

## English and the Channels of Decolonization

In 1953, representatives of the UN Trusteeship Council traveled to the Territory of New Guinea on a visiting mission in order to inspect the area, observe Australia's management of the territory, and speak with Papua New Guinean people about how the UN could help them one day achieve self-government. During similar visiting missions to territories like Togo or Tanganyika, local people would present to council representatives lengthy written and oral petitions, in English or French, regarding the unification of the territory, their political future, and their desire for independence. In those territories, local people not only were already participating in various levels of self-governance, but were demanding more.

In the Territory of New Guinea, the presentations to the visiting delegates were rather different. In 1953, there was only one small region of the territory—just outside the old German colonial capital of Rabaul on the island of New Britain—in which people engaged in any kind of self-governance. Local government councils there, the first experiments in self-governance, collected a small tax from each family and used the money to build schoolhouses, medical aid posts, and structures where people could process copra from their coconut trees. But even there, in the most politically, economically, and educationally “advanced” part of the Territory of New Guinea, the delegates were stunned by the kinds of presentations local people gave them. Not only was the level of “advancement” low compared to the other trust territories in Africa and the Pacific, but far more concerning was the fact that the local people did not seem to be demanding self-government at all. In some cases, they seemed to be doing the opposite, as was the case with a petition presented to the delegation by leaders of Tavuiiu Village.

The original petition is not included in the files I examined, but a typewritten copy of it is. A handwritten comment—"allow"—next to a grammatically incorrect sentence suggests that someone wanted to keep all the typos and errors that were in the original. Below, I have reproduced the document's formatting as much as possible, including all errors, which are not marked with *sic*:

Wednesday

18th March 1953

Tavuiliu Committee  
Welcome by the U.N.O. Missionaries

We are very pleased to see you today, and we are very happy too, because you visited this Territory of Papua and New Guines.

Today is the day for usto tell you that we are not in the Village Council. The three important things that we are not to have a village council, "is"

- (1) We are foolish. We haven't got enough sense for this Council.
- (2) We need to give the help to each of us.
- (3) Most of our people are very poor. They have no money at all.

These three things are very important in our minds.

Now we wish to tell you that we are very anxous to stay under the control of the Administration.

We have a small quantity of money, so we ready for the Co-operative. And we wish too, to give a Tax for the Administration, if he is allowed.

Now the Village Council closed the schools, hospitals and every thing for the Administration. If he allows usto buy another school in some other places, we wish to follow that the Administration say.

Wisky is very dangerous.

1. It fills the man and makes his brand foolish.
2. It makes man poor and kills his wife with their children.

Thank you very much for those reations.

We give them to you.<sup>1</sup>

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This is a complicated, multi-voiced communication, with various implied as well as overtly identified audiences, claims to its authors' foolishness notwithstanding. One addressee of the petition is the neighboring local government council. The Tavuiliuans were upset that this council had cut off their access to certain schools and medical posts because they had not agreed to join with and pay taxes to the council. That is to say, the petition is about how the Tavuiliuans want to *retain* their autonomy and not be under the thumb of the neighboring village's leadership. The second addressee is the Australian administration. The petition is a demand that the administration help the Tavuiliuans deal with their dispute with the neighboring local government council, to help them regain access to these services. They are also claiming that they do not have enough money for the tax that the local government council is charging, although they do have a smaller amount

that they could give to the administration if necessary. In addition, the self-deprecating opening (a common way to start speeches across Papua New Guinea) about being foolish can be read as a complaint to the Australian administration that the Australians have not done enough to prepare them for managing funds and resources. The third and perhaps least important addressee is the explicitly identified one, the delegates of the UN visiting mission (note that they are referred to as “missionaries,” something that the delegates continually bristled at).<sup>2</sup> While the delegates are recognized as important visitors, the Tavuiliuan leaders mostly seem to opportunistically take this high-profile moment to direct a very overt and effective complaint at more local targets.

The agenda of the Tavuiliu Committee can partly be read from the letter itself, especially if a reader has some familiarity with the way complaints tend to be lodged in Papua New Guinean contexts. Some of the context of the local dispute is spelled out more fully in accompanying documents, so there is evidence that it was clear to some members of the Australian administration at the time. But what is also clear from those documents is that this sort of local contextualization was not at all visible to the UN delegates. In fact, the discussion of this petition in the Trusteeship Council chambers in New York begins, “Although the meaning of this petition is not clear. . . .”<sup>3</sup> The Tavuiliuans’ refusal to join one of the only organs of self-governance then in the territory, and their claims about their own foolishness, became a recurring issue brought up during subsequent discussions of the Territory of New Guinea (in later reports the group seems to be referred to by the name “Raluana”). Over the next few years in Trusteeship Council debates, the (nationalist) Chinese, Syrian, Soviet, Belgian, and other delegations continued to inquire about the Tavuiliuans’ refusal, although they eventually grasped some of the local dynamics involved. During subsequent visiting missions, the status of Tavuiliu’s relationship to the neighboring local government council was on the official agenda and delegations were constantly on the lookout for any other groups that might be refusing to join councils. Tavuiliu’s refusal to join a project of self-governance was so surprising, and such a contrast with the petitions from Togoans, Cameroonians, or Tanganyikans, that many delegates on the council argued that this could only be read as a damning portrait of the failures of the Australian administration. Papua New Guineans didn’t even know what they should be asking for.

