

A NOTE ON GEORG VON DER GABELENTZ'S IDEAS ON
THE POSSIBILITY OF "MISCHSPRACHEN"¹

Ranier Lang

Institute of Applied Social and Economic Research

The notion of hybrid languages (Mischsprachen, "mixed languages") has long attracted scholars whenever a language could not unambiguously be classified because of otherwise unexplainable structural or lexical abnormalities. Substratum theory was a flourishing industry in Indoeuropean studies (Jespersen 1959) and some of today's scholars still have recourse to the concept of substratum (see, e.g., Wurm et al. 1975).

In Pacific linguistic studies, the Melanesian languages posed a problem for the scholars studying the Austronesian languages. On the one hand, there were obvious similarities between the Melanesian and Polynesian languages, but there were also quite noticeable differences which demanded explanation. As the Polynesian languages were isolated from any other language groups while the Melanesian languages were in close proximity to Papuan languages, it appeared natural to explain the aberrant character of the Melanesian languages as being due to Papuan influence. Von der Gabelentz and Meyer made a first attempt to abstract from this concrete situation a

set of conditions that would allow for hybrid languages. The systematic nature of their attempt deserves documentation and the substance of this note is directed to that goal.²

Georg von der Gabelentz and A.B. Meyer published their addition to Hans Conon von der Gabelentz's Die melanesischen Sprachen in 1882, four years after the appearance of Volume 1 of Osthoff and Brugmann's Morphological Investigations in the Area of Indoeuropean Languages, a landmark in neogrammarian scholarship. Von der Gabelentz and Meyer's introduction deals with the problem of the relationship of the Malayo-Polynesian languages (as they called them) with the Melanesian languages. In the light of what was then known of the Melanesian languages and in view of the interests of their time and the linguistic ideas available, they tried to account for a number of anomalies which became apparent when they attempted to prove conclusively a clearcut and unproblematical family relationship. In the process they discuss a number of alternative explanations for the perceived problems, all of which they reject with the exception of one, namely that the Melanesian languages had to be pidgins. They devote considerable space to a discussion of this possibility and of these pidgins subsequently developing into full-fledged languages. The data on which they base their hypothesis are inadequate in many respects, and their ultimate conclusions have been superseded by theories based on more adequate data, and, in general, on better insights into the nature of language. Their significance lies in the way they argue for the concept of 'Mischsprachen' and the time at which they present their argument.

Their contribution appeared in 1882, but they make no specific reference to theories then current. It is significant, however, that the Junggrammatiker had published a series of important articles and books between 1876 and 1880, in which they had provoked many of their contemporaries with their insistence on the absolute regularity of sound changes without any exceptions (or so, at least, they were understood by many of their contemporaries). It was not until 1885, however, that

opposition to the Junggrammatiker made itself felt most clearly in print, one of the more important of the critics being Hugo Schuchardt (whom we may consider one of the founders of pidgin and creole studies). Schuchardt specifically addressed himself to the Junggrammatiker by titling his paper Against the Junggrammatiker; von der Gabelentz and Meyer, on the other hand, almost as if to avoid controversy and almost apologetically, simply argued for a certain point of view on the internal strength of their data and without reference to any outside theories. This is one of the reasons why their ideas appear to have gone largely unnoticed. Another was that their paper was more or less addressed to specialists in Malayo-Polynesian and Melanesian linguistics. And finally, while their contemporaries were arguing over sound laws, von der Gabelentz and Meyer specifically stated that the present state of Melanesian linguistics did not admit of any discussion of sound laws due to insufficient knowledge, and that their evidence derived from the compound findings of grammar and racial classification. This must have weakened their argument considerably in the eyes of their contemporaries, who had available to them a century of research in the reconstruction of the Indo-European sound systems, and changes within and across those systems.

