

Language of Inequality

Edited by
Nessa Wolfson
and Joan Manes

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Stephen A. Wurm

The Status of New Guinea Pidgin (Neo-Melanesian) and Attitudes Towards It

Introductory Remarks

New Guinea Pidgin, commonly known as Tok Pisin and, years ago, also as Neo-Melanesian (though this term remained confined to linguistic literature and never really gained any currency in New Guinea itself) is the major *lingua franca* of Papua New Guinea. It has well over 1,500,000 speakers which is over half the population of the country—with this number increasing rapidly. It has the official status of one of the three major languages of Papua New Guinea—the other two being Hiri Motu (or Police Motu) with about 200,000 speakers and English which has approximately the same number of speakers. The language is, in its vocabulary, predominantly English-based, with about 15 percent of its vocabulary derived from the Austronesian (Melanesian) Tolai language of New Britain, and 5 percent from German and a few other sources such as Malay and Portuguese. In its structure, it is quite unlike English, and much more like an Austronesian language. Its grammar is quite complex, and it is certainly not just a simplified and jargonised form of English as used to be popularly believed by many in the past. The language is quite highly developed today and adequate for the expression of a range of sophisticated thoughts, and often used by Papua New-Guineans in preference to their own language, even if they share a common tongue. In spite of this, only a small fraction (perhaps 30,000 or so) of its large number of speakers speak New Guinea Pidgin as their first language—in other words, the language has been creolized only to a very minor extent. At the same time, a great proportion of its speakers have a first-language mastery of it and speak it with greater proficiency than any other language they know, including their mother-tongues. This is understandable in a country with about 760 distinct local languages (Wurm 1977c) in which New Guinea Pidgin is the major means of intercommunication between speakers of different languages, and is used by a large proportion of the population more often than any other language.

New Guinea Pidgin has, in recent years, undergone a considerable reorientation of its status and functional role. This is in line with developments in

other parts of the world in which pidgins and creoles are spoken and in which there have been fundamental political and social changes in recent years. The social positions of the speakers of such pidgins and creoles have, in such areas, undergone radical changes, and this has had far-reaching effects upon the standing, functions, and use of these languages. In particular, some languages that until recently carried the stigma of low-caste language—and continue to do so in the eyes of some members of the new social setups—have suddenly been elevated to much higher social and functional levels than has hitherto been the case. (Wurm 1977a). In this, it has to be kept in mind that pidgin and creole languages traditionally occupy clearly definable positions in the linguistic hierarchy of a society that is strongly stratified linguistically and socially, and their functions and role are determined by the class standing of their speakers and the social situations in which they are used within and across class boundaries.

History of the Development of New Guinea Pidgin

For the understanding of the specific situation concerning New Guinea Pidgin, a brief discussion of its origin and development to the present day may be of value (Mühlhäusler forthcoming).

As early as the 1880s, New Guinea Pidgin had become stabilized in a form from which present-day New Guinea Pidgin is directly derived, and in contrast to many other pidgin languages in other parts of the world, became nativized almost from the beginning, i.e. had become a language used primarily for communication between members of the indigenous population rather than one used for intercommunication between whites and indigenes. As a result of this, it quickly developed into a language with close to the same range of expression and social functions as an indigenous first language. It had been established by Mühlhäusler (1978) that the earliest form of a stable New Guinea Pidgin was spoken in the Duke of York Islands, to the north of New Britain, around 1882. Mühlhäusler suggests that this earliest form of New Guinea Pidgin owes its origin to the development of a stabilized plantation pidgin on Samoa. After 1879, labourers were recruited for the Samoa plantations from the Duke of York area, and the first labourers returned there from Samoa in 1882. In this year the first plantations were established in the Blanche Bay area of the Gazelle Peninsula of New Britain, with labourers from Bougainville and New Ireland, and it seems that experienced ex-Samoan labourers were employed as overseers on these new plantations. The vocabulary of the newly stabilized language seems to have subsequently been enriched with Tolai and German words in the administrative centre of

Rabaul on the Gazelle Peninsula. With the rapid spread of administrative control and the resulting inter-tribal pacification, through much of what was then German New Guinea, intercommunication across tribal boundaries became important, and New Guinea Pidgin became nativized and firmly established in the area.

