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The convergence of Nalik with Tok Pisin: Two languages becoming one linguistic repertoire

Abstract: The Nalik language of New Ireland, Papua New Guinea has been increasingly heavily influenced by universal bilingualism in Tok Pisin and, to a much lesser extent, the English-medium education system. This can be seen in the loss of the phoneme /ɣ/, the adaptation of Tok Pisin-like morphological and syntactic constructions, the shrinkage of the Nalik lexicon, changes in the semantic range of some words to be more like Tok Pisin, and a more direct pragmatic environment in public speaking. This merging of Nalik with Tok Pisin must be taken into account in any Nalik maintenance or revitalisation efforts.

Keywords: Tok Pisin, Nalik, convergence, Papua New Guinea, bilingualism

1 Introduction

Papua New Guinea, by far the largest South Pacific island nation, is well known for having the largest number of languages of any nation in the world, 840 for a population of approximately nine million according to the 2024 edition of *Ethnologue* (Eberhard et al. 2024). Of these, 25 indigenous languages, as well as Tok Pisin (an English-based pidgin-creole language and lingua franca), English, several Chinese languages, and numerous languages spoken by migrants from other Papua New Guinea provinces are spoken by the residents of New Ireland Province in the Bismarck Archipelago in the nation's northeast, who numbered 232,351 in 2021 (Igitoi 2021), very few of whom are monolingual. This study¹ will look at language contact

¹ Unless otherwise stated, the data on which this study is based come from observations made in Madina and nearby Nalik-speaking villages during my parttime residence there since 1989.

Note: I would like to thank Professor Thomas Stolz for his many probing questions about language use in Papua New Guinea during my time some years ago as a visiting professor at the University of Bremen, a catalyst that eventually led to my writing this chapter.

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in the homeland of the speakers of one of these languages, Nalik, and examine what effect this language contact, in particular the universal acquisition of Tok Pisin and, through education, exposure to English, is having on the generation of Nalik children now growing up in the third decade of the twenty-first century. This will help us to anticipate what the rapidly changing linguistic ecology of the area might look like in the rest of this century and in turn, assist elders in the community decide what, if any, measures should be taken to deal with this new linguistic ecology.

Nalik is an Austronesian language and closely related to other languages in northern New Ireland, Djaul, and Lavongai (New Hanover) islands in New Ireland Province in what Ross (1988: 291) has called the Tungag/Nalik Network of New Ireland languages. The traditional Nalik homeland is in the Tikana Local Level Government Area of northern central New Ireland in a band across this long and narrow island. Nalik settlements today are located along the coasts, with five Nalik villages on the west coast and eleven on the east coast, all 80 to 120 kilometres southeast of the provincial capital, Kavieng. In 2015 an estimated 5000 people considered themselves Nalik with an estimated 4000 of them fluent or semi-fluent speakers of the language (Volker 2015). Many of them live outside the traditional Nalik homeland, and many of the people living in the Nalik area are immigrants from other parts of Papua New Guinea who sometimes, but not always, have a passive knowledge of Nalik, but generally do not have an active knowledge of the language.

The last reported monolingual speaker of Nalik was an elderly man in a west coast village who died in 1988 (Volker 1998). Today in addition to the English that they learn in school, all Nalik people speak Tok Pisin, which has become the dominant language for most younger people, especially those living on the east coast, where villages have easy access to transportation to Kavieng, and where many migrant workers have settled.

Clan affiliation in New Ireland Province is based on matrilineal genealogies, is far more important than any linguistic identity, and often crosses linguistic borders and therefore creates a tolerance of language shift and multilingualism. In addition to its use in its traditional homeland, Nalik is spoken, or at least passively understood, as a second language by many speakers of closely related Lakurumau to the north of the Nalik area and by many speakers of Kuot, the only indigenous non-Austronesian language in New Ireland Province, to the south. Both of these languages have far fewer speakers than Nalik. Speakers of all three languages belong to the Malagan cultural area of northern New Ireland Province, with shared customary beliefs, clan structures, rituals, and art. Oral history suggests that Kuot was previously spoken in a much larger area than it is today, and that language shift from Kuot to Nalik has been occurring since before the first imposition of colonial

control in 1884. Many Nalik speakers have knowledge of their Kuot roots and some trace their matrilineal clan home to areas where Kuot is still spoken.

Tok Pisin, now spoken by almost everyone in New Ireland, is an English-based pidgin language, with its genesis on the multiethnic trading vessels of the nineteenth century South Pacific and the “blackbirding” indentured labour system that brought Melanesians from many Austronesian language backgrounds to work for years on plantations in Queensland and German Sāmoa at the end of the nineteenth century. This early form of Melanesian Pidgin English was brought to the Bismarck Archipelago in what was then German New Guinea by returning labourers, where it was heavily influenced by the Kuanua language of the Gazelle Peninsula of New Britain and lexically by German.²

English, a legacy of Australian colonial rule from the end of World War I to 1975, is also part of contemporary life in New Ireland, as it is the language of instruction at all levels of public education in Papua New Guinea. New Ireland was one of the first areas of Papua New Guinea where Western formal education was developed in the colonial era. This has resulted in much higher levels of primary and secondary school attendance today than in the country as a whole. Even though the estimated national adult literacy rate in 2024 is only 65% (CIA 2024), it is virtually 100% among adult Naliks and, unlike much of Papua New Guinea, primary school education is universal in Nalik villages and among diaspora Naliks living in urban areas. For several decades, a majority of Nalik youth has gone on to at least some years of secondary education, usually at multiethnic boarding schools where no one language group is dominant in the student population. This means that virtually all Nalik youth and adults alive today have at least a passive understanding of basic English and many have spent their formative teenage years living in boarding schools where English was used in class and where Tok Pisin was the dominant language in student dormitories.

Because it is the medium of education, English is also the language of most formal written communication in the national and provincial governments and is the language of the only two national newspapers in the country. While most people retain a passive command of basic English after school, usually enough to read the daily national newspapers, individuals’ ability to produce enough English to use communicatively varies greatly. It is not normally used as a spoken language in New Ireland outside of schools except with visiting tourists and other foreigners.

² See Mosel (1980) for an analysis of the relationship between Kuanua and Tok Pisin and Volker (forthcoming) for an overview of the history of, and relationship between, Tok Pisin and English in Papua New Guinea.