While it sometimes seems like the council’s debates about these visiting mission reports meandered from topic to topic, we can read the flow of questions as a way to give us a sense of the causal links delegates made. For example, in the course of a few questions about this petition, the Chinese delegation goes from asking about why Tavuiliuans refused to join the self-governing local government councils, to asking about the state of education in the territory, to asking how the Australians planned on solving the “language problem,” to asking about the status of Tok Pisin.<sup>4</sup> In making this link between a refusal of self-governance and Tok

Pisin, the Chinese delegation's questions exemplify a particular way of viewing the connection between self-determination and English that will be the primary topic of this chapter.

The contemporary dominance of global English is often connected to either earlier colonial education policies or twenty-first-century conditions of neoliberal labor (e.g., Cutts 1953, wa Thiong'o 1986, Cohn 1996, Pennycook 2009, Heller 2010, Cameron 2012). By contrast, the postwar twentieth century is seen as the highwater mark for ethnolinguistic nationalism and the near universalization of the nation-state (Fishman 1968, Anderson 1991, Kelly and Kaplan 2001). But some of the architects of decolonization were interested in creating an international order that would counter empire rather than just universalize the nation-state form. The creation of institutions of decolonization had an important role in the development of global English as well. But while there is considerable scholarship on the use of French in the anticolonial Negritude movements of West Africa and the Caribbean (e.g., Wilder 2009, Warner 2019), less has been said about the role of English in decolonization (but see Mazrui 2004).

For some of the colonial territories like Papua and New Guinea that were not actively engaged in large-scale nationalist independence movements, anticolonial delegations on the Fourth Committee on Non-Self-Governing Peoples and the Trusteeship Council tried to bring them into the UN bureaucratic order first, with an eventual goal of self-determination through a nationalist project coming later. This meant that decolonization in these cases was a matter of developing an informational infrastructure that might eventually lead to nationalist movements for self-determination. In the Territory of New Guinea specifically, this meant creating a communicative network in English, the only official UN language that some Papua New Guineans had even a passing familiarity with. English would be the channel linking would-be Papua New Guinean nationalists with external anticolonial activists and structures. The anticolonial delegations of the UN promoted not a national language, but the colonial language as the engine of decolonization that Papua New Guineans and outside anticolonials would share. Because of that, language could sometimes be one of the few things that both the colonial and anticolonial sides of the UN could agree on. In the Trust Territory of New Guinea, a surprising coalition of delegations and groups all agreed that whatever needed to be done in the colony, one of the first orders of business was the eradication of Tok Pisin.

The irony of the UN interventions in the territory is that while the UN representatives recognized circulation and communication as the base of the problem, they also demanded the eradication of the only language that seemed on its way to potentially solving one part of it. They demanded the eradication of Tok Pisin because they thought it was inhibiting democratic politics by not creating the proper channels of connection among Papua New Guineans or between Papua

New Guineans and external anticolonial actors. How the UN decolonizers came to blame the lack of democratic communication on Tok Pisin, the most likely solution to at least part of that problem, is what I turn to next. In doing so, I hope to show how circulation structured the antipathy to Tok Pisin, blinding the UN delegates to its ability to create a proto-national entity.

#### THE "HUMAN AND GEOGRAPHICAL FACTORS" OF THE TERRITORY OF NEW GUINEA

For many members of the Trusteeship Council, the problem of independence in the Territory of New Guinea was a problem of creating channels of information. This is especially clear in a 1956 visiting mission report on Australia's challenges as the administering authority:

The Mission believes that human and geographical factors must always be kept in mind in considering any aspect of development in the Territory, whether it concerns what has taken place or is envisaged in the future. These form a serious obstacle in many areas in the way of administration and the general advancement of the people. The first consists of an undeveloped population divided by a multitude of cultural and linguistic differences, scattered over an extensive area in village units which generally contain no more than one to three hundred inhabitants, with a substantial number who have not yet been brought completely under administrative control. The second concerns communication difficulties. The Mission realizes that these have been annually stressed and that the Trusteeship Council is aware of the difficult terrain, the lack of roads and similar features of the Territory; nevertheless it is useful to recall what this signifies in concrete terms. For example, Administrative contact with many village groups is brief and infrequent since it has to be maintained by patrol officers traveling for days and weeks on foot with carriers. Administrative officers, other than patrol officers, visit villages for specific purposes, but frequently the patrol officer in the main represents the Administration and as such has many functions.<sup>5</sup>

