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PIDGIN ENGLISH IN THE PACIFIC AREA

REMARKS ON ITS VARIETIES AND DEVELOPMENT

GENERAL REMARKS ON PIDGIN LANGUAGES

Pidgin languages are generally languages which are more or less rudimentary languages developing in situations of contacts between two different cultures, one of them dominant in the contact situation, with the use of such languages restricted to certain limited contacts such as trading, plantation work involving the employment of indigenous labour, master-servant relationships, and similar types of contact situations. Much of the vocabulary of a pidgin language consists of elements of the language of the dominant culture in a more or less distorted, and often semantically changed, form with elements from the language of the non-dominant culture playing a less important part in its vocabulary. Its structural features do not as a rule reflect structural characteristics of the language of the dominant culture, unless the languages of both the dominant and the non-dominant culture are closely related and structurally very similar, though even in such situations quite significant deviations from the structural set-up of the language of

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the dominant culture can be observed in the pidgin language. Some to many of the structural features of a pidgin language may reflect features of the language of the non-dominant culture but, in pidgin languages, a number of unique structural and grammatical features can be observed which appear to reflect some basic simplifications in language use in contact situations between speakers of different languages. In any event, in the usual type of pidgin language, the overall vocabulary is small and limited in its usefulness to the specific types of contact situations in which the language is used and its grammatical complexity is greatly reduced when compared with both the language of the dominant culture and the non-dominant culture. Also, as a rule, the sound system of a pidgin language constitutes a considerable simplification when compared with the sound system of both these languages.

Pidgin languages usually go through a life cycle beginning with a very simplified jargon stage and developing into a more or less standardized and stabilized pidgin stage. Some of the languages stay at that level and eventually fall into disuse. However, the roles and functions of some pidgin languages develop beyond their use in limited contact situations to those of playing the part of languages of general intercommunication between speakers of different languages in the non-dominant culture. In such situations, pidgins develop into expanded pidgins with vastly increased vocabularies and structural complexities, and their range of expression encompasses many additional conversation and face-to-face contact situations in which they can increasingly replace the local languages. This is particularly so if the traditional non-dominant culture is gradually being replaced by features of the dominant culture, with the expanded pidgin language the carrier of the new contact culture resulting from the strong impact of the dominant culture. In many instances, an expanded pidgin becomes creolized, i.e. becomes the first language of the members of the non-dominant culture, with the local language or languages falling into disuse. Also, in many instances, the continuing contact with the language of the dominant culture influences the pidgin or creole language further and further until a continuum between the true pidgin or creole language and the language of the dominant culture develops which consists of a number of stages between the two.

There were, and still are, a very large number of pidgin (and

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creole) languages in many parts of the world, especially as a result of European contact in areas such as Africa, the Americas, East and Southeast Asia, and the Greater Pacific area, with many of these pidgin languages being based on, i.e. deriving much of their lexical store from, a European language such as English, French, Spanish, Portuguese or Dutch. However, some pidgin languages are based on dominant local languages of the areas concerned, for instance up-country Swahili in East Africa, Bazaar Malay in much of insular Southeast Asia, and others. Most of these languages antedate the advent of European contact, though modified forms of some of them which existed in pre-European contact days developed after, and as a result of, European contact, such as Police Motu (Hiri Motu) in the southern part of Papua New Guinea.

Pidgin Languages in the Greater Pacific Area

The presence of a great variety of pidgin languages has for centuries been a special feature of the language picture of East Asia and the Pacific area, especially so since the advent and expansion of European contacts. Apart from a few local-language-based pidgin languages, such as the Bazaar Malay mentioned above which for centuries functioned as a trade language in parts of insular Southeast Asia, and some other local-language-based pidgin languages of more restricted currency, especially in the New Guinea area, the pidgin languages in the Pacific area are based, in their vocabularies, on European languages.

The earliest of these European-based pidgin languages were Portuguese-based pidgins, most of which are now extinct or nearing extinction with only one of them still viable in Malacca in Peninsular Malaysia. Other pidgin languages are based on Spanish and one of them, in several dialects and varieties, is still very viable in parts of the Philippines, though now extinct in other parts of insular Southeast Asia such as a northern part of the Moluccas where a Spanigh-based pidgin and creole was spoken before. French-based pidgins are, or were, used in parts of continental Southeast Asia and New Caledonia, but most of these are now extinct.

The great majority of the European-language-based pidgins of the Pacific area are based on English in their vocabulary, and there

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is, and was, a considerable variety of such languages in existence in the Pacific, with several of these languages surviving today and playing very important roles in the lives of some of the newly independent nations of the Pacific area, in particular the southwestern Pacific.

