STEPS TOWARDS THE DEVELOPMENT OF A WRITTEN CULTURE IN ORAL CULTURE COMMUNITIES: THE ROLE PLAYED BY A UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII BILINGUAL PROJECT FOR MICRONESIANS

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It is only recently that the governments and peoples of the United Nations Trust Territory have come to realize the crucial role native Micronesian cultures and languages must play in the lives of Micronesians. In one way the people of Truk, Ponape, Palau, the Marshall Islands, the Carolinian Islands, Yap and Kusaie--the seven districts of Micronesia--are like the people of medieval England, Germany, and France. Their languages are spoken but rarely written down. Not until recently were there grammars, dictionaries, and systems of standardized spelling. Portions of the Bible, prayers, and hymns were translated quite some time ago, but these were few in number and they varied in details of the writing system, depending on the missionaries who translated them.

English has served a function not unlike that of medieval Latin. Since the end of World War II it has been the language of reading and writing. In Micronesian schools teaching for literacy has been the teaching of skills in English. These skills have been and will continue to be necessary to those who want college degrees or careers in trade or tourism. Similar arguments could be presented for another major language, Japanese.

But, as of now, English is not normally used for business and political affairs within island groups. For news broadcasts, religious services, commerce, and for almost all communication with the exception of secondary teaching, vernacular languages are used. For many Micronesians their command of English will never be adequate to express fully what they want to say, yet for purposes of reading and writing, English has been the only available language. Most Micronesians need command of a writing system for their vernacular for those times when a record of words is important--for wills, letters, and business transactions--and for creative purposes where writing is an aid to shaping an art form, exploring and evaluating ideas, and recording human experience. Tape recorders are useful adjuncts, especially for preserving the oral quality of stories but are less efficient than writing for distribution and storage.

In schools there are specific needs for stories and materials written in the vernacular language. Without such materials it is difficult to teach young children the decoding strategies required for reading. Since all reading matter has traditionally been printed in English, children have had to wait until they knew a fair amount of English before they

could start learning about sound and symbol relationships. There has been little use learning to decode letters and words if these letters and words were part of a language that could not be understood by the children. With materials written in the vernacular language (according to several studies in Engle, 1975), children would find it easier to learn basic reading skills that could then be applied to the reading of both the native language and English.

In 1974, faculty members from the University of Hawaii worked together with Micronesian administrators, teachers, and curriculum writers to plan a federally-funded project in bilingual education. Funds for the initial year were provided by the Trust Territory Government in Saipan from Title I funds already allocated. The project, called Bilingual Education Project for Micronesia #604990, continues presently under Title VII funds. In its first year the project was to include instruction for Micronesian teachers and curriculum specialists not only in the grammar and writing of English but also in the grammar and writing of Chamorro, Palauan, Ponapean, Trukese, Marshallese, Yapese, and Kusaiean. A major aim was to teach people who had never (or rarely) written their native language to write at a fairly advanced level, and for them to produce written stories and teaching units with reading material in science and local history. My role in this, as a teacher of writing with a background in linguistics, was to serve as consultant on the teaching of vernacular composition, and to work during the materials production phase of the project by talking with the vernacular writers about the content of their materials.

The bulk of the present article 1) outlines the project method of teaching writing in the vernacular to people who have never before written their own language, 2) describes the problems encountered by these writers, and 3) describes the results of, and reactions to, this part of the project effort.

The Method

The instructor of the vernacular composition course, Dr. Roderick Jacobs, now a linguist and specialist in Pacific and American Indian languages, had formerly taught composition to elementary, high school, and college students both in England and North America. He had worked with Native American groups on language materials for children. But he was a product of British classrooms, where he and all the other pupils had once produced a story or account of personal experience nearly every week. On the project he did what came naturally, asking the project participants to write in their own language a description of a person in the class, a detailed description of a food, a descrip-

tion of a place, then a descriptive narrative account of an experience they could recall. In class he read out in English samples of good professional and student writing. At one point he had everyone translate an English version of a Pacific legend into their own language and add details that were fitting for their own particular island culture. For this assignment, and for all the assignments, the writers met in language groups to compare what they had written, to give each other suggestions, and to talk about the problems of wording, spelling, paragraphing and such, as these were encountered. The instructor examined what the members of the class wrote by reading their interlinear, morpheme-by-morpheme translations. Graduate students specializing in each of the languages could read and understand the vernacular compositions. They conferred with the writers in some detail, usually once a week.