Their argument runs essentially along the following lines. If there exists a Malayo-Melanesian linguistic relationship, then it is either pure or mixed. If it is pure, then either it derives from common ethnic ancestry or exchanging of languages. They consider both possibilities, and although they cannot show them to be impossible, they consider them improbable. Thus, they are forced to consider the possibility of mixed languages, and in so doing they come to reject as artificial the then commonly accepted dichotomy between languages that have borrowed heavily from others and fully mixed ones i.e., hybrids; what we are dealing with, they argue, is a difference in degree, not kind.

In addition to Hans Conon von der Gabelentz's data, Georg von der Gabelentz and A. J. Meyer claim to have data on only one more language, Mafoor (= Numfoor).³ But it is this language which leads them to a reconsideration of the then prevalent notions of genetic relationship. Mafoor, they found, was an agglutinating language of "the roughest [and] loosest kind" (376) with "a system of stem changes which no Malayo-Polynesian language shows and which by presently accepted standards are irreconcilable with the notion of an agglutinating language" (376). They then go on to argue that if one assumes for the moment that a linguistic relationship can be proven between "black" and "brown" islanders, one is then faced with the possibility that "morphologically different languages can be directly related to each other" (376). Furthermore, there is now a contradiction between physical anthropology and linguistics: linguistically two groups are related, racially they are not. How is this to be explained?

Historically, they note, it cannot be proven whether any of the two groups gave up its own tongue and accepted that of the other or vice versa, and similarly, it cannot be proved that a new racial group arose through racial admixture of two adjoining groups. They then consider a third hypothesis, namely that of common origin; the differences in the daughter languages of the assumed common proto-Malayo-Melanesian would provide evidence for the degree of distance from the parent language. But to measure that there are veritable obstacles in the case of these languages: it would be as if in the case of Indoeuropean we had only French and Marathi to compare rather than Latin and Sanskrit; again, in the case of Indoeuropean, rich grammatical and lexical materials are readily available, while in the case of Malayo-Melanesian no such state of affairs exists. Especially the lack of known synonyms would make the search for cognates difficult.

They then consider the rate of change and argue for rapid change to have taken place, due to the unavailability of literature (which might have tended to preserve

certain features of the languages in question), and also due to the fact that a life of constant nomadism, warring, and the habit of tabooing things was not particularly conducive to the preservation of the lexical or grammatical features of a language.

They reject the hypothesis that one of the groups gave up its own language and adopted that of the other on the following grounds: there are too many dissimilarities in the face of the similarities for the Melanesian languages to be directly descended from either the Malay or Polynesian languages and they must, therefore, be considered a third branch. They counter the objection that the adoption of another group's language might have taken place a very long time ago with the argument that, although it cannot be rejected out of hand, the probabilities are against this having happened because the receiver group would have to be the group less gifted (= occupying a lower cultural/intellectual stage?), "i.e., the black race" (380). And they ask rhetorically whether there can be any likelihood that all these groups, (i.e., the original Melanesians) gave up their own language and adopted a new one and that then all of them developed independently but parallel to each other.

They consider it more likely that a good many of the "black" and "brown" people underwent considerable race mixture, and that as a consequence of this, the languages influenced each other as well.

This leads them to reconsider the notion of linguistic relationship. They point out that the notion of hybrid languages is still not very popular, mainly because in the case of the languages then well known and studied (namely those of the Indoeuropean family), it seemed that one was always able to separate the loans from the original, even when there was a considerable admixture of foreign language material such as in the case of Urdu, the Gypsy dialects, etc. They go on to say

It seems that one can no longer deny that a language may have both a mother and a father, and it will be impossible to unambiguously identify those parts which attest to its inheritance from its father and those from its mother. There is a scale of innumerable possibilities between the adoption of a few loan words, the modification of an entire foreign vocabulary by the rules of the adopting language, and, finally, the complete mixture of original and foreign parts [von der Gabelentz and Meyer call this final stage of mixture "compromising" (381)], and one should assume according to the law of constancy [Stetigkeit] that a society, before it gives up its language for that of another group, should have run through all the points on the scale unless by very exceptional circumstances it is cut off from its traditions (381f.).