Note that both of the issues mentioned here—the small populations divided by languages and the communication problems that come from having lots of mountains—are essentially one issue of circulation: in the Territory of New Guinea, it is hard to get messages in and out. That has kept the people isolated from one another and, the implication seems to be, from learning from one another or the wider world. Without communications, there is no cultural development. With improved communications—especially those fostered by UN intervention—this development can be accelerated.<sup>6</sup>

Cultural primitivity either was not an issue for the Trusteeship Council or was fobbed off onto missionaries as a process of changing "native" mentality. But both the council and the Australian administration agreed that circulatory primitivity

was important and in some ways the harder problem to solve. It would take roads and the introduction of a proper lingua franca, things the administration never had enough money or men to actually implement. Council discussions, with the Australians trying to defend their record of enlightened governance and the anti-colonial states trying to demand a faster timetable to independence, are filled with examples in which the circulatory primitivity of the Territory of New Guinea takes a prominent role. Even when it was mentioned only in passing, it was usually mentioned early on, as the context that governed all comments about the territory. By 1956, it had become so standard to begin discussions of the territory with an invocation of mountains and languages that the authors of the visiting mission reports felt they needed to draw special attention to these factors, to shake Trusteeship Council readers out of a feeling of complacency toward the scale of the problem so that they could really grasp the extraordinary impact of the geographic and linguistic fragmentation.

One of the primary heroes of the 1956 visiting mission's report is thus the airplane, and the "pioneering use" that the Australian administration had made of it in the territory. With the ability to construct roads extremely limited by the mountains, the best alternative was simply flying over the terrain, dropping in from above on the discrete local communities. The challenges of the Territory of New Guinea that were "without parallel" could be mitigated by airplanes:

The fact that these people emerging from stone age conditions are living in areas which are extremely rugged and have remained unpenetrated until quite recently and that they are isolated from each other by mountains and ravines, language differences, fear of each other and a readiness to kill as the only way of self-preservation, make the task a formidable one. But positive factors also exist which throw a new and encouraging light on the situation. One of them is the existence of methods of penetration which were not available in earlier times. The intelligent and pioneering use of small aircraft by Australians is one of them.<sup>7</sup>

In the face of mountains, languages, and "a readiness to kill," airplanes literally swoop in to save the colonial administration. But airplanes can play this heroic role only if the challenges of the Territory of New Guinea are mostly communication challenges, if colonization and subsequent decolonization are about the circulation of information.

The UN delegates were voicing a vision of modernity focused on the cultural and infrastructural ability to move in productive ways (Edwards 2003, Urry 2007). Georg Simmel (1997), for example, notes that "primitive peoples" in general are extremely mobile hunter-gatherers, whereas the communities he considered culturally stagnant, like those in the European Middle Ages, were too immobile. For him, only the moderns get the proportions just right. Mobility has likewise been discussed in terms of class and capital, with laborers usually considered too mobile (see Thompson 1974, Scott 2018: 2). Both Australian and UN documents depict the Territory of New Guinea as an outlier from any of these perspectives, its

population suffering from an off-the-charts immobility that had to be dislodged before the wheels of history could even start to turn.

#### THE PROBLEM WITH TOK PISIN

Even the most utopian anticolonial members of the Trusteeship Council saw limits to Australia's ability to bring together what they thought the mountains and languages were keeping apart. But without the capacity to flatten the landscape and eliminate all vernacular languages, what exactly could the council suggest? In addition to demands for roads and airplanes, one of the most controversial demands that the council made was for the elimination of Tok Pisin. This is particularly strange given that Tok Pisin would seem to offer a potential solution to the linguistic side of the communication problem by serving as a lingua franca for an increasingly large percentage of the population. Yet Tok Pisin was identified as a force antithetical to independence very quickly. From 1953, it was a special subject of consideration during discussions of the Territory of New Guinea's political and economic development. In particular, the use or abandonment of Tok Pisin seemed to council members to imply something important about the kind of movement and circulation in which Papua New Guineans were participating.

The final page of the 1953 visiting mission report contains a few paragraphs on language and on the dissemination of information about the UN. In a relatively short paragraph, the visiting mission makes a recommendation that would become the most controversial element of the document for Australian readers:

The Mission is strongly of the opinion that pidgin is not only not a suitable language for instruction, but that it has characteristics derived from the circumstances in which it was invented which reflect now outmoded concepts of the relationship between indigenous inhabitants and immigrant groups [e.g., administrators, missionaries, plantation owners, and shopkeepers]. Therefore, it believes that the most energetic steps should be taken to eradicate this jargon from all instruction given within the Territory, and that plans be urgently developed to eliminate it from the Territory completely.<sup>8</sup>

Aside from the slightly tortured prose about "characteristics derived from the circumstances in which it was invented," which I address below, no reason was given for the demand that "pidgin" be eliminated. What makes the recommendation even stranger is the fact that a paragraph on the same page seems to prove Tok Pisin's value in the territory. After lamenting that most people seem to know nothing about the UN *except what they learned through Tok Pisin radio and newspapers*, the report concludes that "the preparation of special material on the UN in a medium which the people could readily understand would go a long way toward remedying this situation."<sup>9</sup> In other words, the language acting as a lingua franca for a wide swath of the population, Tok Pisin, should be eliminated, but isn't it a shame that there is no way to communicate with a wide swath of the people of

Papua New Guinea? Why, if Tok Pisin is clearly serving a purpose that the UN itself recognizes, do they still demand that it be eliminated?

