Language Shift in an ‘Importing Culture’: The Cultural Logic of the Arapesh Roads*

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Papua New Guineans regarded their local languages as the main symbol of their local identities, which they held very dear. – Stephen Wurm (2003: 26)

There is . . . a tacit acceptance of the ‘one language = one culture’ assumption, and a concentration on phenomena internal to the language or culture in question, with a consequent neglect, even underrating, of boundary problems of all sorts. – Gillian Sankoff (1980a: 118)

7.1 Introduction: The Ethnic Revitalization Paradox

In this chapter I attempt to wrestle in an ethnographic way with a problem that is familiar to those concerned with endangered languages. One apt label for this problem in the literature is the ‘Ethnic Revitalization Paradox’, a term that was coined by Rindstedt and Aronsson (2002) to describe the disconnect these authors found between the way people speak about their languages on the one hand, and the way they actually use them on the other. In the Quichua-Spanish bilingual community of the Ecuadorean Andes where Rindstedt and Aronsson worked, they found heightened ethnic consciousness, public advocacy for Quichua, and strongly positive mother tongue ideology and rhetoric: ‘I speak Quichua, I don’t want to lose my Indian culture . . . without [our maternal

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1 A similar but somewhat more general concept used by Barbra Meek (2010: x) in her study of Kaska revitalization efforts is disjuncture, ‘the everyday points of discontinuity and contradiction—between social or linguistic groups, within discourses, practices, or between them, even between indexical orders—that interrupt the flow of action, communication or thought’.

language] we are nothing’ (Rindstedt and Aronsson 2002: 724–5). At the same time, however, the authors report that they would never have guessed this if all they had to consider were community linguistic practices, which included near universal bilingualism and thorough-going Hispanicization of Quichua, resulting in a classic pattern of three-generation language shift leading to language loss.

The Ecuadorean example is not the only one that could be given in which people seem to be voting with their feet against languages they nevertheless say they value (see, e.g., Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer 1998; Dobrin 2008; Kulick 1992; Perley 2011). Even when would-be speakers express regret about the language loss they notice taking place around them, this sentiment may coexist with a contradictory desire for development, a sense of shame or cultural inferiority, or a belief that language shift is inevitable and so not worth devoting limited energies to trying to overcome. In such cases, whatever value the traditional language might have as an anchor for ethnolinguistic identity is evidently not sufficient to override these attitudes and motivate people to maintain or reclaim it. We might interpret the paradox as indicative of the overwhelming power of a coercive world socioeconomic system: it hardly matters what language people prefer to speak; what choice do they have but to adopt another language if they are to succeed in the wider society (Nettle and Romaine 2000)? Undoubtedly, to some extent this is true. But we also might seek insight into the cultural models people use to attribute significance to the languages in their local repertoires, and how exactly language use contributes to their sense of who they are. Here, following my conviction that we stand to learn more, and more that activists will find useful, about language shift from exploring matters of culture than we will from analyses of utility (Dobrin 2010), I aim to illustrate how the ideological stances that bear on language may be grounded in implicit cultural assumptions that are not necessarily focused on language as such, but instead on more fundamental notions about how the social world works. These include what makes a person or community good (Kulick 2002), what it means to exercise power (Dobrin 2008), beliefs about lifespan such as how children learn (Paugh 2011) or appropriate comportment toward those in old age (Meek 2007), ideas about the nature of change, and so on. In other words, endangered-language linguistics should concern itself not only with language ideologies, but with the full range of cultural ideas that may lead people who value their languages to nevertheless act in ways that diminish their use.

Because these ideas will vary dramatically from one local context to another, they cannot be addressed in the abstract; instead, they require detailed ethnographic exploration by observing what people actually say and do in the course of their daily lives. Clearly there are larger patterns and commonalities to be

2 See also Fishman 2002 and Spolsky (this volume) on linguists’ over-emphasis on language in addressing the problem of language shift.
found at the level of political economy, educational policy, colonial history, and so on. But as Sicoli (2011: 163–4) argues in trying to explain the different patterns of language shift from Zapotec to Spanish he observed in Oaxaca, Mexico, a ‘typology of language shift that we can apply across cultures does not exist . . . [I]t is only through dedicated, long-term ethnographic work in and with particular speech communities that a maintenance effort can be designed to fit a specific situation.’ The challenge is to understand what members of a given linguistic community think they are trying to do; what it feels like to be who they are such that language shift follows.