How fast or how slow a language may move from one end of the scale to the other they leave open, but they indicate that close study of "contact languages" may well provide important clues to answer the question of the rate of changes. By "contact languages" they mean full-fledged pidgins like Tok Pisin, that of sailors in ports, but also the attempts at communication between the soldiers of an occupying army and the inhabitants of the occupied country. They note that these provide examples of a kind of language genesis which has been appreciated too little. And they add, almost parenthetically, that these languages provide unique opportunities for research into language-in-change not in spite of, but because of, their unbound lack of rules.

The manner in which they envisage the lack of rules is not altogether convincing, mainly because it is built around the notion of the randomness of individual attempts at inter-linguistic communication. But they also take into consideration what we might call institutionalized societal factors, such as intermarriage when the children may grow up bilingually. And they pose a final question: once a pidgin has developed, is its use then restricted only between two groups or could it in fact happen that one of the original languages is gradually replaced by the pidgin? They point out that this depends on the strength and frequency of trade and other relations between the two groups, and on the inborn strength and disposition of the societies involved.

Thus, they very clearly stressed the importance of what had until then been considered marginal phenomena. Although they did not speculate on the origin of language per se they emphasized the study of the genesis of languages, and they rightly pointed out two areas of research: (a) language acquisition by children, in a bilingual context, and and (b) language creation by adult members of two linguistically separate communities wishing to communicate with one another. During the last ten years our attention has once again turned to these two areas.

NOTES

1. The substance of this note was first communicated in 1974 as a paper to the Eighth Annual Congress of the Linguistic Society of Papua New Guinea at Ukarumpa.
2. There is, of course, the wider problem of the notion of hybrid languages as it survives into present-day linguistic research, and especially as it relates to linguistic research in the Pacific. A few brief references will have to suffice. Aside from the standard references cited, by Hooley (1964) - i.e., (Mueller 1876-88, Capell 1943, Friederici 1913, Ray 1926) -- the following are also relevant: Mueller (1897) (arguing from ethnology to linguistics and for a Papuan substratum in the Melanesian languages), Schmidt (1899a, 1899b) (arguing against Mueller (1897) on a matter of generality, but allowing for "Mischsprachen", among them Motu and Jabem), Grace (1961, 1968) (arguing against the concept), Capell (1954, 1973) (professing a 'belief' in language mixture), Biggs (1972) (arguing strongly against the usefulness of the concept), Pawley (1972) (skeptical), Wurm (1954, 1972) and Wurm and McElhanon (1975) (sympathetic to the concept and hopeful of better documented cases). Some of the better documented cases (in and out of the Pacific) recently have been Magori (Dutton 1971), a village on the Indo-Aryan/Dravidian border (Gumperz 1969, Gumperz and Wilson 1971), and Mbugu (Goodman 1971).
3. This language was mistakenly considered a Papuan language by them.

REFERENCES

- Briggs, Bruce G. 1972. 'Implications of linguistic subgrouping with special reference to Polynesia', in Green and Kelly (eds.) 1972:143-152.
- Capell, A. 1943. The Linguistic Position of Southeastern Papua. Sydney: Australian Medical Publishing Co.
- _____ 1954. 'The Indonesian element in Melanesia', Journal of the Polynesian Society 63:263-5.
- _____ 1973. 'Maisin and the Idea of Language Mixture'. Unpublished seminar paper presented at the Department of Linguistics, Institute of Advanced Studies, The Australian National University.
- Dutton, T.E. 1971. 'Magori: Its Nature and Relationship to Other Languages of South-East Papua'. Unpublished paper presented to the Linguistic Society of Papua New Guinea.
- Friederici, Georg. 1913. Wissenschaftliche Ergebnisse einer amtlichen Forschungsreise nach dem Bismarck-Archipel im Jahre 1908. III. Untersuchungen ueber eine melanesische Wanderstrasse. Ergaenzungsheft Nr. 7 der Mitteilungen aus den Deutschen Schutzgebieten. Berlin: Mittler & Sohn.
- Gabelentz, Hans Conon von der. 1861-1879. Die Melanesischen Sprachen nach ihrem grammatischen Bau und ihrer Verwandtschaft unter sich und mit den malaïisch-polynesischen Sprachen. Abhandlungen der philologisch-historischen Classe der Koeniglich Saechsischen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Leipzig.