The following comment from the 1956 visiting mission report on the Territory of New Guinea provides one of the clearest elaborations, and makes the link to questions of circulation explicit. Across several pages, the report provides an elaborate defense of the 1953 demand for the elimination of Tok Pisin. After listing a number of tentative steps Australia was taking to encourage Papua New Guinean participation in governance (creating local government councils or an auxiliary civil service, for example), the report continues:

Each step of this nature which the people take into wider spheres of activity diminishes whatever value Melanesian Pidgin once possessed for them. As has been noted, it had been a practical expedient when little or no participation was expected of the people in the direction of their affairs, and when the development of a national consciousness among them or their advancement on a territory-wide scale was scarcely envisaged. Today, however, a new goal has been set for the people: their progressive development toward self-government or independence. The Mission is therefore convinced that, regardless of how satisfactory Pidgin may have been for the purposes it served in the past, it is now inadequate and completely unsatisfactory as a means of communication for any people who expect to take their place in the modern world in the future. It believes that some advocates of Melanesian Pidgin are unaware of the goal which has been established for the Territory or do not approve of it and, as the 1953 Visiting Mission said, Pidgin reflects now outmoded concepts of the relationship between indigenous inhabitants and immigrant groups.<sup>10</sup>

The report's authors are arguing that while Tok Pisin is a *lingua franca* and has facilitated communication, it doesn't facilitate the right kind. The right kind of language would enable the literal and figurative mobility of speakers to move around the nation-in-waiting and move up a political ladder, to embark on what Benedict Anderson (1991) would later call the "creole pilgrimage." The right kind of language would produce political demands for self-government. The authors seem to argue that Papua New Guineans cannot make such demands for self-government while they are speaking Tok Pisin. For them, it seems to have something to do with Tok Pisin speakers' ability to circulate around the territory and the kinds of interactions they have when doing so.

The Trusteeship Council members take the mountains and the diverse languages of the Territory of New Guinea as barriers to interaction and the cultivation of a national consciousness, but they seem at least to think of these as natural barriers. Tok Pisin, by contrast, is a dishonest barrier in their view—pretending to enable interaction but not fixing the problem of communication, insofar as it has not produced a national consciousness. From the perspective of the UN, it is worse than the other barriers because the only movement it has enabled is movement for colonial labor. As a language of command in Cohn's (1996) sense of the term, it has facilitated only Australian colonizers' barking of orders to Papua New Guinean



laborers. Thus, the only thing a Papua New Guinean can voice in Tok Pisin—a language in which the term for white man is *masta* (from Eng. *master*)—is subordination. It is, in the words of one Australian commenter, a “slave language . . . a caste tongue, a lingo for lesser-breeds, inferiority made half-articulate.”<sup>11</sup>

When the Australian colonizers or Trusteeship Council members talk about the isolation of Papua New Guineans divided by mountains and languages, they ignore the significant movement of men for various forms of colonial labor. When the 1953 report makes reference to the “circumstances” in which Tok Pisin was invented, they mean the blackbirding system of coerced Melanesian labor on sugarcane plantations on Samoa and coastal New Guinea where Tok Pisin was stabilized and developed (Mühlhäusler 1978). Stewart Firth (1976) says that roughly one hundred thousand Pacific Islanders were recruited to work on plantations across the Pacific between 1867 and 1914, in addition to roughly another hundred thousand recruited in German New Guinea alone during that time frame (see also Jolly 1987). In 1956, roughly forty-five thousand New Guinean laborers were employed in the territory, about ten thousand of them working in service to the colonial government and the rest working for private or missionary enterprises.<sup>12</sup> These mostly male laborers were all speakers, to one extent or another, of Tok Pisin.<sup>13</sup>

Even when small groups of laborers kept to themselves in monolingual ethnic units (what were called labor lines, or *lains* in Tok Pisin), they had to have some Tok Pisin knowledge in order to understand the commands of white overseers and of indigenous workers who had been promoted to *bos boi* (from Eng. *boss boy*) status, since neither overseers nor *bos bois* would likely have any knowledge of a laborer’s vernacular language.<sup>14</sup> Margaret Mead’s (1931) short paper on Tok Pisin even refers to the language as “talk boy” (*tok boi*, or “laborer language”). As Kulick (1992) wrote, knowledge of Tok Pisin was considered one of the Western valuables a laborer would come home with (see also Wedgwood 1953: 106).

