

# LANGUAGE & LINGUISTICS IN MELANESIA

Journal of the Linguistic Society of Papua New Guinea ISSN: 0023-1959  
Vol. 38, 2020



## Considering the Etymology of the Word “Pidgin”

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A well-known theory on the etymology of “pidgin” postulates that the word is derived from “business.”<sup>1</sup> However, the Papua New Guinea Pidgin English (Tok Pisin, TP) word *pasin* seems clearly linked to “fashion” in Chinese Pidgin English (CP). It, in turn, can often be interchanged with CP **pidgin**.<sup>2</sup> I consult data from Leland (1876) for CP and suggest that the word *pasin* in current Tok Pisin (TP) is semantically (and historically) related to the word **pidgin** in CP. If this is the case, the form *pasin* in TP is not derived from a corruption of **bisnis**, but from CP **pidgin**.

**Key Words:** Etymology; *pasin*; *pidgin*; Chinese Pidgin; Tok Pisin; Leland

In 1876 (p.3) Leland wrote: “The word pidgin, if derived, as is generally supposed, from the English word *business*, indicates the difficulty with which Chinese master our pronunciation. It is also characteristic of the jargon, from the incredible variety of meanings which it assumes...”

Leland does not provide his sources for the etymology of pidgin, but others have followed his statement that “The most widely accepted etymology is from the Chinese pronunciation of the English word *business*.” He further claims “As business or commerce is the great bond of union between the Chinese and foreign residents, it is not remarkable that this should be the chief and ever-recurring word, and give its name to the language formed in its service” (p. 3).

Leland’s dictionary (p.131) cites the meanings of **pidgin** and its etymology as follows:

“**Pidgin**, business; affair; occupation; a word of very general application—e.g., *joss-pidgin*, religion; *chow-chow pidgin*, eating or cookery. Probably the Chinese pronunciation of the word business (*pi-tzin*, C.V.), according to others of the Portuguese *occupacao*.”<sup>3</sup>

Although it is possible to occasionally translate or interpret **pidgin** as meaning “business” or “work,” these are by far the least common senses of the word in CP. We must examine multiple contexts to discover its meanings, but most represent a particular manner or way that

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<sup>1</sup> This is “generally supposed.” In addition to Mihalic (1971), Muhlhausler (1985), Murphy (1943), Steinbauer (1968) and Volker (2008). Schebesta and Meiser (1945) go as far as to entitle their work the “dictionary of Bisnis-English. I have appreciated the comments of George Huttar on a previous version of this article.

<sup>2</sup> In this article, bold print signals Chinese Pidgin words that I wish to highlight and italics signals Tok Pisin words.

<sup>3</sup> C.V. means “Chinese vocabulary of Pidgin English” (Leland 1876:119).

something is done. **Pidgin** usually occurs as the head of an adjectival or pronominal phrase and, in such cases, the meaning is similar to how *pasin* is used in TP.<sup>4</sup>

All of the following sentences (from Leland) contain the word “**pidgin**.” In examples (1-3), it refers to the moral of a story (**molal/moral pidgin**) and is added at the end of three stories:

- 1) *Dis my glate molal-pidgin of he stoly of Wang-ti.* (22, “This is my important lesson in the story of Wang-ti.”)
- 2) *T’this is he molal-pidgin of he song of Captin Blown.* (37, “This is the moral of the song of Captain Brown.”)
- 3) *T’his my glate moral pidgin of the stoly of Ahong.* (51, “This is the great lesson in the story of Ahong.”)

The compound CP **Joss-pidgin** (**Joss** is sometimes spelled differently), often suffixed with **-man** “man”, indicates a religious expert (8-13), otherwise, a religious item (6, 13), a religious action or religion in general (4, 5,7). In one instance (14) **pidgin** is reduplicated to show its exceptional religious nature.