When German New Guinea was taken over by the British and Australian forces in 1914, New Guinea Pidgin continued to spread, and regional dialects and distinct social dialects began to develop. However, it remained strictly a low-caste language, and there was almost no social intimacy between indigenes and Europeans.

The Second World War fundamentally affected the social setup in Papua New Guinea and brought about new social patterns in which New Guinea Pidgin was to have new functions. Its importance was recognized by the Australian authorities, and the prewar social barriers between indigenes and Europeans broke down, especially with members of the armed forces. New Guinea Pidgin assumed the function of a means of expressing solidarity among all racial groups in Papua New Guinea. These events can be regarded as more or less deliberate acts of external language planning—but much more deliberate acts were performed in the extensive use of Pidgin in war propaganda, with a view to strong social control. Also, large-scale recruiting of indigenes from many, often remote, areas as carriers and labourers produced a sharp increase in the number of speakers of the language and led to its spread into new areas.

After the end of World War II, New Guinea Pidgin accelerated its spread through Papua New Guinea, a regional dialect became stabilized and nativized in the highlands, and the language started to make inroads into areas where Police Motu (now called Hiri Motu) functioned as a *lingua franca*—this development had already begun during the war years. The breakdown of social barriers between indigenes and Europeans continued and led to the gradual change of New Guinea Pidgin from a caste language to that of a language with new roles in the changed Papua New Guinea society.

In the early nineteen-fifties, English began to play a major role for the indigenous population as a result of primary schools switching to English as the main—and in the Government schools the sole—medium of instruction. At the same time, the United Nations Organization called upon Australia in 1953 (Hall 1955) to discontinue the use of New Guinea Pidgin in the then Trust Territory of New Guinea. This was an amazingly unrealistic and ill-informed pronouncement because the Australian administration was obviously in no position to control the use of a fully nativized *lingua franca* whose primary function was to serve as a means of intercommunication among the indigenous population. The pronouncement did have the effect of strengthening the pro-English language policies of the administration, but the spread of New

Guinea Pidgin continued at an ever-increasing rate, both geographically and with regard to its social functions. A new sociolect of New Guinea Pidgin, called Urban Pidgin, which already had had a limited existence, became well established and developed. New styles such as written style, radio announcing, etc. emerged in the language. Regional dialect development first reached a peak during the early nineteen sixties, especially in the highlands, but a gradual neutralization of regional variants began subsequently as a result of the increasing mobility of the population and the increasing impact of mass media. English influence on New Guinea Pidgin steadily increased, particularly in Urban Pidgin. The language began to become creolized in some areas. However, this had little influence upon the form of language for sociolinguistic reasons. To be understood, the children who were and are the speakers of creolized New Guinea Pidgin had to conform to the nativized forms of the language which were already in constant daily use in interactive communication situations.

During the 1970s and the rapid political changes which took place in that decade in Papua New Guinea, two major developments occurred in the function and role of New Guinea Pidgin (called Pidgin from here on for the sake of brevity):

A new contact culture developed in Papua New Guinea which moved away from the traditional culture, though it incorporated elements from it and also adopted many elements from the Western culture. Nevertheless, it was basically quite distinct from both and typically modern Papua New Guinean. In its development, Pidgin became its intrinsic means of expression. The rapid spreading of this sub-culture in recent years, predominantly in urban environments, but also to some considerable extent in some rural areas, has resulted in a dramatic increase of the functional role and geographical importance of Pidgin which is now in a diglossic relationship with English in urban settings, i.e., the two languages exist side by side, with Pidgin and English fulfilling mutually exclusive, specific social roles and functions. In several areas, Pidgin is beginning to replace, or has already replaced, the local vernaculars on its way toward creolization (Mühlhäusler 1977).

Recent political developments on the Papua New Guinea scene during the rapid progress of the country toward its present independence have created a situation in which there has been a dramatic extension of the use and functions of Pidgin on what may be termed the public level: quite large groups in Papua New Guinea expected Pidgin to expand its role and functions into areas of expression and communication in which it had not been used previously. Such areas are, for instance, (a) its very predominant use as a debate language in the Papua New Guinea Parliament on issues that traditionally have been discussed in English; (b) its increasing use in broadcasting, where it is used to report on world news and for the discussion of political,

economic, social, and other concerns that sometimes require quite high levels of complexity of expression; (c) its similar use in writing in the press; (d) its widening role in education.

