

Journal de la Société des Océanistes

112 | Année 2001-1 Micronésie plurielle

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Electronic version

URL: http://journals.openedition.org/jso/1712 DOI: 10.4000/jso.1712 ISSN: 1760-7256

Publisher

Société des océanistes

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 June 2001 Number of pages: 73-80 ISSN: 0300-953x

Electronic reference

Elizabeth Keating, « Language, Identity, and the Production of Authority in New Discursive Contexts in Pohnpei, Micronesia », *Journal de la Société des Océanistes* [Online], 112 | Année 2001-1, Online since 28 May 2008, connection on 24 April 2019. URL: http://journals.openedition.org/jso/1712; DOI: 10.4000/jso.1712

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Language, Identity, and the Production of Authority in New Discursive Contexts in Pohnpei, Micronesia

par

Elizabeth KEATING *

Many ships came to Ponape. ¹ Many were the foreigners who settled on Ponape, and foreign things also became numerous, the kinds of animals and the kinds of plants, both large and small plants which could grow on Ponape. Moreover white people and black people—all kinds, as well as certain kinds of sickness, etc., also became numerous. And certain different kinds of enlightenment ² also became well established in Ponape

(Bernart, 1977: Chapter 61, The Story of the Third Period).

Increasing contact between Pohnpeian and Western languages and cultures has taken place in the last 150 years 3. Although linguists often focus on loan « words » into Pacific and other languages, there are other more significant « loans » cross culturally, that is, in new contexts for language production. Borrowed language events or contexts can contribute new meanings and new authority to utterances, as well as new participant roles for speaking. The Pohnpeian lexicon evidences loan words from four recent colonial groups: Spanish, German, Japanese, and American. Before that, voyages of other Pacific Islanders often brought new influences. Linguistic evidence, for example, suggests that Western Polynesians, among them Samoans, voyaged to Pohnpei, and this contact played a role in shaping Pohnpeian culture (Rehg ms). A Pohnpeian term for food or kava served before a formal meal or kava ceremony, ahmwadang has, according to Geraghty (1994: 244) a Samoan

origin 4. This paper discusses some aspects of language borrowing and language influence in Pohnpei. Using language excerpts from several contexts, I discuss how new ideas that stem from cultural contact are incorporated and interpreted within local ideals, and mediated through existing language structures. Elements of borrowing are reflected in the following communicative practices: writing, the organization of temporal and spatial relations, the production of knowledge, naming practices, and communicative aspects of the body. Some 'borrowed' language terms (a result of Pohnpei's transnational connections) lend themselves to rhetorical polarities in oratory and in everyday speech that create differences between local and foreign practices and values, including tradition and modernity, morality and immorality. Borrowed discourse terms and contexts also create new social categories and enlarge the verbal repertoire of certain groups. In Pohnpei this is reflec-

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I gratefully acknowledge support from the National Science Foundation (grant #9120466) and the International Institute for Education (Fulbright) for the field research upon which this article is based. I also thank the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics for two additional field research opportunities. Without the cooperation and generosity of the people of Pohnpei this work would not have been possible, and I sincerely thank them.

- 1. Ponape is an earlier spelling of Pohnpei.
- 2. Protestant and Catholic systems of thought.
- 3. This summary of Pohnpeian history is indebted to the work of David Hanlon (1988) and Francis Hezel (1983).
- 4. The Samoan term is 'amataga' beginning.'

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ted in some changes in the way some members of society are viewed and in how new forms of symbolic behavior are mediated through discourse.

I first discuss some of the changes in the communicative landscape and then focus on how local and imported ideas are mediated through language in youth oratory and in informal, everyday conversations between women. In oratories recorded in 1993 in Pohnpei, Pohnpeian youth discuss both indigenous and Western influences, including the authority of the written word, formalized schooling, wage work, colonial government, marriage, and ideas about individual agency and the future. The idea of youth formally addressing a gathering is not an indigenous idea, but the young people frame their remarks within indigenous practices, formulaic speech acts whereby they request permission of the chiefs, God, and indigenous deities to speak. Thus locally authorized, they measure a span of implications from global to national to local. In everyday conversations recorded among women, the women use borrowed language terms in a complex process of reiterating traditional values within modern frameworks.

