INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

EPW-4
"Tok Pisin"

P.O. Box 628,
Port Moresby,
Papua,
Territory of Papua
& New Guinea
June 18, 1967

Mr. Richard H. Nolte,
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Dear Mr. Nolte,

In a number of very important respects, the single most important element in the socialization of many New Guineans, as New Guineans, is the learning of Pidgin. It is Pidgin more often than English that helps to break down the old barriers between once hostile communities, that makes communication possible not only with Europeans but with other-language-speaking New Guineans too.

Pidgin, Pidgin English, once referred to in a derogatory way as tokboi, and now officially known as Neo-Melanesian, is spoken by probably 300,000 New Guineans. It is probably the only language known to 10,000 New Guineans, who have, largely, been brought up away from their own home areas. They have not, therefore, learnt their own vernaculars, but live in surroundings where English is not widely spoken. Pidgin is, in fact, the lingua franca, the principal means of inter-racial and inter-language-group communication throughout New Guinea, and the Southern Highlands of Papua.

Pidgin, spelt Pisin in its own dictionaries, has a vocabulary which finds its principal roots in English, German and Kuanua, the language of the Tolai of the Gazelle Peninsula of New Britain. Its syntax, according to linguists, is of a Melanesian kind, and certainly bears but little external resemblance to that of either of its Western European forebears. Its vocabulary, its special expressions, even its grammatical structure, vary quite widely from place to place throughout the Territory, very largely under the influence of the particular traditional local languages, and the special linguistic and social history of the local people. Nonetheless, Pidgin is spoken and understood throughout the Trust Territory of New Guinea, the British Solomon Islands Protectorate, and, to a lesser extent, the New Hebrides. Its use in Papua is growing, as it gradually displaces Police Motu, a creolised version of the Motu language of the coast around Port Moresby, which was officially sponsored by the pre-War Papuan Administration as the principal Papuan lingua franca. In fact, Sir Hubert Murray went to very great pains indeed to exclude the use of Pidgin from Papua,

a resolve that was only rendered entirely futile after the War, when the two pre-War Administrations were amalgamated. The Southern Highlands of Papua were entered and administered after the War by Pidgin-speaking Europeans and indigenous assistants, and Pidgin has become the lingua franca there too.

It is necessary, however, to distinguish between Pidgin as a social phenomenon, and its role as a subject of continued political and academic debate.

Briefly, the use of Pidgin has been a political issue since the early 1950s. Successive resolutions were then passed by the United Nations Trusteeship Council, and unfavourable observations made by United Nations Visiting Missions to New Guinea, all opposing its further growth, and certainly any official encouragement of its use. The U.N. seemed to feel that the rapid expansion of Pidgin seriously retarded the official fostering of English as the Territory's principal, and official, language, and in some way served to perpetuate the indigenes' inferior status to Europeans in colonial society. Pidgin was regarded simply as a form of bastardised English, not as a language in its own right.

Linguists have disagreed very widely as to Pidgin's status as a language. Perhaps most notably, Professor Robert A. Hall, Jr, of Cornell University, has written numerous articles and at least one book defending the status of Pidgin and taking direct issue with the United Nations' verdict, quite apart from his more serious, academic studies of its linguistic peculiarities. There has, however, been no paucity of linguists and politicians, both indigenous and foreign, who have attempted to controvert his arguments.

In large part, the debate has been purely academic. Since the mid-1950s, the Territory's Administration has refused assistance to mission schools (the major element in the Territory's primary and secondary education system) that do not teach in English. Pidgin is not used as a medium of instruction, much less is it taught as a school subject in its own right in Administration and Administration-assisted schools. Pidgin is still taught, however, in many, especially the more backward, areas of the Territory, but only in mission-run schools. Pidgin remains the principal means of communication between European officials in the bush and their indigenous charges, and between indigenes from different language groups. The Administration has never provided any financial inducement for its officers to learn local languages, even in areas where they may be understood by great numbers of people. Indeed, the ability at least to speak and understand Pidgin is a virtual prerequisite for a Papuan or New Guinean in search of a job. Only a very few missions even have encouraged their European workers to learn local languages. Still, the language remains a matter of controversy for politicians and academics, as evidenced, for example, by Dr. Wurm's recent articles in Pidgin's defence, and the long and eloquent plea by the new Professor of English at the University of Papua and New Guinea in his inaugural lecture, that English remain the official language,

and the medium of instruction in schools throughout the Territory.

