

Pisin Tok

Steven Shepard

Steve@ShepardComm.com

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As many of you know, I am fascinated by language. I had the good fortune to grow up overseas, in Madrid, Spain, the result of which is that I became a multicultural, trilingual kid early on in my life. When the time came to enter university, I went to UC Berkeley and earned an undergraduate degree in a little-known field called Romance Philology with a specialization in ancient Spanish. Philology is the study of language origins; Romance Philology is the study of Romance language origins.

I was in my element. To understand how languages evolve, one must study the language from its earliest stages, the result of which is that I spent a lot of time with my nose buried in Latin, Greek and Sanskrit manuscripts, studying Indo-European migrations, reading medieval epic poetry (El Cid, Don Quixote, El Conde Lucanor) and becoming entirely comfortable with the difference between a sibilant 'S' and an apicoalveolar 'S.' I could (and still can) write easily in the phonetic alphabet. It was fascinating, esoteric stuff, but I loved it. I still do. Which brings me to this essay.

I continue to study languages, even today. My excuse (as if I need one) is that because I travel to so many odd places, I need to have a minimal command of the local language. Truthfully, I just enjoy the sound, the rhythm, the music of language.

Consider Swahili, for example. Swahili, spoken chiefly in east Africa (Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Malawi) is a palimpsest, a local native language overlaid by the English of the colonial occupation. It relies heavily on both, and is highly onomatopoeic. For example, the Swahili word for a machine gun is a boom-boom-takataka. In other words, the sound of the word describes the sound of the thing it defines. 'Sasa' means quickly; it just sounds fast. And 'lala' means sleep; the next time you say that someone is "in lala-land," thank Swahili.

But even more interesting to me is an odd collection of languages called Pidgin. Spoken in well over 100 countries around the world in a variety of forms, Pidgin is also a genetically engineered language, typically formed from multiple languages mixed together. My favorite of the variants is Melanesian Pidgin, spoken in Papua New Guinea and a few other places throughout the island groups that make up Indonesia, Irian Jaya, and parts of Polynesia. It too is onomatopoeic, and to understand the meaning of its words and phrases one must give up the standard practice of trying to recognize linguistic cognates and just listen to the sound of the word. A cognate, by the way, is a word in one language that sounds like a word in a different language, usually because it derives from the same linguistic roots. For example, 'house' in English sounds just like 'haus' in German, and in fact mean the same thing because they derive

from the same origin. There are, however, false cognates; the Spanish verb “embarazarse” doesn’t mean ‘to be embarrassed,’ even though it sounds that way; it means ‘to be pregnant.’ Many are the non-native Spanish speakers who, while attempting to tell someone how embarrassed they are, instead received hearty congratulations – and were then embarrassed when they were told what they had actually said.

I want to give you a short lesson in Pidgin, just because it’s such a fun language and because it will spark your imagination. And, because if you learn to speak it you can be understood in more than 100 countries. So let’s begin, first with a few simple words and phrases. Remember, don’t try to make sense out of the spelling of the words; try to make sense out of the *sound* of the words or words. Here we go.

Ais – Ice

Aiglas – Eyeglass (Are you starting to get the hang of it now?)

Win masin – Wind machine (a fan!)

Nogat moni – no got money (I’m broke)

Maufgras – Literally, mouth grass – as in the grass that grows on your mouth. This is the Pidgin word for a moustache. Is this a cool language, or what?

Gras bilong het – With a little thinking you should be able to figure this one out. It means ‘Grass that belongs on your head,’ or hair.

Man I katim gras bilong het – The man who cuts the grass on your head – your barber.

Lek bilong pik – Leg that belongs to the pig. This is Pidgin for a pork roast.

Ainim klos – I’m getting close – or nearby.

Asples bilong gavman – This one requires a bit of a stretch. ‘Aspes’ means ‘Ass place,’ or the seat. ‘Asples bilong gavman’ means ‘Ass place that belongs to the government,’ or the seat of government. How cool is that?

Namawan pikinini san missiskween – When spoken, it sounds (more or less) like ‘Number one pikinini son Mrs. Queen.’ Pikinini is a word stolen from Swahili and means a small child. So the number one pikinini who is the son of Mrs. Queen? That would be Prince Charles.

If you would like to know more about Pidgin, Check out <http://www.june29.com/hlp/lang/pidgin.html> for a complete Pidgin-English dictionary.

Also, where you can not only read the language but also listen to it spoken. The remarkable thing is that with a little bit of practice, you can become fluent in this language. How fun is that?

Tenkyu long ridim (Thanks for reading).