Background

The first contact between the inhabitants of the island of Pohnpei ⁵ and non-Pacific, Western European culture is believed to have occurred circa 1595 when a Spanish ship arrived (Hanlon, 1988: 28). The ship was part of an expedition, a "conquista espiritual," to bring Christianity to the "savages" (Hezel, 1983: 33-4; Hanlon, 1988: 27). The Pohnpeians' response to the Europeans was similar: a written Pohnpeian account, by native historian Luelen Bernart describes the moral depravity of the Europeans (Bernart, 1977: 104, translated by Fischer, Reisenberg, and Whiting). The Pohnpeians called the Spanish eni en pohn madau 'ghosts of the open ocean'. The word eni or 'ghost' referred not to the divine qualities of the foreigners but to their alien, and potentially malevolent nature (Hanlon, 1988 : 26). After almost three hundred years of no (known) contact, Protestant missionaries, from the U.S., and American whaling crews began to come more regularly in the late 19th century. Spanish, Germans, Japanese, and Americans all made efforts to colonize Pohnpei. ⁶

Missionaries have been highly influential in the Pacific as elsewhere in promoting the adoption of certain European ideas and practices. One of these practices concerns the organization of time. Although the Pohnpeians did not uniformly borrow European words for marking units of time, under the influence of Christian missionaries the local concepts of how to categorize cyclical changes were expanded. The idea of a seven-day week was imposed with the introduction of Sunday worship practices. When missionaries instituted the practice of Sunday meetings, Pohnpeian names for the seven days of the weekly cycle were developed. However, these were based not on Spanish, English, or German, but on the indigenous counting system with 'one' being Monday and 'five' being Friday. Pohnpeian days are now named: niehd, niare, niesil, niepeng, nialem ('at.one', 'at.two', etc), rahn kaunop ('day of.preparation' Saturday), and rahn sarawi ('day sacred' Sunday). Pohnpeians counted nights not days (Bernart, 1977: 103). Pohnpeians traditionally divided the year into seasons, the season of plenty and the season of scarcity, and also divided the year by stars:

« There were twelve stars, which we used to count from the beginning of the year to the end of the harvest season. It is said that this count began at the time the Erythrina tree came into blossom. Now when the flowers opened up and were beautiful they gave the time the name of Period of Erythrina [trade wind season, winter]; and when the blooms fell down and were finished and the seeds started growing, the name of that time was changed to Period of Growth. This was the time of harvest [...] Some of these stars make good times, while others make bad times—rain and big winds from the west...Now these twelve stars are the great stars which constitute the stars of the breadfruit season » (Bernart, 1977: 97).

The concept of dividing the year into months was borrowed with the names for the months. The Western day is organized around 'hour' and 'minute' segments, and Pohnpeians imported these terms into their vocabulary.

^{5.} A full portrayal of Pohnpeian society is beyond the scope of this paper. For a more complete description the reader is referred to Bascom, 1965; Reisenberg, 1968; Petersen, 1982; Shimizu, 1982, 1987; Hanlon, 1988; Falgout, 1984; Mauricio, 1993; Kihleng, 1996; Pinsker, 1997; Keating, 1998.

^{6.} The first attempts, by the Spanish and German governments in Pohnpei met with strong resistance from the Pohnpeians. Spanish and German governors were assassinated.

Personal names are another way language represents new practices adopted through contact with missionaries. The practice of 'given' or 'first' names, and the practice of surnames (see Rodríquez-Ponga, 1997) give each Pohnpeian a unique identity from birth to death, contrasting with the traditional way that Pohnpeian identities (in the title system) change over time e.g. with age, marriage, and other events which result in the acquisition of new titles. The introduced surname practice was based on patriliny, whereas matrilineal clan identification is central in traditional title-based identity. The production of gendered identities was influenced by new aspects of gendered body covering. According to Bernart (1977), Pohnpeian men at first were resistant to Western clothing practices, but the influential, Protestant-trained Pohnpeian Henry Nanpei « started the Ponapeans wearing trousers, shoes, jackets, hats, and the like, for formerly they used to be ashamed to be in trousers » (Bernart, 1977: 125). Women were taught that their breasts should be covered, and that only certain clothing was appropriate for Sunday religious observances. At the time of the first Spanish arrival, islanders had extensively tattooed their bodies; such a practice symbolized adulthood, and was a way of keeping track of genealogies, and recording historical events (Hanlon, 1988: 41), as well as a way to increase sexual attractiveness (Moral, 1998). The Pohnpeian body prior to missionization was quite literally a text. As a result of missionization, tattooing ceased. The word for tattooing (*nting*) continued to be used for writing. Writing and the interpretation of written symbols were not new to Pohnpeians (see, for example, Rainbird, 2000).

