok Pisin in the context of globalization and digital technology. While prior studies have mapped its basic linguistic features, the impact of technological advancements on the evolution of contact languages like Tok Pisin remains largely unexplored.

The novelty of this study lies in combining linguistic analysis with sociolinguistic research, focusing on the effects of globalization and digitalization on contact languages. This approach aims to provide new insights into how languages like Tok Pisin adapt amidst rapid social and technological changes.

The title of this research, "A Linguistic and Sociolinguistic Analysis of Tok Pisin," highlights the critical role of Tok Pisin as a unifying language in Papua New Guinea, connecting over 800 diverse linguistic groups. This study is important as it delves into the language's historical development, sociolinguistic context, and linguistic features, shedding light on its evolution from a pidgin to a creole. Understanding Tok Pisin is essential for preserving its cultural significance, shaping inclusive language policies, and addressing concerns about its perceived impact on English proficiency. Additionally, the research fills gaps by exploring how globalization and digital technology influence contact languages like Tok Pisin, offering valuable insights into language dynamics in multilingual societies.

The primary objective of this research is to analyze the linguistic and social evolution of Tok Pisin by integrating historical, sociolinguistic, and technological perspectives. This study aspires to contribute to inclusive language policy development and a deeper understanding of the role of contact languages in multilingual societies.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research employs a qualitative descriptive approach to explore the linguistic and sociolinguistic dynamics of Tok Pisin in Papua New Guinea (Taguchi, 2018). The study focuses on understanding its morphological and syntactic features, historical development, and societal attitudes. supplemented by secondary data from existing literature on linguistic and sociolinguistic features of the language.

Data collection combines surveys and document analysis, ensuring comprehensive coverage of both qualitative and quantitative aspects. The research procedure begins with identifying relevant literature to frame the study context, followed by survey distribution to gather firsthand data on attitudes toward Tok Pisin. Data analysis uses thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and insights in linguistic features and societal attitudes. Statistical methods support the interpretation of survey data, while triangulation ensures the validity of findings.

This study focuses on Tok Pisin, one of the official languages of Papua New Guinea, as the object of study, with the aim of exploring its linguistic features and sociolinguistic role. The subjects of this study were 15 Papua New Guinean students living in Melbourne, who were selected through deliberate sampling to represent diverse cultural and regional backgrounds. The study adhered to certain criteria, including participants who

were native or fluent speakers of the Tok Pisin language, and combined qualitative and quantitative data. By analyzing the historical, cultural, and sociolinguistic context of the Tok Pisin language, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of its significance as a lingua franca and its impact in connecting the country's diverse linguistic communities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Historical, cultural and sociolinguistic situation of Papua New Guinea – Tok Pisin is spoken here.

Tok Pisin, an intriguing creole and a form of Melanesian Pidgin spoken in Papua New Guinea (PNG), has evolved into a well-structured language that is now valued as an accessible means of communication—a lingua franca for effective intercultural dialogue among Papua New Guineans who may not understand each other. The other two dialects in this group are Bislama from Vanuatu and Pijin from the Solomon Islands. Tok Pisin is predicted to be 1 ½ centuries old or so, spoken by an estimation of 3 – 5 million people, whereby the language use applies as both second and additional language – it is a creole for approximately 500,000 Papua New Guineans. An updated data from Australian National University Tok Pisin language website mentions there are “more than six million speakers”. As other living languages – it is continuously changing and expanding.

Papua New Guinea occupies the eastern part of New Guinea Island, while the western half belongs to Indonesia and is divided into six provinces: Papua, Central Papua, Highland Papua, South Papua, West Papua, and Southwest Papua. Europeans discovered PNG relatively late, at the end of the 19th century, primarily due to the challenging topography, despite the fact that humans had inhabited the region for thousands of years. The island was divided into two parts: the southern region became British New Guinea (later known as Papua), and the northern area was colonized as German New Guinea, which included the Admiralty Islands to the north and the Bismarck Archipelago to the northeast. After World War I, New Guinea came under German administration while Papua was managed by Australia; both regions united to form Papua New Guinea in 1975. According to ethnologue languages of the World, Papua New Guinea has 852 languages.