Tok Pisin is the normal medium of communication with non-Nalik people, even with those who reside in Nalik villages or who are married to Nalik partners.

2 Today's rapidly changing Nalik linguistic ecology

Today all Nalik children learn Tok Pisin as infants. This childhood acquisition of Tok Pisin is a relatively new phenomenon. Although New Ireland was one of the first areas where the use of Tok Pisin became widespread, which is reflected in the large number of words with New Ireland origins in Tok Pisin, until recently Tok Pisin was a language learned in adolescence or adulthood and used mainly for interethnic communication. This changed with the rapid changes in mobility and technology Papua New Guinea experienced after attaining independence from Australia in 1975. A growing number of Naliks were able to take advantage of their relatively high levels of formal education and obtained employment outside their traditional homeland, living in urban areas for part or even all of their lives. As a result of this and the large number of Naliks meeting future partners while attending multiethnic secondary and tertiary institutions, the number of interethnic marriages has increased. Children who grow up in these families tend to speak Tok Pisin as their dominant home language, even if the family returns to the Nalik homeland. Today there would be only a handful of families who use mainly Nalik with their children, although there are still a number of families where there is frequent code-switching between Nalik and Tok Pisin. Even families where both parents and all four grandparents are Nalik often use Tok Pisin with their children today. One grandmother told me she does this because "Tok Pisin is easier for children. They can learn Nalik when they are older." This rarely happens however.

When I first moved to the Nalik area in 1989, I lived next to a village primary school. During recess time, almost all the children playing outside my window used Tok Pisin, and it was rare to hear children playing with each other in Nalik. Nevertheless, almost all could speak in Nalik when addressed in Nalik by an adult, and I could use Nalik to interview all the children in the grade 5 and 6 classes about their daily life. This survey of grade 5 and 6 children from two Nalik villages who attended Madina Primary School showed that Tok Pisin was already the dominant home language in most families, as only about a quarter of children reported using "mainly Nalik" at home.

Today I could not conduct a survey with primary school children speaking only in Nalik. On several occasions in the past several years when I have had the opportunity to address primary school assemblies, I have found that I have had to use Tok

Pisin or English, as a sizeable minority of children no longer have even a passive knowledge of Nalik. Further evidence of this rapid loss of the ability to use Nalik is the fact that I am well known in the village where I live as a promoter of the use of Nalik, and to please me, children will sometimes try to initiate a conversation with me in Nalik. Many times, however, they are unable to proceed very far and end up giggling and having to switch to Tok Pisin. For some children, their grasp of Nalik is so weak that they will greet me with the wrong greeting when they come across me in the street (e.g., saying the Nalik equivalent of “Good morning” when it is the afternoon).

The relationship between the Nalik and Tok Pisin languages in contemporary Nalik society can be explained by what Fred Anderson (2015) has described as a continuum of linguistic power in multilingual societies, with “power” being related to the relative social strength each language has both in the community as a whole and in the linguistic repertoire of individual speakers. While all languages have a capacity for social interaction and creativity, they differ greatly in the degree to which members of a society use them in daily life and for the purposes for which they are the means of communication. There is always a tendency for languages that are used by more people and for more purposes to have the greater social strength and to crowd out languages with lesser social strength.

In the Nalik area, it is obvious that Tok Pisin is what Anderson (2015) calls the “language of greater power” and Nalik the “language of lesser power”. Tok Pisin is used for a majority of social interactions and the number of social domains where Nalik is used either alone or together with Tok Pisin is declining. While the concept of “linguistic imperialism” has generally been used in discussions of the dominance of English over national and regional languages (e.g., Phillipson 1992), it can also be used here, where the national lingua franca, Tok Pisin, is dominating the local language, Nalik, in an unequal power play. Here the sociolinguistics of power proposed by Blommaert (2010) to describe discourse between people speaking different languages is relevant. In Blommaert’s paradigm, people choose among the linguistic resources available to them in their linguistic repertoire and choose those most appropriate for the level (*scales* in his terminology) to which they aspire or in which they operate. Tok Pisin is a language of mobility and symbolises the world beyond the small area where Nalik is spoken, and so one cannot be surprised that it has greater sociolinguistic power than Nalik and is therefore chosen more often than Nalik.

This situation is not unique to Papua New Guinea, as there are many countries where languages of lesser power and languages of greater power are spoken in the same society. In these societies not only is there a tendency for languages of lesser power to be dominated by languages of greater power and to be used less often (see Volker and Anderson (2015) for examples of this in the Asia-Pacific region), there is

a tendency for bilingual and multilingual individuals to try to make the grammars and semantics of the languages they use converge.

This phenomenon has received particular attention by linguists in India. The convergence of the grammars and phonologies of the varieties of languages spoken in adjacent areas but belonging to separate languages families was described as early as 1971 for a community in southwestern India (Gumperz and Wilson 1971) and more recently for other areas in India, such as by Roy and Subbārão (2023) for northeastern India. These researchers report that there is a tendency for bi- and multilingual speakers to use the same grammatical patterns or phonological systems in all the languages they speak. Where this is done over time and by enough speakers, this can result in language change in one or more of the languages involved so that their grammars, phonologies, or semantics can become more similar. Theoretically, this could eventually result in the different languages having nearly identical phonologies, grammars, and semantics and being distinguished only by the lexical items used to express these nearly identical systems.

Given the current sociolinguistic situation in New Ireland, we can expect the phonologies, grammars, and semantics of Tok Pisin and Nalik to converge in a similar way. Because of the dominance of Tok Pisin in relation to Nalik and the role of Tok Pisin as a medium to communication beyond the immediate local area, we can also expect that it is more likely that Nalik will adopt Tok Pisin features than the reverse. Moreover, because of most persons' low levels of English proficiency and limited opportunities outside of school to use English, we should not expect English to exert a strong influence on the phonologies, grammars, and semantics of the other two languages. As the analysis that follows will show, these expectations are indeed valid.

3 Phonology

The phonological systems of both Nalik and the New Ireland dialect of Tok Pisin phonology are still poorly described. Nevertheless, to even a casual observer, it is obvious that some young children are not acquiring /y/, a prominent Nalik phoneme that does not exist in Tok Pisin, but they are acquiring /z/, another prominent Nalik phoneme that does not exist in Tok Pisin, but that is taught in primary school as an important English phoneme.

