

Varieties of Melanesian Pidgin: Separate Identities vs. European Stereotypes

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1 Introduction

One of many unresolved questions in the history of Melanesian Pidgin involves the divergence of this language into the three distinct national dialects of today, i.e., Tok Pisin in Papua New Guinea, Pijin in Solomon Islands and Bislama in Vanuatu. Speakers of these three varieties can, for the most part, understand each other; moreover, they recognize that they are speaking the same language, despite the numerous structural (and to a lesser extent, lexical) differences between them. For these differences to have spread throughout the three speech communities at all age-levels, we need to assume that by the time the oldest speakers of today learnt the language, mostly as plantation labourers in their early adulthood in the period between the two World Wars, the different varieties were already well-established.

For information on the development of Melanesian Pidgin from the period of the First World War and earlier, we cannot refer to existing speakers, simply because they are no longer living. Melanesians from this period left almost nothing in the way of written records as literacy levels were extremely low until well into the twentieth century.¹ Thus, we are forced to rely almost entirely on European observations of how Melanesians spoke Pidgin from the period of its earliest intrusion into the islands of New Caledonia and southern Vanuatu in the 1840s until after World War I.

¹ In any case, literacy in the early years was passed on either in the vernacular or in English (and French, in the case of Vanuatu), rather than Pidgin.

The difficulty that we face in relying on European observers is that we must first of all assess the accuracy of written sources dating from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The major problem in trying to extract reliable information from such sources is in filtering out any lexical or structural information that the writer may have introduced, either knowingly or unknowingly, into the records of a language that he or she, for the most part, did not believe to be a real language at all, but merely a local corruption of English by intellectually inferior Melanesians.

Interference could have come from three potential sources: the writer's knowledge of English; his or her knowledge of how people in other parts of the world spoke in places where what they felt to be "broken English" was used; and his or her prior knowledge of how people in other parts of Melanesia spoke Melanesian Pidgin at the time. A final possible source of confusion could have arisen with Europeans accurately recording the speech of Melanesians who, recognizing that their interlocutors were not Pidgin speakers, accommodated towards English, and perhaps even believed that they were speaking standard English.

What I will demonstrate in this paper is that there has indeed been interference from all these factors in the written record of one of the three varieties of Melanesian Pidgin, i.e., Bislama. This interference in turn confounds studies relating to the question of when and under what circumstances the three separate varieties of Melanesian Pidgin emerged, as written records suggesting relative homogeneity may well have masked spoken heterogeneity.

2 Sources

In this section of the paper, I will undertake a critical examination of pre-modern written sources on Melanesian Pidgin. For the most part, information is provided more or less in passing in books written by European travellers, plantation owners, labour recruiters and missionaries. Very few publications were ever intended to be used primarily as sources of linguistic information on Melanesian Pidgin. A typical source of information on late nineteenth century Melanesian Pidgin comes in quotations such as the following, from the captain of a recruiting vessel on a small island in Vila harbour in Vanuatu:

During the afternoon of the day after the wreck, when we were all at work fixing up our camp, one of the Fijians—who seemed to keep their eyes all around them—said to me:

“Cappen! man Vila, he come!” [Wawn 1893(1973):142-43]

Many of these authors were writing some years later from memory, or on the basis of notes taken many years ago. The quote just presented, for example, is found in a book published in 1893, and refers to a shipwreck that took place in 1878, fifteen years earlier.

2.1 Pidgin Fantasies

Bickerton and Odo (1976:13) maintain that early European accounts of incipient pidgins and creoles involve widespread “comic-book stereotyping of non-standard varieties”. Dutton (1980:2) also suggests that we should reserve judgement on the accuracy of many early records of Melanesian Pidgin for the same reason. There is certainly evidence that Europeans did sometimes misrepresent pre-modern era Melanesian speech in the direction of their own preconceptions of how they thought Melanesians “ought” to be speaking.