The rise of Tok Pisin can be traced back to the Pacific trade in the central Pacific prior to the 20th century. Pacific Pidgin English served as a trade language on ships seeking “whale products, beche de mer, and other commodities”. Many traits of Pacific Pidgin likely originated from Aboriginal pidgin as a foundational element. The development of Melanesian Pidgin began in August 1863 with the onset of the Pacific labor trade, which involved the recruitment of Melanesians, some of whom were kidnapped, to work on plantations in Queensland and Samoa. In Queensland, the majority of workers came from Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands, with some from the Bismarck Archipelago joining the labor trade between 1883 and 1884. However, most of the third group worked on Samoan plantations from 1879 to 1912. In 1878, many experienced plantation workers from other regions who had previously worked in Queensland also migrated to Samoa. These groups brought Melanesian Pidgin with them, leading to the emergence of two distinct varieties of Melanesian Pidgin after 12 years: one in Samoa and one in Queensland. The Bismarck Archipelago workers returned and the usage of Tok Pisin spread as a lingua franca – adding German and native language (Kuanua) in German owned plantations, hence; expansion and stabilisation of Tok Pisin happened – a new version of Tok Pisin began here.

Tok Pisin was recognized as one of the official languages of Papua New Guinea following its independence in 1975, alongside English, Hiri Motu, and Papua New Guinean Sign Language. Although it is often used informally, Tok Pisin is also utilized in formal settings, such as parliament. Furthermore, in various urban and rural regions of Papua New

Guinea, including Sepik, Tok Pisin serves as the primary language of instruction in elementary schools. The language attracts both positive and negative views. An intriguing, fun fact of Tok Pisin is that it “carries the richness of Melanesian expression, deriving from many languages of Papua New Guinea”.

B. Description of morphological and syntactic features.

A number of factors such as “L1 and L2 usage, regions, situation, and degree of bilingualism with English” affect Tok Pisin’s morphology.

1) Morphological features:

a. The transitive marker –im

The following morphological features are retrieved from.

- 1. Im: this affix is widely employed across Melanesian Pidgin English. It is derived from the English object pronoun “him”. Transitive verbs in Tok Pisin needs im. Approximately 90 words in Mihalic have two forms: transitive and intransitive.

Example:

- a) sanap = ‘to be standing up’, and sanapim = ‘to stand something up’.
 - b) Dring = ‘to be drinking’, and dringim = ‘to drink (something)’
 - c) Giaman = ‘to be lying’ and giamanim = to deceive (someone)’ (from obsolete English gammon ‘to deceive’)
 - d) Marit = ‘be married’ and maritim = ‘to marry (someone)’
- 2. Reduplication often times occur for intransitive verbs:
 - a) Waswas wasim
 ‘wash oneshelf, bathe ‘to wash (something)’
 - b) Tok(tok) tokim
 ‘to talk, converse’ ‘to say (something), to tell (someone)
 - 3. In current Tok Pisin, there is a case recorded from a Simbu young man eliding the m for –im transitive verb as per this sentence:
 Ol suti sla boi ia, ol puti em lo kar
 ‘They shoot this boy ANAPH they put him in car’
 - 4. Tok Pisin borrows quite many verbs from English recently for stylistic reasons:
 - a) Mi bin witnesim long ai bilong mi
 - b) I PAST witness with eye POSS me
 - c) ‘I witnessed it with my own eyes’

b. The –pela suffix

The fella suffix is derived from the English word ‘fellow’ and its usage appears across Melanesian Pidgin. The main difference is a little bit spelling, in which Solomon Islands Pijin and Bislama utilise ‘falla’, whilst Tok Pisin employs ‘pela’ – its shortened as ‘pla’. There are two different forms: 1. “monosyllabic adjective” like numerals, example; wanpela, and “plural marker on pronouns”.

- 1. The –pela adjectival suffix
 Examples are adjectives taking suffix and having more than one syllable: sevenpela and yelopela.
- 2. Usage of –pela for pronoun
 A striking distinction happens between English and Tok Pisin pronouns as shown in the table below:

Table 1. Differences between English and Tok Pisin pronouns

Person Number	Singular	Dual	Trial	Plural
First	<i>Mi</i>	(excl.) <i>mitupela</i> (incl.) <i>yumitupela</i>	<i>Mitripela</i> <i>yumitripela</i>	<i>Mipela</i> <i>Yumi</i>
Second	<i>Yu</i>	<i>Yutupela</i>	<i>yutripela</i>	<i>yupela</i>
Third	<i>Em</i>	<i>Em (tupela)</i>	<i>yutripela</i>	<i>Yu</i>

c. The –s pluralising suffix

In recent Tok Pisin lexis, the plural –s is added, for instance, *bois* ‘boy’; *gels* ‘girls’, *frens* ‘friends’; *perents* ‘parents’; *wiks* ‘weeks’; *stuidents* ‘students’; and *tichas* ‘teachers’.