An essential part of Pacific Islander contact with Western cultures includes the introduction of Western literacy practices and culturally specific practices about learning and knowledge. Western books organize and conceive of knowledge production and dissemination in particular ways. As Duranti and Ochs note for Samoa: « when a Samoan child is first exposed to literacy instruction he or she is taught something more than the alphabet [...] literacy is accompanied by an attention to a world of objects and values that either are removed from the immediate context of the child's everyday life or suggest Western alternatives within a range of possible choices that would include more traditional objects and values » (Duranti and Ochs, 1988: 189). In one of the only written compilations of Pohnpeian oral narratives (Bernart, 1977), the influence of the Bible on indigenous written genres is evident. A chapter and verse organization, similar to that in the Bible is used. Some Biblical narratives are incorporated into Bernart's history, for example, « The Story of the Romans » (Bernhart, 1977: 174). Bernart's book also lists all of the titles of Jesus Christ.

In Pohnpeian terms, having knowledge increases an individual's *manaman* or power, while the transmission of knowledge decreases power (Falgout, 1984; Petersen, 1993). The phrase *pirakih me i pwapwa* ('what I am saying is twisted') begins Bernart's history, a conventional strategy of intentionally altering parts of an account in order to thwart listeners' attempts to obtain and share a speaker's knowledge, i.e. to limit *manaman* transfer or power sharing. This is a very different concept of authority and knowledge than that represented in Western historical narratives as well as in Christian narratives. Evangelism and spreading the 'good news' or knowledge of Christianity is a major project.

Space and spatial relationships have also been affected by contact with colonizing peoples. For example, the site of the original Spanish fort has developed into the town of Kolonia, organized according to Western principles of urban space. Pohnpeians traditionally do not organize their residence patterns into villages or towns, but live on farms or plantations. Both the Spanish and the Germans significantly altered relationships between individuals and land by changing land inheritance practices. In an influential decision, the transfer of a large tract of land to a singleowner, a non-chiefly Pohnpeian, for example, was upheld by a document of the Spanish 7. New deities and mediators and mediating practices between these deities and the people have been incorporated into Pohnpeian cultural and language practices since Western contact, including new worship practices. Differences in the nature of knowledge and the dissemination of information and expertise between Pohnpei and the West were and still are significant. Notions of individual agency and responsibility vary greatly between indigenous philosophical traditions and Western religious philosophy.

I became interested in youth oratory in Pohnpei as a new context for producing and contesting what it means to be Pohnpeian in a post-colonial world. Both traditional and European ideas of building authority are part of this process.

^{7.} In 1896 the Spanish Governor Pidal recognized Henry Nanpei's land claims, which were based on a document signed by his father Nanku on May 27, 1863 (Hambruch I, 1932 : 287-8, see also Ehrlich, 1978).

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Youth oratory

The young people's speeches I recorded in 1993 represent a borrowed discourse context youth oratory. In the speeches, language is used to incorporate as well as to differentiate indigenous ideas and practices (tiahk) in interesting ways. The specific speeches I discuss were given in the Catholic Church by members of the island-wide Catholic youth group or pwihn pwilopwil. In Excerpt 1, for example, two sides (pelien, from pali 'side') are created, the side of tiahk (indigenous customs) and the side of 'government' (pelien sapwellimatail tiahk versus pelien atail government). The government referred to is the colonial import, i.e. the democratic-style of government instituted by the American administration (1947-1983).

(1)

01 wahuniki lapalap koaros en *pelien sapwellimatail tiahk*,

Honor all the important people on the side of our [high status] traditions

02 oh wahuniki lapalap koaros en *pelien atail gover*ment

and honor all the important people on the side of our government

(note: words in italics show specific examples referred to in the text)

A feature of the Pohnpeian language is used here to create a difference in status between the traditional and the imported (see Keating, 1998 for a discussion of this feature). A statusraising term, *sapwellimatail*, is used for 'our' in the phrase 'our customs' (i.e. 'our [high status] *tiahk*') whereas the 'our' in the phrase 'our government' is not marked for status, resulting in lower status by comparison with the high-status-marked term for indigenous customs.