The early twentieth century plantation manager in Vanuatu, Robert Fletcher, passed judgement on Bislama as a language (as well as his knowledge of it) as follows, in one of his letters to England soon after his arrival in the islands in 1912:

Everybody talks to the natives in Biche-la-mar, which is a kind of pidgin English. It is used by French and English; and by natives themselves when talking to men of a different tribe. Even French and English people talk it to one another. It is a weird kind of Esperanto. I haven't got the hang of it yet, but will give you some examples later on.
[Asterisk 1923:26-27]²

Within five weeks, he wrote another letter in which he obviously thought he had “got the hang of it”, as he proceeded to demonstrate his new-found skill to his corre-

² Fletcher's letters were published, unbeknown to him, by his friend in England, Bohun Lynch. To preserve the writer's anonymity, they were published under the name of “Asterisk”.

spondent in England in reporting the following dialogue between himself and the recently converted Nirawa, whose Christian faith he wanted to test:

"Time you altogether dead-finish, Nirawa, where you stop?"

"Me no savvy, master. Missie (missionary) he speak body belong me go in ground, wind belong me go up-tree (on high, aloft, etc.). Me think he speak altogether gammon too much. Me think time me fellow dead-finish me stop altogether same pig." [Asterisk 1923:37-38]

This text should not be taken too seriously as an exact rendering of the conversation between Fletcher and Nirawa, however. Even if we ignore the writer's own reference of five weeks before to his limited capabilities in Bislama, there are some features of Nirawa's answer in themselves that appear highly suspicious. To express similarity, for instance, there are many other earlier sources which suggest that Nirawa probably would not have said *altogether same pig*, but something that would have been written as *all same pig* or as *all the same pig*. No other source that I have seen includes the phrase *go up-tree* as meaning 'rise'. Judging by what other sources record, and by what has survived into modern Bislama, it seems likely that Fletcher was confusing this with what he might have written as *go on top*. Fletcher also seems to have confused the first person pronouns *me* and *me fellow*, assuming that they were merely variant forms. However, after 1914, he consistently uses the former as a singular pronoun and the latter for the plural, correctly reflecting modern usage.

There are other writers in the past who have gone much further in adopting a comic approach to Bislama. Fortunately, the more extreme forms of this genre are easily recognizable as racist stereotyping of Melanesians' linguistic abilities. One notorious case that can be quoted involves what was repeatedly claimed to be the word for 'saw' in Bislama. Johnson (1922:48) claims that this was expressed as:

... brother belong ackus (axe), pullem he come, pushem he go.

The joke is repeated in Alexander (1927:215):

...saw... "E one feller something belong kai-kai wood, 'e...come, 'e go, 'e come back, 'e ackis...belong teeth belong tommyhawk.

It even lasted into the 1930s:³

some-fella-thing belongem-white-man, 'e-come, 'e-go, 'e-kai-kai-wood [Bellamy 1933:247]

Pull'im 'e come, push'im 'e go; wool 'e fall down. [Harrison 1937:145]

However, such reported “words” for ‘saw’ in early twentieth century Bislama can fairly easily be disregarded. At best, these may represent oncc-off descriptions by ni-Vanuatu neophytes operating in an unfamiliar cultural milieu which became part of the folklore of Melanesian Pidgin, just as some of the more out-of-touch present-day Europeans in Port Moresby like to pretend that Papua New Guineans refer to a ‘helicopter’ as *miksmasta blong Jisas Krai*s, rather than *helikopta*.

2.2 Anglicisation

Many pre-modern written sources include lexical items and constructions which are not part of any variety of modern Melanesian Pidgin and which appear to represent direct incorporations from English. Keesing (1988:41), speaking of pre-modern sources for Melanesian Pidgin, concludes that “almost all observers have heavily anglicized their renderings of pidgin.” Anglicisms in written sources potentially have two quite different sources, however. The first of these involves reinterpretations of Melanesian speech by European observers in the direction of their own language, while the second involves possible accommodation by Melanesians to their English-speaking interlocutors.