Attitudes Towards New Guinea Pidgin

Against this history of the development of Pidgin and of its use and function, a discussion of earlier and present attitudes toward the language may be of interest.

Earlier Attitudes Towards New Guinea Pidgin

Earlier European attitudes towards Pidgin were mostly strongly negative and based largely on misinformation and language prejudice (Wurm 1969, 1973) and constitute an interesting illustration of European attitudes towards indigenous concerns in a colonial setting. There were essentially two main types of criticism of Pidgin on the part of Europeans (Wurm 1977b):

The essence of the first of these criticisms was that Pidgin constituted a corruption of English: Pidgin was described by critics as a disgusting, debased corruption of English, full of insulting words, and sounding quite ridiculous to listeners.

This criticism is based on erroneous premises. Pidgin is not English, just as English is not French though it contains an abundance of words of French origin. In its structure and basic principles, Pidgin is much more like an Austronesian language than English. As such it is quite different from English, just as English is structurally different from French. It is true that the percentage of the English-based lexicon of Pidgin is considerably greater than that of the French-based lexicon of English, but it is not greater than the Latin-based vocabulary of French and Italian. Nevertheless, present-day French or Italian are not regarded today as corruptions of Latin, though it may be argued that they owe their historical origin to exactly that, just as it may be argued that Pidgin owes its origin ultimately to a corruption of English even though the situation relating to Pidgin was in many respects quite different from that leading to the emergence of French or Italian. However, in its present-day form, Pidgin constitutes an established language when judged from the linguistic point of view.

To describe Pidgin as disgusting and debased, as being full of insulting words, and sounding ridiculous to listeners, is the result of looking at it from

an outside point of view, i.e., one based on a different language, namely, English. In such a fashion, any language closely related to another in a portion of its vocabulary, or in both structure and vocabulary, could, when looked at from the point of view of this other language, be said to be debased, full of insulting words, and as sounding ridiculous to listeners—i.e., to listeners speaking this other language, and not the language in question itself. Speakers of Dutch and German, Spanish and Portuguese, the various Slavic languages and others could potentially find themselves in such situations quite frequently—quite a number of the words in such closely related languages are similar or near-identical in form and appear to be easily recognisable to speakers of one such language when uttered by speakers of the other language, but their meanings are often rather different, and a quite harmless word in one language can be a highly insulting one in the other, but, as has been pointed out, it may sound nearly the same. Educated members of two such speech communities who realise this problem do not usually have the habit of describing each other's languages as being full of insulting words. Why is it then that speakers of English described Pidgin as being full of insulting words, though if they had any knowledge of the language at all, they had to know that such words which were formally similar to insulting words in English, had harmless meanings in Pidgin? The traditional attitudes of the English-speaking whites towards the indigenes may well have had much to do with this, as well as the belief on the part of many of the former that Pidgin was a sort of 'baby-talk' fit to be used by and to the indigenes only, and not a real language. At the same time, it may also have to be taken into account that some English speakers were, because of their still lingering adherence to the Victorian heritage, perhaps more sensitive to and emotional about what they looked upon as insulting words, than speakers of most other languages. Also, English is not a member of a pair of very closely related major languages such as those referred to above. Because of this, most English speakers have not been exposed to a language which sounds much like theirs in many respects, though strangely, and sometimes embarrassingly, differing from it in many instances. (The only instances of such exposure are provided by the dialectal differences existing, for instance, between British and Australian English, or British and American English: these certainly provide a few examples similar to those referred to above.) If Pidgin is taken into account English can be looked upon as a member of just such a pair of languages that are closely related at least in one respect—i.e., in their lexicon. However, only a very small proportion of the speakers of English ever comes into contact or is familiar with the exact nature of Pidgin—this helps explain the over-reaction of many English-speakers on their first contact with this, to them, unfamiliar and strange sounding idiom. Characteristically, the most ardent, emotional, and articulate critics of Pidgin had been largely persons who knew

very little about it, whereas quite a few of the European residents of Papua New Guinea who have a good knowledge of it regard it either impartially and dispassionately or may have a lot to say in its favour.