After their vernacular composition course, the participants spent a summer seminar working with Frederick Jackson, a project staff member, looking at literature (usually children's) written within European, Asian, and some Pacific cultures, this to stimulate their thinking about the kinds of material they did or did not want for their schools back home. Here they also discussed what children learn from literature.

In the final semester of the project's year-long first phase, the participants spent a good deal of their time writing materials in the vernacular languages. They met once a week as a group to compare rates of progress and once a week to discuss the instructional purpose of their materials: what kinds of instructional questions should accompany the material? what would students learn from these? and so on. The requirement for the materials-production course was quantitative: forty pages of material or ten instructional units. Again the graduate students conferred with individuals on the grammar, style, and orthography of their writing. The materials of each participant were typed on mimeo stencils and run off on thick seventy-pound text paper, some on a small offset press by David Bird, a staff member with some technical expertise. All of the work of a single individual was bound into a 5 x 8 inch booklet of which seventy copies were made. Each participant came up with a cover design and silk-screened the seventy covers. The final cost was close to eighty cents per copy. Those who returned to their Micronesian schools at the end of the year took with them thirty-five copies of their work ready for classroom trial, perhaps revision, then reprinting in larger numbers by the Trust Territory education facilities.

The kinds of material produced were of three types: materials for teaching grammar, material for teaching reading in grades 1-3, for which vocabulary was controlled, and more advanced reading matter for children of grade 4 and up. For these older children a variety of material was produced, but the greatest quantity was prose fiction--a

translation of *Charlotte's Web* and some of Grimm's fairy tales into Palauan, local stories and legends written in Ponapean, a short autobiographical novel written in Marshallese. In the non-fiction category there were historical accounts focussing on the Marianas, written in Chamorro, and a story written in Trukese that included information about navigation, the stars, and weather.

Problems Encountered by the Vernacular Writers

To discover the processes and problems involved in learning to write a heretofore spoken-only language, I did several things. I sat in on the class sessions of the materials writing class (materials for Grade 4 and up) during the final semester. I spent several hours in the large project office, where most of the final student typing was being done, and where students came to talk to each other and to consult with graduate assistants who had offices there. I talked with the instructors of the courses in vernacular grammars, the course in English grammar, and the two courses in writing--one in English and one in vernacular writing. Finally I taped six in-depth interviews with participants--two Trukese, three Palauans, one Chamorro, one Ponapean, one Mortlockese, and one Mokilese--about their experience with writing and learning to write. In most of the interviews I made some attempt to engage the person in conversation about the writing he had done in elementary school, in high school, at the university, and on the project, how he perceived the need for vernacular materials, and how he perceived his own growth.

We should anticipate that the Micronesians interviewed would not be critical of the program. As teachers they have an investment in learning and would be inclined to say only kind things about the host institution, its professors, and program. They would be likely to agree that they had learned whatever skills had been explicitly set out as goals. However, this paper is not an evaluation of this project but rather a look at what may be fairly common problems people have when they engage in writing what has previously been an unwritten language. This is an important part of the whole bilingual education effort.

The Problem of Detail

Several of those interviewed talked about the writing they had done in the past as too short, too thin, and too skimpy. Not only did they think their present writing was fuller and more detailed, but also they said that they had never previously thought about detail being of value,

for example in the development of characters. As one participant said about her earlier work:

> I just sort of told it. I didn't give the reader a good picture of what was really happening, just a sequence, first I did this, second I did this . . .

The writing of fully-developed, interesting prose--the goal for the present course--was something quite new. This participant was able, for example, to give essential information about a food but, as the English version below shows, unable at first to write a full-page description of *experiencing* the food.