No study has been published of the phonology of the New Ireland variety of Tok Pisin. The most comprehensive description of the phonology of Tok Pisin at a national level is still Laycock (1985). A basic overview of Nalik phonology has been

described in Volker (1998). While recognising the lack of specifically New Ireland focus in the former study and the lack of detail in the latter, these can still be used as a basis for examining the speech of children today.

Laycock (1985) has described what he calls the “Tok Pisin core phonology” (i.e., the phonology that is shared by most geographic and social varieties of Tok Pisin) in his Table 2, which is reproduced in Table 1 in which I have added the relevant Standard Tok Pisin orthographic representations and, where contrastive, information about voicing in square brackets.

Table 1: Tok Pisin consonants (adapted from Laycock 1985: 297).

I	stops [unvoiced]	p [P, p]	t [T, t]	k [K, k]
II	stops [voiced]	b [B, b]	d [D, d]	g [G, g]
III	Clusters [unvoiced]	mp [mp]	nt [nt]	ŋk [nk]
IV	clusters [voiced]	mb [mb]	nd [nd]	ŋg [ng]
V	nasals	m [M, m]	n [N, n]	ŋ [ŋg]
VI	continuent	w [W, w]	l [L, l]	y [Y, y]
VII	continuent	-	s [S, s]	h [H, h]
VIII	flaps	-	r [R, r]	-
IX	fricatives [unvoiced]	f [F, f]	ʃ [S, s]	-
X	fricatives [voiced]	v [V, v]	ʒ [S, s]	-

Using the information in Volker (1994), we can draw a similar chart in Table 2 with the same terminology to represent the Nalik consonants. It should be pointed out that in Nalik there is a very small number of words that differentiate minimal pairs of words between the pairs of sounds written as ⟨f/v⟩, ⟨s/z⟩, ⟨p/w⟩, ⟨t/r⟩, and ⟨k/x⟩, but in most – but not all – words they are allophones, with the first of each pair of sounds tending to be used when adjacent to a consonant other than /l/ and the second sound tending to be used between vowels or between a vowel and /l/. The rules governing this are complex and not yet fully understood, as there are numerous individual lexical items for which this rule does not apply, and the rule can be reversed for emphasis. For all of these reasons, the fact that there are a small number of words for which they differentiate between meaning, and because native speakers were adamant that they should be represented as separate letters when the Nalik orthography was being settled in the 1980s, they have been analysed in Volker (1994) and subsequent work as separate phonemes.

Table 2: Nalik consonants (from Volker 1998).

I	stops [unvoiced]	p [P, p]	t [T, t]	k [K, k]
II	stops [voiced]	β [B, b]	d [D, d]	g [G, g]
III	Clusters [unvoiced]	-	-	-
IV	clusters [voiced]	mb [mb]	nd [nd]	ŋg [ŋg]
V	nasals	m [M, m]	n [N, n]	ŋ [ŋg]
VI	continuent	w [W, w]	l [L, l]	y [Y, y]
VII	continuent	-	s [S, s] voiceless z [Z, z] voiced	ɣ [X, x] voiced
VIII	flaps	-	r [R, r]	-
IX	fricatives [unvoiced]	f [F, f]	ʃ [S, s]	-
X	fricatives [voiced]	v [V, v]	ʒ [S, s]	-

Given the linguistic power differential between Tok Pisin and Nalik and universal Tok Pisin – Nalik bilingualism, we would expect that any convergence between the two languages to be for Tok Pisin to have an influence on the Nalik phonological system rather than the reverse. This is indeed the case among many young children today.

Comparing Tables 1 and 2, we see that Nalik has two consonants that are absent in Tok Pisin: both what Laycock would label voiced continuents: a voiced coronal sibilant /z/ and a voiced velar fricative ɣ (written ⟨x⟩). I have not heard any children having difficulty producing /z/ in Nalik names or words, possibly because this sound is present in English and taught in school from grade one onwards.

This is not the case, however, with /ɣ/, which is common in Nalik, but has no English equivalent. I have heard many pre-adolescent children being unable to produce /ɣ/ in Nalik, even in the common greetings which tend to end in *doxo* ‘good’ (e.g. the equivalents of *good morning*, *good midday*, *good afternoon*, and *good evening*). These children usually substitute the voiceless glottal fricative /h/ – which does appear in Tok Pisin and English, but in Nalik only in loanwords – for the voiced velar fricative /ɣ/, e.g., *paanaraan doho* for *paanaraan doxo* ‘good morning’. While a majority of children can still produce /ɣ/, I do notice that for an increasing number of children, this is no longer possible.

Interestingly, before the establishment of a fixed orthography for Nalik in the 1980s, many Nalik people used the letter *h* to represent /ɣ/ when writing Nalik. At that time almost all Nalik persons had a good command of Nalik as well as at least primary English-medium school education. Since the letter *h* was not otherwise needed to write Nalik, the choice of this letter representing a fricative sound made

in the back of the mouth was an obvious choice to represent /ɣ/. Some people still spell their Nalik names with *h* rather than *x* for this reason.

There does not yet seem to be a convergence of the vowel systems of the two languages. Both Tok Pisin and Nalik have a five-vowel system, but unlike Tok Pisin, vowel length in Nalik can be phonemic, most notably with /a/ and /a:/, written ⟨a⟩ and ⟨aa⟩, respectively. If the vowel systems converged, we would see speakers confusing common Nalik words that are differentiated only by vowel length, such as *laraf* ‘yesterday’ and *laraaf* ‘afternoon’, or converting them into homonyms. This is not yet the case.

4 Morphology

In contemporary Nalik there are a number of morphological constituents that are disappearing in the speech of younger speakers. These are all distinctions, morphological categories, or irregularities that do not have parallels in Tok Pisin.

In the noun phrase this can be seen in the disappearance of the irregular plural marker *fu*. Both Nalik and Tok Pisin mark plurality with prenominal particles, *mun* and *ol*, respectively. In Nalik a small number of female humans, however, use the irregular marker *fu* instead of *mun*. Many younger speakers, however, use *mun* with these nouns or else use both together.