7.2 Arapesh Language and Social Identity

In the rural Sepik region of New Guinea where the Papuan (Torricelli family) Arapesh languages are spoken, the revitalization paradox takes a somewhat muted, and locally distinctive, form. Language-related projects like vernacular schooling, Bible translation, and language documentation are generally welcomed by communities. I say ‘welcomed’ because these activities tend to be initiated or at least heavily facilitated by outsiders, such as educators, scholars, activists, and missionaries. A discourse promoting vernacular language vitality has little resonance as one moves out from urban middle-class and educational-policy circles and into rural areas, where local people are more concerned with the going price for their cash crops, sorcery rumours, church politics, and pending development schemes than they are with planning for their cultural and linguistic continuity. It is difficult to interpret direct evaluative comments made by Melanesian villagers who do not live in an ‘interview society’ like Westerners do (Atkinson and Silverman 1997; Briggs 2007) and who are culturally predisposed to seek common ground with their interlocutors while being culturally indisposed to place stock in verbal expressions of inner states.3 But when the question of how Arapesh people feel about their languages does arise, the answer is almost always positive. It is not unlike what Reiman (2010: 255) reports for the Kasanga people he worked with in West Africa: ‘when told that their language and culture are valuable and worthwhile,’ he says, they ‘agree and appreciate it.’ As Gray et al. (2008: 86) put it in summarizing the results of their recent language survey in the Western Arapesh region, ‘people stated positive attitudes towards the vernacular and asked for help in preserving their language, yet do not use the vernacular to speak to their children’.

Like Papua New Guineans in other areas of the country, the Arapesh

3 A ‘doctrine of “the opacity of other minds”’, a belief that one cannot know what other people are thinking, has been repeatedly noted in the literature on Pacific societies (Robbins and Rumsey 2008: 408).
villagers I lived with on the Sepik West Coast (see Figure 7.1) insisted that their traditional way of speaking was the correct or ‘straight’ way, in contrast to neighboring villages where people are said to ‘twist’ their talk along the local dialect/language continuum, eventually to the point of incomprehensibility as one advances across the social landscape.

Although the Gapun villagers Kulick discusses in his seminal study of Sepik language shift view their language, Taiap, as difficult compared to neighboring languages, they also describe it as ‘sweet’, deeply rooted, and richly expressive (Kulick 1992: 7). They like their vernacular speech, associate it with themselves and their lands, and wish their children would learn it. And yet, as in Gapun, in the coastal Arapesh villages the shift to Papua New Guinea’s creole lingua franca, Tok Pisin, is well advanced, despite the fact that this has very little functional motivation and brings them little benefit. There is nobody in any rural Arapesh community today who does not speak fluent Tok Pisin, and virtually all have learned it as a first language. In Apakibur village near the north-eastern boundary of the Arapesh language area, multiple attempts were made to establish a village-based vernacular (or tok ples) preschool to revitalize the use of Arapesh, but as I have discussed elsewhere, because the school did not serve other important community needs, the effort repeatedly failed (Dobrin 2008).

Figure 7.1 The Arapesh language area.

4 For an overview of the social history of Tok Pisin, see Romaine 1992.
5 Apakibur children now attend a preschool adjoining the nearby community school. But because it integrates students from villages with different traditional languages, it operates exclusively in Tok
It has often been claimed that the spectacular linguistic diversity we find in New Guinea is a product of language difference being actively ‘perpetuated as a badge of identification’ and a ‘form of deliberate boundary marking’ (Laycock 1982: 34; Mühlhäusler 1996: 47). Indeed, the New Guinea area provides some of the clearest cases that have been made for esoterogeny, that is, languages in contact not converging but diverging because speakers actively exaggerate their differences (see, e.g., Salisbury 1962; Thurston 1987, 1989). But while this might be taken to suggest that people are mapping language onto cultural identity along lines similar to the Quichua case (viewing their traditional languages as markers of social group belonging), I believe it would be wrong to read it this way for the Arapesh situation, for at least three reasons.

