

COMMENTS ON GOVERNMENT INTERPRETERS AND TRANSLATORS IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

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パプアニューギニアにおける
公的通訳者・翻訳者について

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パプアニューギニアは世界で最も多言語の国であるが、公共の通訳者・翻訳者の養成やサービスはきわめて非効率的・非組織的である。これは一つには単一言語で用の足りたオーストラリアや植民時代からの遺産であり、同時にメラネシアと西欧の文化の差からくるそれぞれの通訳者の期待が異っていることに無理解であることに由来する。市民が自由に利用できるように通訳・翻訳サービスのレベルアップをはかるには、文化に対する理解を深めること、又、プロの通訳者・翻訳者のトレーニング強化が必要である。

Abstract

Although Papua New Guinea is the most multilingual country on earth, the development and use of interpreters and translators in the public service have been remarkably inefficient and unsystematic. This is due both to the legacy of colonial rule by monolingual Australians and to a lack of understanding of the different expectations of interpreters in Melanesian and Western cultures. Greater cultural sensitivity and better professional training are needed if the standard of interpreting and translation is to be improved sufficiently to permit access to government services by all citizens.

Received. Apr. 28, 1995

1. Introduction¹

Given the fact that the creation of Papua New Guinea as a political entity over the past century has resulted in the speakers of over a fifth of the world's languages² being

united in one modern nation-state, together with the fact Papua New Guinea has three official languages (Tok Pisin, Hiri Motu, and English), one would expect that a consciousness of language related issues and the importance of the role of interpreters and translators would be quite highly developed in Papua New Guinea. This is particularly so in light of the call in the National Goals and Directive Principles of the Constitution of the Independent State of Papua New Guinea for

“... recognition that the cultural, commercial, and ethnic diversity of our people is a positive strength, and for the fostering of a respect for, and appreciation of, traditional ways of life and culture, including language, in all their richness and variety...”

(Government of Papua New Guinea 1975: 41)

Unfortunately, this has not been the case. The efficient use of interpreters and translators has not been the rule in the Papua New Guinean government service, either in the colonial period or since Independence in 1975. This has been due to some extent to the lack of understanding of the role of interpreters in both traditional and modern Melanesian society, and to the imposition of Western cultural expectations of what the role of interpreters and translators should be. With greater training, and the acceptance of Melanesian, rather than Western, roles for translators and interpreters, it should be possible to improve the standard of translation and interpreting in the public service. With this in mind this paper will briefly examine some characteristics of translation and interpretation in Papua New Guinea both before and after contact with the West. It will also look at current translating and interpreting practices and suggest methods to help improve the standard of translating and interpreting in Papua New Guinea.

2. Interpreters in precolonial Papua New Guinea

Although there do not seem to be any studies of the role of interpreters in Papua New Guinea prior to contact with the outside world in the latter half of the last century, it is possible to extrapolate what their role was from descriptions of interpreting in traditional village settings in more recent times. Perhaps the best known study of this sort is Salisbury (1962) describing the use of several languages in the Siane area along

1 I would like to thank Paul Brennan, William Ferea, Anna Kelangari, and Melchior Togolo for the many questions they answered about their respective areas of expertise, George Grace for his comments on an earlier draft of this paper, and Emi Matsui for assistance translating the abstract. Any omissions or errors remain mine however; *mea culpa*.

2 With less than four million citizens Papua New Guinea has more than 849 separate languages (Grimes 1988:688).

the border between the Simbu and Eastern Highlands Provinces.

Because of marriage and close contacts across linguistic lines, most of the inhabitants of the village Salisbury described were bilingual in the Dene and Siane languages. In spite of this bilingualism, in fact because of it, interpreting between the languages was an important part of public discourse in the village. Salisbury (1962: 4) reported that when Siane leaders would speak in public, they would often speak in Dene, a neighbouring vernacular, which would be translated into Siane, the language of the village. Since virtually all villagers were bilingual, this meant that they listened to the leaders' messages twice. Salisbury reported that when he as an expatriate spoke publicly in Siane, his words were also "interpreted" into Siane as if he had used a foreign language.

That this was not only a Highlands pattern is shown by Sankoff's (1976: 304) report of the practice in a Morobe Province village of visiting leaders always speaking in Tok Pisin with an interpreter repeating in the vernacular, Buang. She reported that this was the case even when the dignitary was a native Buang-speaker, and even though nearly all persons in the village were bilingual in Tok Pisin (New Guinea Pidgin English) from early childhood.