The history of the origins and development of these English-based pidgins of the Pacific area and East Asia is quite complex and what is presented here constitutes, to some extent, a simplification and schematization of this complex picture in which individual English-based pidgin languages did not constitute simple developments from an earlier form of English-based pidgin, but as a rule resulted from multiple influences of various types of English-based pidgins or of specific local situations (Mühlhäusler forthcoming). It is not possible, and will never be possible, to determine the exact number of English-based pidgins which have existed in the Pacific area because of this complex mutual influence situation, and it is also extremely difficult to determine what constitutes a pidgin *language* as opposed to a variant of another pidgin language because of the very considerable similarity between these languages, especially on the level of vocabulary. It is easier to determine major varieties of English-based pidgin on the basis of an interaction between historical developments and local influences, which makes them sufficiently different from each other for constituting clearly separable linguistic entities which in some instances are so different that communication between speakers of such distinct varieties of Pidgin English is not possible, or only possible to a very limited extent.

The earliest known form of Pidgin English in the Pacific and East Asian area developed on the coast of the Chinese mainland in the 18th century. It is known that as a means of communication between English and Chinese in those areas a Portuguese-based pidgin language was used in the period between the first Portuguese contacts and the later English contacts (Hamilton 1727). It has been suggested that the English-based Chinese pidgin which developed in the area constituted a relexification of this Portuguese pidgin (Whinnom 1965), though it has also been suggested that the English-based Chinese pidgin developed independently as a result of the establishment of the first English trading post in Canton in 1664 (Hall 1966).

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In the first half of the 19th century, English-speaking sailors and traders visited the southwestern Pacific, with one of their main interests in the area being the collection of a species of sea cucumber, called *bêche-de-mer* in French, which they sold in China where it was highly priced and a great favourite. In these contacts between the English-speaking sailors and the native populations of the area, from the New Hebrides to the Carolines, an English-based pidgin language developed which had as its starting point the Chinese Pidgin English used by the sailors, with a considerable linguistic input arising out of the contact situation between the English-speaking sailors and traders and the local populations who collected the *bêche-de-mer* (known as *trepang* in many parts of the southwestern Pacific) and sold it to the traders who in turn took it back to China for sale to the Chinese. This early South Sea Pidgin English was referred to by the name Beach-la-mar (or Biche-la-mar), which is derived from the French *bêche-de-mer*, and it signifies the importance which this trade article had in the relations between the English-speaking traders and the local populations.

A number of different varieties of this early Pacific Pidgin English, or early Beach-la-mar, developed in various parts of the Pacific as from the early 19th century, with the influence of the Pidgin English language carried by the *trepang*, and also the sandal wood traders in the Pacific. They were supplemented in their development through more sustained local contacts with English-speaking traders and others residing on various islands of the Pacific world. These forms were found in the Solomon Islands, the New Hebrides (now called Vanuatu), Fiji, in many parts of Micronesia, and they also spread into Polynesia and may have contributed to the later development of Hawaiian Pidgin English. A variety of this early Pacific Pidgin was also used in New Caledonia, where its currency was strengthened by the presence of Beach-la-mar-speaking mission teachers from Samoa and Rarotonga and the later arrival of English missionaries. There were also Australian settlers and miners who came to New Caledonia during the first decade of French rule (Hollyman 1964) and whose use of the language strengthened its position in New Caledonia. The later relexification of Beach-la-mar with French vocabulary gave rise to the Pidgin French which was used in the New Caledonia area for many years,

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but is now virtually extinct. Later versions of this Pacific Pidgin also spread to New Guinea in forms called Papuan Pidgin English and Torres Straits Pidgin English.

These early varieties of Pacific Pidgin English were all rather limited languages with small working vocabularies and simple structures in the early days, and their functions were esentially those of constituting means of limited communication between Europeans, mainly traders, sailors, and a few others, and members of the local populations.

This situation was altered quite strongly with the establishment of sugar-cane plantations in Queensland in Australia in the 1850s for which extensive labour was required. The Australian Aborigines proved quite unsuitable for plantation work and, in view of this, an extensive labour recruitment programme started after 1850 to obtain native labour from the southwestern Pacific area, especially the New Hebrides and Solomon Islands. This recruiting, commonly known as blackbirding, continued for a number of decades with the result that many thousands of Melanesians were brought to the Queensland sugar-cane fields from various parts of Island Melanesia and thrown together in labour-gangs for a number of years. In view of the fact that there were many quite different local languages in the areas of Island Melanesia from which they were brought to Australia, the only language of intercommunication between Melanesians of different language backgrounds was Pacific Pidgin English. Having thus become a *lingua franca* predominantly used for inter-native communication rather than for communication between the Melanesians and their white supervisors and masters, the language expanded rapidly in its word store and grammatical complexity and flexibility, with most of the additional vocabulary coming from English as used by their supervisors, but often misunderstood and labelled with wrong semantic tags. Being used in an entirely new range of situations relating to native concerns and interests rather than to simple trade situations, the language became vastly expanded in its range of expressiveness, with this enhanced by some input from a new master-servant relationship in the plantation situations. A fair level of standardization and stabilization of the language took place as a result of its extensive inter-native use on the plantations.

