

Review

A Living Language. Selected Aspects of TokPisin in the Press (on the Basis of Wantok Newspaper)

by Marcin Walczyński

Nysa: Publishing Office PWSZ in Nysa, 2012, 311 pages

ISBN: 978-83-60081-61-7

Price: 27 PLN

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The book, based on the author's PhD dissertation, scrutinizes the role and function of Tok Pisin in the Papua New Guinean society. Its aim is to substantiate that it is, as other pidgins and creoles, a living and developing linguistic entity, which should not be perceived as marginal or trivial. The analysis of the content, structure and form of this work indicates that it is more an extended essay or a compendium of knowledge of Tok Pisin than a representative academic research.

To begin with, the introductory part does not contain key elements of a scientific thesis, namely-subject matter, investigative perspective, theoretical background or method of analyzing the source material. Instead, the author provides five impugnable objectives of the study. The first aim - "to demonstrate that pidgins and creoles are worthy serious linguistic study (...)" (Walczyński 2012:16), as well as the second one - "to track the genesis of the language in question" (Walczyński 2012:17) seem to be purposeless since in the past these languages were the subject of research of many other linguists as e.g. Hugo Schuchardt, Derek Bickerton, Donald Winford and John Rickford. The third goal - "[to] show that [Tok Pisin] (...) is applied in many social domains" (Walczyński 2012:18) is also inexplicit as this assumption is true about all languages in use. The fourth objective, constituting the subject matter of one of the analytical chapters, is to examine whether the New Guinean newspaper *Wantok*, conforms to the norms by which the standard variety of

Tok Pisin is defined (Walczyński 2012:18). This objective requires reformulation and reversal. Taking into consideration that *Wantok* is a popular printed medium which aims at transmitting the standardized model of Talk Pisin, the researcher should have performed an in-depth description, examination and analysis of its representative textual content. Assessing whether *Wantok* is a conclusive example of standard Tok Pisin is in fact an examination of the newspaper itself, not any kind of research upon a living language as the author purports in the title of his publication.

The next aim – to show that Tok Pisin is a living and continually developing language which can be used in majority of communicative situations (Walczyński 2012:19) is, similarly to the third goal of the work, true about every single existing language. In conclusion, the aims of the study might be identified as disputable and an attempt to accomplish them leads to the incorrect structure of the investigation.

The organization of the book as well as the structure of theoretical chapters seem to be incoherent and in-transparent. The classical division into chapters in a linguistic research entails three parts; the first one presents and discusses the theoretical background of the research topic, the second explicates the method of analyzing the source material and the third one, being the synthetic summary of the first two chapters, contains the analytical part of the work. The author of *The living language...* has designed four theoretical chapters and two analytical ones. The theoretical sections form a compilation of randomly selected quotes, which are not juxtaposed, contrasted, commented, analyzed and discussed. The organization of the theoretical background often perpetuates a four-step scheme: (1) ascertainment of the existence of a particular scholar publication, (2) de-contextualized presentation of an opinion/fact/finding, (3) constatation that a given quote/approach is problematic/key/interesting. Furthermore, the structure lacks a consistent transition from one paragraph to another. The paragraphs do not refer to each other and lack pertinent topic sentences, which would encapsulate the main points of each paragraph. The succeeding paragraphs begin with unrefined phrases like “another scholar who wrote on pidgin languages and related phenomena (...)” (Walczyński 2012: 40), (...) was another person who devoted some of his publications to the issues of pidgins and creoles (Walczyński 2012: 41) “another researcher (...) published his articles connected with the study of pidgins and creoles” (ibid.), “also (...) wrote a few articles about pidgins and creoles” (Walczyński 2012: 43). Furthermore, the presentation of the particular quotes or paraphrases leads to very short, facile conclusions like: “this research provided evidence for the claim that pidginised and creolised languages undergo similar linguistic process to any other

language” (Walczyński 2012: 40) or “in conclusion, it may be said that pidgins and creoles cannot be said (...) to be worse than natural languages such as English or French” (Walczyński 2012: 120), or it simply ends with no conclusion or comment whatsoever.

The fact that the theoretical chapters lack any critical analysis of the discussed material and many issues are not fully expanded but only signaled are not the only objections. Primarily, the author omits crucial theoretical aspects which a contact linguistic research should unquestionably raise. Instead of setting the theoretical base in the context of pragmatics, as well as anthropological and contact linguistics, the author concentrates only on selected characteristics of pidgin and creole linguistics, which do not directly apply to the analytical part of the research.

In the analytical chapters one can find three elements which arouse considerable doubts: the method, text corpus and conclusions. Indisputably, the research topic demands explicit references to the discourse analysis or textologists, as well as to the scientific tools excogitated by the prominent scholars specialized in these fields. Although the author of the book includes the opinions of some key experts such as Donald Winford, William Foley or Alessandro Duranti in the bibliography, he does not employ their methods in his study. The main and the only method he applies in the research is a linguistic observation defined as a “careful study and selection of representative samples to exemplify particular phenomena” (Walczyński 2012: 204).

As stated above, the criteria for choosing the source material are unclear. The researcher decides to analyze 14 issues of a weekly newspaper without implementing a chronological or thematic selection. Inexplicably, the language material of the newspaper is perceived as a “living language” and the journalistic stylization is not taken into account. Significantly, the criterion for using the term “living language” also remains questionable; the author does not circumscribe the scale of using the given language by *e.g.* a sociolinguistic questionnaire or interview. The next objection may be raised against the fact that the author has not had a direct contact with Tok Pisin in real use; he has not visited Papua New Guinea to expand his research standpoint.

It appears that the inaccurate choice of method and the source material, as well as improper strategy of analytical chapters result in vague conclusions which do not shed any new light on linguistics. For instance, we can encounter obvious concluding remarks like the “majority of headlines in *Wantok* are rather informative because they briefly – usually in one sentence or in a sentence equivalent (without a verb) – summarise the contents of the articles” (Walczyński 2012: 233) or

(...) any language (...), is not only an idealized construct functioning in human minds; it is first and foremost, a real living entity functioning among people and helping them to create their reality (...) Language and society are almost inseparable as one cannot exist with the other. (Walczyński 2012: 285)

Indubitably, both conclusions were made in the past: the first one accords perfectly with a headline definition and the second is almost a core assumption of sociolinguistics.

Furthermore, in some sections the formal demerits such as numerous colloquialisms and bibliographical inaccuracies are observed. Colloquial phrases are especially noticeable in the acknowledgements, e.g.: “[I have] come over many difficulties that stood on my way,” “big thank-you (...) goes to (...),” “loads of positive energy,” (Walczyński 2012: 13) “(...) who did a great job,” “serious and less serious matters” (Walczyński 2012: 14). In other chapters we detect further colloquialisms: “it means that they see pidgins as a direct product,” (30) “it can be surely said that (...),” (Walczyński 2012: 34) “the extent to which compounds are present in *Wantok* is not overwhelmingly big” (Walczyński 2012: 213) and “ (...) it is now time to look at (...)” (Walczyński 2012: 223). In the bibliography the researcher does not provide complete information about the author. In some bibliographical items he also fails to include the first editions of a cited volume.

To conclude, *A living language...* is not a scientific research. Considering its structure, organization and content it might be stated that it constitutes a quasi-encyclopedia – a collection of knowledge about Tok Pisin within the framework of pidgin and creole linguistics. One may wonder if the work has a potential to be considerably developed basing on the data collected in the field.