But for the Trusteeship Council members, whether they were administering authorities hoping to stall the move toward independence or non-administering authorities demanding a faster timetable to independence, Tok Pisin was a deficient language capable of fostering only the movement of labor but not, say, a labor movement. Even if there was a paranoid belief among colonizers that Tok Pisin was being used to communicate secret messages of rebellion (see chapter 3), the UN members worried that Tok Pisin had so far not been able to produce any kind of consciousness among the laborers as a larger group. When the 1956 visiting mission report on the Territory of New Guinea says that some “advocates of Melanesian Tok Pisin are unaware of the goal which has been established for the Territory or do not approve of it,” the authors are referring to Australian colonials who the UN delegates assume are interested in Papua New Guineans only as cheap labor. In this view, Tok Pisin is the linguistic channel for moving to and from the plantation only as a “boy” rather than as a potential citizen.

More than this, the members of the visiting mission in 1956 used Tok Pisin as a scapegoat for their frustrations that Papua New Guineans were not demanding independence. The council members assumed that if messages about forms of democratic governance could come “in” from the “outside,” then Papua New Guineans would have a natural desire for it. Tok Pisin’s apparent deficiencies with regard to expressing concepts of proto-national and global governance—and its facility for plantation-based, racist forms of address—shouldered the blame for the strange way that the visiting mission interacted with local Papua New Guinean groups. So how did the Trusteeship Council’s visiting missions want colonized peoples to interact with the UN? A pamphlet that the Trusteeship Council Secretariat produced (but never distributed, for reasons I outline below) offers a good look at the council’s model of proper bureaucratic decolonization.

#### HOW TO MAKE POLITICAL DEMANDS

In 1953, the Trusteeship Council produced a short pamphlet, explaining the role and functions of the UN as a whole and the trusteeship system in particular, that was supposed to be distributed directly to peoples in trust territories. Written as a fictional account of a young teacher conversing with a colonial officer in an unnamed African trust territory, “The Story of Aman and the United Nations” was written in what they hoped was a simplified English accessible to as many of the trust territory residents as possible (French translations were planned at one point as well). It was written as an Everyman story—perhaps that is why “Aman,” a man, was the protagonist—of a simple rural resident engaging in direct communications with a friendly global bureaucracy.

In “The Story of Aman and the United Nations,” the description of the petition system presents the UN Secretariat’s ideal narrative of political participation and communicative flow for trust territory indigenous peoples. In the story, Aman writes a petition to the Trusteeship Council to ask for more supplies and teachers for the school at which he works. He gives it to delegates of the council during the visiting mission’s inspection of Aman’s trust territory. Several months later, Aman receives a letter from the council in the mail:

The men of the council, the letter said, had read Aman’s paper in their meeting and had talked and given much thought to this matter. They were all in agreement that all of the people in Aman’s village who wanted to learn to read and write should be able to do so. Education was a very important work because in this way people got the learning to help themselves. Some way should be found, the council said, to get for Aman’s village the needed teacher and books. Now the representative of the big nation which watched over Aman’s country was a member of the council and took part in the talking over of Aman’s paper. He said his government was in agreement with all the council had said. (United Nations 1952: 27)

This pamphlet was never distributed to the peoples of the trust territories. In 1952, the administering authorities of the Trusteeship Council raised strong objections to it. Some of the criticism concerned the pseudo-simplified version of English, which the British, French, and Belgian delegates all argued would be offensive to educated people in the trust territories.<sup>15</sup> The pamphlet is filled with grammatically complex nominalizations and circumlocutions that only seem to make the processes and events discussed more abstract (e.g., “Education was a very important work because in this way people got the learning to help themselves”).

More importantly, the administering authorities denounced the pamphlet for presenting a version of the trusteeship system that considerably downplayed the role of the colonial states and considerably overplayed the role of the UN in providing state services.<sup>16</sup> They thought that the pamphlet promoted the belief of the UN Secretariat and the anticolonial non-administering delegations that “the inhabitants of Trust territories should be encouraged to look in the first place to the United Nations as the source of responsibility for their progress and welfare and only secondly to the Administering Authorities.”<sup>17</sup> The critics denounced in particular the story’s depiction of direct communication between the UN and local peoples. Indeed, they considered the pamphlet’s production itself to be a version of this, since no input from the administering authorities had been sought as the story was written. For Australia, the UK, or France, such direct communication undermined the administering nations’ authority and prestige in the eyes of the trust territories’ inhabitants. Although five thousand copies had been printed by the time it came up for debate in the Trusteeship Council, all the other planned copies and translations were canceled because the administering authorities refused to distribute them (thereby proving that the UN could not, in fact, have unrestricted communicative access to trust territory peoples).

Particularly given this denunciation by the administering authorities, we can read “The Story of Aman and the United Nations” as a relatively undiluted version of the UN Secretariat’s and the anticolonial delegations’ perspective on the trusteeship system: the council shepherds the non-self-governing indigenous peoples of the world toward greater political control while overseeing the administering authorities’ efforts to usher that independence along, to the point that eventually the administering authorities should retreat completely. This is largely described in terms of a flow of communication in which the UN gives indigenous peoples knowledge of UN services, the people petition the UN for them, and the UN sends in its representatives while browbeating the administering authorities into helping. As part of this information flow, the visiting missions collect new petitions while checking on the progress of programs that were developed in response to earlier petitions. The narrative roughly follows what Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink (2014) have called a “boomerang pattern” of international advocacy.

