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Tok Pisin and Hawai'i Creole English: Siblings or Wantoks?

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Abstract

Contemporary Tok Pisin and Hawai'i Creole English share many similar grammatical patterns, such as *no ken* for negative constructions and the *-im* transitive verb ending, as well as a number of lexemes of non-English origin, such as *kanaka* 'native', and *kaukau* 'sweet potato' in Tok Pisin and 'food' in Hawai'i Creole English. This discussion asks whether these similarities are signs of a shared ancestry – for example, the Proto Pacific Pidgin English posited by Keesing (1988) – or simply the result of both having originated in English and Oceanic environments. To answer this, grammatical forms in Tok Pisin are compared with those in Hawai'i Pidgin English, from which Hawai'i Creole English developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, using data collected from family memories of a grandfather who learned Hawai'i Pidgin English as a teenager in the 1890s. Although there are similarities in some prominent words and morphemes such as the possessive *brong / bilong* and the adjective marker *-fela*, these can be explained as the result of borrowing individual items (and some grammatical 'baggage') from an earlier Chinese Pidgin English to which the first speakers of each language were exposed. The underlying grammatical structure of Tok Pisin is Oceanic, while that of Hawai'i Pidgin English is not, and there are significant differences in the ways that these shared words and morphemes are used. The evidence, therefore, points away from the two languages sharing a common ancestor.

1. Introduction

Anyone traveling from Papua New Guinea to Hawai'i is immediately struck by the similarities of Papua New Guinea Tok Pisin and the language linguists call Hawai'i Creole English and Hawai'i residents call Pidgin. When I moved to Hawai'i from Papua New Guinea for graduate school, I was amused by a sign for the *Royal Kaukau Restaurant* (*kaukau* being Tok Pisin 'sweet potato' and Hawai'i Creole English 'food'). I was also surprised to hear the neighbor who helped me unlock the door when I was locked out of my apartment say in what could have been perfect Tok Pisin, *Yu no laik yusim hama?* ('You don't want to use a hammer?') and *No ken brukim, isi* ('Don't break it, slowly!'). Male friends are affectionately called *baga* ('buddy, mate'), and indigenous Hawaiians proudly refer to themselves as *kanaka*, which also means 'native, indigenous' in Tok Pisin, but in a pejorative sense.

The question arises as to whether the apparent similarities are because of a genetic affiliation (i.e., they are siblings) or because of borrowings and diffusion (i.e., they are *wantoks*). Or are these similarities the result of chance borrowings? To answer these questions, I have used data collected in the late 1980s from a graduate student from Hawai'i who was as curious about Tok Pisin as I was about Hawai'i Creole English.

Her grandfather, Ichihei Odawa, had emigrated from Japan to Hawai'i as a nineteen-year-old in 1894. This was a time of great social and linguistic upheaval in

Hawai'i. The Hawaiian monarchy had been overthrown by Americans, and the 'Republic of Hawaii' they had set up was soon to be formally annexed by the United States. The indigenous Hawaiian population had been decimated by new diseases, such as measles, chickenpox and syphilis, introduced by Westerners since their first arrival at the end of the eighteenth century. Land tenure had changed from a traditional type of communal ownership to individual freehold, with much land quickly being bought up by American individuals and companies. The need for a healthy and pliant plantation workforce made plantation owners recruit large numbers of East Asian workers, such as Mr. Odawa. The various Asian communities quickly became the largest group in Hawai'i, so that even today, Hawai'i is the only US state with an Asian-American majority.

Hawai'i Pidgin English arose in this new society as Asian plantation workers speaking various languages had to communicate with Americans, Puerto Ricans, Portuguese, and indigenous Hawaiians. As people married outside their communities and children grew up in multi-ethnic neighborhoods and families, this pidgin became their native language, Hawai'i Creole English. Today, like Tok Pisin in Papua New Guinea, Hawai'i Creole English is the most widely spoken language in Hawai'i, though (also like Tok Pisin in Papua New Guinea) it has no formal standing in schools. It is rarely used in public or private writing and is rarely heard on the radio or television. Like Tok Pisin, it is a mark of local identity, but even for many native speakers, it is not thought of as a 'real' language (like English) and is, for some, a reminder of the colonial plantation past.