During the 1950s, the well-known British television personality David Attenborough travelled to Vanuatu. Part of his conversation with a leader of the John Frum cargo cult on Tanna was reported as follows:

Me savvy you will come...John Frum 'e speak me two weeks ago. 'E say two white man 'e come to ask all thing about red cross and John. [Attenborough 1983:114]

³ This tired joke might have died a decent death half a century ago, except that it was resurrected—in modern spelling—in a volume that appeared in the 1980s, in a book aimed at the tourist market:

Wanfala samting blong kakae wud; i kam i go i kambak; brata blong tamiok. [Tryon (undated):7]

This reads almost like a deliberate parody of nineteenth century texts in Bislama. From what we know of modern Bislama, it is almost impossible to consider that one ni-Vanuatu would have addressed another ni-Vanuatu in this way. We can be certain that a present-day person from Tanna, speaking to another ni-Vanuatu, would have expressed the same meaning more like the following:

Mi save se bae yu kam... John Frum i talem long mi olsem ia tu wik i go finis. Hem i talem se bae tu waetman i kam blong askem olgeta samting long saed blong red kros mo John.

David Attenborough may have been deliberately satirising the speech of Melane- sians, as described in the preceding section, though we might presume that his consid- erable experience as a world traveller in modern times would have made this less likely. There are three other possible explanations for his inaccuracy here. The first is that he may have unintentionally “corrected” the Bislama towards standard English himself, possibly from incomplete jottings that he took down at the time. The second possible explanation is that he may have deliberately shifted the speech towards English to make it easier for his readers to understand. Finally, he may have accu- rately recorded the speech of an individual who himself thought he was speaking not Bislama but English, recognizing that Attenborough was not a Bislama speaker. This kind of accommodation is something that certainly does happen. For instance, Thurston (1987:5) reports:

... I have observed Niuginians speaking to expatriates in Papua New Guinea in sim- plified Tok Pisin. When I first arrived in 1975, my ability to understand fluent Tok Pisin was minimal. In order to help me communicate, my Anêm hosts spoke in painfully slow Tok Pisin in which they used mostly content words—a type of telegraphic Tok Pisin. Over time, they gradually adjusted their speech until it was no different from the way they speak Tok Pisin with one another.⁴

⁴ Similarly, when I first went to do fieldwork on the island of Paama in Vanuatu in 1976, after having spent a month in Vila, the capital, “learning Bislama”, I thought I was getting by quite well in the language. Thirteen years later, somebody was reminiscing with me about those days, and commented how hard it had been to speak to me then because I could not speak Bislama, and because he had to speak English to me. I certainly did not suspect that people thought they were speaking English at the time.

2.3 Generalization of Local Melanesian Pidgin Features

A further homogenizing influence in the written record of Melanesian Pidgin has been the tendency of Europeans to assume that lexical items, and perhaps also grammatical constructions, encountered in one part of Melanesia were also current in other parts of Melanesia. Until the mid-1880s, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu were completely undivided by any kind of national boundaries, and there were no central colonial governments. Labour recruiting vessels plied the waters of Melanesia with complete disregard for present-day boundaries from the Loyalty Islands in the south to New Ireland in the north. Many European observers at the time referred simply to "South Seas English" or "Kanakan English", regardless of whether a speaker originated from New Caledonia, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands or Papua New Guinea.

Colin Simpson is one writer who we can be quite certain is guilty of this because his material is so recent. He wrote an account of his travels through parts of Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu in the early 1950s, and it would appear that he assumed that usages current in Papua New Guinea were also current in Vanuatu. For instance, he uses the words *diwai* 'tree' (Simpson 1955:97) and *longlong* 'crazy' (Simpson 1955:113) in a Vanuatu context. These words are only ever used in Tok Pisin, however, and the appropriate words in Bislama are *wud* (or *tri*) and *hafmad* respectively. He also reports *tokim* 'tell' as a transitive verb in a Bislama context (Simpson 1955:97), but, once again, this is only found in Tok Pisin. In Bislama, *tok* 'tell off' and *toktok* 'talk' are used intransitively, while the transitive verb can only be *talem* 'tell' (which does not occur in Tok Pisin). In the same way, Tryon (1982:274) generalizes his knowledge of the Bislama form *oli* to Solomons Pijin in his quoted example *ol i developem economic infrastructure*, when even the most anglicized Solomons Pijin speaker would almost certainly use *olgeta* before the verb, and not *ol i*.