d. Other word-formation process

1. Compounding

Compound expressions were recorded by Muhlhausler; exemplifying *wantok* from English ‘one’ and ‘talk’, other examples are *wan skul* ‘class mate’, *wan wok* ‘work mate’, and *wan lotu* ‘church mate’.

2. Reduplication

An example of reduplication was provided by Muhlhausler as shown below:

Wanpela wanpela ailan I gat nem bilongen yet
One one island PRED have name POSS it REFLEX
 ‘Each island has its own name’

2) Syntactic features

Tok Pisin’s word order is SVO.

a. The particle i

The particle *i* is used for the 3rd person pronoun:

For example: *em i kam*
s(he) pred comes

In a case like the Highlands, the particle *i* is left out as per this example:

Mipela [] go l’ aus na [] stap nau mipela [] ting osem

We go to house and stay now we think that

[] nogat wantla problem ba [] kamap osem na mipela

not one problem FUT arise so that we

femli olgeta mipela [] go [] stap lo aus

family all we go stay in house.

‘We went to the house and stayed there thinking that there were no problems so we stayed in the house’.

- b. Other syntactic features obtained from (Smith, 2002, p. 125 - 137); I try to construct the examples though.

Table 2. Syntactic features

No	Syntactic features and their functions	Example in sentence
1	<i>Bai</i> from English by Future marker	<i>Mi bai kam na lukim yupela</i> I will come and see you all
2	<i>Bin</i> from English been Past tense marker	<i>Ol I bin raun kam lukim mipela long Jayapura.</i> They came and visited us at Jayapura.
3	<i>Laik</i> from English like Wanting to do something	<i>Mipela laik beten/prei nau</i> We want to pray now
4	<i>Pinis</i> from English finish Completed action	<i>Em i bin kam bek pinis</i> He/she already came back
5	<i>Save</i> for habitual action	<i>Shelley save go lotu long Clayton</i> Shelley always goes to church at Clayton
6	<i>Wok long</i> for continuous tense	<i>Mi wok long kai-kai saksak na pis</i> I am eating sago and fish
7	<i>Stap</i> means situated	<i>Buk bilong yu I stap insait long beg bilong mi</i> Your book is inside my bag
8	<i>Mas</i> means assuming something to be true	<i>Go na sekim, em must ol wantok bilong yumi</i> Go and check, it must be our relatives
9	<i>Ken</i> (gen) means again	<i>Tokim ol, noken kam gen</i> Tell them, don't come again.

C. A note of the features appearing in non-standard varieties elsewhere (cf. 'vernacular universals' noted in Burridge 2007)

- 1) Lack of inversion in main clause yes/no questions
yu kisim dispela ting-ting tu/ah? (Female, 38, Madang)
'you get the point?'
- 2) Me instead of I in coordinate subjects
Mi na barata/brada/brata bilong mi kam bihain long taim 'me and my brother were late'
barata/brada/brata bilong mi na mi abrusim taim 'my brother and me were late'
(Female, 38, Madang)
In Tok Pisin: both 'kam bihain long taim' and 'abrusim taim' mean the similar thing 'late'.
- 3) Adverbs same form as adjectives
Kam hariap means 'come quick', whilst kam ariap stret means 'come quickly'
(Female, 38, Madang)
- 4) Absence of plural marking after measure nouns
Faivpela yia 'five years'
- 5) Lack of inversion / lack of auxiliaries in wh-questions
'what you doing?' yu mekim wanem?
In standard Tok Pisin, they will say 'yu wok long mekim wanem?' to show a continuous activity, but sometimes the progressive tense is left out as in yu mekim wanem?
- 6) Special forms of phrases for the second person plural pronoun
Yupela for you all. It is common in Melanesian Pidgin, whereby Bislama and Solomon Islands Pijin employ 'yufalla'
- 7) Irregular use of articles
Mi bin gat wanpela naispela gaden/gaten 'I had nice garden'