- 4) *Allo-tim he make Joss-pidgin, What you fan-kwei cally ‘ligion’.* (25, “He was always doing rituals, what you foreigners call ‘religion’.”) [In TP, the CP form would be called *lotu pasin*]
- 5) *My like Chinee Joss-pidgin best.* (25, “I like the Chinese religion best.”) [In TP, *pasin lotu bilong Sainaman*]
- 6) *One day he massa take Joss-pidgin beads.* (56, “One day the master took the rosary beads.”) [bis bilong lotu pasin]
- 7) *He make Josh-pidgin allo plopa now.* (56, “He does the ritual correctly now.”) [TP = *pasin bilong lotu*]
- 8) *All-same one patele, one Joss-pidgin man.* (56, “Like a priest, a religious person.”) [TP = *lotu man/pater*]
- 9) *My tinkee Puss-cat he Joss-pidgin-man.* (58, “I thought the cat was a priest.”) [TP = *pasin lotu man/pater*]
- 10) *When t’hey talkee pig look-see all-same Joss-pidgin-man*” (60, “When they talked to the pig, it acted like a priest.”) [TP = *pasin lotu man/pater*]

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<sup>4</sup> Mihalic (1971:150) gives *pasin* the English meanings of “fashion, custom, manner, way of life, conduct and behaviour.” Volker (2008:62) gives examples of it meaning “behavior” or “custom”. A wide variety of glosses can be found in Schebesta and Meiser, who spell the form *fashin/fasin* and gloss it as “fashion, custom, habit, style, mode of living, usage, practice, conduct, method, manner, way, precept.” (1945:53) In Steinbauer (1969:141) *pasin* is glossed as fashion, custom, manner, conduct, way of life, behaviour. All of these meanings are evident in the CP examples. TP *pasin* may precede the referent (as in *pasin nogut* ‘a bad behaviour’) or follow it (as in *gutpela pasin* ‘good behaviour’). In examples that follow square brackets suggest TP equivalents to the CP. The numbers preceding each CP translation refer to page numbers and examples in Leland.

- 11) *He tailey of he piggy of he **Joss-pidgin-man**.* (61, “It was the pig tail of the priest.”) [TP = *pasin lotu man/pater*]
- 12) *One Eng-he-lis **Joss-pidgin-man** stop China-side one-tim....* (80, “There was an English priest living in China...”) [TP = *pasin lotu man/pater em i waitman*]
- 13) ***Heaven-pidgin-man**—first chopper...* (45, “A holy man—the best example...”) [TP = *pasin olsem God antap*]
- 14) *He wooly hin, he led goose he allo **Joss-pidgin** thing.* (101, “The wooly hen, the red goose, they are all religious things.”) [TP = *olgeta lotu pasin*]
- 15) *One big **Joss-pidgin-pidgin** chance for allo like him.* (50, “One exceptional God-like chance for everyone like him.”) [TP = *pasin tru bilong lotu*]

**Pidgin** may be preceded by an article (“the” in 16), or a demonstrative (“this” in 17-21; “that” in 23-33), each pointing to the way in which something is done.