3 The Evaluation of Pre-Modern Sources

There is real potential for disagreement about how to interpret pre-modern written records. Clark (1979-80:23-24), for example, makes a case that most of the writers whose materials we are referring to were quoting actual events, rather than producing fiction derived from their imaginations. He also points out that there was no particular reason

for most of these writers to have deliberately falsified reports of the kind of speech that they attributed to Melanesians. He makes the final point that in any case, there are remarkable consistencies between most of the kinds of things that are attributed to Melanesians from different authors writing in different places about different things and for different reasons. Thus, Clark's position is that we can take pre-modern sources at something close to face value.

Keesing (1988:41, 119), on the other hand, argues that Europeans heavily anglicized the lexicon of nineteenth century Melanesian Pidgin, and unsystematically mangled its grammar, again often in the direction of English, to the point where he implies that we should interpret written evidence more or less as we wish:

... we have texts such as Captain Moresby's description ... of how, on Erromango in 1872, a Lieutenant Smith negotiated with the "eastern chiefs" to signal that they understood his decision not to launch a punitive expedition against them by having them "make a paper" We may presume that for the interpreter and the Erromangans, the agreement was to mek-em pepa. [Keesing 1988:125]

It is, in fact, possible to assign degrees of reliability to pre-modern sources in many cases. Robert Fletcher, who was the author of the inaccurate quotation that I referred to earlier, was writing initially on the basis of a five week acquaintance with Bislama. David Attenborough's time in Vanuatu was also only a few weeks. Many published accounts of experiences in the Pacific, however, were based on much longer periods of talking with Melanesians. Fletcher was not only a very elegant and entertaining writer in English, but he also had a natural flair for languages. Letters that he wrote later suggests that after a couple of years, he acquired a very comfortable command of Bislama.⁵ In 1916, he wrote quite a nine-page satirical skit in Bislama which demonstrated a clever, and remarkably modern-looking, command of the language.⁶

There are real risks in making presumptions such as those made by Keesing as they are based on a Chomskyan assumption that Melanesian Pidgin had an absolutely sys-

⁵ He even managed to father and rear a son through the medium of Bislama until he left Vanuatu in 1919.

⁶ This skit possibly even represents the first published literary effort in any variety of Melanesian Pidgin.

tematic grammar. While the Erromangans may have said *mekem pepa*, we cannot rule out the possibility that in the early 1870s, they actually did say *mek pepa*, especially since *mek* survives residually without the transitive suffix in modern Bislama in forms such as *mektrabol* 'be a nuisance', *meknoes* 'cause disturbance', *mekwanem* 'do what' and so on.

In evaluating pre-modern written materials in Melanesian Pidgin, we can conclude that if a quotation is provided by a writer who was writing on the basis of an extended period of contact with Melanesians, if it is internally consistent, if it is consistent with other sources from the time, or if it is consistent with what we know of present day varieties of the language, then it should be safe to assume that it is fairly representative of Melanesian usage at the time.

4 The Emergence of Dialect Differences

From what has been said so far, it would be conceivable to argue that the patterns of speech represented in nineteenth century written accounts of contacts with Melanesians represent a special koineised European register of "South Seas English". Thus, dialect differences could have emerged among Melanesians speaking Pidgin somewhat earlier than is suggested by the written record. A koineised variety used by Europeans would not necessarily have borne a direct resemblance to the actual speech of Melanesians from Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu at the time, even though it may well have been reasonably well understood to people from all these areas.

At the same time, it is possible to argue that the relatively uniform speech of pre-modern written records accurately reflects an earlier linguistic uniformity throughout Melanesia, and that modern dialect differences did not emerge until relatively late. This is the view expressed by Keesing (1988:53), who argues that until the 1880s, there was a single dialect of Pacific Pidgin (that was spoken not just in Melanesia, though most of its speakers would still have been Melanesians, at least by the late nineteenth century) which was structurally uniform throughout the area where it was spoken. This uniformity, he argues, was maintained by the constant feeding of labourers from one plantation situation to another. He goes so far as to argue that among bush speakers of Bislama and Solomons Pijin, the differences were minimal even as late as the 1930s (Keesing 1988:173).