It can also be seen in the disappearance of the Nalik dual marker *u*, probably originally a shortened form of the numeral *uru(a)*³ ‘two’. Unlike numerals, which appear in postnominal positions, *u* takes the prenominal position of the article *a*. Tok Pisin does not have a dual marker distinct from the numeral *tupela* ‘two’, which, like Tok Pisin adjectives, has a prenominal position. While, as described below, most Nalik speakers use Tok Pisin numerals, for a minority of those who still use Nalik numerals for small numbers, *uru(a)* appears in a prenominal position, like its Tok Pisin equivalent.

The influence of Tok Pisin can be seen with the disappearance in the speech of many young Nalik speakers of the difference between alienable and inalienable possession, which Blust (2013: 484) has called a “nearly universal” characteristic of Oceanic languages. In Nalik the possession of terms relating to genetic kinship, the deity, physical and spiritual body parts, and traditionally owned land have traditionally been marked as inalienable by using inalienable suffixes rather than separate possessive pronouns (see Volker 1998). This distinction does not exist in Tok Pisin, nor in the speech of many younger speakers of Nalik.

3 In the northeastern dialect *uru*, elsewhere *urua*.

The loss of this distinction seems to have spread unevenly through the lexicon. In the 1990s I observed that in Madina Community School, children from Madina Village no longer used inalienable possessive suffixes with *iza* ‘name’, whereas children from neighbouring Luaupul Village at the same school did. At that time all children did use inalienable suffixes with words denoting members of their immediate family (the equivalents of ‘mother’, ‘father’, ‘grandparent’, etc.). Today even this use has almost completely disappeared in the speech of those children who still speak Nalik. Similarly, even adults rarely use inalienable possessive suffixes when referring to the possession of customary land or names of the deity, such as *Nakmai* ‘God’ or *Piran* ‘Lord’. With the commonly used word *das* ‘brother’, for many speakers the third person inalienable possessive suffix *-na* has been fused onto the root, with many speakers using the alienable possessive pronouns equivalent to ‘my’ and ‘your’ with *dasna*. For these speakers, as in Tok Pisin, there is no longer a marked category of inalienable possession in Nalik.

In the verb phrase both Tok Pisin and Nalik mark durative aspect by preverbal particles. In Tok Pisin this is with *save* (ultimately from Portuguese *sabe* ‘knows’), while Nalik has traditionally used *i* before intransitive verbs and *t* before transitive verbs. Today many Nalik speakers no longer use *t*, so that as in Tok Pisin, the distinction between transitive and intransitive verbs is no longer made. The Nalik durative marker *i* has the same form as the Tok Pisin predicate marker *i*, which is undoubtedly the motivation for the choice of *i* rather than *t* as the sole remaining Nalik durative marker.

While transitive durativity may no longer be marked, transitivity itself is still marked in Nalik, as it is in Tok Pisin. For many Nalik verbs, transitive verbs are formed by adding the transitive suffix *-ing* to the intransitive verb (e.g., intransitive *rexaas* ‘to know [about something]’ and transitive *rexaasing* ‘to know [something]’). This is similar to Tok Pisin, in which almost all transitive verbs are marked with the suffix *-im*, which is added to an intransitive verb to form its transitive equivalent (e.g., *rit* ‘to read [intransitive]’ and *ritim* ‘to read [something]’). When loanwords that are transitive are absorbed into Nalik, they are marked with the Tok Pisin *-im* suffix and not the indigenous *-ing* transitive suffix, even if they are relatively recently acquired words related to government bureaucracy or technology that have been taken directly from English and not Tok Pisin (e.g., *transferim* ‘to transfer [students or workers]’ and *downloadim* ‘to download [something]’). This is a strong indicator of the dominance of Tok Pisin grammar in the linguistic repertoire of bi- and trilinguals.

Another verbal category that has almost completely disappeared in Nalik is the past tense locative copula *vinai*. This has been used optionally for sentences in the past where the predicate is a locative (e.g., the equivalent of ‘she was at the market’). *Vinai* is the only copula form present in Nalik; there are no present tense

and no non-locative copulas. Tok Pisin does not have a copula of any sort, which has been a motivation for the loss of *vinai* in Nalik. Today the use of *vinai* is very rare and we can assume that it will disappear completely with the current generation. This is another example of a morphological category disappearing in Nalik if there is no equivalent in Tok Pisin.

In their personal pronoun systems, Nalik and Tok Pisin differ in that traditionally, at least for many older speakers with high status, in Nalik the third person singular pronoun, *naan*, could not refer to a nonhuman. This rule seems to be a stylistic rule that these speakers have used to separate their speech from that of ordinary speakers. For those speakers who make this distinction, it is made no matter what the grammatical relation of the pronoun is (subject, direct object, or prepositional object), so that these speakers lack a third person singular pronoun for nonhuman referents. Today only a very few older clan leaders make this morphological distinction.

We can assume that the motivation for the disappearance of this distinction is the convergence of the Nalik personal pronoun system to that of New Ireland Tok Pisin. In the New Ireland dialect of Tok Pisin there is no distinction between the use of the third person pronoun *em* for human or nonhuman referents. In some other dialects of Tok Pisin, a human / nonhuman distinction does exist for some speakers, but it is only when the third person singular pronoun is the object of a preposition. In that position, *en* is used for a non-human referent instead of the otherwise default Tok Pisin third person singular pronoun *em*. This use of the variant *en* is a feature of the dialect spoken in Madang Province on the New Guinea mainland. That dialect is the basis of the standard written form of Tok Pisin used in the Tok Pisin translations of both the Bible and Bahā'ī scriptures with their many pronominal references to God, a nonhuman (e.g., *long En* 'to Him/Her'), so it is familiar to many New Irelanders through religious services. It is also familiar to many New Irelanders who have lived on the New Guinea mainland. A few Naliks do use *en* rather than *em* after prepositions, but this is overcorrected to apply to all referents, whether human or nonhuman. The presence of this distinction does not seem to be prevalent enough in the Tok Pisin of New Irelanders to motivate the retention of the distinction in Nalik.

5 Syntax

In the changes we have examined so far, the influence of English has been minimal or non-existent. When we look at the changes in the syntax used by younger Nalik-speakers, however, we can see the influence of English as well as Tok Pisin.

This affects the construction of comparatives and the lack of passive voice. Tok Pisin has further been the motivation for the modern construction of existential clauses.