Several standard criticisms have been levelled at Pidgin, and reasonably uniform sorts of answers returned:
(a) that it is a vulgar and degrading way of speaking, that it is, in fact, no language at all, but serves only to preserve the vocabulary and attitudes of colonialism;
(b) that it is inadequate as a means of communication in a modern society;
(c) that its official encouragement would only serve to complicate yet further the Territory's already complex linguistic problems.

It does seem true that some Motu-speakers and Europeans do, in fact, feel that Pidgin is really but a species of baby-talk, a debased form of English which no self-respecting European chooses to use. Some Papuans and New Guineans feel that it perpetuates social relationships and ways of thinking more appropriate to the colonial past than to the modern society that is emerging in the Territory. In large part, this sort of argument reflects the legitimate pride that many of the Motu people especially feel for their own language, and their feeling that the Territory's indigenes should preserve their pride and refuse to take second-best linguistically. John Guise, probably the most prominent present-day Papuan politician, even before he became wellknown in politics, achieved a measure of renown during the 1950s for his letters to the press attacking the use of Pidgin. For those who do not yet speak English, and for whom communication with the outside world would therefore be impossible without Pidgin, such arguments may have about them the ring of educated arrogance, or of a proto-nationalism without much real point. In fact, many New Guineans regard the learning of Pidgin as a most important turning-point in their lives, when, for the first time, they are able to look for work outside their home areas. A knowledge of Pidgin is still one sure way of gaining prestige as an educated man, and one capable of dealing with Europeans, in some of the more primitive areas of the Territory.

Certainly, Pidgin contains many words that were in their original English form "unladylike", or simply obscene. The language grew up in an environment not particularly renowned for its gentility, the world of the late nineteenth-century canefields, plantations and mines. Fortunately, the allegedly rude words in which Pidgin abounds do not carry their less pleasant connotations over from English, but have often been forgotten in favour of their less conventional, but more useful, day-to-day meanings. Thus, as lo bilong gavman simply means "constitution", and mi bagerap means "I'm tired" or "I've had it". Some quite innocent sounding English expressions, however, have a Pidgin meaning all of their own.

A brief example from an Administration political education pamphlet entitled "The Representatives' Responsibilities" may demonstrate at least the superficial dissimilarity of Pidgin and English. This document, unfortunately, lacks, as do most Europeans, the eloquence and true feeling for colloquial expression that Pidgin may gain when used by men of considerable oratorical

ability in their own language, and to whom Pidgin is, very often, therefore, simply an alternative, rather than a secondary, means of communication:

> "Ol wok o diuti em Memba i mas karim o mekim insait long House of Assembly em hevi moa long sampela wok em wusat man i holim long dispela kantri. Emi bikpela samting moa long save gut long dispela. Wonem ol dispela diuti o wok?
>
> "I tru Memba i gat diuti o wok long elektoret bilong em. Em i mas toktok bilong ol pipal long dispela elektoret bilong em insait long House of Assembly, long wonem em i sanap bilong ologeta pipal long dispela elektoret, na i mas save gut long ol samting em ol dispela pipal i laikim. Bihain long taim miting i pinis, em yet i mas go bek long elektoret bilong em na tok klia long wok em i House i mekim pinis na wonem ol tingting ol i bin oraitim na watpo ol i bin oraitim ol dispela tingting..."

The official translation reads:

> "The responsibilities that a Member of the House of Assembly must bear are among the heaviest carried by any person in this country. It is important to understand this. What are those responsibilities?
>
> "Of course an Elected Member has responsibilities to his electorate. He must speak for his electorate in the House, because he represents all the people in that electorate, and he must fully understand what those people want. After each meeting, he should return to his electorate and explain the work the House has done and tell the people what decisions were made and why these decisions were made..."

Although the foregoing passage dealt with something alien to the experience of most New Guineans, at least until very recently, and was rather stodgy and repetitive in presentation, as well as so literal and faithful to the English original as to be almost completely graceless, it should be clear that Pidgin is more then a particular local form of Simple English. If anything, the orthography of the foregoing passage is rather more anglicized than usual. Pidgin has as yet no standardized spelling system, and the spelling of a particular word quite often varies quite haphazardly even within the one article or letter.