First, repeatedly in this area of the world we find that high-level group boundaries fail to coincide with linguistic ones. In the Arapesh area there was never any basis for people to assume that they would share the most important features of their social identity with fellow speakers. Before pacification in the 1910s, Arapesh villagers in this region regularly joined forces with speakers of the genealogically distinct (Ndu family) Boikin language to their east in defence against other Arapesh speakers, while fearing sorcery attacks by speakers of Bukiyip, a mutually intelligible Arapesh variety, farther inland. These historical patterns of alliance and conflict continue to influence people’s feelings about local linguistic differences today. When the Arapesh New Testament was dedicated in 2004, Apakibur villagers were delighted to accept (indeed purchase) the books to the extent that Western individuals and institutions were implicated in their production. That is, the value of these objects lay in their having been produced for them by caring outsiders concerned for the villagers’ welfare. However, the villagers are disinclined to actually read them because lexical and orthographic elements they contain mark them as deriving from their former enemies, people they still today see as competitors. Since the 1960s a wider Arapesh identity has emerged, in part as a byproduct of regional political events that transpired after the Second World War (discussed below). But this new Arapesh identity is still not so much linguistically or even socially motivated as it is geographically motivated, incorporating those communities on the northern side of the Torricelli watershed up to the province boundary that shares a common vehicle road. So traditionally, the identity indexed by ‘one’s own language’ did not really extend beyond the sovereign political unit (the clan, hamlet, or village), always highly local, simultaneously kin-based and residence-based groupings. Working with Yopno people in Morobe Province, Papua New

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Psin and English. Its aim, to give village children a head start and improve their outcomes in formal schooling, therefore differs from that of the original Apakibur preschool, which villagers viewed as a space in which children would return to speaking their vernacular language.

6 The competing villages were affiliated with the two different ‘roads’ discussed below.
Guinea, Slotta (2012: 5) describes this way of interpreting local linguistic diversity as ‘socio-geographic provenance’, a term that fits the Arapesh situation well.

Second, it is not at all clear that our analytic category of ‘languages’—sets of linguistic features bundled up into distinct codes—is also the operative emic one for the communities in question. Consciousness of such units does not seem to be very well-developed in Melanesia, where, as Mühlhäusler (1996: 35ff) points out:

[...]the concept of a ‘language’, together with the metalinguistic labels for ‘language’, ‘dialect’ and similar entities are conspicuous by their absence. Language was not a self-contained object of inspection ... The difficulties of distinguishing between languages, dialects, communalects and such phenomena encountered by present-day linguists ... do not so much reflect their inability to find these ‘objects’ as their non-existence.

Linguistic differences are vigorously attended to, but distinct language varieties are more often identified simply by the name of the locality or kin group, a phrase that translates as ‘our talk’, or in other cases by contrasting sets of some emblematic form, such as the word for ‘no’ in the Torricelli area (olo, one, au, weri, etc.; see, e.g., Laycock 1975).7 In fact, the label ‘Arapesh’ was coined by anthropologists Fortune and Mead in the 1930s to fill just this gap:

The Arapesh have no word in their language indicating their entire tribe or their entire country. The word arape[1] means simply friends, and it is their word for their more distant personal connections. This word has been coined in the written form Arapesh in order to name their tribe, country, language, and culture. (Fortune 1939: 23)

Arapesh people apply the same term bora[2]p equally to what a linguist would call ‘the language’ and individual acts of speaking, raising questions about the cultural traction of whole languages construed as autonomous entities along the lines of Saussurean langue. In his forthcoming grammar of Taiap, now labelled ‘Tayap Mer’, Kulick argues that the idea of language as a shared system has little purchase in Gapun, where each speaker acts as if they own their own proprietary version of the language, dismissing all others as incorrect. He believes this has implications for language shift, since older speakers can each still have their Tayap irrespective of what the young people do. Here again, we find that a universe of discrete languages modeled according to the ‘Herderian equation’ that maps language and culture onto peoplehood (Volk) in Western language

7 This is, of course, not unique to Melanesia, but found also in Aboriginal Australia (where ways of speaking in eastern Australia were named for the word for ‘no’ as Austin (this volume) notes) and elsewhere. Indeed, the indigenous name for Welsh is Cymru, meaning ‘comrades’ (while the English are called Saesneg, meaning ‘foreigners’).
ideology is not a structuring framework for traditional Melanesian social identities (Foley 2005; see also Silverstein 1996).

Third, and most importantly, as (Sankoff 1980b: 19) long ago noted:

Over much of Papua New Guinea, though people had a great deal of pride in, and derived some of their identity from, their own local speech variety, often exaggerating its differences from the speech of their neighbors, this went hand-in-hand with an openness of attitude and an interest in the learning of other speech varieties.

