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Abstract

W.O. Ashcroft has observed that 'worlds exist by means of languages'.¹ Languages make possible the expression of far more than words and stories: they provide the means through which entire belief systems, entire cultural realities are given form, expression and terms of reference.

GILIAN GORLE

Writing in English: Freedom or Frustration? Some Views from Papua New Guinea

W.D. Ashcroft has observed that 'worlds exist by means of languages'.¹ Languages make possible the expression of far more than words and stories: they provide the means through which entire belief systems, entire cultural realities are given form, expression and terms of reference.

In Papua New Guinea, a country of great cultural and linguistic diversity, questions of language are inevitably political. The total population numbers 3.8 million, yet there are over 800 languages and many distinct cultural groupings – in a land area of 462,840 square km. A major contributing factor to this linguistic complexity is the ruggedness of the land, which prevented and still to some extent hinders) contact between different areas.

The government's language policy has privileged Hiri Motu, English and Tok Pisin² as the three official languages of Parliament, and English has for many years been the language of education and administration. Vernacular languages are currently enjoying a higher status with the Education Department's recent proposal to begin primary schooling in selected vernaculars and introduce English later. This proposal aims to keep children connected to their cultural roots – a connection which has proved more and more tenuous for at least two generations who were schooled in English.

The views of Papua New Guinea's writers are vitally important to any discussion of language choice and use. Their voices are all the more significant in this. the International Year of Indigenous People.

Most of the writers I have interviewed³ see language choice as a political issue with very practical implications for themselves and for their country. John Kasaipwalova, whose writing was prominent in the 'first wave' of Papua New Guinea literature, considers the choice of English is political

in the sense that this is what we've inherited, but this is not going to last all the time.... Sooner or later ... we will be in schools learning Bahasa Indonesia, learning Japanese. so it's really just a matter of time. English is iust the fact of predicament at the moment because all our schools and teachers when we started off happened to be English-speaking. (interview 24.9.92)

William Takaku, Director of the National Theatre Company, has a similar viewpoint:

It is a political issue. political in the sense that it is a decision that you are not a party of as a writer or as a person here. First of all, you are forced to accept that you can only communicate in English. That's political.

In the sense that the government of the land has decided that this is the language of instruction?

Yes. in that sense it is political and destructive. After all, what we try to say in English, we can say and relate much better in our own languages.... English is a continuation of neo-colonisation. You know: keep going, people may look different, but the attitudes are the same. There's change on the surface, but it does not affect the spirit. English is a continuation of colonisation and exploitation by the British Empire. (interview 23.9.92)

It comes as no surprise to find that much of Takaku's work with the National Theatre Company makes use of Tok Pisin and a range of vernacular languages.

Adam Delaney, a young writer who chooses to work either in English or in Motu depending on his target audience, notes that language choice has only become a political issue in Papua New Guinea since colonial times – and specifically since the Government's commitment to have a language policy:

We've survived for thousands of years using the languages that we've had. It's never been an issue. I think the mentality's got to go away from people.... It's not a political issue. I think the only reason it's political is that Parliament wants it that way. Parliament has decided that we'll have the three languages,⁴ and the people who have the tools and the power to speak in those languages now use it as a political tool. (conversation 22.10.92)

Two other young writers, Louiaya Kouza and Steven Winduo, assert (in sharp contrast with William Takaku, quoted earlier) that English is a natural language in which to express themselves. Loujaya Kouza, who had a collection of poems published in 1978 when she was 15, continues to write poetry and songs while working as a journalist and reporter. She comments that writing in English is 'a natural phenomenon ... I was weaned on English' (personal communication, June 1992).

Steven Winduo, who began writing in the early 1980s, was closely involved with the Papua New Guinea Writers Union in the mid-80s, and had a poetry collection published in 1991. He describes English as his 'thinking language'. While recognising the importance of his native Boiken dialect and other vernaculars, he notes:

The problem is that these languages are facing destruction.... I've spoken English most of my life, and Tok Pisin. I was born into my dialect but I can't speak it now, because I've been constructed to speak English.... I think in English or Tok Pisin, depending on the situation. But interestingly, I write in English before I think in Pisin.... But it's even more complex. With literary work, most of my reading is in English, so I think in that culture.... And every aspect of my professional life [as a lecturer in the Language and Literature Department at the University of Papua New Guinea] happens in English. (interview 6.10.92)

Winduo explains that he writes in English 'for political reasons':

Writing in English is a political issue in the sense that I'm using that language to bring the other languages to that level also.... When you see one of my texts, you'll see that it's all constructed in English, but within that construction there are other languages. They ... play a very significant role in that these are parts that make up the whole discourse, the whole text. It's not as if English is playing a dominant role, it plays an accommodating role, perhaps diffusing other languages. I'm using it more as a channel for these other languages.

So it's playing more of a collaborating role rather than a dominating one?

