

7.4.2.3. POLICIES AND EXPERIENCES IN THE CATHOLIC MISSION IN THE FIELD OF TEACHING IN PIDGIN

Francis Mihalic

Over the last century, the Catholic Mission in Papua New Guinea has made more extensive use of Melanesian Pidgin than any other organisation in the country.

When the first Missionaries of the Sacred Heart (MSC) arrived on Matupit Island off Rabaul in 1882 and the Divine Word Missionaries (SVD) settled on the small island of Tumleo off the Aitape coast in 1896, Melanesian Pidgin was already solving the language problem of plantations.

Both groups of missionaries sooner or later came upon the same problem of choosing a common language for evangelising a country with 700 tongues. Luckily in Rabaul they already had three large language groups: Kuanua (33,000), Lote (12,000), and Baining (6,000). With these they could manage quite well so long as they confined their work to New Britain. The SVD missionaries, on the other hand, established beach-heads from Aitape to Madang and each time landed in a new language area.

Both missions found a ready-made solution in Melanesian Pidgin disseminated by indentured labourers who shuttled back and forth from the Gazelle Peninsula to the Solomons and the Sepik River basin. Friedericici (1911) says that this worker migration was already a common procedure in 1911. From then on it increased, for this was the first chance that local people had to earn money and they were recruited in droves. By 1931 there was an annual turnover of more than 27,000 indentured labourers. Each brought back to his people the useful language which had made communication possible on the multilingual plantations and gold fields.

There were several attempts to establish an official language in Kaiser Wilhelmsland, as New Guinea was called when it belonged to Germany. The government was so horrified at the possibility of 'this horrible

jargon' even becoming recognised as a language that it tried unsuccessfully to introduce Malay (Höltker 1945). The Catholic Mission of Alexishafen first considered using the Bogia language and later Boiken (see chapter 7.4.5.10. in this volume) as its official medium of evangelisation. But both choices came to naught. Where was the tribe or area which would accept a rival's language in preference to its own? And even if it did, the coastal Melanesian languages differed so much from the Papuan languages of the interior, that they were completely foreign languages when compared with each other. And if a foreign language was to be chosen, then why not either German or English and be done with it?

In that context imagine a man of the stature of W.C. Groves, long-time Director of Education in Papua New Guinea, making a statement like this: 'When English is widespread in New Guinea villages, they will no longer be New Guinea villages. And a sorry day that indeed will be' (Groves 1936:162).

But the tendency in that direction was not to come until the 1960s.

In the meantime, during the German and Australian regimes, Pidgin kept spreading by its own innate usefulness and universal acceptance. Before the advent of roads and radio, it did more to vault the barriers of Papua New Guinea's 700 languages than any other factor.

Father Kirschbaum, that intrepid explorer of the Sepik and its peoples, never needed any language but Pidgin on his countless expeditions between 1913 and 1939.

From 1924 until 1957, the Rabaul Catholic missionaries set about compiling half a dozen dictionaries of Melanesian Pidgin. Fathers Stamm, Borchardt, Brenninkmeyer, Dahmen, and Kutscher were amongst the pioneers. Unfortunately all of these works remained manuscripts, some of which I have seen personally and copied onto tapes. In the line of Pidgin literature the Rabaul mission at this time produced mostly catechisms and devotional books.

Independently of them the Divine Word Missionaries on the New Guinea mainland were pooling the opinions of their trained linguists. After a series of meetings the Catholic Church in this area declared Melanesian Pidgin its official language in 1931. Two of the prime movers were Fathers William van Baar and J. Schebesta. Both had written Pidgin dictionaries and Fr Schebesta's comprehensive one was on the presses at Alexishafen, when the war broke out. Fr L. Meiser, S.V.D., duplicated what had been salvaged of it and published that in 1945. It was far more extensive than John Murphy's *The Book of Pidgin English*, which appeared as a practical handbook for the troops in 1943 (Murphy 1943).

Even before the official statement of 1931, Catholic missionaries along the north coast were using Melanesian Pidgin in all their schools. Primers, catechisms, liturgical books, hymnals, prayer books, Bible stories, and some biographies were run off the small press at Alexishafen or were printed overseas. It must be remembered that in those days prior to World War II virtually all the schools from Madang to the West New Guinea border were run by the Catholic Mission. Literacy first came to north coast New Guinea through Pidgin in mission schools. The same can be said for much of the Eastern and Western Highlands after they opened in 1934.