This ‘openness of attitude’ is a more general cultural characteristic found all over New Guinea, and what I want to consider in more detail in the remainder of this chapter, because I believe it is critical for understanding the role language plays in the construction of identity in this part of the world. In brief, what I want to demonstrate is that the Arapesh appropriation of Tok Pisin follows an indigenous cultural logic that assigns value to, and works to attract, items and activities associated with cultural others. To that extent, although Arapesh language shift follows a familiar pattern in the sociolinguistic qualities it ultimately exhibits (disrupted intergenerational transmission, contraction of domains, frequent code switching, etc.), the phenomenon cannot be fully understood by viewing it as just one more case of ‘politically dominant languages . . . overwhelm[ing] indigenous and local languages and cultures’ (Hale 1992: 1). It must also be understood as the result of culturally particular, ideologically motivated, agentive action on the part of the language’s former speakers (see also Sicoli 2011).

7.3 Language in an Importing Culture

What Sankoff (1980b) is describing in her reference to Papua New Guineans’ ‘openness of attitude’ is how mastery over other people’s ways of speaking was never just a functional requirement for communication in light of New Guinea’s rightly renowned linguistic diversity, but a culturally elaborated method of enhancing an individual’s social status: political power at the regional and village level has always been associated with multilingual skills. In order to facilitate trade relationships, the exchange of women, and war alliances, young men would be sent away to live in allied communities for a few years or be initiated into other groups’ men’s cults specifically to strengthen the relationship and gain fluency in the others’ language (von Schlesier 1961). One manifestation of this assignment of value to foreign speech is the phenomenon of ‘gratuitous

8For an argument that ‘openness of attitude’ has exerted an influence on linguistic structure, see Foley (2005). Evidence comes from the New Guinea Middle Sepik, where the ceremonial vocabulary is replete with foreign elements, and where the regional trade languages display morphosyntactic patterns that cannot be found in the local linguistic repertoire but instead seem to be modeled on languages spoken at a great social and geographic distance.
translation’, repeating oneself in another language, for a number of different symbolic purposes, all of which mark the speaker as sophisticated and in control of both the situation at hand and the wider social scene, amounting to a claim that ‘this speech is worth listening to’ (Salisbury 1962). Historically, the second language used to serve this emphatic function would be that of a neighboring community. Now it is often (or always) Tok Pisin (Kulick 1992: 75ff).

Similarly, in New Guinea and the surrounding islands it is common to find that a community’s most highly prized oral texts, such as the powerful spells that make yams grow and traditional song/dance complexes (in Tok Pisin known as *ol singsing*), are not in the local vernacular but in another language, not necessarily one that even the speakers understand. For example, although Kilivila speakers of the Trobriand Islands can generally recognize and label instances of their sung ritual register *biga baloma* honouring the spirits of the dead, the forms used in this register are so unfamiliar (they are presumably archaic) that only those individuals highest in status know what they mean; the same goes for many Kilivila magical formulae, ‘the meanings of which are completely unknown even to the magicians themselves’ (Senft 2010: 81). As Malinowski (1978 [1935]: 221–2) explains, a ‘coefficient of weirdness, strangeness and unusualness’ is part of what gives such speech its power. The words of all but one or two of the traditional *singsings* Apakibur villagers still know how to perform are indecipherable to anyone in the community, and as far as they know it has always been that way. Arapesh people account for this by saying matter-of-factly that the *singsings* ‘come from Madang’, an area some 300 kilometres to the east that can be compared to New York or Paris in that they were the centres of the Arapesh fashion world. Arapesh villagers never themselves went there, but when they heard reports of the latest innovations taking place in the region they sought to activate their social networks to access and enjoy those innovations too (Mead 1935, 1937, 1938). The best documented example we have of such an importation is a *singsing* that originated in the Murik Lakes region near the mouth of the Sepik river, and then made its way over a period of years during the early colonial period along the coast and up into the Torricelli foothills via local maritime trade circuits. The incomprehensibility of all these highly valued speech forms is not (or not only) a consequence of specialized knowledge loss or top-down language shift. It is a stable cultural orientation that specifically draws value from the marking of some cultural element as distant, old, or foreign.

Summing up the argument to this point, a person’s ‘native language’ traditionally contributed to the construction of Arapesh local identity in a place-based way, in that expectations about the way individuals should speak

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Photographic images documenting the transaction can be accessed at <http://www.arapesh.org/image_gallery.php?set=aa_01>.
were tied to the kin-based group from which they hailed. Yet at the same time, the command of speech variation helped create a person’s ethnolinguistic identity, in that control of foreign varieties was an index of an individual’s social reach, and hence influence and power.