Yes. So it's a very political thing. To quote Chinua Achebe, language bears the burden of my experience. Whatever language I use, it communicates, it carries a lot of my burdens, it's a self-justifying thing. (interview 6.10.92)

By contrast Russell Soaba, a relatively prolific writer who has continued to publish since the early 1970s, comments that he uses English as a medium of expression

out of choicelessness.... English is the only language made available to us in its wider scope as far as audience is concerned. I myself feel I have no choice but to use the language, to write it. But the difficult thing about English is that it's a matter of mastering the language, as you would any language.... Well, that's the only language that I write in. I can't write in any other. (interview 25.8.92)

Generally Papua New Guinean writers have not experimented widely beyond the conventions of standard English, except to incorporate vernacular words into texts, as both Soaba and Winduo have done. Two writers whose work consciously makes use of different English registers and codes are John Kasaipwalova and Nora Vagi Brash. Kasaipwalova's story 'Betel-nut is Bad Magic for Aeroplanes'⁵ moves smoothly through a range of registers, accurately capturing the speech styles of different people at Jacksons International Airport outside the national capital, Port Moresby. His story 'Bomanus Kalabus 0 Sori 0!'⁶ achieves a similar, uniquely Papua New Guinean effect. This effect is likely to be short-lived, however, according to Kasaipwalova:

When I want to give something for a universal audience, for my children, and grandchildren later to come, I cannot do that because by the time they get to read it, they will not understand the Papua New Guinea English that is spoken. (interview 24.9.92)

Poet and dramatic satirist Nora Brash, who is equally fluent in Motu, English and Tok Pisin, explains that she writes in all three languages and allows the context and the audience to dictate her choice.

I see language as a political weapon. The people who live in town use English.... I think ... it is essential that one writes in the language the people know best. If I'm writing for the village audience, I will write in Motu.

*The High Cost of Living Differently*⁷ is a little play ... set in Tabari Place, or Koki,⁸ anywhere that people gather. The character is what white people would call an eccentric fellow. We would call them funny people: funny in that they make people laugh and so on. And the man talks in his own language: it's not English/ or Motu, or Tok Pisin, it's his own English. Everyone can understand what he's talking about. He's climbing a mango tree, he sees a beautiful juicy ripe mango. On the other side of the tree is this snake with its mouth wide open, ready to swallow a frog. The man watches the snake with its mouth open, and he's so frightened when it swallows the frog because he thinks he might be next in line. So he jumps out of the mango tree, leaves his laplap hanging there and tells the people what happened in his elaborate English. Then someone suddenly realises he's naked. He says, 'Oh, what are you doing without your laplap?'

'Oh, I forgot. I left my laplap in the tree.' He uses that sort of language, and people who gather in markets, that's their sort of language so they understand it.... That's how I use languages in my work. I think language should suit the audience. (interview 13.4.92)

The work of John Kasaipwalova and Nora Brash illustrates a phenomenon which W.D. Ashcroft has described:

One of the most interesting features of post-colonial literature is that kind of writing which is informed by the linguistic principles of a first language or an English moulding itself out of a peculiar (post-colonial) relationship to place. This is an 'overlap' of language which occurs when texture, sound, rhythm and words are carried over from the mother tongue to the adopted literary form.⁹

Possibly related to what Ashcroft is describing here, is an experimental dramatic genre which the National Theatre Company has developed, as reported by William Takaku:

We've tried to develop actions where languages will not matter. We're trying to discover this kind of drama. There's one play we do about a land dispute. The characters come in with their own language - *tok ples*.¹⁰ But we know what we're talking about. So in that way we use a lot of languages in our performances. (interview 23.9.92).

The voices of Papua New Guinea's writers gain a particular resonance from the unique cultural and linguistic diversity which typifies their country. In 1993, when the world's attention is focused on indigenous people, their message is all the more timely.

NOTES

1. W.D. Ashcroft, 'Constitutive Graphonomy: A Post-Colonial Theory of Literary Writing', *Kunapipi* 11.1 (1989), pp. 58-73.
2. Also known as 'Pidgin English' or simply 'Pidgin'.
3. In the course of my M.A. thesis research I spoke to seven writers in the Port Moresby area. All of them are quoted in this article.
4. Motu, English, and Tok Pisin.
5. John Kasaipwalova, 'Betel-Nut is Bad Magic for Aeroplanes', in Ganga Powell, ed., *Through Melanesian Eyes: An Anthology of Papua New Guinean Writing* (Melbourne: Macmillan, 1987), pp. 69-77.
6. John Kasaipwalova, 'Bomanus Kalabus O Sori O!', in Ulli Beier, ed., *Voices of Independence: New Black Writing From Papua New Guinea* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1980), pp. 69-70.
7. Nora Vagi Brash, *The High Cost of Living Differently: A Radio Play* (Boroko: Institute of PNG Studies, 1976).
8. Both locations are in Port Moresby.
9. W.D. Ashcroft, 'Is That the Congo? Language as Metonymy in the Post-Colonial Text', *World Literature Written in English* 29.1 (1989), pp. 3-10.
10. 'Talk place', a generic term meaning any person's vernacular language.