- 16) *He often come **t’he pidgin** on—all-same as Wing-King-Wo.* (86, “He often turned the pidgin on—just like Wing-King-Wo.”) [TP = *pasin olsem*]<sup>5</sup>
- 17) *Allo **this pidgin** much tim go.* (28, “All of this behavior went on for a long time.”) [TP = *dispela kain pasin*]
- 18) ***T’his pidgin** no can do.* (36, “You can’t do this kind of thing.”) [TP = *dispela kain pasin*]
- 19) *Man make **t’his pidgin** so fashion in China land at home.* (51, “People do it like this in their Chinese country.”) [TP = *dispela kain pasin*]
- 20) *Bm’mby Chinaman no likeee **t’his pidgin**, he velly angly...* (98, “Later if the Chinese person doesn’t like this way, he is very angry.”) [TP = *dispela pasin*]
- 21) *Massa pay my one piece cumshaw for talkee he **t’his pidgin*** (99, “The master will give a present for telling in this way.”) [TP = *dispela pasin*]
- 22) *One piecee Chinee-man, he my flin, hab makee **t’his pidgin** California-side...* (106, “A Chinese man, who is my friend, made it up this way in California.”) [TP = *dispela pasin*]
- 23) *He talk **t’hat pidgin** how-tok-tsi (t’hat meanee ‘velly hood’).* (50, “He said it in a manner (that was very good).”) [TP = *pasin olsem*]
- 24) *Massa he talkee, ‘Boston-man no like **dat pidgin**’* (27, “The boss said ‘Bostonians won’t like that moral.’”) [TP = *pasin olsem*]
- 25) *Look-see **dat pidgin**—see dat cat hab catch...* (56, “Look at that way—see what the cat caught...”) [TP = *pasin olsem*]
- 26) *T’at mousey tink **t’at pidgin** velly nice.* (57, “The mouse thought that way was very nice.”) [TP = *pasin olsem*]

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<sup>5</sup> The sentence comes from the long explanation by An Chung at the end of the “Ballad of Wing-King-Wo. However, An Chung does not agree with the moral to the story as provided by the Englishman and says “I wish the Master would have been more careful when he wrote that moral.”

- 27) *He sick man talkee t'hat pidgin velly hood.* (90, "The sick man talked about that instance very well.") [TP = *pasin*]
- 28) *And when one piecee man talkee you t'hat pidgin...* (97, "And if a man talks to you in that way...") [TP = *pasin olsem*]
- 29) *One piecee takta ship-side talkee my t'at pidgin.* (100, "One of the doctors on the ship told me about that custom.") [TP = *pasin olsem*]
- 30) *He look-see t'at allo plopa pidgin*" (102, he could see that all of it was the proper thing to do) [TP = *olgeta gutpela pasin*]
- 31) *...my catchee t'hat pidgin China'side, galaw.* (103, My word, I just knew that work/way was from China.") [TP = *kain pasin*]
- 32) *...Duckey savvy t'hat golo-pidgin, he allo-tim walkee t'his-side, t'hat-side look-see dirt.* (104, "...The duck knew in that looking for gold, he walked from one side to the other examining the dirt.") [TP = *pasin bilong painim gol*]
- 33) *My no wantchee—my hab hear talkee t'hat fightee-pidgin.* (112, "I don't want to—I had heard about that way of fighting") [TP = *pasin bilong pait*]

A possessive pronoun ("my" in 34) also may modify **pidgin**:

- 34) *It b'longey my pidgin to study fo deglee.* (18, "It was my custom/business to study for a degree.") [TP = *pasin bilong mi*]

Some examples of how **pidgin** is modified include the adjectives: "good" (42-45), "polite" (46) "proper" (47-49), "nice" (51) "bad" (52) "much" (53), and "a little bit" (54). Each of these indicate the manner in which something is done:

- 42) *No man make good-pidgin outside allo dat bobbely...* (23, "No one can make good work out of that trouble.") [TP = *gutpela pasin*]
- 43) *Suppose you find one piecee man muchee hood pidgin...* (106, "If you find a man who has a good manner [in California]...") [TP = *gutpela pasin tru*]
- 44) *My tinkee can do good pidgin, suppose Englishee-man, insteadee pay he chilos...*"(76, "I think it would be good business if the English man instead paid the children...") [TP = *gutpela pasin*]
- 45) *Now s'posey you make good pidgin to man t'hat b'lieve in Fo.* ("Suppose you do something kind to a believer in Budda.") [TP = *gutpela pasin*]
- 46) *...my ting he tol-oli good look-see pidgin stoly.* (38, "I think he told a tolerably good kind of story.") [TP = *pasin bilong glasim gutpela*]
- 47) *An' on polite-pidgin Chinee beat allo, up or down—.* (37, "And in a polite manner the Chinese beat them completely--.") [TP = *naispela pasin*]
- 48) *Talkee t'hat no plopa pidgin...* (43, "He said that is no way to behave.") [TP = *pasin tru*]