7.4 Importation and Identity

In order to understand the cultural logic driving New Guinea people’s openness to foreign features, linguistic and otherwise, it is necessary to appreciate how the Melanesian construction of group identity is derived from notions of property and personhood. And to do this, it will be helpful to make explicit the quite different logic by which these notions are implicated in the construction of identity familiar in the West. It is common to say that Western societies are ‘individualistic’ in their conception of the person, but linguists do not always appreciate the degree to which this conception underpins the Herderian language–culture–nation equation so central to Western language ideology. I should emphasize that the ideas presented here are not my own; they draw heavily from other anthropologists, especially Simon Harrison, whose thinking is shaped in part by fieldwork among Manambu speakers on the Middle Sepik, and whose writings on the relativity of cultural identity I find particularly insightful and extensible to issues of language (Harrison 2006).

In his influential anthropological study of identity and nationalism in Quebec, Handler (1988: 15–16) argues that modern group identities are ideological projections of the basic unit of the Western social universe, the possessive individual: ‘The nation or ethnic group is taken to be bounded, continuous, and precisely distinguishable from other analogous entities. Moreover, from this perspective, what distinguishes each nation or ethnic group is its culture, which provides the “content” of group identity and individuality.’ Thus, autonomous social groups are conceived of as bounded and unique person-like entities that seem to own or possess cultural ‘things’, their patrimony, that are primordially theirs. As Harrison (2006: 84) emphasizes: ‘the most fundamental imperative of a nation or ethnic group is to define for itself a “culture”, a body of “authentic” custom . . . a patrimony capable of being encroached upon, appropriated, adulterated, defended, conserved’, lost, and so on. This cultural logic, which defines group identity in terms of proprietary possessions originating within the group itself, leads naturally to an emphasis on groups as separate and independent from one another, while drawing attention away from the ways in which groups interrelate.

But traditional Melanesian culture assumes a very different mapping of persons on to cultural property, with very different implications for the way group identity is constructed. In the ethnographic literature on Melanesia, a key
concept is that of relational personhood: the way persons are idealized less as autonomous individuals than as the intersection of others to whom they are connected (Robbins 2004). This idealization can perhaps be seen most clearly in the cultural practices set into motion at the end of life, when Papua New Guineans create their own analytic model of the person by decomposing the deceased back into their constituent relations as a way of marking the end of their productive social existence. Arapesh mortuary rituals illustrate this nicely. They consist of a series of food and money distributions that return something of value along each of the important lines of relationship out of which the deceased person was formed, most importantly the person’s mother’s brothers or mother’s brothers’ sons, hence repaying the debt of ‘blood’ inherited from the maternal line (Mead 1940: 430–2).

As a result of this understanding of what a person is, what is traditionally valued in both sociality and economy has less to do with one’s possessions, an accumulation of enduring wealth, than on circulation and exchange, especially what one has demonstrably attracted away from others. This orientation has implications for Melanesian ideas about collectivities, which emphasize borrowings and importations because these index the relationships or social pathways through which they were acquired. Intangible cultural practices like magic and ritual, artistic styles, festival complexes, and other ways of speaking were not traditionally valued as a form of cultural property because they originated inside a community and were therefore the community’s own, but because they were appropriated from others elsewhere. As Harrison puts it, groups would strive not to possess their ‘own unique culture, but rather their own unique combination of elements from other cultures’ (Harrison 2006: 70).

Kulick’s (1992) ethnography of language shift in the Sepik village of Gapun analyses the assimilation of Tok Pisin into the villagers’ linguistic repertoire as reflecting a radical reconceptualization of their sense of personhood, with Tok Pisin and Taiap mapped onto a series of new social oppositions that came about in the course of their colonial encompassment: modern versus jungle-savages, Christian versus pagan, educated versus ignorant. But the root opposition Kulick posits is between the indigenous moral notions of hed, a selfish insistence on personal autonomy, and save, a desirable quality of social awareness and cooperation with others. Note the way this local distinction morally reverses the two types of identity construction just described above: the Western one in which value derives from what is produced and owned by the self, and the Melanesian one in which value derives from the effective pursuit of social relations. While I have never heard Arapesh villagers discursively elaborate a hed–save opposition in quite the way Gapuners do, there is no doubt about the overall appropriateness of Kulick’s analysis for the Arapesh situation; indeed, I find reading his ethnography to be oddly eerie, almost like meeting a group of strangers who all speak another language in the voices of your friends.
Contemporary Arapesh villagers, too, use Tok Pisin to symbolically incorporate qualities they associate with people of another kind.