> This food is made of unripe green papaya. When you bite it, it's crispy and has a salty, sour and hot taste. Its color is sometimes red, yellow, or white, depending on the personal choice. Sometimes the papaya is grated or sliced thin and long. You mix it in with salt, vinegar, accent, garlic, and a little bit of hot pepper.

Compare the above writing with the following description, which was written by another member of the same language group, someone who possessed an obvious gift for clear observation and a fine memory for sense impressions.

> *Chamorro Fina "Denne" (Chamorro Appetizer)*
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> To make a *Fina "Denne,"* use two juicy half ripe green small and round sweet-smelling [sic] lemons. Cut it open in half which some juicy white substance runs down the blade of knife and onto the cutting-board. Squeeze each half on a small white round saucer, until all the halves are squeezed out of its juicy substance. Then add dashes of salt until gradually mixed with the white juicy and watery liquid till you get the taste just right like little bit sour and little bit of saltiness. Then you add enough red small hot pepper crushed to the white substance. Now you will see a beautiful juicy red watery and sour-salty liquid in a small, white, round saucer.
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> Chopped about three small stalks of leafy green onions to give a sweet likeable aroma of a true native appetizer. Then take a piece of roasted meat, or roasted fish, cold sliced in small sizeable bites of fresh tuna and dip in the red juicy watery sour-salty and aroma of leafy green onions, then put it in your mouth and feel that juicy red sour-salty hot liquid and aroma of leafy green fresh onions, with cold soft piece of fresh tuna or meat and chew it. You will experience the taste

that your saliva keeps squirting out in your mouth that it becomes full you starts to swallow it down little by little down your throat. Then you said, "MMMMMMM. Mmmmmm. It's delicious."

The more it stings your tongue the more you keep on eating, until the watery white substance in your nose is running down and you have to run and blow it out. It was so good that you start to puff out air through your mouth trying to cool off the stinging of the red hot pepper.

When you can't stand it anymore you take a glass of very cold ice water to quench the tongue of flame coming out from the mouth. That feels better--whistling air out and taking air in through the mouth as fast as you can. Now you can feel that the fire is out and white smoke is coming out. That means that if you want to start another fire keep dipping your piece of meat or fish in the sweet smell of leafy green aroma of onions and sour-salty watery red liquid. Nevertheless, a very cold water or a piece of ice cube is the answer.

The native *Fina "deene"* shows who is the stout-hearted men, who can fight the small red hot pepper.

(The original in Chamorro by Teresa Taitano)

The first writer, who had earlier written the very short piece, was now able to learn from her friend's example, for on the next assignment she too included the descriptive and narrative details that make the following piece lively and evocative:

Morning on Rota

The roosters on the kamachili trees around my house are already crowing. From a distant I can hear the church bell ringing. This wakes up the people early in the morning to attend morning mass. It never fails for the old rusty bell to ring every morning at four o'clock, three times every half hour.

I got up from where I was sleeping because I could hear my grandmother and grandfather talking to each other. My grandmother already finished folding their mat, and is fixing herself to go to mass. I can hear all her movements in their room because the walls in our house are old and thin. There are also some parts where there are small holes in which we

love to peep through. Their room is not pretty, kind of bare. There's only the bed, the few statues of saints on the shelf. There are also some boxes against the wall in which their clothes are put. The floor mat is placed standing against the corner of the room where it will not be in the way.

My grandfather is already outside the house taking down his fishing net where it was hanging against the wall. He has become very dark from the sun. His hair has only a few gray strand compared to his age, his body is well built. He is still a very strong man, and healthy too. He can do almost anything. He is a farmer, a fisherman, and he can also make rope out of tree bark.

I love to go fishing with him because he makes me carry the fish pail. He usually scolds me for being very active and running in the water where I chase the fish away. He will often say to me, "Stay behind me and walk slowly and quietly. If you keep on misbehaving, I will have to send you home and you can work at home."