Even though the administering authorities did not share this ideal of the UN's role in trust territories—indeed, delegates from administering authority states would strongly dispute this version of the trusteeship system—all delegates on visiting missions to the Trust Territory of New Guinea assumed that they would engage in interactions that were recognizably about the voicing of political demands. But aside from some of their visits to Tolai communities on New Britain island, which had had the longest and most intense contacts with the colonial administration, the UN delegates were usually very disappointed, if not bewildered, by their interactions with Papua New Guineans from the highlands and interior. Even visits to New Britain—like the visit to the Tavuiliuans discussed at the beginning of this chapter—could cause UN confusion.

As I discuss more in the next chapter, during UN visits to the highland and interior regions of the Territory of New Guinea, interactions with local groups were often less about democratic talk and more about visual presentation and performance. Papua New Guineans, who may have only been told by colonial officers that a group of important people were coming and to gather at an administrative center on a given day, usually presented dances of welcome. These were, of course, political events for Papua New Guineans, ways of recognizing important outsiders that should be reciprocated. But as political events they did not necessarily involve the enunciation of demands or desires as would be expected by the delegates hoping to find citizens-in-training like the fictional Aman.<sup>18</sup> As mentioned at the outset, this contrasts sharply with the delegations' experiences in other trust territories, like Somaliland or Togo, where local peoples submitted hundreds of petitions during visiting missions that were carried back to UN headquarters. From 1946 to 1966, the Trusteeship Council received only twenty-seven petitions from people in the Territory of New Guinea, and many of these were from the Chinese community rather than from indigenous Papua New Guineans (Tomasetti 1970: 49).

In this context, knowledge of the UN's functions (discussed in trusteeship documents as the problem of "dissemination of information about the United Nations") was an important index for the delegates of the political development of the indigenous peoples in a territory. Because the UN Secretariat envisioned itself as the driver of progress toward development, it considered it essential that colonized people know about the UN's services and its work on those peoples' behalf. The Australian administration was well aware of this by 1953, and worried that the visiting mission would take this lack of dissemination of information about the UN as a synecdoche of Australia's overall neglect of Papua New Guineans.<sup>19</sup> Not only did Papua New Guineans often dance and sing rather than petition or demand, but they seemed to have no idea that the UN delegates were there in order to be the addressees of such speech acts. The blame for this was laid at Tok Pisin's feet. The 1956 visiting mission report says:

The Mission's arrival had also been publicized via radio, the press, including a Melanesian Tok Pisin news-sheet, and by the Administration. In most of the Territory,

however, it was apparent that the people did not know what the Mission represented. In the least advanced areas large numbers attended public meetings at the request of the Administration. But at these it was exceedingly difficult to convey information concerning the United Nations that had much significance for them. The most concrete definition that could be given was that the United Nations was a “big fella kivung” (large council) whose aim was to try to prevent wars. The Mission was identified as a “good fella too much” which had come to “lookim dispela place”, meaning that the Mission had come to inspect the place. The people, nevertheless, understood that they were free to speak on matters of concern to them, and they did so, freely.<sup>20</sup>

The description of the UN as a large council with the aim of preventing war seems like a perfectly adequate one, as does the claim that it was a very good (“good fella too much,” what would now be written as “gutpela tumas”) group that came to inspect the area (“lookim dispela place”/“lukim dispela ples”).<sup>21</sup> For “the least advanced” Papua New Guineans who had only been “pacified” (i.e., had regular interactions with the Australian administration) for five years or so, it is unclear how the UN’s system of international oversight and global bureaucracy ought to have been described, since this description seems if anything to mimic the language used in “The Story of Aman and the United Nations.” Indeed, the UN had to explain its role to peoples in the so-called developed as well as underdeveloped nations regularly throughout the 1950s. Here Tok Pisin’s etymological relationship to standard English is used to highlight the disparity between the UN’s high-minded ideals of information flows leading to independence and the realities of trying to move through the process of colonization and decolonization for communities with such shallow histories of interaction with the administration. What the audiences at these gatherings lacked was an extended experience of colonial education and the emerging postwar global order, but what the UN report emphasized instead was Tok Pisin’s inability to either voice liberal political demands for self-government or facilitate the flow of information to and from a global bureaucracy. Yet note the optimism of the final sentence: even with the limited language of Tok Pisin, New Guineans still managed to “speak on matters of concern to them,” proof that the UN’s model of communication leading to independence worked even with a deficient medium of communication.

#### INFORMATION FLOWS

The Trusteeship Council insisted upon standard (Australian) English as the only language that could produce the proper flow of information and political development that the UN was trying to create (often against the wishes of the administering authorities). Tok Pisin kept Papua New Guineans out of the flow of information: messages from the UN to the trust territory peoples, petitions and complaints from those peoples to the UN, the reports on compliance with petition-based issues, and the administering authorities’ responses. Visiting mission delegates thought that Tok Pisin circumlocutions, while fine for enabling labor

migration, were inadequate to the task of explaining the intricacies of the council's relations with the General Assembly or the Fourth Committee. Rather than face up to the longer struggle involved in Papua New Guinea's decolonization, the visiting mission held on to its assumptions about the naturalness of people coming together for nationalist struggles and blamed Tok Pisin instead.