The influence of English is particularly evident in changes in the construction of comparatives. Nalik has traditionally had two ways of forming the comparative of adjectives. Both involve the noun or pronoun being described, a construction ending in the transitive suffix *-ing* and as the direct object of this transitive verb the noun or pronoun with which the subject is being described. The first option uses the relevant adjective as the main predicate, followed by a second verb, *paamu* ‘first’ with the transitive suffix *-ing*, as in (1). The second uses the comparative verb *vu* as the predicate, followed by the relevant adjectival verb with the transitive suffix *-ing*, which is followed by a grammatical object, which is the pronoun or noun with which the subject is being compared, as in (2).⁴

- (1) Nalik (own competence)

A naalik ka doxo paamu-ing a fnalik.
 ART son 3SG good first-TR ART daughter
 ‘A son is better than a daughter.’

- (2) Nalik (own competence)

A fnalik ka vu doxo-ing a naalik.
 ART daughter 3SG compare good-TR ART son
 ‘A daughter is better than a son.’

Today neither of these constructions is in common use, especially among younger speakers. It is more common either to use the Tok Pisin / English loan *moa* ‘more’ followed by the relevant adjective (with no transitive suffix), which is then followed by the oblique preposition *pan*, the object of which is the noun or pronoun with which the subject is being compared, as in (3), or to avoid a syntactic construction entirely and use a phrase stating one noun or pronoun has a particular quality and the other does not, as in (4).

- (3) Nalik (own competence)

A naalik ka moa doxo pan a fnalik.
 ART son 3SG more good OBL ART daughter
 ‘A son is better than a daughter.’

⁴ The different genders in the subject and object in examples (1) and (2) are not relevant here.

(4) Nalik (own competence)

A fnalik ka doxo ma a naalik kavit.
 ART daughter 3SG good and ART son not
 ‘A daughter is good and a son is not.’

With the use of *moa*, which has the same pronunciation as *more* in Papua New Guinea English, and the preposition *pan*, which rhymes with English *than*, the motivation for the type of comparison shown by (3) appears to be English and not Tok Pisin. The motivation for the second and more common option shown by (4) uses the same circumlocution normally used in Tok Pisin to express comparison (‘a daughter is good and a son is not’).

Another characteristic of modern Nalik is the lack of passive voice. While Nalik did have a passive construction, only a very few older clan leaders have any knowledge of how it works and even they rarely produce sentences using it. It remains only in phrases in a few older songs and oral literature. The motivation for its loss is probably the lack of a passive construction in Tok Pisin. This is reinforced by the weak command of the Standard English passive, which few speakers of Papua New Guinea English have. This is because passive constructions are usually not taught until students are in high school. Many children do not attend high school and even for those who do, passive constructions are often not assimilated into their everyday English usage. When used, the verb *be* is often omitted, so that sentences such as *tax returns rendered at the end of the year* are common, in which there is no surface marking of passive voice.

The construction of Nalik existential clauses has been strongly influenced by Tok Pisin. Three lexemes have been recorded to form Nalik existential clauses: *bawai*, *roxon*, and *gaat*. With *bawai* there is no subject marker and the existential verb *bawai* appears after the subject, as in (5). This construction does not have a parallel in Tok Pisin and has disappeared almost completely in modern Nalik.

(5) Nalik (own competence)

A raafin bawai.
 ART sardine EXIST
 ‘There are sardines.’

The equivalent sentence with either *roxon* ‘have’ or *gaat* ‘have’ requires the third person subject marker *ka*, with the subject following the existential verb, as in (6).

(6) Nalik (own competence)

Ka roxon/gaat a raafin.
 3SG have ART sardine
 'There are sardines.'

Roxon is the original Nalik word for 'have'. It had almost disappeared by the 1990s in favour of *gaat*, a loanword from Tok Pisin (*gat*, from English *got*), but in a short revival of traditional Nalik by a prominent clan leader, Michael a Xomerang (also spelt Michael Homerang), that coincided with the development of a Nalik orthography and the writing of the first books in Nalik, the word was revived. It is now again in common use, although still not used as much as the Tok Pisin loanword *gaat*.

The Nalik construction with words meaning 'have' is a parallel of the equivalent of the Tok Pisin construction with *gat*, which also has the additional meaning 'have', as in (7).

(7) Tok Pisin (own competence)

I gat talai.
 SM/PM have sardine
 'There are sardines.'

Tok Pisin *i* is usually described as a predicate marker, but Keesing (1988) has shown that it can also be interpreted as a subject marker inherited from its initial substrate Austronesian languages in which, as in Nalik, a preverbal subject marker is usually obligatory. With this interpretation, except for the absence of an article (which does not exist in Tok Pisin), the structure of the Nalik sentence in (6) is identical to that of the Tok Pisin sentence in (7).

6 Nalik lexical shrinkage

Lexical shrinkage refers to the replacement of indigenous words by loanwords from other languages, the loss of certain registers and the complete loss of lexical items, and the diminished use of a language in certain domains.

Before the introduction of Tok Pisin during the colonial era, Nalik was used in all lexical domains. For both young men and young women, the development of specialised vocabulary to describe the knowledge being imparted was an important part of their training. In the absence of writing, precision in oral communication was vital for the continuation of cultural and social life, and there was a rich lexicon for the discussion of spiritual concepts that adults were expected to know.

Until formal Western education was introduced during the colonial period and became universal after World War II, adolescent males lived together apart from their families in separate houses known as *haus boi* ('boys' house') in Tok Pisin, which belonged to their maternal clan. Young men in the *haus boi* were under strict discipline by elder men in their clan, often their maternal uncles, who combined a strict regime of intense physical labour, practical training in life skills (such as gardening, fishing, and combat), and clan lore (such as history, rhetorical skills, songs, and dance). This training culminated in their being taken into the bush for training in secret knowledge belonging to the clan, after which they were eligible for marriage and living as adult men. When clan elders recognised leadership skills in particular young men, they were taken aside for special training as apprentice sorcerers, assassins, carvers, or for eventual nomination as *maimai* (clan leaders).

Adolescent females were given similar training by elder clan matriarchs, although they continued to live with their families until marriage. This training emphasised traditional medicine, childrearing, gardening, nutrition, and female health (including birth control and abortion techniques), and like young men, they were also instructed in secret clan knowledge. Since New Ireland societies are matrilineal and land ownership is held by women, particular attention was paid to information related to land and to the history of land transfers and obligations between clans.