Alexishafen now took the next step and adapted Melanesian Pidgin to its religious needs. In 1939 it published its official list of the theological and liturgical terms, which had to be invented for Pidgin. The mission preferred to follow Latin and came up with such derivatives as *baptismo*, *misa*, *eklesia*, *matrimonio* which became standard in coastal Pidgin until about 1970.

The Rabaul Catholic Mission, on the other hand, culled its liturgical and theological terms as much as possible from local words, using *raring* for pray, *nukpuku* for penance, *vartovo* for sermon, etc. To this day these have remained in the islands' dialect of Pidgin.

After World War II the Catholic Mission resumed its practical interest in Pidgin; it took up its education work where it had left off. But now there was a difference: the government became keenly interested in education and from the outset its swing was toward standard English. All books it supplied free were in this medium. Nothing appeared in Pidgin as standard issue for schools. The Catholic Mission accommodated itself to this trend and as a result Pidgin was relegated to the first grades of primary school.

By 1962 the Education Department, strongly influenced by the United Nations' bias against Pidgin, ruled that all subsidised schools were to use only English, from the first grade on. Since most mission schools were in this category, they had to adjust to the directive. Pidgin was phased out of the curriculum completely.

But the Catholic Mission did not give up using Pidgin. In 1957 one of its missionaries, Rev. Francis Mihalic, S.V.D., produced the most comprehensive grammar and dictionary of the language yet to be published (Mihalic 1957). This book was instrumental in standardising written Pidgin because it was the first book ever written in the official orthography compiled by a set of professional linguists in 1956 (Department of Education 1956). Among them was the missionary anthropologist Dr Louis Luzbetak, S.V.D., from the Anthropos Institute in Germany.

In spite of Pidgin's exclusion from the curriculum of officially recognised schools, it continued to spread by leaps and bounds - aided mostly by the new Administration radio stations. People also started to move into towns and a dialect of Pidgin developed which assimilated more and more English words, technical and parliamentary terms (see 7.4.1.4.3.5. in this volume).

The wealth of these additions and changes forced Fr Mihalic to revise his dictionary in 1971. It arrived under the new title: *The Jacaranda Dictionary and Grammar of Melanesian Pidgin* (Mihalic 1971). Since then it has been officially declared the standard text to be followed in all Administration departments. Along with the New Testament (British and Foreign Bible Society 1969) it became the norm for all spelling once again, after a meeting of linguistic experts in November 1969.

In the last decade the 11 Catholic dioceses which work in the Highlands, on the islands, and along the north coast of Papua New Guinea have concentrated on specialised catechist or evangelist training. All of this is still done in Pidgin. The Catholic missionaries still maintain that even if Papua New Guineans speak fluent English, they revert to Pidgin when confronted with the deeper, more intimate and personal concerns and problems of life. Religion, the missions hold, rightly belongs in this category.

During the twilight period for Pidgin in the education field the Catholic bishops had the faith and foresight to sponsor the establishment of a Pidgin newspaper in 1967. Their intention in sponsoring *Wantok*, a fortnightly news magazine, was to continue educating adults religiously and politically, to give the local people the only forum for written self-expression which they have in the Pidgin medium. In short, they felt that a newspaper was a practical service to a developing country and was filling a need which extant expatriate newspapers were loath to fill because of the financial risk involved. After just three years of existence, *Wantok* already had about 50,000 readers.

With localisation advancing in the upper echelons of the Education Department, the swing back to Pidgin in primary schools may be just a matter of time, in spite of recent changes in official attitudes which may give indications to the contrary (see 7.3.2.6. and the Appendix to chapter 7.3.2. in this volume).

Such a change of heart in favour of Pidgin would be a logical result of the growing national awareness for preserving and fostering the culture and traditions of the country. Pidgin is as much a part of this culture and tradition as are birds of paradise and artifacts and sago and betel nut and slitgongs.

The Catholic Church in Papua New Guinea has used Pidgin for nearly a century now and it has never regretted this choice. The fact that it is today the largest religious body in this country is due in no small part to its use of Pidgin in circumventing the linguistic maze that cuts this nation into a 700-piece jigsaw puzzle. The Catholic Church also thinks Pidgin has a future and will continue to use and support it in any way it can.

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