It is true that much of the vocabulary of Pidgin did in the past, and partly still does, echo the sorts of inter-racial relationships that exist in colonial society. The ubiquitous use of boi when addressing an indigenous New Guinean, and kanaka when speaking of him, as well as his reply of masta, reflect the colonial heritage of Pidgin. Boi is now being very rapidly displaced by "mate", or, more usually, the indigene's name, while "New Guinean" is becoming the noun used to refer to the indigenes, or they are referred to by the names of their home areas such as "Tolai", "Chimbu" or "Buka", for example. Even during the last eighteen months, I have

noticed the very rapid displacement of masta by "sir" in personal conversation and by "European" or wetman ("white man") in the third person. Kanaka is now used mainly by New Guineans themselves as a derogatory term to describe their more backward compatriots in the bush. In a very real sense, the vocabulary of Pidgin is changing with the structure of race and social relationships generally throughout the Territory.

Argument over the adequacy of the vocabulary of Pidgin properly belongs to the linguist, but the argument on this point has been even more wildly assertive and less satisfactory than is the case on other points. It has been said many times that the vocabulary of Pidgin, like that of almost every other living language, is constantly increasing to cope with new situations, phenomena, and ideas. Some of the words used in the above quotation, especially such a word as "elektoret", would have been quite meaningless to most New Guineans just four years ago. It has now entered the vocabulary of the language in such a way that it apparently requires no explanation or amplification at all when used. Similarly, the word "ba'azet", variously spelt, has become the regular word for "budget"; in fact, the list of similar new creations is immense. Very skilled speakers of Pidgin seem quite capable of expressing fine shades of meaning in the language, and to explain, then employ, quite specialised concepts, though the Territory's lawyers insist that legal draughting in Pidgin is simply impossible. The Department of District Administration has recently been unable, for example, to translate "majority rule" precisely into Pidgin. "Bihainim tingting bilong planti moa pipal", its final compromise, means no more than "supporting the opinion of many people", and is inadequate for the task. The concept can be explained through lengthy circumlocution and demonstration, but the problem of finding an accurate, short means of translation still remains.

It does seem true, nevertheless, that Pidgin is quite adequate for conveying the day-to-day thoughts and observations of the average New Guinean. The language will expand its vocabulary as more sophisticated and technical means of expression are sought from it. Pidgin is currently inadequate as a means of expression only in the way in which the languages of pre-literate societies are inadequate as a means for the communication of ideas and their dissemination in the modern world. It simply is the case that the need for New Guineans to make highly complex and technical decisions will rapidly outstrip the educational advancement of the broad mass of the Territory's population, and that, therefore, the daily vocabulary of Pidgin will prove inadequate in a manner that English would not. In other words, if the rate of political and technological progress in the Territory continues to proceed at the present tempo, one can imagine a situation in which the educated and political elites will speak either English or a form of Pidgin with rather more foreign words in it than is the case even now. Perhaps, however, this phenomenon will simply resemble the present dischotomy between the day-to-day vocabulary of English and the emerging international jargon of science.

Perhaps the third criticism of Pidgin is the most important. If Pidgin were to spread rapidly throughout the Territory and displace English almost completely as the official language and the most used medium of instruction, then the Territory's population would be effectively cut off from the literature and text-books of the rest of the world. The cost of translating even a fraction of the necessary technical and literary materials into Pidgin would be astronomical. On the other hand, while it may marginally slow some individuals' progress when they later come to learn English, Pidgin is of immense importance as the primary means of intra-Territorial communication.

Pidgin has not only helped to break down the old barriers of linguistic isolation within the Territory, and between the races, but it has, in fact, given birth to a whole sub-culture of its own. Although S.W.Reed pointed to the emergence of such a phenomenon already in the early 1940s, no serious study has so far been made of the social importance of Pidgin, and especially of the community of songs, expressions, poems, in fact the entire set of social bonds created by the simple act of speaking a common language, that have grown up in New Guinea.

Pidgin now serves as a simple bond among indigenous New Guineans when they seek to set themselves apart from Europeans, or even coastal Papuans, when they share no other common language. The concept of a wantok, i.e. a speaker of one's own language, did not exist in pre-contact society, where men fought against other speakers of their own language as often as they fought against linguistic outsiders. Nowadays, wantok is used as an expression of friendship to speakers of one's own language in an otherwise linguistically alien environment, although its use also expands at times to mean "friend" generally. In bar fights I have seen wantok used to express a measure of unity amongst the indigenous combatants when a group of Europeans attempted to interfere. In a rather strange way, the common bond of Pidgin gave a sense of solidarity to those who had been fighting, as they sought to keep the conflict within their own group, and to exclude the alien intruders. Thus, Pidgin very often provides a sense of unity among New Guineans where none previously existed, both against Europeans, and, very often, against non-Pidgin-speaking Papuans. Pidgin-speakers in the more primitive areas of the Territory, where as yet but few people may speak even Pidgin, are wellknown for the scorn which they may show for their less well-educated compatriots even on quite public occasions.