- Gabelentz, Georg von der and A.B. Meyer. 1882. Beitraege zur Kenntnis der melanesischen, mikronesischen und papuanischen Sprachen, ein erster Beitrag zu Hans Conon's von der Gabelentz Werke, "Die Melanesischen Sprachen." Abhandlungen der philologisch-historischen Classe der Koeniglich Saechsischen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften. 3. Band.
- Goodman, Morris. 1971. 'The strange case of Mbugu', in Hymes (ed.) 1971:243-54.
- Grace, George W. 1961. 'Austronesian linguistics and culture history', American Anthropologist 63:359-68.
- _____. 1968. 'Classification of the languages of the Pacific', in Vayda (ed.) 1968:63-81.
- Green, R.C. and M. Kelly (eds.). 1972. Studies in Oceanic Culture History: Volume 3. Honolulu: Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum.
- Gumperz, John J. 1969. 'Communication in multilingual societies', in Tyler (ed.) 1969:435-48.
- _____. and Robert Wilson. 1971. 'Convergence and creolization: A case from the Indo-Aryan/Dravidian border in India', in Hymes (ed.) 1971:151-67.
- Hooley, Bruce A. 1964. 'A brief history of New Guinea linguistics', Oceania 35:25-44.
- Hymes, Dell (ed.). 1971. Pidginization and Creolization of Languages. Proceedings of a Conference Held at the University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica, April 1968. Cambridge: University Press.
- Jespersen, Otto. 1959 [1922]. Language: Its Nature, Development and Origin. London: Allen & Unwin.
- Mueller, Friedrich, 1876-88. Grundriss der Sprachwissenschaft. Wien: Hoelder.
- _____. 1897 'Die Papuasprachen', Globus 72:140-1.

- Osthoff, Hermann, and Karl Brugmann. 1878. Morphologische Untersuchungen auf dem Gebiete der indogermanischen Sprachen. Leipzig: Hirzel.
- Pawley, Andrew. 1972. 'On the internal relationships of Eastern Oceanic languages', in Green and Kelly (eds.) 1972:1-142.
- Ray, S.H. 1926. A Comparative Study of the Melanesian Island Languages. Cambridge: University Press.
- Schmidt, P. Wilhelm. 1899a. Ueber das Verhaeltniss der melanesischen Sprachen zu den polynesischen und untereinander. Sitzungsberichte der kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften philologisch-historische Classe CXLI, Band 6, Abhandlungen.
- _____, 1899b. 'Die sprachlichen Verhaeltnisse Oceaniens (Melanesiens, Polynesiens, Mikronesiens und Indonesiens) in ihrer Bedeutung fuer die Ethnologie', Mittheilungen der Anthropologischen Gesellschaft in Wien 29:245-58.
- Schuchardt, Hugo. 1885. Ueber die Lautgesetze: Gegen die Junggrammatiker. Berlin: Oppenheim.
- Tyler, Stephen A. (ed.). 1969. Cognitive Anthropology. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Vayda, Andrew P. (ed.), 1968. Peoples and Cultures of the Pacific. Garden City, N.Y.: The Natural History Press.
- Wurm, S.A. 1954. 'The Indonesian element in Melanesia: A reply', Journal of the Polynesian Society 63:266-73.
- _____. 1972. 'The classification of Papuan languages and its problems', Linguistic Communications 6:118-78.
- _____, D.C. Laycock, and C.L. Voorhoeve. 1975. 'General Papuan characteristics', in Wurm (ed.) 1975:171-89.

_____ and K.A. McElhanon, 1975. 'Papuan language classification problems',
in Wurm (ed.) 1975:145-65.

Wurm, S.A. (ed.). 1975. New Guinea Area Languages and Language Study, Vol 1.
Papuan Languages and the New Guinea Linguistic Scene. Pacific Linguistics
C38.