The UN's demand to eradicate Tok Pisin was met with disdain and anger from members of the Australian public and officialdom, although the people who usually spent their time talking about how ridiculous and un-language-like Tok Pisin was did not suddenly shift into making a defense of it. Instead, they argued that the UN had no right to demand anything in regard to it: "Pidgin is an established language, and was established long before the United Nations Trusteeship Council came into existence."<sup>22</sup> Minister for Territories Paul Hasluck, who wanted to "slay the dragon of Pidgin," brought out the familiar specter of communism that so often seemed to accompany discussion of Tok Pisin, stating to the Australian press that to "say that [Tok Pisin] should be abolished immediately is as ridiculous as to suggest that all Europeans should begin speaking nothing but Russian next week."<sup>23</sup>

Robert A. Hall Jr., the American linguist focused on pidgins and creoles who was mentioned in earlier chapters, took great offense at what he dismissively called the UN's "pronunciamento." He rushed to print a short book in response, *Hands Off Pidgin English!* (1955), and he traveled to Papua New Guinea to investigate conditions in person soon thereafter. His rejoinder focused in large part on proving that Tok Pisin was a "real" language with a grammar and a lexicon that reflected "Melanesian" influences and an ability to expand and grow as the territory itself did. Hall worked with W. C. Groves, the longtime director of education in the Territory of New Guinea, and both men argued in as many places as possible for the linguistic complexity of Tok Pisin, as if getting Tok Pisin into the category of grammatical "language" would be the thing that would make its critics disappear.<sup>24</sup> Even UNESCO's (1953) *Use of Vernacular Languages in Education*, in which Camilla Wedgwood's section on Tok Pisin (pp. 103–15) specifically claims it as a vernacular language that should be used in education in the Territory of New Guinea, was not enough to get the Trusteeship Council to reverse its opinion. Other commenters at the time offered alternative suggestions to replace Tok Pisin's deficiencies—English written phonemically, or Ogden and Richards's Basic English, or, in one of the more far-fetched suggestions, Charles Bliss's invented iconographic language known as Semantography.<sup>25</sup>

None of those arguments ever convinced the members of the Trusteeship Council, although it is worth noting that files in the National Archives of Australia show that the government took the suggestion of using Basic English seriously for a brief period in the 1950s, particularly given Winston Churchill's endorsement of it. Aside from a certain prejudice against pidgin and creole languages that speakers of the pidgin or creole's lexifier language almost always express, these arguments failed in part because they did not get at the primary issue

that many members of the Trusteeship Council had with Tok Pisin. For Soviet, Indian, and other anticolonial council members who made the most aggressive demands for the Territory of New Guinea's near-term independence, the integrity of the Queen's English was not a concern. For these delegates, it was not just that Tok Pisin didn't seem to fit the mold of a proper language as a code, but that Tok Pisin seemed to be incapable of producing either the speaker mobility needed for proto-national "creole pilgrimages" or the message mobility needed for the UN's direct communications with Papua New Guineans as a channel. Tok Pisin, they thought, had only supported the issuing of unidirectional commands in a plantation environment. It did not allow for the circuit of information flow that the Trusteeship Council and the UN Secretariat in particular envisaged for a progressive path to self-government.

The UN Secretariat's concern about the crucial role of the dissemination of information about the UN was not just a form of organizational self-importance. The secretariat and some of the more vocal members of the anticolonial bloc of nations required that territories have the informational and linguistic infrastructure needed to develop an international institution capable of squaring off against the colonial empires of Europe. Self-determination for members of this bloc did not have to mean, first and foremost, a national consciousness and desire for independence. Self-determination could exist, at least for a time, as an informational flow between the UN and the non-self-governing territories. But like the unpaved roads that get washed away every year in the rainy season, Tok Pisin seemed to them to be an infrastructural mirage. It could not help foster the kind of communication that would produce lasting change.

## CONCLUSION

The prior routes of Tok Pisin-speaking laborers, to plantations and back again, had not produced the kinds of consciousness raising that delegates from the newer nations in the UN hoped were universal. Indeed, the entire framing of the naturalness of a desire for self-government depended on a story of material constraints on circulation to explain the conditions in the territory at all. If it was only a matter of getting the good news about democracy out to the people, then the UN only had to worry about the ease with which information flowed. When the Chinese delegation meandered from interrogating the Tavuiliuan refusal to set up a local government council to discussing education, language policy, and the problem of Tok Pisin, it followed a chain of connection that established Tok Pisin as a "slave language," even if it was one that many men spoke and even if it was the only immediate medium for the wide dissemination of information.