Several other speeches set up this same duality between *tiahk en Pohnpei* ('customs of Pohnpei') and *tiahk en wai* ('customs of the foreigners'), although at times the two ideas are brought together, as in the phrase used by one orator *kasukuhl in tiahk* ('Western-style schooling in [Pohnpeian] customs'), which combines imported and indigenous contexts and concepts (Excerpt 2, line 2) suggesting new knowledge dissemination procedures for indigenous practices.

(2)

or rahnwet me pwulopwul tohto kin iang pwukoa nan pelien tiahk,

today is the day that many youth take on responsibilities on the side of custom,

02 ih kitail me pahn (?) de tiahk sang ni atail pahn ale *kasukuhl en tiahk* we are the ones who will [?unintelligible]... cus-

toms from those of us who will

03 sang me semen kan de atail pahpa oh nohno be schooled in customs from the forefathers or our father and mother

In another youth's speech, Catholic priests are called by the Pohnpeian term *soumwaroh* ('high priest'), by the Spanish loan *pahdire*, and by the English loanword *diken* (deacon).

The youth group organizes their speeches around a literate secular authority, the dictionary. The event was framed around each orator's choice of a particular 'word' as a topic for his or her speech, for example, fear, homesickness, happiness, love. The speaker in Excerpt 3, line 2 refers to the concept of the dictionary (using the English loan word) as an authoritative site for understanding to emerge. These young orators have taken on explication and translation as their project, and have foregrounded a Western source organized on Western principles (the dictionary) as their authority, even though their speeches are in Pohnpeian.

(3)

01 nan *sapwellimatail* pwuken kawewe kan in *our [high status*] book which explains

02 de koasoi *dictionary* ni e kawewe lepin mahsen wet

also called a *dictionary* where it explains these words

A dictionary is of course a reference book containing alphabetically arranged words, with codified authoritative information about meanings and use. A dictionary is also a book that interprets meanings from one language system to another. This latter type of dictionary is one which missionaries were initially most concerned with producing. How one finds the meaning of words and understanding in a language dictionary is a process of translating systems of representation, for example Pohnpeian to Spanish or German to Pohnpeian. The codified knowledge of the West contained in books does not ordinarily frame itself as partial and subject to interpretation (except to postmodernists and those critiquing science) as does the field of Pohnpeian knowledge. Organizing an event of oratory around a dictionary indexes literary practices and skills and frames the orators' authority in particular ways.

Throughout the speeches both Western and indigenous authority structures are used together and alternately in interesting ways. Speakers 'beg permission of the chief' to speak

(sakaradan, line 2), and keipweni, or lower themselves in the presence spirits or humans serving as intermediaries between the people and the spirits (Mauricio, 1993: 147) (line 3). Included in this group of spirits is the Christian God, the paramount chieftess, and the high priests, a mix of indigenous and borrowed mediators between the human and the divine.

(4)

- 01 mwohn i pahn patohwen doula i pahn patohwen doula
 - before I go on [low status], I go on [low status]
- 02 i pahn wia tungoal *sakaradan*I will make my [low status] request to speak,
- 03 keipweni pahn kupwuren samatail Koht wahuniki erekisohn and lower myself under the heart/authority of our father God. I honor the body/people of
- 04 Pohnpeieu sapwellimahr likend koa, oh soumwourou koa
 - Pohnpei, our chieftesses and high priests

Youth orators situate their speech under the authority of the paramount chief, secondary chief, paramount chieftess, the head of the parish, and the president of the youth group. We can see the role of language in indexing indigenous versus non-indigenous authorities. The leader of the parish is termed *kaun en mwohmwodiso*, a phrase with all Pohnpeian words, incorporating the morpheme *iso*, which refers to the paramount chief. The youth group leader, in contrast, is described with a Latinate term, borrowed from English, 'president'. A sharp distinction is made juxtaposing indigenous and borrowed terms, secular and sacred, and pre-contact and post-contact practices or customs.