Keesing (1988:57) concedes that some local lexical conventions were in force during the late nineteenth century, but these represented superficial differences which were quickly learned by newcomers from other Pidgin-speaking locations. There is certainly convincing evidence for the existence of regional lexicons. On the basis of documentary and other evidence, I have argued (Crowley, in press) that some words of local vernacular and French origin were in use in Bislama in Vanuatu by the 1880s and these words are for the most part not attested anywhere outside Vanuatu. Similarly, Mühlhäusler (1979:193) points to evidence that words of New Britain origin, and words of German origin began entering Tok Pisin around the same time.

However, the relative lexical homogeneity of the written record provided by Europeans should not necessarily be interpreted as meaning that the differences were as slight as they appear. Most words of Melanesian origin in all varieties of Melanesian Pidgin fall into the areas of flora, fauna and Melanesian cultural beliefs and practices. These semantic fields are rarely touched upon in most European sources so the absence of recorded vocabulary in these areas is not necessarily significant. In any case, the argument that Europeans anglicized the grammar would apply equally to the lexicon, so it is conceivable that Melanesian Pidgin lexicons were more diverse than the record suggests. In Crowley (in press), I argue, for instance, that while the word *navele* 'Barringtonia edulis' is attested in use by speakers of Melanesian Pidgin in Vanuatu by the late nineteenth century (Davillé 1895:54), it seems merely coincidental that other edible fruits and nuts such as *nangae* 'Canarium indicum' should have remained unrecorded in the written record for another forty years (Marshall 1927:6).

Keesing's hypothesis of a monolithic Melanesian plantation culture with a unified linguistic expression is also hard to tie in with the oral tradition of descendants of Solomon Islanders and ni-Vanuatu labourers living in Queensland today. Despite Keesing's (1986:165) claim that cultural ideas fused throughout the Melanesian Pidgin speaking community, descendants of ni-Vanuatu and Solomon Islanders have been recorded on tape by Clive Moore as reporting that plantation labourers jealously preserved their own magic while in Queensland, and even maintained their own separate vocabularies to express this. There is evidence that the modern Bislama words *masing* and *su*, probably of Ambrym origin, both referring to love magic and sorcery, were used by ni-Vanuatu (but not Solomon Islanders) in Queensland. The same tapes also

indicate that Papua New Guinean labourers (but not other Melanesians) in Queensland used a word something like *tamarama* with a similar meaning.⁷

Keesing (1988:57) also argues that there was an undifferentiated grammar of Melanesian Pidgin in the latter part of the nineteenth century. He states that documentary evidence does not support the contention that recognizable dialects were characterized by structural differences at this stage. Unfortunately, he does not test his assumption against the data. His own argument that documentary sources are anglicized would predict that sources from all Melanesian Pidgin speaking locations would end up looking alike anyway. Despite the evidence that I have pointed to in earlier sections of this paper that written sources have indeed tended to homogenize the data on Melanesian Pidgin, it is still possible to find evidence for structural heterogeneity towards the end of the nineteenth century.

For example, a comparison of the pronominal system reported for Samoan Plantation Pidgin with documentary evidence for the contemporary pronominal system in Bislama produces some quite significant differences:

Samoan Plantation Pidgin (Mühlhäusler 1978:96)

	Sg.	Pl.
1	<i>mi</i>	<i>mi ol</i>
2	<i>yu</i>	<i>yu ol</i>
3	<i>em/him/i</i>	<i>em/him/ol</i>

Bislama (Crowley, in press)

	Sg.	Dl.	Trl.	Pl.
1	<i>mi</i>	incl <i>yumi</i>	<i>yumi trifala</i>	<i>yumi olgeta</i>
		excl ?	?	<i>mifala, wi(fala?)</i>
2	<i>yu</i>	?	?	<i>yufala</i>
3	<i>hem/i</i>	<i>tufala</i>	<i>trifala</i>	<i>olgeta(fala), hemfala</i>

Not only are there differences in form such as *yu ol* vs. *yufala* 'you (pl.)' and *ol* vs. *olgetafala* 'they (pl.)', there is also evidence for a greater number of contrasts in pronominal categories in Bislama, i.e., the (possibly partial) emergence of dual and trial pro-

⁷ This appears to be a modern derivative by Melanesian Queenslanders of the Tok Pisin word *tambaran*.

nouns, as well as a distinction between inclusive and exclusive in the first person plural.

