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Issues in the Linguistic Ecology of the OUP Tok Pisin Dictionary

Abstract

Tok Pisin is one of the four most widely spoken languages in Melanesia. Unlike the other three—English, Indonesian, and French—it has a low status, and for many years no comprehensive Tok Pisin dictionary has been available. This paper looks at the linguistic ecology of the 2008 Oxford University Press *Papua New Guinea Tok Pisin English Dictionary* and the issues raised both in the preparation of the dictionary and its acceptance by the general public after publication.

Because of its low status, Tok Pisin is not used in schools, so children do not learn its spelling system or how to use it effectively. There is very little written material in Tok Pisin except for religious material, and, while it is used extensively in radio, it is rarely used in the more prestigious medium of television. There is no government support for or regulation of the language. There is therefore little understanding of even how to use any dictionaries except monolingual English dictionaries.

Lexicography standardising the written form of a language that is primarily oral was an important issue. Although the basic spelling system of Tok Pisin was standardised in the 1960s by Frank Mihalic, many people do not follow it. In the preparation of the dictionary this caused disagreement just what “standard written Tok Pisin” be, which regional dialect forms should be accepted, and to what extent recent Anglicisms were really Tok Pisin words. A reaction against the low status of the language also caused disagreements about the inclusion of terms arising from the colonial past and terms thought to be sexist, vulgar or derogatory.

The publication of the dictionary by the small arm of a large commercial was an issue, as this company does not have the resources to develop an electronic version of the dictionary for mobile telephone access. It also does not have the expertise to evaluate the work done by its editing team. The distribution of this and other PNG produced books and their availability at prices the general public can afford continue to be problematic.

As the dictionary is now being rewritten, the editorial team this writer leads needs to take into account these issues. At the same time, government and other educational institutions should recognise the need to develop a culture of literacy and literature in this rapidly expanding Melanesian language. This dictionary can be a valuable tool in that development.