Most of the labourers were, after some years of work on the

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sugar-cane fields, repatriated to Island Melanesia, though quite often not to their original home area. In general, these home-comers, be it in their own areas or in some other area, were regarded as having become highly sophisticated, far-travelled people who brought back with them a vast store of new knowledge including what was often believed to be the language of the white man. With their mastery of a variety of Pacific Pidgin English which was far more elaborate than, and vastly superior to, the restricted pidgin varieties used by those who had stayed behind, their language became a model which was eagerly learned by others in the areas to which they returned. This led to a rapid spread of the knowledge of varieties of Pacific Pidgin English in those areas and contributed to its stabilization in different forms in different areas. Other factors contributed and led to the evolvement of a few rather distinct forms of Pidgin English, amongst them the ancestors of present-day Solomon Islands Pidgin and the present-day English-based pidgin language of the New Hebrides (now called Vanuatu) which was given the name Bislama or Pislama, a name which represents the local pronunciation of the original name Beach-la-mar or Biche-la-mar. Other varieties benefiting from this language input, and also other circumstances, were the already-mentioned Papuan Pidgin English and Torres Strait Pidgin English.

A few of the Melanesian labourers stayed behind in Queensland near the sugar-cane fields areas even after the cessation of blackbirding towards the end of the 19th century. A few surviving speakers of the old Canefield English variety of Pidgin English which was used towards the latter part of the last century on the canefields of North Queensland can still be found there.

Both Solomon Islands Pidgin and the Vanuatuan Bislama developed further since the beginning of this century and are today two rather distinct varieties of English-based pidgin in the Pacific area, with the latter in particular showing a number of sub-varieties.

In Australia itself, an earlier English-based Australian pidgin, antedating the development of Canefield English in Queensland, had come into being as a result of contacts between the English-speaking settlers and the Australian Aborigines. It was widely used in earlier days, but is now restricted to some remote areas, especially in the north of Australia. However, a number of creolized forms of Australian Pidgin had developed in the last decade and had

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become very viable in a number of areas. The various creoles, known in Australia as Kriol, do not differ much from each other, but each has a few characteristics of its own.

The most important English-based pidgin in the Pacific area is undoubtedly New Guinea Pidgin, now officially known as Tok Pisin. It came into being towards the end of the 1870s on the plantations in Samoa, which was then under German colonial rule and to which the Germans imported a number of native labourers from the Duke of York area to the north of the large island of New Britain. In the early 1880s the first plantations were established in German New Guinea itself and, as overseers, experienced New Guinean plantation workers were brought back from Samoa. This led to a rapid spread of the already-stabilized plantation language from Samoa amongst these labourers and also amongst the native population of the nearby parts of German New Guinea, which was essentially the area of Rabaul on the Gazelle Peninsula at the northern end of New Britain. That town was the administrative centre of German New Guinea and, as a result, this variety of Pidgin English became enriched with a number of German vocabulary items and also with a very considerable number of items from the local language of the area, Tolai. This new version of the language spread rapidly through many parts of German New Guinea with the extension of administrative control and pacification which resulted in greatly increased intercommunication between speakers of different local languages, with the usual means of this intercommunication being the new type of New Guinea Pidgin. The language became nativized, i.e., it became mainly a means of intercommunication between members of the native population, and not between Europeans and members of the indigenous population. It quickly developed into an expanded pidgin of a very high order and, as a result, into a language of great complexity and flexibility of expression. The language continued to spread until the end of German rule, and this spread continued and accelerated after the Australian takeover of German New Guinea in 1914, with this New Guinea Pidgin becoming the numerically most important and most viable English-based pidgin language in the Pacific area. Interestingly enough, only a comparatively small percentage of its speakers, between 1% and 2%, speak it as their first language, though a very large number of its speakers have a native command

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of it equalling or exceeding their command of their own mother tongue and often use it in preference to their own languages even in situations in which they could communicate in the latter. This is essentially in situations in which the subject of discussion bears little or no relationship to the traditional culture of the speakers, but deals with aspects of the contemporary world and the newly developing contemporary culture for which the usual means of expression is New Guinea Pidgin or Tok Pisin, which is the name given to it by official decree of the Papua New Guinea government in 1981 (Wurm 1977).