Every morning when we leave to go fishing, we would start on the beach below our house, going either south or north till the end of the village. Sometimes we would be late and we would find a lot of fishermen on the shore. It is not year round that people go net fishing for these particular fish. They have seasons when they will appear on the sea shore. They are long, (probably the same size as our fingers) sort of silver in color, and very easy to scale. They have very fine bones. We eat the bones if my grandmother fries the fish. If she fixes it as fish *kelaguin,* she would scale the fish, cut the stomach and remove the insides, then she would remove the bones. She mashes them up very fine and she then mixes in lemon juice and salt. Sometimes she will put soy sauce instead of salt and make it hot with red hot pepper. How delicious it taste with hot steaming rice!

(The original in Chamorro by Rita Iños)

The Problem of Style

Acquiring a natural and lively style in the vernacular was more difficult than acquiring a sense of detail because no "authority" could offer the writers suggestions. They had to rely on other speakers of their own language, equally inexperienced in writing. There were no models to

guide them--no books beyond the vernacular translation of the Bible and a very few other materials. As one Ponapean speaker commented:

> In English I can see examples. I can see it in the books. From there I can try to do the same. But in the vernacular, it's impossible.

The initial tendency for most of the participants was to imitate English structure. In fact, when they wrote their first assignment in the vernacular-writing course, a description of their home village, four of the six I interviewed had begun by writing an entire English version first, then translating it back to Palauan or Chamorro. (This was not true for the Trukese speakers.) It was not until the instructor told them they must think first in their own language that they had any doubts about their method. Up until then, writing to them--almost by definition--meant English writing. Their own language, like the writing of the Bible, was to be arrived at through translation. It had not occurred to them that as native-speakers they had a quicker access route. One of the participants verbalized this when she said she had to teach herself to "hear" her language in her head. It took an extreme act of will, she said, to do this, so apparently this was something she had not done when she wrote English. It was a technique she was now having to learn for the first time.

The Problem of Translating Culture

For those doing translation from English into the vernacular, there were various minor kinds of problems. In Palauan, for example, almost every spoken utterance is preceded by a word something like "and," which also functions as a connective between utterances. Should this be inserted in the translation even though the English had no such equivalent? And if so, should the written version look like one enormous sentence whose parts are connected by these conjunctions? Should commas as well as the conjunction be used? Should direct quotations be used even though the speakers had never heard direct quotations used in vernacular *speech?* (The Palauan writers decided to use direct quotation.) Should the names of the characters be changed to ones more familiar in the language? If so, should the animals in *Charlotte's Web* be changed to animals more familiar to the children? (The translator decided "no" on both counts, deciding to retain the foreign flavor of the book.)

How much would be lost in translation because of cultural differences? In Palau, where flowers are part of the landscape year around, would children miss the essential point that flowers beginning to bloom are associated with the important awakening of the earth and being

able to play outside? To the translator of *Charlotte's Web* it seemed that E. B. White went on an inordinately long time about flowers blooming and that her readers would be bored.

Should the English words "king" and "queen" be used in translating "The Lady and the Tiger" or would substitutes like "chief" and "chiefs wife" be preferable? Would children know what a tiger was? In all these cases, the writers decided that stories, even if in the vernacular language, should retain much of the foreign culture from which they were derived, and that this in itself would not affect the children's growing feeling for their own culture.

Results and Reactions

Almost every interview contained an unelicited expression of the writer's feeling that his own writing was really quite remarkable, and this from men and women for whom the cultural norm is generally self-deprecation about one's own accomplishments. A Pingalapese (Palau district) reported that he had read aloud his stories to other speakers of the language, people on campus not connected with the project. For them it was the first time they had heard anything at all read in their language (a spelling system and dictionary are only just now being developed), and their reaction had been one of tremendous excitement. He was eager to hear the reactions of children in his home area. This same participant, a language arts supervisor in his area, said he would have school children write in the future starting, as he himself had done in the project, with the description of a house. He would have them do a first version to be handed in, not for grammatical correction but for suggestions as to where detail could be added. Then the children would have the chance to add more and hand it in again.

Another claimed, "The way I look at this writing that we have done, I think I really learned something. I believe we can improve the kind of writing that we have done before to our children."