Differences between Samoan Plantation Pidgin and Bislama are not restricted just to the pronominal system. For instance, the interrogative “what” in Samoan Plantation Pidgin was recorded in most environments as *wat*, with *watnem* as an occasional pronominal variant (Mühlhäusler 1978:97).⁸ Sources for contemporary Bislama, however, strongly favour *wanem*. Pionnier (1913), whom Keesing (1988:101) specifically names as a reliable observer of late nineteenth century Bislama, points exclusively to the use of *wanem* rather than either of the Samoan Plantation Pidgin variants.

Given an innovating language such as nineteenth century Melanesian Pidgin, it is likely that innovations spreading with a floating labour pool reached some locations before others, and perhaps did not reach other locations at all. In Crowley (mimeo), for example, I argue that some features of early Melanesian Pidgin had possibly diffused to South Seas Jargon speakers in the Central Pacific. Thus, it seems quite plausible to argue that at any particular time, there were also structural differences between the Melanesian Pidgin of one part of the Pacific and another, even if these were only relatively small, and even if in some cases these only represented greater preferences towards one variant over another.

My own account of the evolution of the “predicate marker” *i* in Bislama (Crowley, in press) differs significantly from that in Mühlhäusler (1978:105), largely, it seems, because Bislama appears to have been well ahead of Tok Pisin in the spread of this feature.⁹ Whereas Mühlhäusler notes that *i* did not occur at all before verb phrases with a third person subject in the 1870s and 1880s in Tok Pisin, I noted that it is attested in 55% of comparable environments in Bislama at the same time. Mühlhäusler notes that it only begins to creep in in Tok Pisin only by the first decade of the twentieth century, whereas contemporary Bislama sources attest it in 97% of comparable environments. This feature reached only a 70% distribution in records of Tok Pisin by the 1920s and the 1930s, by which time its appearance was almost categorical in Bislama.

⁸ That *wat* is not simply an anglicism is suggested by the fact that this form is still common as a variant of *wanem* in modern Solomon’s Pijin.

⁹ And in modern Bislama, *i* has a wider distribution than in both Tok Pisin and Solomons Pijin.

The evolution of *i* in Bislama, therefore, appears to have been thirty or forty years ahead of Papua New Guinea.¹⁰ Thus, the argument for a monolithic Pacific-wide Melanesian Pidgin grammar in the nineteenth century seems unupportable.

5 Conclusions

In attempting to detail the history of Melanesian Pidgin and its divergence into the national dialects of today, we find ourselves severely handicapped by our sources. Some, perhaps most, writers commenting on or referring to pre-modern Melanesian speech have clearly anglicized what they heard, or they have modified it in other ways according to their own perceptions of how they think Melanesians ought to have been speaking. This means that linguists are placed in the position of having to decide how much they are going to believe what has been written. Some argue that we should have a fairly free hand to reinterpret documentary evidence. Unfortunately, this means that we may become just as guilty as nineteenth century observers of fabricating Melanesian speech and distorting the history of Melanesian Pidgin. Others may argue that what was written was recorded accurately, but this produces a view of a language that was almost unimaginably unsystematic for a very long time.

The view of the history of Melanesian Pidgin that I have tried to present in this paper is one in which there probably were some kinds of regional differences in both structure and lexicon in different Melanesian Pidgin speaking locations in the Pacific at any particular time. These differences existed, I have argued, despite the various kinds of stereotyping and homogenization in written sources. While labourers were in contact in Queensland and Samoa, or working on ships, these differences would have had a chance to diffuse, but the fact that particular features may have diffused does not necessarily mean that there was uniformity.

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¹⁰ There is also evidence to suggest that the spread of *i* occurred relatively early in Solomons Pijin as well as in Bislama.

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