In the 1980s, when I first met his granddaughter (then, a mature-age post-graduate student), Mr. Odawa had already passed away several years previously. His family, whose first languages are Hawai'i Creole English and English, fondly remembered the 'quaint' way their grandfather spoke. His granddaughter and I compared contemporary Tok Pisin with the way she and her family remembered their grandfather speaking, by each of us asking the other how certain phrases were said in either Tok Pisin or Mr. Odawa's Hawai'i Pidgin English. From this, it was possible to compile lists of words and constructions that were similar and different.¹ This approach does have obvious limitations, as the examples she remembered of Mr. Odawa's Hawai'i Pidgin English were not in context and could not always be confirmed by the actual speaker himself. Many of her reconstructions were later verified or redefined by other members of her family; these were used as primary data. This method did, however, provide a means to compare certain aspects today's Tok Pisin with a very early form of Hawai'i Pidgin English, the precursor to modern Hawai'i Creole English, which was rarely recorded in writing at the time of its genesis. From these comparisons, we can make some preliminary conclusions as to whether the two languages are siblings or wantoks.

¹ I would like to thank Marion Nomura and her family for sharing their family memories with me and for the aloha with which she resurrected her grandfather's speech.

This comparison looks at lexical and syntactic data only. As one can expect from an adult second language learner, Mr. Odawa's pronunciation was heavily influenced by his native Japanese, the only other language he spoke. He did not differentiate between [l] and [r], using only a single flapped consonant, written as *r* below. This distinction is not made in Hawaiian or Japanese, the native languages of many early Hawai'i Pidgin English speakers, but, since modern Hawai'i Creole English speakers do make this distinction, there is a good chance that many early Hawai'i Pidgin English speakers differentiated between these sounds as well. On the other hand, both Hawaiian and Japanese have a basic CV syllable construction, and even today, many Hawai'i Creole English words derived from English have an extra vowel to break up English consonant clusters (e.g., *kakaroch* for 'cockroach'). This was also a characteristic of Mr. Odawa's speech.

2. The Oceanic hypothesis

Keesing (1988) has hypothesized that the various pidgin Englishes of Melanesia and elsewhere in the southern Pacific are the descendants of an early Proto Pacific Pidgin English that had its origin in the northern and eastern Pacific islands. According to this hypothesis, a pidgin arose on multi-ethnic ships with English-speaking officers and crews that had many Micronesians and Polynesians. According to this hypothesis, a pidgin arose on multi-ethnic ships with English-speaking officers and crews that had many Micronesians and Polynesians. These sailors spread this pidgin to various Pacific ports. Later, traders and returning plantation workers spread it further, including to island Melanesia. Although this pidgin moved from the eastern and northern Pacific to the southwest, it retained its essentially East Oceanic grammatical framework.

If this hypothesis is true, early Hawai'i Pidgin English had its origins around 1870 in the Proto Pacific Pidgin English of sailors and i-Kiribati plantation workers and was then learned by Asian immigrant workers who came later. Several decades later, it was brought to Melanesia mainly by blackbirded Melanesian laborers returning from plantations in Queensland, Fiji, and Sāmoa, but also by Melanesian men who worked on Pacific trading ships. Thus, according to this hypothesis, Hawai'i Pidgin English (and, by extension, modern Hawai'i Creole English) and Tok Pisin share a common ancestor in Proto Pacific Pidgin English.

3. Evidence for a common Oceanic origin

Keesing's Oceanic hypothesis is based on features of Tok Pisin and closely related Vanuatu Bislama and Solomons Pijin that have clear parallels in Oceanic languages. If it is correct, and if Tok Pisin and Hawai'i Pidgin English (and, therefore, Hawai'i Creole English) have a common Oceanic origin, then Mr. Odawa's Hawai'i Pidgin English should also show these features that can be traced back to similar constructions in East Oceanic languages.

Three such features could be firmly identified. One is the use of time and aspect particles. Keesing (1988:14) gives the presence of Hawaiian-derived *pau* ‘finish’ to mark non-durative completed aspect in Hawai’i Pidgin English as evidence for its Oceanic grammatical structure. Tok Pisin *pinis* (from English finish) works in the same way:

- (1) Hanahana pau, orait, yu-fera slip / Wok-im pinis, orait yu-pela slip.²
 work finish, then you-PL sleep/ work-TR finish, then you-PL sleep.³
 ‘When you’ve finished working, then you can sleep.’