As primary education became universal in the years following World War II, an increasing number of young people attended the two high schools located in the Nalik-speaking area, often as boarding students. These young people have no longer been under the continual control of clan elders and no longer had time to acquire the same amount of indigenous knowledge that earlier generations had. Today many clans no longer have *haus boi*, and even where they do, they are more like clan meeting houses than places where young men gather to be taught how to behave and speak. At the same time, young women spend much of their time with their peers rather than with their grandmothers and clan matriarchs. Many elders claim this lack of traditional training for adolescents is the cause of an increase in the number of premarital pregnancies and a decrease in the acquisition of customary knowledge in recent decades. While there is no objective proof for the first claim, the second is undoubtedly a cause of the shrinkage of the Nalik lexicon.

It is not a surprise that the introduction of new technology, flora, fauna, and religious beliefs have brought new words into Nalik, before World War I in the German colonial era from German and Latin, and for the past 100 years since the Australian takeover of New Ireland during World War I from English and Tok Pisin. What is surprising is that Nalik words for an increasing number of items that were

common even before the onset of colonialism, such as *varama* ‘knife’ and *win* ‘cup’, have been completely replaced by their English and/or Tok Pisin equivalents (*naip* ‘knife’ and *kap* ‘cup’, respectively).

In addition to the replacement of these words, Nalik has lost whole fields of terminology. The most pervasive has been the field of indigenous spirituality. With the growing influence of Christian missions, foreign missionaries strove to eliminate “pagan” practices such as traditional dancing, birth control, and beliefs that they connected to sorcery. This became easier with the breakdown of the *haus boi* system and young people having fewer opportunities to have regular access to instruction by custodians of Nalik knowledge. As the awareness of Nalik cosmology and spirituality has been lost, a great many of the words used to describe them have also been lost. In recent years this has widened to include the loss of indigenous words that were adapted to use in the introduced religions that have to a great extent supplemented the indigenous belief system.

The rapidity of this loss can be seen in worship services and scripture study meetings among Nalik Bahā’īs, who published a prayer book in Nalik with Christian, Muslim, and Bahā’ī prayers and a translation into Nalik of an important book of Bahā’ī scripture, *Kalimāt-i-Maknūnih* (*Hidden Words* in English, *A Doring Bang-baang* in Nalik), soon after the adoption of a Nalik orthography in the 1990s. In these translations a conscious effort was made to incorporate terminology from traditional Nalik cosmology. While being actively used at that time, which coincided with a short period of Nalik revitalisation led by a respected clan leader and Bahā’ī teacher, Michael a Xomerang, today four decades later they are used only by some elderly people and, except for a few hymns, have disappeared from active public use. Even if they can use Nalik for everyday communication, few younger and middle-aged people in the 2020s have enough understanding of higher registers of Nalik to use these materials comfortably and prefer using scriptures in English instead.

A field in which Nalik terminology has disappeared to an even greater extent is mathematics. Nalik originally had a well-developed mathematics system based on a hybrid base-five and base-ten system that could be used to count up to 999, with a separate completely base-ten system to count up to ten for ceremonial purposes, such as counting pigs donated for a memorial service.⁵ With universal education in English and its less complicated counting system and the almost identical counting system used in the New Ireland dialect of Tok Pisin, this system fell out of active use after World War II. An attempt was made in the 1990s to revive it for use in the Nalik-medium lower primary schools being set up at that time,

5 See Volker (1996) for a detailed description of Nalik mathematic terminology.

and even to expand it by coining Nalik terms for words needed to teach modern mathematics. With the collapse of that experiment and the reintroduction of an all-English school system in this century, however, there has been no incentive to hold on to it. Today even people who speak Nalik frequently use the English / Tok Pisin counting system and its numerals in Nalik for all but the first few numbers. When they do use original Nalik numerals, some speakers place them in a pre-nominal position as in English and Tok Pisin, rather than after the noun as has been the case in Nalik in the past. The ceremonial counting system has almost completely vanished except for a few clan leaders who have learned it by reading Volker (1996).

The examples of Nalik lexical shrinkage mentioned so far have included some kind of replacement: the replacement of an indigenous word by a loanword (e.g., ‘knife’), the replacement of indigenous terms for spiritual concepts with new introduced terms, and the wholesale replacement of the Nalik mathematics system by the English / Tok Pisin system. A more serious instance is terminology related to flora and fauna, as this is a disappearance of a whole register rather than just the displacement of an indigenous with an introduced system. Primary school children who participated in a project looking at the role of local birds in Nalik culture showed a surprisingly low awareness of the names of local flora and fauna (da Silva 2017). In some cases, even with the names of their own clan totems they knew only the Tok Pisin and not the indigenous name of the bird. More concerning than that was the fact that for many animals and fish they could only describe the creature, not give its name in any language. This indicates that they may not recognise it when an elder talks about it, even when the Nalik name is used in a discourse that is otherwise all in Tok Pisin. This limits their ability to have access to indigenous knowledge of the environment in which they live.

It should be pointed out that there is public awareness of Nalik lexical shrinkage. This is due in part to the attempt by Michael a Xomerang mentioned above to revive indigenous “classical” vocabulary and to return to indigenous words that had been replaced by loanwords. While since a Xomerang’s death in 1999, that attempt at linguistic revival is no longer very active, several words are still used as linguistic emblems by people who wish to indicate their desire to use “classical” Nalik. These include *roxon* instead of *gaat* in constructions such as (6) and using indigenous *taamon* ‘if’ instead of the Tok Pisin loan *sapos* (from English *suppose*) ‘if’, as well as the use of the respectful formal greeting *maluvio* ‘respect and love’ that was revived as a daily greeting in primary school assemblies in the 1990s.

7 Semantics

Together with actual lexical shrinkage, we can notice that the semantics of a number of Nalik words and phrases has moved in the direction of Tok Pisin. To some extent this is because of changes in society in the century and a half that Tok Pisin has been part of the New Ireland linguistic ecology, but often there is a change in the direction of the semantic range of a Nalik word or phrase in the Tok Pisin equivalent that cannot be explained solely by non-linguistic changes in society.