(5)

- 01 isonahnken kan, likend kan, *kaun en mwomwo-diso* wet,
 the secondary chiefs, paramount chieftesses, the leader of the parish,
- 02 *president* en pwihn pwulopul, kumwail pwihn pwulopwul kan the president of the youth group, all you youth

The entire discursive context of youth oratory itself is situated within Western ideas of youth as a category with rights, privileges, expectations, and the capacity for revolutionary change. The idea of young people giving speeches to a gathering of the whole community, and the very concept of an island-wide youth group or *pwihn pwilopwil* collapses traditional notions of organization by clan or chiefdom and the prevalent Pacific age-graded seniority where older sisters and brothers have authority over younger ones,

as well as the indigenous value of clan or chiefdom identity over national identity. One speaker poses a question to the pwihn pwulopwul en wehin Pohnpei ('the young people of the chiefdom of Pohnpei'). Another young orator talks about anahnen me pwolopwul rahnwet nan wehin Pohnpei, the 'needs of the youth in Pohnpei today,' as if all the youth share common experiences apart from other members of the society. These speeches are particularly concerned with defining the experience of « youth » as a uniform class of people in Pohnpei, using language, a crucial tool in the social construction of knowledge and experience. A model of a shared status as youth or as « the younger generation » with a common future is suggested by these speakers, particularly when they discuss such problems as drinking alcohol, crashing cars, and not finishing school as signs of the morality of the society as a whole. One orator calls for the youth group to « dream » and the reference is not to nighttime consciousness, but to planning and envisioning the future, including a notion of one's agency and power to transform the future. 'Vocation' is a term used, which indicates choices beyond the traditional repertoire of roles. This power is not invested solely in youth, however, but also in the more traditional power of spirits or in God's word within the 'holy book' (the Bible) which is, as one speaker states, a guide for young people. One of the important choices about the future is contained in the Bible according to these young Pohnpeians; it is the choice between the « wide road to hell » and the « narrow road to heaven ». These two destinations are organized by the orators as el (hell) using the foreign loan word and nanleng (heaven) using the indigenous term.

(6)

- 01 Madeu de sapwellimen Madeu pwuhk irelaud isuh Matthew or Matthew's [high status] book, chapter seven,
- 02 iretikitik eisek siluh e kaweid kin kitail ahl en kohlang
 - verse thirteen advises us which road to follow [...]
- 03 eri iaduwen emenemen kitail me pwulopwulen Pohnpei rahnwet and how each one of us who are the youth of Pohnpei today
- 04 ia atail pelipel *ahl tehlap* de *ahl tehtikitik* should make our choice, *the wide road or the narrow road*

Indigenous ideas of the afterlife include the idea that the dead reside below the sea. To get there, they cross a bridge at *Wasahn Sohpor*, the

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'Place of No Return' (Hanlon, 1988: 104). Those who sing with a good voice (a metaphor for a dutiful life) successfully cross the bridge; those who sing poorly fall off the « twisting » bridge (Mauricio, 1993) into a pit called Pweliko.

To some young orators, traditional knowledge rather than Western knowledge is valued (see Example 7), and *tiahk* (custom) is defined as the foundation of a Pohnpeian identity and a high status life.

(7)

01 tiahk pahn wia poasoned en sapwellimatail ieias. Pohnpeian customs are the foundation of our [high status] lives.

Borrowed language terms lend themselves to rhetorical polarities in the borrowed context of youth oratory in the Catholic Church, indicating important differences in values between local and foreign practice. However, the meanings of borrowed terms, concepts, and contexts are constantly negotiated in Pohnpeian society in everyday interactions as well as in these public speeches. The interactants in the following excerpts from everyday conversation also negotiate understandings of the meanings of imported Western ideas, in this case negotiating new models of women's behavior and new bodily presentations. Several imported American English words are used in this process, including the word « style ». In Excerpt 8, the narrator describes how M, a woman who already has a child of her own, is habitually enacting the « style » of a small girl (kisin serepein) by wearing shorts rather than a skirt. Shorts are typical of American hot weather wear, but are particularly immodest for women in Pohnpei because they reveal the thigh area. The appropriate dress for women in Pohnpei is clothing which conceals the natural shape of the erotic parts of her body, the area between the waist and the knee (little girls can wear shorts, literally 'small trousers,' however).

(8)

- 01 e kin wiala *style* duwete kisin serepein a udahn she habitually comports herself in a *style* just like a little girl. Really,
- 02 soahing me sehten *kisin rausis* [...] with the same kind of shirt and *shorts*
- 03 M [name] ah likouo tangete nan kahuen udahn kin style
 M's [name] clothes run up her buttocks. That's

M's [name] clothes run up her buttocks. That's really *stylish* [sarcastic voice].

Choosing imported « see through » fabric (menipinip me aramas kileng weite 'thin that people can see into') can also be problematic, as it

does not conceal the outline of the thighs and underwear (*sarmada* is a Japanese loan word for a type of undergarment). In Excerpt 9 several women share in creating Pohnpeian values through judgments about imported materials used in local dress.