Another common tense-aspect marker that was remembered was the future marker *baimbai* (from English by and by), now usually contracted to *bai* in modern Tok Pisin. The use of *bin* (from English been) to mark past tense is limited to Tok Pisin and is not a feature of Mr. Odawa’s Hawai’i Pidgin English. Moreover, the use of *wen* (from English went), used as a preverbal particle in modern Hawai’i Creole English to mark past tense, was not remembered in Mr. Odawa’s Hawai’i Pidgin English.

Another common form is the use of *ol* as a plural marker. While this is not used in modern Hawai’i Creole English, it was used in Mr. Odawa’s Hawai’i Pidgin English, as it is in modern Tok Pisin. This is similar to the pre-noun plural articles or markers in many Oceanic languages.

4. Evidence against a common Oceanic origin

There are, however, a number of typical Oceanic grammatical features lacking in Mr. Odawa’s Hawai’i Pidgin English. These include the lack of a first person non-singular inclusive/exclusive pronoun distinction, productive reduplication, marked transitivity, and predicate marker. Their presence in Tok Pisin point to an Oceanic origin for Tok Pisin and, therefore, to different origins of the two languages (Tok Pisin and Mr. Odawa’s Hawai’i Pidgin English).

One area where both Mr. Odawa’s Hawai’i Pidgin English and Tok Pisin show many similarities is in their pronoun systems. As discussed below, both languages use *-fera / -pela* to mark first and second person non-singular, and both use a *-tu-* infix before *-fera / -pela* to mark dual. But while Tok Pisin makes the same first person non-singular inclusive / exclusive distinction that almost all Oceanic languages make (*yumi / mipela*, respectively), Mr. Odawa’s Hawai’i Pidgin English did not. Because this is so nearly universal in Oceanic languages, its absence is a strong counterargument to Mr. Odawa’s Hawai’i Pidgin English having the same Oceanic origins that Tok Pisin has.

² When pairs of word or phrases are given, the first is from Mr. Odawa’s Hawai’i Pidgin English and the second from contemporary Tok Pisin, unless otherwise noted.

³ The following abbreviations are used in this work: 3 third person; ADJ adjective marker; ART article, FUT future marker; PL plural marker; POSS possessive marker; PREP non-specific locative and temporal preposition; SG singular; TR transitive marker.

Another common feature in Oceanic languages is reduplication. This is a productive feature of Oceanic languages to create new words or to change the grammatical category of a word. Tok Pisin uses this, for example, to differentiate between intransitive and transitive verbs:

(2)	was-im	was-was	luk-im	luk-luk
	wash-TR	wash-wash	see-TR	see-see
	'wash something'	'wash oneself'	'see something'	'look'

This was not evident in the data from Mr. Odawa's Hawai'i Pidgin English. Indeed, the only reduplicated words were of Hawaiian origin, such as *hanahana* 'to work' and were apparently borrowed in their reduplicated form.

Overt marking of transitivity is another mark of Oceanic languages. Keesing (1988:119) called the use of the transitive marker *-im* in Tok Pisin 'unmistakable evidence of the stamp of Oceanic grammar'. This was evident in only one example in Mr. Odawa's Hawai'i Pidgin English (*givim* 'give'). This is surprising, since it has been attested in Hawai'i since the early nineteenth century, and is a productive transitive marker in modern Hawai'i Creole English (realized as either as *-im* or *-om*).

Most Oceanic languages have subject-referencing pronouns, clitics that are prefixed to the verb and are co-referential with the person and number of the subject. Keesing (1988:143-170) gives evidence that what is often called the predicate marker in Tok Pisin (*i*) is actually this same subject-referencing clitic that has lost the distinctions of number and person (except in first person, where it is realized as zero). Mr. Odawa did not appear to use this kind of clitic, as the following sentences show:

- (3) Mi givim yu kaukau.
 1SG give you:SG food
 'I'll give you some food.'
- (4) Yu-fera olsem haole.
 you-PL like white.person
 'You people are just like white folk.'

Indeed, as in Japanese, he often left out any overt reference to a subject, e.g.,

- (5) Nufu kaukau, baimbai slip.
 when eat FUT sleep
 'When we've eaten, we'll go to sleep.'