Another characteristic of interpreting in traditional Papua New Guinea was the fact that multilingualism was one of the criteria for establishing oneself as a bigman (Sankoff 1976: 290). Face to face communication has always been considered the only trustworthy form of communication in Papua New Guinea (Brennan 1982: 210) and speaking through someone else is an introduced and somewhat unnatural concept (Bau 1981:91). Thus leaders have had to be multilingual in most Papua New Guinean societies. Boys from prominent families would often receive specialised linguistic training by living for extended periods in "foreign" areas or by even being adopted out to a family from another language group.

These practices indicate that in at least some areas of Papua New Guinea, the primary purpose of interpreting is not the unambiguous transfer of knowledge from a speaker whose language is not known by the audience, and who does not speak the language of the audience, as it is in Japan and the West. Instead the primary purpose is to signal the public and important nature of the discourse concerned as well as the importance of the speaker. Moreover, in contrast to modern Japan and Europe where interpreting is a specialised occupation, in traditional Papua New Guinea there was no specialised position of interpreter. Instead linguistic skills were only one part of the wide repertoire of skills required by a Melanesian bigman.

3. Interpreting in the colonial period

In the latter half of the nineteenth century German and British colonial rule was established in what was to become Papua New Guinea. By the end of World War I Australia had taken over from both as the colonial master. Australian rule lasted until the achievement of Papua New Guinean Independence in 1975. During the colonial period Tok Pisin, Hiri Motu, and English were spread as *lingue franche* and languages of government.

The identification of multilingualism with political power continued in the colonial period. One of the requirements for being appointed an indigenous colonial agent, such as a *tultul* or *luluai*, was the ability to interpret between Tok Pisin and at least one local vernacular. These colonial intermediaries had an important role, and even if they were not officially a *tultul* or *luluai*, interpreters were often called upon to arrange negotiations or to mediate in disputes, as well as represent villagers with the kiaps, the expatriate extension officers who exercised colonial government control in rural areas (Bau 1981: 90). While the Australian kiaps may have thought that the ideal interpreter was a self-effacing transmitter of information, Papua New Guineans viewed interpreters as power brokers, and often attacked them physically if affairs did not go as expected (Bau 1981:91). This view of interpreters as politically important men was undoubtedly the reason why a large number of national politicians of the previous generation, including a majority of the members of the last pre-Independence House of Assembly (the colonial forerunner of the Papua New Guinean National Parliament) were former government interpreters (Bau 1981: 90).

There was no formal training for these colonial interpreters. This was partly because most interpreters in Papua New Guinea were illiterate and partly because the Australian ruling class came from a monolingual and linguistically unsophisticated background. Nevertheless, as cultural intermediaries interpreters had to bridge the gap between a Melanesian system of government which is informal and based on the security of a network of personal relationships with others in the community, and a Western system of government, which is formal and based on the security of rule by law (Staats and Conti 1976: 319).

This is in contrast to twentieth century Western and Japanese interpreters and translators, who work between language groups sharing what University of Hawaii linguist George Grace (1988) has called the “modern-world monoculture” in which all

languages are reshaped into “transcodings of one another”. The cultural gap between indigenous Papua New Guineans and their Western colonial masters was far greater than that faced by their contemporaries interpreting between European languages, who could draw upon a two thousand year old common European cultural heritage. It was also a greater cultural gap than that faced by contemporary interpreters between Japanese and European languages, who at least had the advantage of certain shared cultural traits common to any industrial society, such as print literacy, a written history, and a basic understanding of industrial technology. Moreover, while government interpreters in Europe and East Asia were meant to be faceless intermediaries between parties who were at least nominal social and political equals, in the colonial Papua New Guinean environment most government interpreting was not between social equals. Colonial Papua New Guinean interpreters, who received no specialised training, were therefore forced to be much more independent cultural intermediaries than their Japanese and European contemporaries, for whom specialised university training had become the norm by the middle of this century.

4. Government interpreting since Independence

In the Papua New Guinean government service today, interpreters and translators can be found in a number of different areas, including the legal system, hospitals, and Parliament. In all three areas there are varying degrees of dissatisfaction regarding the standard of interpretation and translation, either on the part of the clients, the interpreters/translators, or both.

Lang (1976a and 1976b) has discussed the role of interpreters in Enga Province working for kiaps in the period immediately before Independence. Comparing these interpreters with their counterparts in Europe, Lang was struck by the amount of power that the Papua New Guinean court interpreters had. For example, before making an appointment to see the kiap, plaintiffs would discuss the merits of the case with the interpreter. Lang criticised the interpreters for becoming actively involved in the questioning of witnesses and noted the detrimental effect this had on the kiaps’ ability to question the plaintiffs and witnesses effectively. He noted that court-room discourse tended to be directed to the interpreter rather than between the expatriate kiaps and Enga-speakers through the interpreters. He concluded that more training was necessary for both interpreters and kiaps to ensure that the role of an interpreter was a self-effacing one, as well as to improve their general standard of language, so that more exact

interpretations would be made.