With regard to the argument that Pidgin sounds quite ridiculous to listeners, i.e., speakers of English unfamiliar or only a little familiar with it, it is interesting to note that a similar situation may well be said to exist between English and French if the numerous French loanwords in English and their diverse pronunciations and meanings in these two languages are taken into account. However, it is culturally and socially largely inappropriate for educated speakers of the two languages to regard the other language as ridiculous, whereas it was culturally and socially correct for speakers of English to regard Pidgin as a ridiculous language and at the same time as nothing more than a debased corruption of English.

Pidgin Regarded as Inadequate

The second argument against Pidgin is that it is an inadequate, restricted language unsuited for the expression of thoughts on anything but the most elementary level. In contrast to the arguments discussed above which are not often heard any more today, this argument is still frequently voiced. In this, it has to be pointed out that the question concerning the adequacy of a language is only meaningful if the culture is named for whose expression that language serves as a vehicle. Since every natural language constitutes a reference system for the culture within which it has developed, it follows that every language is basically adequate for the expression of and reference to the cultural concepts constituting the culture to which it belongs, and undergoes changes along with changes of this culture. It also follows that a language is inadequate for the expression of a culture to which it does not belong, and that this inadequacy increases in direct proportion with the degree of difference between the culture to which the language belongs, and the one which critics pointing to its alleged inadequacy expect it to express.

Examining Pidgin in this connection, the first question to be asked is whether Pidgin is a fully adequate medium for the expression of the cultural concepts of the people of Papua New Guinea who have been using it as their *lingua franca*. Pidgin is the major *lingua franca* employed by indigenes in multilanguage situations as the means of intercommunication in all situations concerning multilanguage groups as a whole or at least a multilanguage section of it. However, there are cultural and social situations involving members of a single homogeneous speech community only in which the language of intercommunication is not Pidgin, and for which Pidgin is inadequate—understandably so, because it has no connection with that

specific part of the indigenous culture which may often be ritual in nature. At the same time, a language other than Pidgin would also be inadequate, English probably more so than Pidgin, because of the greater alienness of the culture to which English belongs, to the cultures of the indigenous population of Papua New Guinea, than is the case with Pidgin.

The cultures of the indigenous population of Papua New Guinea are rapidly changing, much of them getting lost and being replaced by something new that is approaching uniformity and is neither traditional nor European (see above). The language serving as a reference system for this new growing element in the cultures of the population is Pidgin, and being the means of expression of this new set of cultural concepts, it is intrinsically adequate for this task.

It is quite correct to say that Pidgin, in its present form, is not adequate for the expression of the range of concepts constituting a sophisticated Western culture such as the British-Australian toward an approximation of which the Papua New Guinea culture was thought to be heading. However, it seems quite unlikely now that the basic culture of the new Papua New Guinean nation will ever become a copy of the British-Australian model—it will certainly become something with a character entirely its own, and what will have been absorbed into it from the British-Australian culture will only be a component element that will have undergone drastic changes and adaptations. With the development of this basic culture, the language serving it as a means of expression may well be expected to have the inherent ability to develop with it and to become richer and more complex, in step with the culture to which it belongs. The exceedingly rapid development of this culture does, however, pose a problem for the language serving and maintaining it: for it to remain in step with the changes and advancement of the culture, numerous new terms have to become part of it at an accelerating rate. At present, most such new terms are loanwords from English—this constitutes the line of least resistance, with a language with a vast reservoir of terms readily available to be drawn upon. There is some justification for such a procedure provided the adoption of English loans does not exceed an unavoidable minimum. However, this is unfortunately not the case with Pidgin at present, though it does contain the necessary linguistic mechanisms for the creation of such needed additional terms, in conformity with the nature of the language itself, to ensure its adequacy (Mühlhäusler 1979).

A third criticism was often levelled against Pidgin in the not-too-distant and recent past, and sometimes even today: it has been said to constitute a bad heritage from the days of colonialism, and that it has been used for the purpose of accentuating, emphasising and perpetuating social and racial distinctions, i.e., it has been used by the European masters in speaking to members of the indigenous population to keep them in their place.

A part of this argument is certainly true for the past, though it has to be remembered that most of the use of Pidgin as a means of intercommunication was between indigenes and not between Europeans and indigenes. This criticism has been made by some European and quite a few non-European members of the United Nations Organisation, and has also been put forward by a few Europeans, as well as by some indigenous leaders, in Papua New Guinea itself. However, it seems unrealistic to hold this view in this form for the present or the future: several languages which in the past used to be stigmatised by the type of social features ascribed to Pidgin in this criticism have become the national languages of nations. Indonesian is a good example: until the middle of the last century, the local population in the then Dutch East Indies was forbidden by law even to learn Dutch, so that it could be kept linguistically and, in consequence, socially, clearly separated from the European rulers. Nevertheless, the linguistic tool used for this separation has now become the national language of the Indonesian nation.