Two years ago,Pidgin was rarely heard in Port Moresby. Europeans here refused to speak it, though very few indeed could speak even Police Motu. The local Motuans stuck proudly to their own language, and despised those who found it necessary to speak Police Motu to them.

By early 1966, it was noticeable that things had changed a little since the year before. Pidgin was used far more than ever before, as increasing numbers of New Guineans came to work in, perhaps simply to see, the big town. Pidgin had always been used on

the local plantations as the principal means of communication with the workers who came here under the Highlands Labour Scheme. By 1966, Pidgin was used as a bond among the less well-educated and sophisticated, as a means, for example, for passing rude sexual comments about passing Motuan women who usually did not understand the language, and even about uncomprehending Papuans generally. Few women at all, anywhere in the Territory, speak anything other than their own tokples or local language - probably a symbol of their generally lower social status traditionally, and now educationally. The women have never needed to learn Pidgin as have the men, for there is also very little employment available for them outside their villages except in more skilled occupations, as teachers, nurses, etc.

Now, although still not widely used in Papua, and insulting if employed in conversation with English-speaking Papuans and New Guineans, Pidgin is being increasingly used on signs and in conversations in the Port Moresby area. The cultural ethos that one inescapably associates with Pidgin has come too. In fact, some extremely fluent, if politically-minded, English-speakers use Pidgin in order to create a special sort of bond with their less sophisticated friends, even from their own home areas. Pidgin, then, is used as a sort of proto-nationalistic means of distinguishing New Guineans from nearby Europeans, and, less frequently, Papuans. It enables the urban sophisticate and the illiterate labourer in town to converse as linguistic equals. Papuans now use Pidgin much more readily than before in order to communicate and establish some common bonds of identification with their New Guinean compatriots. In the House of Assembly, for example, Motu is now used less than ever, and many a well-prepared speech in English is interrupted by a shouted request to speak in Pidgin instead. Despite the provision of a simultaneous translation service in the House, for English, Pidgin and Motu, Pidgin is now almost universally used by the indigenous Members, and by many of the European elected Members. Most of the ten Official Members, however, have remained faithful to the United Nations' will, if not the House's, and either cannot or do not speak anything other than English in the House. A few Official Members have, however, bowed to the requests of the elected Members. As the translation of official documents and bills is often inadequate, and many of the Members are illiterate anyway, much of the House's proceedings remain almost incomprehensible to many of the indigenous Members, who, therefore, rely upon the Official Members' speeches for explanation of many bills and other documents. The simultaneous translation into Pidgin of as complex a document as the annual budget is such a difficult matter as almost to defy the best attempts at intelligibility of the most conscientious interpreters.

The new Administrator, Mr. D.O.Hay, has recognised the growing importance of Pidgin in the Territory, and has broken with his predecessor's stand on the matter. The response to his speeches in Pidgin has been so favourable that one wonders at the persistence of the old policy which preferred the silence of incomprehension or the frequent interruptions that accompanied translation to the present gratitude at the new ease of communication with Nambawan Gavman.

Pidgin, then, whatever the linguists may argue as to its intrinsic merits, has revolutionised New Guinea society. It has broken down old barriers, and allowed for direct inter-racial and inter-language-group communication where this was not previously possible. It has made a national radio news-service feasible, and a newspaper, the Nu Gini Toktok, available to the relatively unsophisticated. Pidgin has been one of the most important elements in the Territory's slow and hesitant groping towards nationhood. Its very history, its origins on the plantations and in European employ generally, have allowed for, if not encouraged, the growth of that common set of experiences and attitudes from which a nation grows. One only hopes that the linguists' and overseas politicians' arguments will not be allowed to subsume the sociological importance of Pidgin, which will, in a sense, probably remain whatever they may say. Indeed, the matter may have been decided already, for both of the Territory's new political parties have advocated the adoption of Pidgin as the Territory's national language. Its use as the common language of daily discourse, one party feels, must not be confused with the official use of English. Interestingly enough, one of these two parties, the PANGU Pati, has a strong Papuan, English-speaking membership. The Christian Democrats advocate the use of Pidgin as the national language, and that the Territory should become Australia's seventh state - an interesting combination of prospects for Australians.

Yours sincerely,

Edward Wolfers.

Received in New York June 28, 1967