As discussed below, both Mr. Odawa's Hawai'i Pidgin English and Tok Pisin use the preposition *brong / bilong* to mark possession. Tok Pisin also uses a general locative and temporal preposition *long*, either alone or with words specifying the location. This follows an Oceanic pattern in which locative expressions must be followed by a general preposition, as in Hawaiian

- (6) lalo o ke kumula'au
 under PREP ART tree
 'under the tree'

which in Tok Pisin would have a similar construction:

- (7) aninit long diwai
 under PREP tree
 'under the tree'

This structure is maintained in modern Hawai'i Creole English,

- (8) andanit a da chri
 under PREP the tree
 'under the tree'

This feature is conspicuous by its absence in Mr. Odawa's speech. Instead he is remembered for often using Japanese postpositions, such as made 'until' in the following sentence:

- (9) Mi stap ten klok made.
 I stay ten o'clock until
 'I'll stay until ten o'clock.'

One surprising difference between Mr. Odawa's Hawai'i Pidgin English and not only Tok Pisin and Oceanic languages, but also his native Japanese, was his use of yes and no to answer negative questions. In English, a yes or no answer repeats the truth value of the original statement itself, whereas in Oceanic languages, Japanese, and Tok Pisin, it reflects whether the speaker agrees or disagrees with the questions ('yes, you are correct' or 'no, you are incorrect'), as in the following Tok Pisin sentences:

- (10) Yu no dring-im wara?
 you:SG no drink-TR water
 'Aren't you drinking water?'
- (11) Yes, mi no dring-im.
 yes I no drink
 'No, I'm not drinking. (Yes, you're correct, I'm not drinking).'
- (12) No, mi dring-im.
 no I drink-TR
 'Yes, I am drinking. (No, you're incorrect, I am drinking).'

This is also the type of answer given in modern Hawai'i Creole English, especially by children who are still learning English. But surprisingly, Mr. Odawa is remembered as using an English-style construction, answering:

- (13) No, mi drinku.
no I drink
'No, I am drinking.'

He would not have said:

- (14) *Yes, mi no drinku.
yes I no drink
'Yes, I'm not drinking.'

5. Ambiguous evidence

Some similarities between Mr. Odawa's Hawai'i Pidgin English and Tok Pisin may be similar to Oceanic languages, but because these are similar to lexical or syntactic constructions in other relevant non-Oceanic languages, these cannot be seen as clear evidence for a common Oceanic origin.

One such similarity is the position of interrogatives. Both Mr. Odawa's Hawai'i Pidgin English and Tok Pisin do not have an obligatory interrogative fronting rule like English, as the sentence-final position of *wat* in the following example shows:

- (15) Yu laiki wat?
2SG like what
'What would you like?'

While this is common to most Oceanic languages, it is also common to Mr. Odawa's native Japanese, so it is more an indication that his Hawai'i Pidgin English is not English than that it is Oceanic. Evidence that Japanese was a strong influence in Mr. Odawa's use of interrogatives is shown by the fact that, in addition to English-derived interrogatives such as *hu* 'who', *wat* 'what', and *watpo* 'why' (Tok Pisin *husat*, *wanem*, *watpo* or *bilong wanem*, respectively), he also used *nashite* and *naze* 'why', both derived from Japanese.

Sentence word order is another area that is ambiguous. Word order in Oceanic languages is typically SVO. It is difficult to tell whether Mr. Odawa's basic word order was SVO like English, modern Hawai'i Creole English, and most Oceanic languages, or SOV, like his native Japanese. The data show sentences such as (16) that were SVO and those such as (17) that were SOV:

(16) Yu-fera gachi diswan.
 you-PL get this
 'You folks get this one.'

(17) Taim mi Japan go
 when I Japan go
 'When I went to Japan'

Another construction with the same form as Oceanic languages, but also English or Japanese, was the form of the noun phrase. In all sentences with noun phrases, the same order was used, determiner + adjective + noun, e.g.,

(18) tufere gudu wahine
 two good woman
 'two good women'

This is the same construction in English, Japanese, and Oceanic languages.

6. Chinese Pidgin English morphemes

A number of items seem to have their origin in Chinese Pidgin English. Some of these are the most characteristic markers of modern Hawai'i Creole English and Tok Pisin, including the suffix *-fera* / *-pela* (from English fellow), a Chinese Pidgin English marker for numerals, adjectives, and plural pronouns (Keesing 1988:95). The different uses in each language point to independent adoptions of this suffix which, at least in the case of Melanesia, was probably brought by European sailors, rather than the Chinese themselves.