By contrast to European attitudes, earlier indigenous attitudes towards Pidgin were predominantly favourable—except perhaps in areas in which Pidgin was encroaching upon the regions in which traditionally the other major *lingua franca* of Papua New Guinea, i.e., Hiri Motu (then called Police Motu) was holding sway—and they centred on the one hand around the important communicative role of Pidgin which made it possible for indigenes from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds to freely intercommunicate and act together. This gave them a feeling of unity and solidarity and made them look upon Pidgin as ‘their’ language giving them a level of identity which eventually laid the foundations for the new Papua New Guinean subculture mentioned above. On the other hand, the favourable attitude of indigenes towards Pidgin resulted from the advantage which it gave them in communicating with Europeans and the authorities, and in obtaining economically lucrative employment (Wurm 1977c).

Present-Day Attitudes Towards New Guinea Pidgin

Present-day attitudes towards Pidgin in Papua New Guinea are quite varied. Some of them reflect the views and vested interests of certain groups (Wurm 1977c).

Attitudes displayed by Europeans at present living in Papua New Guinea no longer have great relevance in contrast to European views in earlier days. It is of interest, however, to note that most of the Europeans in Papua New Guinea today take a stand toward Pidgin which is quite different from the traditional European view of earlier days: they regard Pidgin as a language in its own right without emotional bias and make serious efforts to learn it

properly. This, in turn, strengthens positive attitudes of indigenes towards Pidgin and reinforces their growing expectation that Europeans resident Papua New Guinea have a good command of the language—which is by no means an easy task.

Unfavourable Attitudes Towards New Guinea Pidgin

At the same time, earlier negative European attitudes have become perpetuated among many educated Papua New Guineans who have gone through the indoctrination of an English-based education. They adopted the prejudices of earlier administrators and of their teachers, and they show a tendency to over-estimate the importance and potential of English for Papua New Guinea.

While these attitudes of the English-speaking elite are at least in part emotionally based, a large number of less educated Papua New Guineans frown upon the use of Pidgin, at least in the educational system, for what in their view are pragmatic reasons, and would not like to see the use of English cut down in favour of Pidgin in schools. This attitude stems from the great importance attached to English and education in English by the administration of Papua New Guinea during the last two decades of Australian rule which induced many Papua New Guinean parents to regard English as the sole key to wealth and economic progress. However, this view is gradually losing ground today as a result of the fact that such parents are often disappointed in their hopes. In present-day Papua New Guinea, knowledge of English is almost totally irrelevant for many school leavers. However, it is true that the exclusive use of Pidgin in elementary education would, in the present situation surrounding education in Papua New Guinea, produce serious problems for children wishing to proceed to higher education which is in English. However, the educational system is changing, and this unsatisfactory situation is likely to change too in the foreseeable future as a result of suitable language policies.

Other Papua New Guineans with a vested interest who look upon Pidgin with disfavour are the supporters of regional nationalism and separatism in Papua who look upon Hiri Motu as their symbol of national and group identity. The existence of this group and their political movement which is now losing strength appears to have constituted one of the main reasons for the Papua New Guinea Government's disinclination and inability to give its full support to Pidgin as the main language of the country.

Favourable Attitudes Towards New Guinea Pidgin

The abovementioned instances of general or selective unfavourable attitudes towards Pidgin are far outweighed by a generally favourable attitude towards it on the part of a large part of the population, and of the majority of the political leaders. official support of Pidgin is very cautious, but unofficial support is much more powerful.

Favourable Attitudes Towards New Guinea Pidgin Based On Pragmatic Reasons

For a very large proportion of the population and also for much of the administration, especially on the lower levels, but also among higher officials, the reasons for the positive attitude towards Pidgin and its support are essentially pragmatic (Mühlhäusler 1977). For the majority of the rural population, Pidgin is the only link which they have with the outside world and the only avenue which gives them access to new ideas. It is the linguistic tool which makes it possible for them to cooperate and function as higher units through the local government councils across language barriers. The records of the meetings of these councils are always kept in a *lingua franca*, very predominantly Pidgin, even if some of the council debates themselves may be held in local languages. For lower administration officials, Pidgin constitutes a totally indispensable tool for their work, and the rural population looks upon Pidgin as their only effective means of access to the Administration. Missions also see Pidgin in such a pragmatic light.