- 49) My tinkee dat be muchee **plopa pidgin** fo' ghost to make. (47, "I think that would be the really proper custom for a ghost to do.") [TP = *planti pasin tru*]
- 50) *That blongey desk—all plopa pidgin he!* (78, "It belonged in the desk—it was done properly.") [TP = *stretpela pasin*]
- 51) *T'hat nicey pidgin for you.* (89, "That is nice work that you have done.") [gutpela pasin]
- 52) *T'ot'ha' day you talk bad pidgin.* (44, "The other day you spoke in a poor manner.") [TP = *kranki pasin*]
- 53) *my tinkee he hab muchee pidgin, galaw, allo t'at nightey.* (101, I thought he had a lot of work, my word, all of that night") [TP = *planti pasin moa*]
- 54) *...he wantchee makee one littee piece pidgin long-side you...* ("...he wants to create a little advice with you) [TP = *wanpela liklik pasin*]

Some examples of a negated manner are found in (55, 56):

- 55) *But make no pidgin long-side you.* (53, "But this has nothing to do with you.") [TP = *nogat pasin*]
- 56) *You no hab pidgin, you no lite or leed.* (67, "You are not educated, you can't write or read.") [TP = *nogat pasin*]

In one example **pidgin** is used with an interrogative to query the manner of how something is done:

- 57) *T'hat olo Captin ask chop-chop, 'Wat pidgin t'his can be?'* (32, "That old Captain asked quickly, 'What kind of thing can this be?'" [TP = *wanem pasin?*]

**Pidgin** also occurs with verbs, usually as a nominalized form indicating the manner of the action, as in "digging" (58), "coming" (59), "killing" (60), and fighting (61):

- 58) **Diggee-pidgin**, *then he healee...* (46, "Digging away, then he heard (something)...") [TP = *pasin bilong brukim graun*]
- 59) *But jist as he come pidgin top-side he holy head...* (49, "But just as it came to the top of his holy head...") [TP = *kamap pasin*]
- 60) **Makee kill-pidgin**; *Makee all he savvy.* (59, "Murder him; Make him understand.") [TP = *pasin bilong kilim i dai*]
- 61) *...he likki waifo hab larn fightee pidgin, how can do swordee.* (109, "...the little wife learned how to fight with a sword.") [TP = *pasin bilong pait*]

Several examples show how verbs can be combined with **pidgin** to form new meanings, as in: "student" in (62, 63); "love" in (64); "to fence" in (65); and "to examine" in (66 and 67)—the latter combines "look" and "see":

- 62) He ***larn-pidgin*** sit top-side gluon. (28, “The student sat on the ground.”) [TP = *pasin sumatin*]
- 63) *T’his come larn-pidgin’s head...An’ larn-pidgin catchee dolla’.* (40...41, “It occurred to the student...And the student received money.”) [TP = *pasin sumatin*]
- 64) *So muchee girl make love-pidgin what-side he makee go...* (83, “So many girls made love wherever he went.”) [TP = *v pasin amamas*]
- 65) *...no hab man China-side savvy so good sword-pidgin all-same my fata.* (109, there wasn’t anyone in China who could fence like my father.”) [TP = *gutpela pilai pasin long yusim bainat*<sup>6</sup>]
- 66) *Wat-fo he wantchee make look-see pidgin how he one schola’...* (86n, “Why did he want to make out that he was like a scholar...”) [TP = *pasin giaman*]
- 67) *...wat-fo’ he no catchee one look-see-pidgin diploma all-same as one Ink-i-lis man buy.* (86, “How come he didn’t get the same kind of examination diploma as the English man buys.”) [TP = *giaman pasin*]

There are indeed a few examples in which **pidgin** can be translated as “way”, “custom”, “work”, or, even (perhaps), “business” (although I have not translated it that way). Consider the following:

- 68) *Supposey one piecee gentlcum lo leed dis, wantchewe come did pidgin he family...* (76, “Suppose that a gentleman reads this and wants to do the (same) way/custom with his family...”) [TP = *pasin*]
- 69) *He lowdah gunboat captin blong he pidgin.* (77, “His work was as captain of a gunboat.”) [TP = *pasin*]
- 70) *It blongey he pidgin he take boy.* (78, “It was his assignment/work to take the boy.”) [TP = *pasin bilong em*]
- 71) *Sapposee something no be allo plopa—that Massa he pidgin, galaw.* (93, “If sometime something is not done correctly—that is just the master’s way.”) [TP = *pasin*]
- 72) *So talkee all-same Pidgin, ‘Why so?—makee sel’* (68, “So he talked like this in Pidgin/in this way, ‘Why is that?—it is for sale.’”) [TP = *olsem long tok Pisin*]
- 73) *Suppose one man belongey smart, he allo-way catchee pidgin-eye.* (74, “If a person is that clever, he looks around like a bird (and sees what is going on).” [TP = *ai bilong pasin*]

Sentences (72) and (73) demonstrate the use of pidgin in two different senses: 1) referring to the actual language (72); or 2) to describe someone who is “looking around like a bird,” that is the bird called a pidgin (73). The translation of (72) could also be “[He] talked this way.”

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<sup>6</sup> I am not sure how to put this meaning across in a few words—I am sure that a TP speaker who saw people fencing would have a more concise and better expression.

### The use of “fashion”

In a several sentences in Leland the word **fashion** (with various spellings) is used instead of **pidgin**, but in such cases the meanings are similar, or the same. This further supports our suggestion that “manner/fashion/way” is the underlying meaning for **pidgin** and that the word probably did not come from “business”, although as mentioned, in a few cases **pidgin** (68-71) can be translated as “work” or “business”.

Additional examples of **fashion** in CP demonstrate how its meaning parallels the meanings of **pidgin**.<sup>7</sup>:

- 74) *My tinkey Mongol fashion No plopa fashiono my.* (70, “I thought like a Mongol. Mine was not a correct way.”) [TP = *stretpela pasin*]
- 75) *My make he first-chop fashion about the glate Ahong.* (48, “I have given the best account about the great Ahong.”) [TP = *namba wan pasin*]
- 76) *T’hey makee allo noble so-fashion t’hey make do.* (51, “They have all done great things.”) [TP = *dispela gutpela pasin olsem*]
- 77) *Sapposee he lib homo, so-fashion he look-see.* (71, “If he lived at home he would know what it was.”) [TP = *pasin olsem*]
- 78) *And t’hen he massa talkee so-fashion, allo China boy makee laugum.* “Then the master talked like that, and all the Chinese boys laughed.” [TP = *pasin olsem*]
- 79) *Go walkee bottom side so-fashion.* (77, “He went below deck in this manner.”) TP = [*pasin olsem*]
- 80) *He talkee, ‘No good fashion hab got in Tartar lan’.* (71, “He said “There are no good customs in Tartar land.) [TP = *nogat gutpela pasin*]<sup>8</sup>
- 81) *...but my no tinkee Massa catchee plopa fashin to talkee so wat China boy wantchee do.* (79, “...but I don’t think the Master understood the correct way to tell the Chinese boy what to do.”) [TP = *stretpela pasin*]
- 82) *he no makee plopa fashion, p’ho!”* (“My! (he didn’t do it in the right way.”) [TP = *stretpela pasin*] (Notice also examples 43, 37, 63, 68, 83)
- 83) *How fashion my can pay liber?* (“How can I pay for a river?) [(bilong) *wanem kain pasin*]
- 84) *How fashion allo happy ting he come!” How fashion allo happy wailo ‘way!* (57, In what ways does happiness come! In what ways does happiness leave!) [TP = *wanem kain pasin*]

In one sentence “custom” occurs instead of “fashion” or “pidgin”, but the meaning is similar:

<sup>7</sup> Note, however, that **so-fashion** is unique in CP, and corresponds most closely with **this/t’his pidgin** (); dat/t’hat (); t’he. The equivalent in TP would be *pasin olsem*.