In both Mr. Odawa's Hawai'i Pidgin English and Tok Pisin, this suffix is used for numerals, such as *wanfera* / *wanpela* "one", e.g.,

(19) wanfera man / wanpela man
 one man one man
 'one man / a man'

But for Mr. Odawa, *wanfera* could be used only with humans; the following phrase was ungrammatical for him, while its equivalent in Tok Pisin is quite acceptable:

(20) *wanfera tebol / wanpela tebol
 one table / one table
 'one table'

Another use of *-fera* / *-pela* in both languages is as an adjectival marker, e.g.,

(21) bigfera / bikpela
 'big'

But, again, there was an interesting difference in the use of this suffix. In Mr. Odawa's Hawai'i Pidgin English, the *-fera* suffix was omitted in a pre-noun position e.g.,

- (22) tu-fera gud wahine
two-ADJ good woman
'two good women'

It was used only in predicate adjectives, e.g.,

- (23) Man him big-fera.
man 3SG big-ADJ
'The man is big.'

This is exactly the opposite of Tok Pisin, where adjectives in noun phrases normally have the *-pela* suffix, while predicate adjectives need not, e.g.,

- (24) tu-pela gut-pela meri
two-ADJ good-ADJ woman
'two good women'

- (25) Man em bik (or bik-pela).
man 3SG big big-ADJ
'The man is big.'

Interestingly, two high frequency adjectives without the *-fera* suffix derived from English in Mr. Odawa's Hawai'i Pidgin English also have equivalents without the *-pela* endings in Tok Pisin, *tumachi / tumas* "much" (from English 'too much') and *rerebet* 'very little.' The latter has a cognate in Bislama and Solomons Pijin *lelebet*, while Tok Pisin uses Kuanua-derived *liklik* without the *-pela* suffix:

- (26) rerebet mani / liklik mani
very.little money little money
'very little money'

- (27) tomachi pirikia / tumas trabel
much trouble much trouble
'too much trouble'

The third use of *-fera / -pela* in both Mr. Odawa's Hawai'i Pidgin English and Tok Pisin is to mark first and second person non-singular forms:

	Singular	Dual	Plural
first	mi /mi	mitufera /mitupela	mifera / mipela
second	yu /yu	yutufera /yutupela	yufera / yupela

The data from Mr. Odawa showed *him* used as a third person singular pronoun, as in (23). The Tok Pisin equivalent *em* also has its origin in English ‘him.’ But, as mentioned above, the pronominal systems differ greatly in Tok Pisin having an Oceanic inclusive / exclusive first person non-singular distinction, while Mr. Odawa’s Hawai’i Pidgin English did not show this Oceanic trait.

One ubiquitous lexical item in both languages that can be traced back to Chinese Pidgin English is the genitive preposition *brong* / *bilong*, e.g.,

- (28) haus brong mi / haus bilong mi
 house POSS I house POSS I
 ‘It’s my house.’

Other common items with English etymologies that also existed in Chinese Pidgin English are *sapos* ‘if’ and *olsem* ‘that’.

7. Conclusion

While there are words and morphemes that are common in contemporary Hawai’i Creole English and Tok Pisin, there is little evidence that these are the result of a common genetic link between the languages themselves inherited from an Oceanic origin. The only strong evidence is the use of verbal tense-aspect markers and a pre-noun plural marker.

The most obvious similarities, such as the use of the suffix *-fera* / *-pela* and the use of the possessive preposition *brong* / *bilong*, can be explained as borrowings from Chinese Pidgin English. These may have come to Hawai’i directly with the first Asian immigrants from China, but, in the case of Tok Pisin, they are more likely to have been introduced by Western sailors and traders who were acquainted with Chinese Pidgin English through visits to Chinese ports.

The absence in Mr. Odawa’s Hawai’i Pidgin English of a number of typical Oceanic features that are present in Tok Pisin constitutes strong evidence against an Oceanic basis for the variety of Hawai’i Pidgin English he spoke. This evidence includes the absence of first person plural inclusive and exclusive pronouns, productive reduplication, overt transitivity marking, subject marker clitics or predicate marker, and locative and temporal preposition constructions. Since Mr. Odawa’s speech represents the very early form of Hawai’i Pidgin English that was the ancestor of Hawai’i Creole English, we must conclude that Hawai’i Creole English and Tok Pisin are wantoks, but not genetically related sibling languages.

Reference

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