But there is one way in which I believe Arapesh ethnography can shed additional light on the phenomenon of Sepik language shift, and that is by deepening our understanding of the traditional mechanisms that give the drive to embody save in its characteristic shape. In the chapter of his book that focuses on Christianity, entitled ‘Preparing to Change’, Kulick (1992) makes repeated reference to the notion of a ‘road’ as the pathway for social improvement and transformation:

Christianity is the ‘road’ (rot) that will lead to the metamorphosis they all anxiously await. (Kulick 1992: 163)

Gapuners actively and creatively attempt to exploit the links they perceive between the written word, Christianity, and cargo in order to bypass the priests and find their own ‘road’ to the millennium. (Kulick 1992: 171)

[A]mbitious young men . . . spend much time trying to find the ‘forms’ and the addresses to mysterious places in America that they have heard will open a ‘road’ to the cargo. (Kulick 1992: 180)

[S]chool is a ‘road’ preparing their children for another way of life. (Kulick 1992: 180)

Each innovation seen as having its source in the outside world of school, church, or ‘the countries’ is viewed as a significant step further along the ‘road’ to the final transformation. (Kulick 1992: 186)

While we might interpret these repeated references to roads as metaphorical, they are not merely abstractions. Roads had, and continue to have, a real institutionalized existence all over New Guinea, and although they are organized somewhat differently from place to place, we can see what gives the metaphor meaning when we know how they operate in their more concrete form. The functioning of roads in Arapesh culture described below draws upon my own fieldwork with Ira Bashkow along the roads of today (Dobrin and Bashkow 2006 provides a detailed analysis), as well as on published and unpublished writings by Mead and Fortune, who did ethnographic and linguistic research among the Arapesh in the early 1930s when the traditional road network was just beginning to break down.

Before pacification in the early 1900s, Arapesh people did not travel around freely so that they could come into contact with just anyone. Instead, wherever they went they followed particular roads. These were both real physical footpaths between localities, and more abstract conduits for social interaction and exchange (see Figure 7.2 and Figure 7.3).

In addition, individual Arapesh had ‘road-friends’ or ‘road-men’, inherited relationships with others in neighboring localities. The names for these were essentially reciprocal gender-marked kin terms (road-friends were always male); so a man would have his gobikin, while being the other’s kworiain. These
Figure 7.2 A ridgetop road in the Prince Alexander Mountains.
Figure 7.3 An Arapesh woman following a bush road to her garden.
hereditary friendships were understood to be the product of risk and effort on the part of one’s forefathers, and the roads they created had to be actively kept open or maintained. At the level of whole localities, roads represented stable alliances that allowed for safe passage, so that travelers would not have to fear ambush whenever they stepped off their own lands. The relationships they defined helped create confederacies individuals called upon to support their efforts in feasting and warfare, and they set up very specific local channels for inter-community exchange.

In the eastern Arapesh region there were two major roads: the Rohwim and the Cemaun (see Figure 7.4 for a schematic diagram). These ran from the coast in the north up into the mountains separating the coastal Arapesh region from the Sepik plains in the south. These were not the only roads, just the ones that were most fully institutionalized in the region where Fortune and I both happened to work.

When looked at from an etic point of view, the roads were clearly a mechanism for diffusion. Following them one could trace bilingualism and borrowings, or trade items and artistic styles as Mead (1938) was able to do. But when looked at emically, they must also be understood as a primary framework for defining Arapesh social identity. Each stage of advance along a road was justified by a principle of commutative relationship:

A man has not scattered friends in various hamlets. He is one of a line of friends, inland to seacoast, who are friends of one another ... The natural friendships,
following migration in former generation and the like, are usually between friends of friends, or friends two or three or four times removed. (Fortune n.d.: 67–9)