Since Independence the local court system run by expatriate kiaps has been replaced by village courts working under customary law and in the vernacular. However, middle-level courts operated under the national Magisterial Service and the National and Supreme Courts are still conducted in English. Several members of the National Court staff have told me that although Section 37 of the Papua New Guinean Constitution guarantees the right of an accused to “be informed promptly in a language which he understands... of the offence with which he is charged” and “to have without payment the assistance of an interpreter if he cannot understand or speak the language used at the trial of the charge” (Government of Papua New Guinea 1975: 21), these constitutional rights are frequently violated because of the lack of adequately trained, educated court interpreters. In addition, because of the lack of documentation on the majority of Papua New Guinean languages, it is impossible to test the proficiency of a prospective interpreter with any degree of objectivity (Tomasetti 1976: 1134).

Lang (1976b and 1975) has also discussed the role of orderlies as interpreters in hospitals during the time just before and after Independence. He has noted that because most doctors at that time were expatriates who did not speak a vernacular or even Tok Pisin, and because hospitals did not have specially appointed interpreters as such, orderlies ended up having to act as intermediaries between doctors and their patients. While today there are more Papua New Guinean doctors, not all patients, especially in rural areas, speak Tok Pisin or another language spoken even by a Papua New Guinean doctor. Moreover, there are still many expatriate doctors working in the country. It has been my observation that especially among recent arrivals from South Asia, very few of the expatriate doctors who have come since Independence have learnt a Papua New Guinean language, so many of the observations made by Lang just after Independence are still valid.

Lang pointed out that in contrast to European medical interpreters, orderlies receive no training in interpreting and are primarily health professionals, not interpreters. He noted that this causes several problems. The first is that orderlies did not retain more than three facts when interpreting. This was in contrast to trained European interpreters who retain up to nine facts at a time (Lang 1975: 7). Secondly, in the Papua New Guinean situation discourse was directed towards the orderly-interpreters, not through them, and they often interrupted patients or initiated questioning independently of the

doctor. Thirdly Lang (1975:9) criticised the orderlies' "attributing the status of *ignora-mus* to the patient" by simplifying doctors' comments or omitting parts of them.

Nevertheless, he mentioned that orderlies tended to impede the work of doctors much less than court interpreters did the work of *kiap* magistrates (Lang 1976b:21). He attributed this to the fact that their status as colleagues of the doctor was well established, to the fact that discourse was generally much shorter, and to the fact that their knowledge of the subject matter was far better than that of court interpreters. He recommended, however, that interpreting be included as part of the training of orderlies, especially interpreting for groups of more than two or three, where Lang found the most problems. He also suggested that doctors receive in-service training in the more effective use of orderlies as interpreters.

The role of parliamentary interpreters has been discussed by Bau (1981) and Brennan (1978). The National Parliament of Papua New Guinea is conducted in all three national languages (Tok Pisin, Hiri Motu, and English), with most verbal communication in Tok Pisin and most written communication in English. Parliamentary interpreters make up the National Translation Service, which has been in existence in one form or another since 1964 (Bau 1981:90). In spite of the fact that these interpreters are the only simultaneous interpreters in Papua New Guinea, their role is not well known or understood, even among politicians (Bau 1981:89 and Brennan 1978).

There are several problems which this service faces. Foremost is the stress caused by the interpreters' heavy work load. This heavy work load stems in part from the fact that, as the only official translation office in the national government, they must often take on much outside work in addition to their parliamentary interpreting and translating duties (Brennan 1978).

This stress is exacerbated by tensions between the interpreters and the politicians they serve. Many of the politicians were once interpreters themselves and one parliamentary interpreter told me that politicians' criticism of mistakes made by young interpreters often demoralises staff. Few parliamentarians provide interpreters with copies of speeches in advance and few proof-read translations made for the Hansard, which is entirely in English (Brennan 1978). Bau (1981:91) attributes this lack of cooperation to the fact that since many parliamentarians originally rose to power as interpreters, they are suspicious of the potentially threatening role of interpreters in Parliament. In addition, parliamentary interpreters sit in booths hidden from sight and their simultaneous interpretations are heard on headphones which parliamentarians and members of the

public wear. Since face to face communication is the norm in Papua New Guinea, it is quite possible that this invisibility of the interpreters adds to the suspicion which some members of Parliament have.