Perhaps the most fascinating example of this is the word *lagaf*. To understand how the semantic range of this word has changed with bilingualism in Tok Pisin, we first need to understand how the English words *hot* and *hard* changed phonologically as they were adopted into Tok Pisin. In many words, English [ɒ] (as in *hot*) and [ɑ:] (as in the Australian pronunciation of *hard*) were merged in the five-vowel Tok Pisin phonemic system as /a/. At the same time, with the exception of only an extremely small number of words, Tok Pisin does not permit voiced final consonants, so a final [d] in English became a final [t] in Tok Pisin. In this way, both English *hot* and English *hard* became homonyms in Tok Pisin, *hat*.

Like English, Nalik originally had two words meaning ‘hot’ and ‘hard’ or ‘difficult’, *lagaf* and *vulvulazaai*, respectively. But with bilingualism in Tok Pisin, an increasing number of people used *lagaf* for both words to the extent that by the 1990s, *vulvulazaai* was remembered by some older Nalik speakers, but no longer in common use. Today, just as there are two homonyms for *hat* in Tok Pisin, there are now the two same meanings for the two homonyms of Nalik *lagaf*.

As indigenous words are replaced by Tok Pisin and/or English loanwords, semantic distinctions originally made in Nalik can be lost. This is different from the creation of homonyms, such as with the modern use of *lagaf* just described. With *lagaf*, people use the same phonemes, but are still just as aware of the difference in meaning between ‘hot’ and ‘difficult’ as when there were two separate lexical items. When asked, even linguistically unsophisticated people analyse the two meanings as homonyms, and school children have no problems learning and differentiating the two English words *hot* and *hard*.

An example of semantic distinctions being completely lost is the introduction and wide use in modern Nalik of the Tok Pisin/English loanword *lav* ‘love’ with all its Western meanings. This word has for the most part replaced the indigenous Nalik words *olavaai* and *olaving*. *Olavaai* is an intransitive verb meaning ‘to love with no expectation of that love being reciprocated’, for example, when one falls in love with a happily married person who shows no interest in an extramarital affair. *Olaving* is a transitive verb (with the transitive suffix *-ing* already mentioned above) meaning ‘to love with a reasonable expectation of that love being reciprocated’, such as the love of a child for its mother or the romantic love of someone

who obviously shows interest in being seduced. With both *olavaai* and *olaving* being replaced by English *love* / Tok Pisin *lav*, distinctions that once could be easily made in song or oral literature with the two indigenous words can no longer be made succinctly, and the immediate awareness of the status of a potential relationship has been lost.

Sometimes changes in society can cause the semantic range of a Nalik word to change so that the surface form of the indigenous word remains, but it ends up with the same semantic range as a different word in Tok Pisin and / or English. *Ziparaas* is an example of this. In precolonial society this word referred to a protective fence around a village to keep out invaders. With this idea of protection, the word was also used to describe the protection that legal decisions made by clan leaders had. This latter meaning was transferred to the legal decisions and protections of the colonial legal system. With the imposed peace that the Australian colonial administration provided, the protective fences were no longer needed and were forgotten by everyone except a few people who were interested in oral history, so the word lost its meaning of a fence. As this was occurring, introduced religious and political ideologies introduced Western ideas of the ethics of justice, which were attached to the word describing the legal system that enforced these ethics. Today the meaning of *ziparaas* has moved to being almost identical to that of *justice* in English and *jastes* in Tok Pisin, the ethics and practice of being fair, just, and reasonable. Any meaning related to its original definition as a protective fence has been completely lost.

The semantic range of *mus* has changed in a similar circular way. When cars and trucks were first introduced to New Ireland, they were given the name *mus*, which originally meant 'large canoe', but by being applied to land vehicles, the meaning became widened to mean 'transport'. But in recent years, the Tok Pisin loanword *ka* (from English *car*) has become more widely used, pushing out the Nalik word originally used for this introduced technology, so that *mus* is returning to its original meaning of 'water transport'.

There are a number of expressions in Nalik that may be calques from Tok Pisin. Because of the influential role that New Ireland languages played in the development of Tok Pisin from Melanesian Pidgin in the early colonial era, it is difficult at this stage to know if certain idioms were originally from Nalik and other New Ireland languages and became calques in early forms of Tok Pisin or if the idiom originated in Tok Pisin and was later calqued to make a similar Nalik phrase. The use of *roxon*, and later *gaat*, 'have' in existential phrases in a construction similar to Tok Pisin *gat* has been discussed above. Because there was already a different construction for existential phrases using *bawai*, it is quite likely that the use of the equivalent of 'have' is a calque, particularly since the loanword *gaat* edged out using the indigenous word *roxon*.

Similarly, with Nalik expressions such as *dor texaasing* ‘to announce’ or ‘to explain’, a word-for-word translation of the Tok Pisin idiom with the same meaning, *tok save* (literally *speak knowledge*), or *mara na vaal* (Tok Pisin *ai bilong haus*) ‘front door’ (in both languages literally *eye of the house*), it is difficult to tell if the Nalik phrase is a relatively late calque of the Tok Pisin phrase, if the Tok Pisin phrase developed much earlier from Nalik and / or the other Austronesian languages that were the substrate of the language, or, less likely, the two were independent developments. Unfortunately, this question will be difficult to answer, as we do not have archival evidence from Nalik from the early part of the twentieth century to see how far back these Tok Pisin-like idioms go in Nalik.

The examples so far have been words and phrases that Nalik has borrowed or imitated from Tok Pisin. As the language of greater power, we would expect that Tok Pisin would have taken fewer words or phrases from the language of lesser power. Indeed, the only loan in the opposite direction from Nalik into the New Ireland dialect of Tok Pisin that I have documented is the idiom *fangan faat* ‘embezzle’ or ‘embezzlement’. Literally ‘eat stones’, it uses *faat* ‘stone(s)’, a Nalik slang word for coins. It is used unchanged by speakers of many languages in New Ireland to speak humorously or ironically in Tok Pisin about embezzlement. I have not seen it used in Tok Pisin outside of New Ireland Province.

8 Pragmatics

As society has changed, public rhetoric styles have changed greatly. This is undoubtedly due to the introduction of Western ideas of equality and democracy and the resulting drastic changes in power dynamics caused by the breakdown in the power of clan leaders that came as the German and then Australian colonial administrations and missions exerted their power and later introduced the Westminster political system, with its politicians who did not necessarily have traditional titles. Many Nalik people identify these changes with the introduction and spread of Tok Pisin and English, which are thought of as much more “direct” than Nalik, so the adoption of more direct ways of speech in Nalik is identified as being more like Tok Pisin and English.