<sup>8</sup> For additional examples of “hood/good,” see: (30, 37, 64, 89).



85) *So it blongey olo custom—which neve wailo way---... (51, “So this is always the custom and it never goes away.) [TP = olgeta pasin]*

## Conclusion

I have attempted to demonstrate that the word commonly pronounced as “pidgin,” as in “Pidgin English,” is not a corruption of the way speakers once pronounced “business.” Instead, I have attempted to show that the word *pasin* in TP is historically derived from the words **pidgin** and **fashion** in CP, where the meanings are “manner”, “fashion,” or “custom.” It follows that the CP words **pidgin** and **fashion** underlie the etymology of the word *pasin*, as in *Tok Pisin*.

## A Phonological Note

By examining some TP phonology, there may be support for the **pidgin** > *pasin* change. Note, for example, that: 1) TP forms that are derived from English sources with /sh/ go to /s/ in TP: fish > *pis*; English > *Englis*; finish > *pinis*; wash > *was*; 2) sources with /st/ also go to /s/: yeast > *yis*; guest > *ges*; cost > *kos*; must > *mas*; rust > *ras*; post > *pos*; toast > *tos*; 3) sources with /ch/ also go to /s/: March > *mas*; winch > *wins*; switch > *swis*; sandwich > *sanwis*; it is therefore not surprising that 4) sources with /dg/ go to /s/ as well: porridge > *poris*; pidgin > *pasin*.

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**Editor's Note:**

Dr Franklin's paper challenges the existing (and generally accepted) views on the etymology of 'Pidgin,' so the wary reserve of LLM's expert reviewers is justified, and their comments valid (see some of them below):

"It is nice to see a paper that has such a wealth of data and analysis of this, but the quality of the data is seriously open to question. I see that Mühlhäusler (1985) is listed in the references, but apart from again being listed in a footnote, there is no discussion of this. Peter Mühlhäusler's paper is a pretty convincing review of the available evidence of the origin of the term, and if this is to be contradicted, then something more than the superficial resemblance of Pidgin and Pisin would be needed. How, where and when did it enter TP from CPE? Are there any attestations of speech illustrating how the two could have been used ambiguously or one develop into the other? Without this it seems little more than conjecture.

A much greater problem, though, is a reliance on Leland for examples. ... Recently (relatively) a whole trove of Chinese pidgin examples from a Chinese source were translated and made available to add to the English language accounts reviewed so well by Mühlhäusler. This can be found in Volume 10 of the Hong Kong Journal of Applied Linguistics. The title is: Pidgin English texts from the Chinese English Instructor by Michelle Li, Stephen Matthews and Geoff P. Smith (2005). Some of this was reviewed in the 2010 JPCL article *China Coast Pidgin: Texts and contexts.*"

However, LLM editors thought that the history of 'Pisin' (even if unorthodox) will interest a lot of our readers enough to consider alternative views. LLM shares Albert Einstein's belief that "*To raise new questions, new possibilities, to regard old problems from a new angle, requires creative imagination and marks real advance in science*"<sup>9</sup> – hence, this publication. Dr Franklin has expressed his willingness to respond to any of your questions or criticisms.

To encourage this type of academic discussion, we have opened a new "Opinion/Comment" page that will provide an outlet for our readers' feedback on this or any other publication in this volume. All questions, opinions and comments will be published unedited; these should be sent to LLM Editor at [langlxmelanesia@gmail.com](mailto:langlxmelanesia@gmail.com).

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<sup>9</sup> Einstein, A. and Infeld, L. 1966. *Evolution of Physics*. Simon & Schuster, N.Y., p.92.