Training is another problem. Although Bau (1981:92) has claimed that prospective candidates must have a good grade twelve pass, be competent in all three national languages, and have some background interpreting or translating experience, it is difficult to ascertain how this is possible. Since the only senior high school to teach translation as an academic subject was Passam National High School, and that course was discontinued after I left the school in 1986, it is difficult to see where young people would have the opportunity to have received translation experience. In-service training is not always provided and parliamentary interpreters have told me that it is not uncommon for university students of English to be employed without training during university holidays.

Related to the problem of training is the lack of terminology in Hiri Motu and Tok Pisin for many Western parliamentary concepts. There is a lack of consistency between interpreters, and difficulties with concepts expressed in English mean that interpreters “have little idea of what they are saying, or confidence that it is correct” (Bau 1981: 92).

5. The missions

In contrast to the government, religious bodies tend to have considerable success in providing translation and interpreting services. An assessment of the Bible Translators Association, the indigenous wing of the Wycliffe Bible Translators / Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) has been provided by Gela (1986). Even those churches not affiliated with SIL tend to have based their training programmes on the same principles as SIL so that, in the lack of a more comprehensive report on religious translation by all groups in Papua New Guinea, it is possible to use SIL as a general model of religious translation and interpreting by other religious missions in the country as well.

Since its introduction to Papua New Guinea in 1957, SIL has relied heavily on expatriate translators. With Independence emphasis has begun to shift towards Papua New Guinean translators, who obviously have a better command of their own languages and cultures than expatriates do. The type of training expatriates receive was found to be inadequate for indigenous translators so that a series of special training sessions has been organised for indigenous translators. These teach skills in contrastive analysis of languages, study skills in English, Biblical exegesis (an important area since virtually no

Papua New Guinean translators can translate directly from the original Greek or Hebrew texts), and literacy training.

An important aspect of the training is what Gela (1986:42) has called “disciple making”, i.e., affirming or creating indigenous church leaders. Training takes place in annual six week sessions so as not to disrupt the translators’ village responsibilities. Training is done in groups as apprentices to more accomplished translators and translators are taught how to use the community so that translation is a group rather than an individual effort. At the same time this would reaffirm the translators’ role as important members of the society. The effectiveness of this type of training can be seen in the extent to which provincial governments depend on SIL for translation and other linguistic-related services, such as the production of texts for provincial vernacular preschool systems modelled on the North Solomons Viles Tok Ples Skul system.

6. Conclusion

Although Papua New Guinea is the most multilingual country on earth and interpreting and translating are vital to achieving national development goals, there has been relatively little success in creating a corps of well qualified interpreters and translators in the government service. There are several ways in which government agencies could learn from the preparation and support given to translators/interpreters by mission-based organisations such as SIL. Two in particular stand out. The first is that training with SIL is systematic and involves improving English skills, developing some knowledge of contrastive linguistics, and training in the subject matter. The lack of adequate, or sometimes even any, training in formal English, in terminology development in non-Western languages, or in the subject matter creates confusion. In this regard it is noteworthy that among government interpreters, the ones with the greatest amount of subject knowledge, medical orderlies, were the ones whom Lang described as the most successful.

The second difference is that the approach taken by SIL reflects Melanesian concepts of the role of a translator/interpreter. Just as traditional leaders, church translators are bigmen because of their position in the community and, rather than specialising in translation alone, their translating duties are in addition to many other responsibilities in their society. Their training encourages group labour and the sharing of effort under the direction of a leader, traditional Melanesian methods of education and work.

By contrast government interpreters, especially those at the National Parliament, work on a European model, where the translator/interpreter is supposed to be faceless and does not contribute directly to the discourse. This is an attempt to create the impression of monolingual communication even in multilingual situations. Papua New Guineans do not necessarily view monolingual communication as the norm and generally regard facelessness as an attempt to hide something. This approach therefore creates conflict with established cultural norms.

In order to improve the standard of interpretation and translation in the government service, much better training programmes will have to be established along the same lines as those provided by SIL for the Bible Translators Association. Similarly, a role for interpreters and translators apart from their interpreting and translating work should be found. For example, in Parliament interpreters could be trained and assigned as paralegal parliamentarians' assistants.

Approaches such as this would deepen interpreters' and translators' command of their subject matter. More importantly, they would conform to Melanesian ideas of the role of interpreters by allowing the interpreters to establish personal relations with their clients through face to face communication and to establish their positions as persons of authority and thus alleviate suspicions about their real role. Until such a Melanesian approach is taken and until the important role of interpreters and translators in the society as a whole, and the public service in particular, is recognised, development will continue to be hindered by inefficient communication in multi-lingual Papua New Guinea.

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