Tit bilong mi bin pen 'I had toothache'
(Female, 38, Madang)

D. Papua New Guineans attitudes to Tok Pisin

As a contact language, Tok Pisin attracts both positive and negative views across regions and age groups in Papua New Guinea. Based on a survey I conducted pertaining 'attitudes to Tok Pisin', a questionnaire distributed to Papua New Guinean undergraduate and postgraduates studying in Melbourne, 15 participants (7 males and 8 females) from various regions in PNG with diverse cultural background reveals both positive and negative views, accompanied with their comments, in which nearly all – 12 participants value the importance of Tok Pisin as a vital and easy mutual intelligible lingua franca for more than 800 diverse language groups and four big regions, namely: Highlands, Islands, Momase and Papua Regions. A little number – 3 respondents reported being disavouring the language, particularly middle-aged and old people. Following is the elicitation of some comments that participants gave, positive attitudes are present and negative attitudes are latter:

1) Positive attitudes

- a. Youngsters probably tend to favor the language, as in the only young participant's response: "I love speaking the language cause it is my home lands language". (Male, 19, East Sepik).
- b. When Tok Pisin serves as an aid breaking down barriers across PNG: "I love the fact that this unique language is something all PNGeans have in common and it defines us. Its such a fun language to speak and I can speak it with any PNGean I meet which breaks down any other barriers there are". (Female, 30, East New Britain and Central Province)
- c. Tok Pisin seen as an PNG's identity overseas: "Speaking tok pisin is like an identity for PNGeans or Pacific Islanders who speak tok pisin when in foreign countries. I think tok pisin is a very informal language and speaking it is relaxing and makes me feel at home just as speaking my mother language". (Female, 32, East New Britain).
- d. Another man from Southern Highlands, aged 40, stated that, "Tok Pisin is good national identity and it should be preserved at all cost".
- e. A 38 years old woman from Bougainville confirmed the importance of TP as other official languages, i.e. English and Hiri Motu by saying: "I see it as just any other official language".

2) Negative attitudes

- a. Despite the value of Tok Pisin being spoken nationwide, some Papua New Guineans contemplate it as a hindrance for a productive writing and speaking in English "Don't really like Tok Pisin either, although it's the common language back in PNG. My reason being that most PNGeans are poor in both spoken and written English is all about the sentence structures. Where I see Tok Pisin as an impediment for constructive English, thus, Tok Pisin structure tend to be adopted in English. Tok Pisin should be abolished in PNG work places/offices and among colleagues. From my observations and even my own personal believe, Tok Pisin is the obstacles for PNGeans in speaking and writing good English". (Male, 38, Simbu)
- b. Tok Pisin is even deemed as a corrupted language from the colonizers: "I am ashamed of it as it is not a distinct language with clear rules or grammar like English. It lacks deep vocabulary as it is a made-up language of English origin where the English colonizers were trying to unify a country of people from unique cultures and dialects". (Male, 39, East Sepik)
- c. Not all words can be expressed in Tok Pisin affecting people to switch to English: "I get frustrated when am trying to describe something in tok pisin but do not real know

the proper word in tok pisin and ending up speaking in English". (Female, 48, New Ireland).

CONCLUSION

This report has explored the history, culture, and sociolinguistic use of Tok Pisin in Papua New Guinea, providing a detailed analysis of its morphological and syntactic features, which align with the concept of 'vernacular universals.' The research confirms that Tok Pisin serves as a vital lingua franca, uniting over 800 diverse linguistic groups across four distinct cultural regions in the country. Morphologically, it shows strong English influence through affixes like "-im" and "-pela," while syntactically maintaining an SVO word order. Sociolinguistically, Tok Pisin elicits both positive and negative perceptions: the majority of surveyed Papua New Guinean students regard it as a cultural identity and essential communication tool, while a small minority see it as a barrier to mastering English. To enhance the reliability of findings regarding public attitudes, expanding the sample size to include more participants from Papua New Guinea would be beneficial. Overall, the study achieves its objectives by analyzing the historical, sociolinguistic, and linguistic dynamics of Tok Pisin, emphasizing its role in fostering cultural identity and unity while addressing its challenges in a globalized and digitalized context. These findings underline the importance of Tok Pisin in shaping inclusive language policies and preserving Papua New Guinea's cultural heritage.

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