For both individuals and communities, when one acquired the things that came in along the roads (and this included not just tangible items like shell-ring valuables or carved wooden plates, but also intangible cultural forms such as hairstyles, linguistic skills, and ritual complexes like *singsings*), it publicly manifested the importer’s political sophistication and demonstrated his influence in the region because it presupposed his ability to mobilize relationships along the road that extended all the way to the source of those things. In his description of the purchase of a dance complex called *Shenei* at a major regional event that he attended in May 1932, Fortune describes the way the intermediate road relationships were all made visible in the gathering crowd of people, who all had a stake in the transaction. This would not be true every time one brought a friend a hand of bananas or picked up a new botanical term in the road friends’ language, but it illustrates the system’s underlying logic: placement along a road implies a claim to recognition by association with those persons and items that pass through. Arapesh people could never simply walk somewhere new and acquire what they desired. Fortune says it was ‘the gravest insult’ to carry one’s own pigs (analogous to currency) across another community’s land; to do so was potentially dangerous and politically destabilizing because it represented a refusal to recognize one’s roadmen.10 Mead and Fortune both speak of importations as happening in a piecemeal way, wrested up the roads from their begrudging owners through effort and expense, one step at a time. So the institution of the roads controlled and slowed the flow of diffusion, channeling the acquisition of imports of all kinds through a linear series of high-maintenance personal relationships.

By the time of Mead and Fortune’s fieldwork, this system was beginning to disintegrate, and a good deal of the fierce competitive politics surrounding the dance transaction Fortune documented was devoted to managing the damage caused by two major disruptions to the roads as an institution for controlling the flow of social capital. The first of these was the white man’s labour, especially plantations. These brought together individuals who would otherwise have no grounds for direct interaction, and they were eager to avail themselves of their new, geographically unsanctioned friendships to access what had been previously beyond their social range. The other disruption was the white man’s own road, what Mead and Fortune called ‘the King’s Highway’. This was the bridle path used by the colonial patrol officers, which presented a new model and metaphor for how roads, and hence interaction between localities, could operate. It assured safe passage as its owners, the white men, demanded, eliminating the need for

10 Still today people ‘clear the road’ to another locality by making gifts acknowledging their road-friends before they attend or contribute to an event there, such as a funeral feast.
personal mediation and extending local people’s reach into new areas. A decade later came the Second World War, parts of which were fought on and in the airspace above Arapesh lands. This devastated the people and completely upended their way of life. When those who survived returned from the bush where they had been scattered in hiding, they did not re-establish many of their former cultural institutions, including the system of roads.

But the desire to enhance one’s identity through importation, which motivated Arapesh people to ‘walk in search of shell rings’, as the exploitation and enjoyment of road friendships was euphemistically called, remains an aspect of Arapesh culture. And I believe we can see the effects of this cultural orientation in the shift to Tok Pisin that has gone nearly to completion in the communities of the area.11 Because those aspects of identity that are conceived of as being within one’s own control are associated with importation, people are always looking for the roads they can follow to acquire distant valuable things. As in the past, these roads are simultaneously metaphorical and physical. In the 1950s, when the coastal Arapesh were regrouping their communities after the war, there arose an influential Arapesh leader named Pita Simogun who called for the Cemaun and Rohwim people to forget their past rivalries and build a new kind of road, a vehicle road that would connect their territory all the way to the town of Wewak to the east (Allen 2012). This they did. Using their save and working together, they felled 50 kilometers of huge trees by hand, creating what has now come to be known as the West Coast Highway. For Arapesh people on the northern side of the Torricelli watershed, that road is now the conduit to most modern forms of value (schools, towns, markets, health centres, and jobs) and the fact that they themselves built it provides a powerful anchor for what wider Arapesh group identity and pride exists in the region today.

The continuing prominence of roads in contemporary Arapesh discourse and social imagination is remarkable. Figure 7.5 presents a depiction of the mountaintop village of Apakibur as drawn by my village brother Timothy, at the time a ten-year-old boy. In it, his home, represented by the house at the top, is positioned in relation to other settlements on the way down to the coastal vehicle road, the row of trucks running at the bottom. As the drawing reveals, Timothy locates himself in social space in a way similar to that mapped out by the traditional road system (though note the aircraft that now flies overhead, obviating thousands of roads at once as it does so!).

11 Suslak 2009: 205 describes a similar series of changes that took place in Mexico: ‘In the 1970s... a campaign to obtain the road that would connect their village to the Valley of Oaxaca finally liberated the people of Totontepec from centuries of economic subordination to the Zapotec neighbors. Direct access to the urban markets of Oaxaca City and Mexico City opened up the flood gates to new flows of commercial goods, media, and people.... Almost overnight, Spanish eclipsed Zapotec as the language of local commerce.’
With help from a village son who achieved significant stature in the national government, the Apakibur community was able to build a vehicle access road connecting their mountain home to the coast. It was washed out and rebuilt several times, in a way reminiscent of the fate of their vernacular village preschool, and then settled into disrepair for about 15 years. The road was regraded yet again a few years ago when the government leader died, so that the villagers could transport his body home for burial. In July 2013 I found it was again impassable (see Figure 7.6).