Higher government officials and political leaders recognize and use Pidgin as a linguistic tool of major communicative importance: of all the languages in Papua New Guinea, it can reach the highest percentage of the population, both on the oral and written levels. Mühlhäusler (1977) points out that statistical analyses have shown that on both these levels, Pidgin can reach over three times more people in Papua New Guinea than functional English and Hiri Motu put together.

The importance attached to Pidgin by the majority of the political leaders of the country is also reflected by the very predominant use of Pidgin as a debate language in the Papua New Guinea Parliament. However, the reasons underlying this use may also be emotional, in addition to being pragmatically based.

Members of the Pidgin-speaking population of Papua New Guinea who lack a knowledge of English often voice their apprehension that they would be left behind should English take over. One reaction to this is the insistence of many parents that their children should be educated in English, as has been

pointed out above. However, this feeling of apprehension also tends to reinforce the pro-Pidgin feelings and attitudes of many Papua New Guineans on the emotional level.

Favourable Attitudes Towards New Guinea Pidgin Based on Emotional Reasons

It has already been mentioned above that large portions of the rural population of Papua New Guinea regard Pidgin as a unifying link which gives them a feeling of solidarity, with this feeling reinforced by the feelings of apprehension concerning English. From this it is only a short step to the frequently observed attitudes of many Papua New Guineans who look upon Pidgin as a means for their self-identification, as a language which is their own and a distinguishing feature of all that is Papua New Guinean, and as something of which they are justly proud. This attitude manifests itself in many interrelated ways: Papua New Guineans expect Europeans who reside in their country to know Pidgin well (its mastery, or that of Hiri Motu, is one of the requirements of Papua New Guinea citizenship). They resent being addressed by Europeans in bad Pidgin and they tend to speak Pidgin to each other whenever possible, especially in situations in which the speaking of Pidgin used to be frowned upon or banned until recently (such as High Schools and the University of Papua New Guinea), and they look upon Pidgin as the means for expressing their deepest feelings and as the vehicle of national self-expression. These attitudes have produced the feeling in many Papua New Guineans that Pidgin should be the national language of Papua New Guinea and this has resulted in its very prevalent use in the parliament as the language of debate (Hull 1968) (though pragmatic considerations also seem to have played a part in this as has been said above), in the re-introduction of Pidgin as a language of instruction in vocational training, in the renewed general admissibility of Pidgin in elementary and adult education (Wurm 1977b), and the emergence of indigenous Pidgin creative writing (Laycock 1977).

Recent Developments and Future Outlooks

With its elevation to high social functions, the establishment of the subculture mentioned before, and the need for, especially lexical, expansion of Pidgin to meet the requirements of its new function, Pidgin has recently entered a new phase of development. The main sociolects, Urban Pidgin and Rural Pidgin, became clearly established, and are diverging rapidly. At the same time, the

stabilization of Pidgin and its regional and sociolectal uniformity in given areas and sociolects have begun to disappear, with fluidity and variability appearing at an increasing rate. This developing is largely attributable to the powerful influence of English, and to the fact that because of the lack of insight into the nature of Pidgin and insufficient coordination of language planning, the necessary linguistic elaboration accompanying the functional extensions of Pidgin have taken place in a haphazard way (Mühlhäusler 1979). These factors are disrupting the basic underlying rules of Pidgin and are beginning to threaten its existence as a separate language.

There seems to be little doubt that Pidgin is to remain the majority language of Papua New Guinea and that its geographical area and functional ranges will increase. The creolization of Pidgin has begun and can be expected to gain considerable momentum. Under these circumstances, and taking into account what has been said above about the recent developments of Pidgin and the destructive influence of English upon it, it seems clear that there is an urgent need of language planning actions. In the present writer's view (Wurm 1977d), Pidgin will be unable to fulfill satisfactorily its envisaged tasks in education and in being used for wider national purposes without its enrichment and standardization through internal language planning actions.

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