(9)

- 01 eri mwahu men re aramas kileng weite dahngemwen you think it's good if people can see your thighs?
- 02 dah ke kin koasongosongih ohlakan what are you doing always enticing men?
- 03 dah songen lidep what kind of woman is that (who has already has a child) [...].
- 04 iapw sohte mwahuki. urohs me udahn *menipinip* me aramas kileng weite kilang
 I don't like it. That kind of skirt is really thin so that people can see through it, can see
- 05 ah sarmada tengie. Kilang wanded where her underwear goes. That looks like a « wanted » woman

A woman is labeled "wanted" by the speaker in Excerpt 9, line 5. 'Wanted' is an interesting loan word from English. It apparently was borrowed by Pohnpeian women from the "Wanted" posters common in United States post offices, posters that are now familiar to Pohnpeians, who have one post office managed by the U.S. Postal Service as a remnant from U.S. Trust Territory days. "Wanted" posters have a picture of and information about a criminal who has escaped. This term is now applied to Pohnpeian women who are sexually promiscuous. The term plays on the double meaning of "wanted," sexual desirability and transgression. The figure of Satan is also a resource for shaping interpretations of behavior. He not only tempts women but takes on the appearance of a Pohnpeian woman.

(10)

- 01 W: ih indang J [name] kilang *sedane* me I told J [name] look at the *Satan* there
- 02 L: ke ese sohte mehkot mwahu you know there's something there that's not good
- 03 pwakiala sang me, pwe kakadongadong chase her away from here because she makes herself abhorrent

The use of the English words 'wanted' and 'Satan' indicates a certain foreignness and 'other-ness' and also draws on symbols from both religious domains and the authority of the state. The use of Satan suggests not only power, but also the personification of a foreign, socially disruptive force, and foreign ideas. Later in the

conversation one of the women reports that her husband has warned her that she will be cursed (*riahla*) for « criticizing others » for their improper « style ». *Riahla* predates Satan and the Wanted posters, and is also used as a complementary authoritative force to control behavior as well as contest authority.

The woman in Example 11 reports on her own efforts to change and to incorporate outsider ideas about the body through the adoption of Western-style dress. She relates to her friend and me in this conversation that her son told her if she wears shorts he will quit school from shame.

(11)

- 01 K [S's son] kahng ien iang wia songen. I kin men K forbids my doing (joining) that kind of thing. I always wanted to
- 02 iang wia songko K kapweiekala dress like that (wear shorts) but K doesn't want me to
- 03 pweki mweliki pwe kilang ehu rahno *lepin rausis* because it would make him sad. One day we saw some *shorts* and
- 04 i inda ai pahn pwainda ai *lepen rausis* e kahng kalakalekete
 I said I'm going to buy some *shorts* for myself and he forbade me to do it, he said, don't you dare
- 05 ke dehr pah *lepin rausis* kohla ihmwen *skulo*. Ke pahn kareda i sohla iang *skul* don't wear *shorts* and go to my *school* or you will make me quit *school*

The meanings of new cultural practices and concepts 'borrowed' from the West are shaped and reshaped through everyday language use. Young people are agents for change as well as agents for reproducing traditional symbolic forms within a contemporary context.

Conclusion

In the last two centuries contact has increased between Pohnpeian and European languages. This can be seen clearly in terms of lexical borrowings. However, rather than talking strictly about loan words, I have broadened my discussion to include influences stemming from the borrowing of discourse contexts, such as youth oratory, and have focused on how new meanings are negotiated through ongoing language events and integrated into local ideas. Borrowed terms lend themselves to rhetorical polarities that can highlight the differences between local and foreign lifeways, and can be used as resources in the negotiation of boundaries of moral behavior. Borrowed discourse contexts and concepts

can enlarge the verbal repertoire of certain groups and create new spaces for contestation. In Pohnpei this is reflected in some changes in the way some members of society are viewed and how access to new styles and arenas of communication is acquired. Elements of borrowing are reflected not only in single words but in writing practice, the organization of temporal and spatial relations, productions of knowledge, communicative aspects of the body, identity and concepts of a moral person. As with lexical borrowings, the meanings of these new relations both shape new contexts and are shaped by the local ecologies of practice in which they emerge.

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Mots-clefs / Keywords

Pohnpei, emprunt linguistique, discours, rhétorique, autorité. Pohnpei, linguistic borrowing, discourse, rhetoric, authority.