The roads have come to my attention in a new way over the past couple of years, since an Arapesh Facebook group has been formed in the hopes of creating ‘avenues and institutions that will preserve our heritage and environment while empowering our people to develop economically sustainable activities that will benefit themselves and all Arapesh, from those in the village to those in towns and cities’. One important function of the Facebook group has been to provide a context for use of the vernacular, although many of the contributors are primarily English and Tok Pisin speakers. Interestingly, when a query was posted about what challenges today’s villagers faced, it generated passionate discussion, with the most attention being given to the need for an effective system of modern roads. Several commenters expressed their belief that health care, education, and food security would follow naturally if the villagers only had roads. As one commenter put it, ‘We cannot bring all services together, my people always tell...’
Figure 7.6 The Apakibur vehicle road, symbol of social efficacy, in disrepair.
me, we just need good roads, don’t worry about others, with roads all other services will just complement together’. Of course, the difficulty of travel is a serious practical problem, with implications for rural people’s daily lives. But this should not preclude us from seeing that the problem is experienced by Arapesh people in a way that is distinctive because of how it is elaborated in their culture.

7.5 Conclusion: Arapesh Language Shift as a Modern Lifestyle Disease

Gillian Sankoff (1980a: 127) once described Tok Pisin as ‘a neutral language’, ‘no one’s vernacular’, and as being in the public domain so that it ‘can be learned with impunity’. That statement is on the one hand profoundly true, but on the other hand slightly misses the mark. Tok Pisin was never neutral. Its original socio-geographic provenance was a group of outsiders, the ‘white men’, who brought it with them from their home village across the seas, and its desirability derived not only from its utility for communication but also from the connection it indexed to them.12 But in saying that Tok Pisin could be ‘learned with impunity’, Sankoff is absolutely correct. The reason it could be learned is not because language was otherwise a proprietary possession, but because no mechanism existed to control its circulation. The imposition of hierarchy that brought with it Tok Pisin, ‘the King’s Highway’ that trumped all others, rendered obsolete not just place-based multilingualism, but the whole lateral system of inter-locality relations upon which Arapesh political life and identity had formerly been premised.

So have speakers of Sepik languages shifted to Tok Pisin because they weigh the language against their vernaculars along some scale of value and find the latter lacking? Not necessarily. Foreign cultural elements such as Tok Pisin skills were always learned and always associated with the better part of the self, but it was impossible for everyone to access them. In the view we get from the roads, the eager incorporation of Tok Pisin looks more than anything like a native cultural process gone haywire because the historical limits on importation have been rendered inoperative. In terms of its mechanism, then, we might see Arapesh language shift as like a modern lifestyle disease: we have heart attacks and get diabetes because we are surrounded by sugar, fat, and salt. Nothing against grains and vegetables, but our bodies are predisposed to hunger for sugar, fat, and salt, and since these are now all around and there is nothing to stop us, we consume them. In other words, as unintuitive as it may sound, we must understand traditional Arapesh culture to be a factor driving linguistic change.

12 For evidence that Arapesh speakers attributed Tok Pisin to a particular geographic location (that they saw it as having its own socio-geographic provenance) see Dobrin (2012: 18).
Over much of Papua New Guinea this system of values is now undergoing significant revision. With the rise of education, national consciousness, and a middle class in Papua New Guinea and throughout Melanesia, there is a movement toward a Western nationalist model of identity like Handler (1988) describes, according to which language and culture take on meaning as the primordial possession of bounded social groups (Foster 1997, 2002). The reasons for this are clear: not only do people now participate in wider discourses about ‘having a culture’, but they are projected into the social role of the possessive individual as Christians with individual souls be saved, as citizens who express their individual choices when they vote, and as advertising targets who are encouraged to make purchases that will satisfy their personal desires. Of course, these changes have implications for language renewal in an importing culture because they recast local languages as the valued possessions of speakers affiliated with modern ethnolinguistic communities. But for engaged linguists who would construe their linguistic preservation work as supporting indigenous cultures, there is an irony in this development: a genuine grassroots movement for Arapesh language renewal can only begin in earnest once a profound kind of cultural assimilation is close to complete.

References


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