Another mentioned that a tape-recorded portion of her story, sent back to the islands, had not yet reached the classrooms because the adults working in various offices of education were playing it for themselves.

Another told me, "I really like my stories, the stories I'm working on, I really do, and I think, I believe, readers will enjoy them very much."

The ultimate evaluators of their work are not the faculty from whom they took credit courses but the children and school community who have been using their first sets of thirty-five sample copies. These are being tried out, and then the teacher-writers will find out whether

other people think them interesting and useful enough to be reprinted in larger batches.

Conclusion

It has been a basic assumption of this article that having a written literature is inherently valuable. Written literature extends the range of experiences shared by a group of people and so creates more opportunity for cultural unity and strength. While oral literature has a similar function and in an era of isolation is a powerful instrument for transmitting cultural values, island oral literature may stand little chance of surviving against the competition of European and Asian written literatures. Children in Micronesian schools, told that reading skill is tremendously important to their future, do not fail to get the underlying message that cultures with written literatures are important. It seems natural for them to conclude that cultures without written literatures are inferior.

The Micronesians we interviewed sought to preserve the cultural richness and uniqueness of their own island districts while at the same time they wanted to see a developing economy based not on U.S. government jobs but on trade, local industry in fishing, crafts, agriculture, and perhaps on expanded tourism. Preserving their culture calls for new literacy skills in the vernacular. Developing the economy calls for greater skill in second languages for use between the districts and outside Micronesia. Cultural goals call for written stories, poems, drama, historical accounts, religious writing and song, not only at the children's level but also for adults, while economic goals depend on writing and speaking skills in English and perhaps other languages, skills for writing business letters and reading materials in science and technology as well as manuals for maintaining equipment or ordering parts. The two kinds of goals, cultural and economic, are necessarily competitive for people's time, but each goal seems necessary to the other. A strong economic system controlled by Micronesians would depend, in part, on a strong sense of cultural values. A strong economy helps make it possible to spare people from the work force to do vernacular writing and thus facilitates the sharing of cultural values.

Since the target date for Micronesian independence from the American trusteeship is 1980, it seems clear from the viewpoint of economic need that children should learn to read and write both first and second languages. Realistically they cannot be expected to become equally proficient and productive in both. Some would need special proficiency in one language, while others would find their way in the other. (And for some, full writing proficiency may not really be necessary in either lan-

guage.) The danger is that writers in the vernacular and all artists will find it difficult to support themselves if the economy becomes entirely cash based. Paying jobs will go to those in commercial and industrial occupations but not to those who write, draw, act, dance, and sing.

At present, through the participation of universities and the granting of federal funds, there has been a certain modest amount of patronage for the creative arts. In effect, the present federal project, emphasizing vernacular writing, has been an instrument of this patronage. The funds for this project, administered by the Trust Territories, have paid and encouraged Micronesian educators to be creative and to produce in written form. Even the translations of American and European works can be thought of in terms of Micronesian culture. Somehow first steps must be taken towards a written literature, and at this point the medium of the vernacular language is more significant than the proportion of nativeness and foreignness in its content.

Perhaps the most important result of the project effort is the collection of bound journals and books produced by the participants. In the future the focus of activity should not be exclusively on the young, and those who produce should not be exclusively teachers and curriculum writers. Members of the community at large should be invited to participate.

The products of writing are a gift to the culture as well as an expression of it. Ideally, perhaps realistically, writers should be paid for their toil, they should have status within the community, and there should be public occasions for recognition of their efforts. To establish a new function and niche in the social structure, difficult as this seems, may not be impossible if teachers take care to single out students who write well in the vernacular, if local radio stations broadcast writers' work, and if cash or other kinds of recognition are awarded promising writers. The churches, community councils, or other strong institutions could create or use existing salaried positions for writers-in-residence, much as large universities do now, and medieval churches once did. This would take over, or at least augment, the role now played by the present bilingual project and other federal efforts. As I see it, this would be an important step toward building a body of written literature. This literature in turn would affirm the various Micronesian cultural identities and help keep Micronesia as a whole from being swamped by other cultures of the world.

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