It is understandable why these languages are thought of as more utilitarian. Tok Pisin had its origins in plantation labour gangs comprised of mainly young men. As it became a more general interethnic language, it was not used for ceremonial events such as *malagans* (traditional northern New Ireland memorial ceremonies) until quite recently. It is used in musical lyrics today, but still rarely used for other creative oral or written literature. Similarly, although English has a rich

literature, it is introduced in primary and lower secondary schools in Papua New Guinea as a utilitarian tool needed for the acquisition of knowledge in other subjects. Only a small number of students get to upper secondary school or university where more literary uses of English are introduced.

Naliks are headed by clan leaders, *maimai* (translated into English today as ‘chiefs’), who are assisted by *wangpaang* (literally ‘messengers’, but translated into English today as ‘assistant talking chiefs’). In pre-colonial Nalik society, the clan was the highest social unit. The pre-colonial clan hierarchy of leaders has been described in an as yet unpublished manuscript by Michael a Xomerang (n.d.). In precolonial society, a *maimai* spoke in public in very high registers and avoided speaking directly to the public when giving orders. Often these orders and pronouncements would be opaque to the general public. He would have at least one *wangpaang*, who would act as an interpreter, ensuring that the message the *maimai* wanted to deliver was understood and obeyed. For example, if there were a case of illicit sexual conduct, such as between two people of the same clan (an act thought of an incestuous in New Ireland cultures), he might make a public announcement that “pigs have broken the fence that needs to be repaired”. The offending couple would be expected to understand that they were guilty and should go away and commit suicide, but if they were slow to understand the indirect condemnation, the *wangpaang* would go to the couple and explain in direct words what the meaning of the *maimai*’s pronouncement was.

Today a *maimai* will publicly denounce illicit behaviour and issue punishments with very direct and strong words, often backed up by village court decisions (although not to the extent of demanding suicide!). Whether speaking in Nalik or, today increasingly often, Tok Pisin, the *maimai* is likely to use the same style of direct speech that would have been used by a Tok Pisin-speaking colonial administrator in the past or an English-speaking national court judge or teacher today.

Whereas as late as the 1990s, Nalik was the language heard most at a weekly village meeting or a more special ceremonial event, such as a funeral or *malagan* memorial celebration, Tok Pisin has now become the default language. Often the Tok Pisin oratory will be framed by Nalik expressions to open and close a talk, but the most important explanations will be in Tok Pisin. This is explained as a recognition of the inability of young persons to understand Nalik, the presence of residents in the community from outside the Nalik area and even from outside the province, and a breakdown in multilingualism that older generations tended to have in several New Ireland languages. In this century even an increasing number of men being appointed clan *wangpaang* and *maimai* do not speak Nalik and will go to the extent of making the customary greetings and ceremonial utterances used at *malagan* memorial ceremonies in Tok Pisin. Where they do use Nalik, they often

do not have a command of the higher ceremonial registers of Nalik that their predecessors had, such as the special ceremonial counting system described above.

9 Conclusions and the implications for Nalik society

Today, all persons who speak Nalik also have Tok Pisin, and to a lesser extent English, as part of their linguistic repertoire. As we have seen, Tok Pisin is the dominant language, which is a motivation for these bilingual speakers to use Nalik a way that is more like Tok Pisin in its phonology, morphology, syntax, lexicon, and pragmatics. This phenomenon has implications for Nalik society and the role the Nalik language plays in the modern identity of individuals and Nalik society.

The reality of rapid language change in the direction of Tok Pisin means that persons interested in the maintenance and revitalisation of Nalik must make decisions about whether to accept this modern, more Tok Pisin-like Nalik or to try to revive older forms. At present, when asked how Nalik should be presented and used in any printed or oral public form, many people respond that preserving and promoting “pure” Nalik should be the goal of any Nalik revitalisation project. These older forms can be elicited from Nalik elders as well as from the few recordings that exist, the few older Nalik writings that exist by persons such as Michael a Xomerang, and the unpublished notes from the inter-war years left by the Nalik-speaking German Catholic missionary Gerhard Hoffman.⁶ This is currently the goal of a small number of elders in Madina Village who meet once a week to exchange vocabulary and discuss the meaning of words with the aim of producing a Nalik – English bilingual dictionary.⁷ With the rapid change in Nalik in recent years, the importance of this documentation cannot be underestimated.

For educators there are pedagogical implications of the drift in Nalik towards having a more Tok Pisin-like structure. At the moment there is little training in comparative linguistics in teachers’ pre-service education. With a greater awareness of comparative linguistics and the dynamics of language change in bi- and multi-lingual societies, teachers can be more aware of changes in Nalik. This in turn can

⁶ Copies of Hoffman’s Bible and liturgical translations into Nalik have been deposited in the Lugagon Village Catholic Church archives and in the Pacific Collection of the University of Hawai’i Library.

⁷ An early rough draft of this dictionary with questions that remain unanswered is available online for public comment at the James Cook University Cairns Institute Language Archives (<https://www.jcu.edu.au/language-and-culture-research-centre/resources/language-archives>).

help instructors, both teachers in the formal educational sector and clan leaders in the informal traditional preparation of new clan leaders to be able to teach students more easily to keep the languages they speak separate and to develop rhetorical skills in all of them. Efforts such as this may or may not preserve older forms of Nalik that are thought to be more “classical” and linked to higher registers, but they will at least help people make informed decisions about the linguistic changes occurring in their society.

If the consensus of the community is that Nalik, at least in its present form, will eventually disappear and that efforts to maintain its “pure” presence are futile, Nalik-speaking society will have to make important decisions about what defines its own identity. This may lead to an acceptance of some emblematic use of Nalik being maintained by persons who identify as Nalik, but who in their everyday lives are Tok Pisin speakers and who, if they do have a knowledge of Nalik, use it in a way that is almost a relexification of Tok Pisin. Or it may lead to an indigenous identity that is separated from the use of the Nalik language entirely. It is hoped that discussions around these topics will lead to informed discussions around identity and language, and the degree to which fluency in Nalik and the ability to use certain registers of Nalik will be necessary for adults to participate meaningfully in Nalik culture in the twenty-first century.

Abbreviations

3	third person
ART	article
EXIST	existential
OBL	oblique
PM	predicate marker
SG	singular
SM	subject marker
TR	transitive

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