Pidgin languages have always occupied a marginal position, both in popular discourses and in specialist discussions within disciplines like linguistics. Pidgins even have a marginal position within pidgin and creole studies. Creoles have



canonically been considered native and “full” languages, whereas pidgins were usually considered a “reduced” second language, a stepping-stone to creoles within what was once called the pidgin-creole life cycle (Hall 1962).<sup>26</sup> Creoles were supposed to offer privileged insights into linguistic genesis or linguistic prehistory (however misguided that idea was), while pidgins at best showed how languages became simplified or reduced. Michel DeGraff’s (2003) discipline-transforming critique of creole exceptionalism has nothing to say about pidgin languages. Salikoko Mufwene (2020) discusses pidgin languages to the extent that he argues that pidgins are not the precursors to creoles, but otherwise he has relatively little to say critically about theories of pidgin genesis, in contrast to his primary focus on criticizing theories of creole genesis.

Within anthropology, pidgins have not been the basis for metaphors of cultural transformation and efflorescence, whereas creoles and creolization have been very rich and productive sources of metaphor in regard to cultural forms that emerged in the colonial and postcolonial Atlantic context. Even if these creolization metaphors can be criticized as overly broad and circular (see Palmié 2006), they have nonetheless been extremely powerful and productive for describing cultures from New Orleans to São Paulo. Pidgins, in the rare cases when they are theorized, are discussed as forms of simplification and reduction (see Mühlhäusler 1974), which are not usually the kinds of concepts that anthropologists use to talk about cultures. That is to say, if creoles and creolization have been reframed from their original, pejorative linguistic meaning of “impure mixture” to being seen as objects and processes of creativity and adaptive survival, pidgins remain much more tied to the colonial sense of simplistic bastardization.

One of the most significant features of pidgins is their capacity to act as the linguistic infrastructure for a mobile colonial labor force. If the model of creole formation is based on the permanent forced relocation of Africans to plantations in the Americas and the radical cultural and linguistic transformations that this violent dislocation created, pidgins have instead been linguistic platforms enabling ongoing labor mobility. The use of Tok Pisin in colonial Papua New Guinea allowed men to travel to plantations and back home again, where those experienced laborers taught it to younger men who subsequently participated in similar forced and temporary migrations of their own.

In that sense, the partiality of Tok Pisin was a problem. It suggested that between primitivity and modernity was some kind of ambiguous state of semi-transformation and only partial speakerhood of the language of the new order. Tok Pisin was testament to circulation in its disordered and coerced form. It contrasted with English as the global language of empire or post-empire it was on its way to becoming. At certain points, the criticisms of Tok Pisin are organized around the question of whether it had a code at all (as the Lutherans sometimes claimed; see chapter 2)—whether it was a structured system of relations, as Saussurean linguistics would demand. Here the kinds of defenses of Tok



Pisin that linguists made were most apropos and effective. Robert Hall, Stephan Wurm, Peter Mühlhäusler, and the Catholic priest Francis Mihalic, among others, all worked to prove that Tok Pisin was independent of English and had a stable, structured core. They defended it as a code. At other points, however, the criticisms of Tok Pisin that various administrators, missionaries, or UN observers made focused on Tok Pisin as a channel for unwanted information or unwanted interactions. Here, the linguists' pleas to consider Tok Pisin a "real" language largely missed the point.

The UN observers did not necessarily care about the structural integrity of the grammar of Tok Pisin or English, or about the productivity of Tok Pisin's morphological system. They were concerned with the routes that Tok Pisin had enabled and those that it was blamed for foreclosing. Tok Pisin seemed to be the infrastructure of indentured labor, without creating a creolized language for uniting workers or for uniting subjects in opposition to colonizers. For many Australian administrators, Tok Pisin was an embarrassing reminder of how little had been done in the colony, a reminder that whatever had been done was in support of the circulation of labor rather than the "advancement" of the community. In an important moment of alignment, Australian administrators, anticolonial delegations from the UN, and even colonizer delegations from the UN all agreed that the modes of circulation and forms of knowledge enabled by Tok Pisin needed to be radically restructured, and that the only language in which positive change was possible was English.

Tok Pisin, especially in the era during which it was more often referred to as "Pidgin," was a language that most colonizers hoped would remain on the road, as it were, moving laborers from their fully culturalized village homes (where indigenous languages would be spoken) to temporary contract work on plantations or in towns. Lutheran missionaries, Australian colonizers, and even the well-meaning UN delegates hoping to usher in decolonization tried to limit the growth and spread of Tok Pisin and the extent to which its speakers could be considered cultural subjects. Histories of pidgins and creoles often rush to make the necessary counterclaim—that these languages that begin in contexts of extractive colonial labor schemes flourish into becoming full-fledged languages. But in trying to understand colonial spaces as communicative networks of control, it is important to examine the processes that marginalize languages. The UN architects of a hoped-for decolonization of the Territory of New Guinea saw that process as a matter of bureaucratic management, one that required the elevation of English first. An ethnolinguistic nationalism, if there ever was to be one, could come later on.