

Children's language learning, multilingualism and school language policy in a PNG Highlands community

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I am currently engaged in research on children's language learning at Kailge, a Ku Waru speaking community in the Western Highlands of Papua New Guinea. The project builds upon linguistic-anthropological fieldwork that I have been doing there in collaboration with Francesca Merlan since 1981, including longitudinal sampling of children's language acquisition since 2004. Our data show that between 2011 and 2013 there was a big increase in the extent to which toddlers were being exposed to the national lingua franca Tok Pisin and learning it along with Ku Waru. This change coincided with a shift in educational policy at the national level away from transitional bilingual education to the introduction of English as a required subject from the beginning of children's schooling, and increased acceptance of Tok Pisin as medium of instruction. Our interviews with parents of young children showed that they were aware of this shift and that their increased use of Tok Pisin to the children had been a matter of conscious choice that had been motivated in part by that awareness. I will discuss the reasons for that shift and some of its unintended consequences, including the way in which the children themselves have become the main drivers of code-switching from Ku Waru to Tok Pisin across conversational turns. This will lead to a consideration of how and to what extent our linguistic expertise might be drawn upon to help parents and teachers understand what is at stake in such situations of incipient language shift.