

Magical Conversation on the Trobriand Islands

Gunter Senft

Abstract. – The Trobriand Islanders of Papua New Guinea are famous for being great magicians. They differentiate among various forms of magic. This paper presents, translates, and comments on, a selection of various magical formulae that are used by expert magicians in different fields to reach various means and ends. It discusses – from the emic, Trobriand, point of view – the speech register represented and established by these formulae and points out that the speech situation between the magician and her or his animate, inanimate, or spiritual addressee is regarded by the Trobriand Islanders as a special form of conversation-like interaction. From the etic point of view, this interaction between magicians and their addressees is analysed as a special form of ritual communication that serves, among other things, the function of relieving the tension in critical situations of social interaction. [Trobriand Islands, magic, ritual communication, Kilivila]

Gunter Senft, Dr. phil (1982); senior research fellow at the Cognitive Anthropology Research Group at the Max-Planck-Institute for Psycholinguistics, Nijmegen, privatdozent in general linguistics at the University of Cologne. – Since 1981 research on the language and culture of the Trobriand Islanders, Papua New Guinea, including 28 months of field research. Before 1981 research and publications on the unguided language acquisition of foreign workers in Germany and on the language production of German workers. – Publications: see References Cited.

1 Trobriand Magic

The Trobriand Islanders of Papua New Guinea have always been famous for being great magicians – and with the publications of Bronislaw Malinowski (1922, 1935, 1974) and others like Powell (1957, 1960) and Weiner (1976, 1983, 1988) this fame has spread far beyond the borders of Milne Bay Province in Papua New Guinea. Until recently all Trobriand Islanders used magical formulae to reach certain aims with the firm conviction that they can thus influence and control nature and the course of, and events in, their lives. The Trobrianders differentiate between various forms of magic; they know weather magic, black magic, healing magic, garden magic, fishing magic, dance magic, beauty magic, love magic, sailing and canoe magic, and

magic against witches and sharks. There are specialists for certain kinds of magic. All magic is regarded as personal property. There is the basic belief that magic came to the Trobriand Islands together with the first ancestors of the four clans. In the matrilineal Trobriand society individuals inherit magic either, and most general, from their matrilineal relatives, or get it from their fathers or from specialists. In general, experts like for example master-carvers, weavers, canoe-builders, sail-makers, healers, etc., accept apprentices and pass their skills on to these apprentices together with the magic that goes or may go with their special skills.

The Trobriand Islanders differentiate between magicians in general, the *tomegwa* or *towosi*, and sorcerers, the *bwagau*, the experts in “black magic,” and the flying witches, the *munukwausa* in particular. The following phrases refer to the activities of magicians:

*epaisewa megwa*¹ s/he is working/doing magic,
emegwa s/he is doing magic,
emigai megwa s/he is whispering magic,
ekauke'ula megwa s/he is carrying/saying magic.

The first two phrases refer to the magical ritual as a whole and in general, and the last two phrases refer to the recitation of the magical formula in particular. Besides the noun *megwa* there are two other more archaic nouns *migavela* and *kema* that can be glossed as “magic,” and the Kilivila lexicon is very rich with respect to metalinguistic expressions that are used to refer to specific forms, rites, and parts of magic (see e.g., Senft 1986: 323, 522).

While reciting – or rather whispering and murmuring – magical formulae, the magician's accen-

¹ The Austronesian language of the Trobriand Islanders is called Kilivila. For a grammatical description and a dictionary of this language see Senft (1986). The orthography of the Kilivila examples presented here is based on Senft (1986: 14–16).