Of the numerous English-based pidgin languages which have existed in the Pacific area, only four remain highly viable today, with Hawaiian Pidgin as a fifth gradually being replaced by a sub-standard English. A few others continue to be spoken by a small minority, but they have no, or only very little, social significance today. One of these languages, in a number of varieties, is the Kriol in Australia, and the other three are New Guinea Pidgin or Tok Pisin, Solomon Islands Pidgin and the Vanuatuan Bislama. All three play a major part in the social, political and day-to-day lives of the three new nations and countries Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, but only one of these languages, Bislama, has been declared the national language of its country, being at the same time one of the three official languages of Vanuatu, the other two being English and French. Both Tok Pisin in Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands Pidgin in the Solomon Islands function as the unofficial national languages of these two countries and as the focal point of national self-identification and consciousness, but they have not been officially declared national languages of these countries.

Tok Pisin is today spoken, with varying degrees of mastery, by about two million people out of the total population of over three million of Papua New Guinea. It is widely used in daily intercommunication, is the main debate language of the Papua New Guinean Parliament, is widely employed in the media services and is the fuctional language of lower-level administration. However, it is only little used in educational pursuits largely because education in English is still generally regarded as the key to advancement of the children and the sole means for their attaining higher and university-level education (Wurm 1977).

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Tok Pisin has been a written language for a number of years, and several periodicals and newspapers have been appearing. Until about a decade ago or so, most writing in Tok Pisin was done by Europeans, and only in recent years have Papua New Guineans contributed significantly to the growing body of literature in Tok Pisin (Laycock 1977). One problem with Tok Pisin literature has been the fact that in spite of the existence of a standardized orthography for the language, many writers continued to use erratic spellings. Several grammatical studies of Tok Pisin have been published, for instance Wurm 1971 and Dutton 1973. The situation is, though on a much smaller scale, the same for Solomon Islands Pidgin and for Bislama, though no grammar of Solomon Islands Pidgin has yet been published.

Tok Pisin has, in recent years, been afflicted by a serious problem: in urban settings a new urban sociolect has developed, under strong influence of English, which has become so different from the continuing rural sociolect that communication between speakers of the two sociolects is becoming very difficult. At the same time, the anglicized urban sociolect is in no way more readily intelligible to speakers of English than the rural sociolect (Mühlhäusler 1979). This has produced problems, especially for the media services and politicians who, when using the urban sociolect, face and increasing communication gap with the majority of the population of the country which is rural. At the same time, the increasing regionalization of the administration in Papua New Guinea is bringing about a reduction in the importance of Tok Pisin as a general language of administration and local affairs, because in some areas local *lingue franche*, whose currency and importance had been drastically reduced by the vigorous spread of Tok Pisin in past decades, are beginning to come back into use in local administration and other local concerns (Laycock 1982).

Solomon Islands Pidgin, which is spoken by over 100,000 people amongst the total population of 150,000 of the Solomon Islands, is in many ways in a similar situation to Tok Pisin in Papua New Guinea. Its level of creolization is very low, only a little over 1,000 Solomon Islanders speak it as their first language (Bennett 1979), and it has also developed an urban sociolect which is extensively used in broadcasting. It is a debate language in the Solomon Islands Parliament and used in other respects very much like Tok Pisin

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in Papua New Guinea (Tryon 1982). Again, as is the case with Tok Pisin in Papua New Guinea, the currency of Solomon Pidgin is gradually being reduced by the strong stress on decentralized administration and government in the Solomon Islands which favours local vernacular languages and regional *lingue franche* over Solomon Islands Pidgin.

Bislama in Vanuatu is spoken by over 80,000 people amongst the 100,000 inhabitants of the country and shows very little creolization. In Bislama there is not, or at least not yet, the problem of the development of an urban sociolect, but regional variation is considerable and the question of the standardization of the language and its orthography is still not resolved. As has been mentioned above, it has been declared the national language of Vanuatu and made one of its three official languages, and it is widely used in daily and official pursuits in the country. Its role in the future of Vanuatu is likely to be powerful and important.

Concluding Remarks

The Pacific area has been a fertile ground for the development of many and varied forms of pidgin languages based on European languages and local languages of the area. The great majority of these languages had only a relatively short life and are now dead or dying. Only a handful of them still persists and continues in important social roles. Amongst these, by far the most important ones are pidgin languages based on English which in various forms continue to flourish today in Australia, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu.

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