



Journal of the Linguistic Society of Papua New Guinea

ISSN: 0023-1959

Vol. 32 No. 1, 2014

A Note on the Etymology of “Bulmakau” in Tok Pisin

Karl J Franklin

Graduate Institute of Linguistics and SIL International

The etymology of Tok Pisin *bulmakau* is uncertain. Mühlhäusler (1985:210) recognizes that its etymology, glossed as ‘cattle, meat’, warrants more investigation. He suggests that it may be traced to the Pidgin that was spoken on Fiji (1985:200). However, it also seems to fit his definition of a folk-etyma (following Hockett 1958:288): “...an invented explanation of why a certain form means what it does, and the invention, no matter how far-fetched, usually turns somehow on the same sort of vague similarity of shape which underlies metanalysis and reshaping.” In this note I would like to explore the term in more detail.¹

In Mihalic’s dictionary (1971:78), he states that the etymology of *bulmakau* is derived from English, combining ‘bull’ and ‘cow’ with the meaning of ‘cattle’. His gloss closely follows that of Schebesta, as revised by Meiser (1945). Other dictionaries, such as Steinbauer (1969:38) and Volker (2008) do not provide etymologies, but simply gloss *bulmakau*, *ol bulmakau* as ‘cow, cattle’. Murphy, in an older publication (1943:64), glosses *bulmakau* as both ‘cow’ and ‘bullock’ and adds (as does Volker) *bulmakau bilong solwara* for ‘dugong’.

Mihalic also gives the word for ‘bull’ as *bulmakau man* and ‘cow’ as *bulmakau meri*; and a ‘calf’ as *pikinini bulmakau*. However, we ask, if part of the etymology of the word is ‘bull’, why is the female ‘bull’ a woman?

Another problem is in glossing TP *bulmakau* with a plural English word (cattle), when the meaning is actually ‘one head of cattle’.

Some have suggested that Tolai (of the Gazelle Peninsula in New Britain) contributed to the etymology. When the Germans brought cattle to Rabaul in the early 1800s, one claim is that the local Tolai form *ma* (meaning ‘and’) was used as a connector between “bull” and “cow”.

¹ I would like to thank Tom Dutton for his detailed and insightful comments on two previous versions of this note. Any errors, of course, are my own.

However, this seems unlikely, as there is no evidence in Tolai of other compound loan-words being joined with *ma*.

Further, if there was a phonological constraint in joining two consonants (the final /l/ of ‘bull’ and the initial /k/ of ‘cow’, the inserted form could simply be the vowel /a/, resulting in *bul-a-kau /.²

Recently, when re-reading Holmes (1924), I came across a more reasonable historical explanation for the etymology of the word—at least in what was then “Papua”. Holmes relates a story (p. 258) of a man who left the Gulf of Papua and was indentured at a plantation (the location was not given) and said that he would not go back. When Mrs. Holmes asked him why, he said “Because the (plantation owners) did not give me any food.” “What did they give you to eat?” “*Boromakau* (tinned meat), *kikiki* (biscuits), *tea*, *suka* (sugar), *raiki* (rice).” Well, what was wrong with that?” “They did not give me any *pu* (sago).” The speaker did not use the TP form for ‘tinned meat’ (*tinmit*) or ‘biscuits’ (*bisket*).

Boroma is, of course, the Hiri Motu (formerly Police Motu) form for ‘pig’ (Lawes 1885:43; Dutton & Voorhoeve 1974), so it does not show up in any of the Pidgin dictionaries. *Boromakau* may be, simply, the way the Eleman language speaker (in the Central Division, now Gulf Province) heard *bulamakau* (as it is more often pronounced—without a consonant cluster). In addition, Hiri Motu was spoken by indentured laborers at the plantation, so it is likely that their form was *boromakau*.³

However, one factor to consider is how certain words like ‘pig’ are often used to classify animals that are unfamiliar to the speaker. In the Highlands (and presumably elsewhere) ‘pig’ is the largest four legged animal known, so pig+X is often used (initially) to classify the new animal, such that X may be ‘sheep’, ‘goat’, or ‘cow’. This is borne out in Lawes (1885:69) where he states that *boroma* also referred to “all large animals, as goats, sheep, cows &c”.

It seems certain that ‘bull’ would not be used to classify ‘cow’ and I suggest that ‘pig’ plus ‘cow’ can be considered as a one likely etyma for Tok Pisin *bulmakau*.

² It could just as likely have been /u/: *bul-u-kau, or even /i/: *bul-i-kau. For example, Mihalic (1971:78) glosses *buli* as ‘bully beef’.

³ Dutton (1985:88-107) gives a detailed analysis of labor recruiting from and into the various Papuan Divisions from 1870 to 1920.

Tom Dutton (personal communication) notes that because ‘Broken’ English (Mühlhäusler’s Papuan Pidgin English (PPE)) was spoken throughout some areas of the Eastern and Western Divisions of Papua before Police Motu (PM—now Hiri Motu), it could have had some influence on the development of PM. Although I don’t have detailed information, it is important to consider what the forms for ‘cow’, ‘cattle’, ‘beef’, ‘meat’ and ‘pig’ were in PPE. Upon examining Broken (Torres Strait Pidgin) on Internet resources, I found no lexemes for either ‘cow’ or ‘pig’, but it seems clear that research from Pacific PE may be useful.

Dutton also notes that PPE was an extension of Pacific Pidgin English brought in by adventurers, missionary teachers, and members of Governor MacGregor’s Armed Native Constabulary, so it would be significant to know the Pacific Pidgin for the same set of words.

On the other hand, Dutton (1980) described Canefields English, a Pidgin variety once spoken in the canefields of Queensland from perhaps as early as 1863 until 1904, which was used by indentured laborers most of whom came from the New Hebrides (Vanuatu) and the Solomon Islands. Only two men were alive at the time of Dutton’s interviews, and in the one text where ‘cow’ is used (p.18) the form given is *kau*. If it had been the Bislama (the Pidgin variety spoken in Vanuatu) form, then *bulumakao* (or a similar form) would have been expected.

Finally, consider that Chinese Pidgin English (CPE) may have had some impact. Leland (1897:120, 122) gives the following glosses: *bull-chilo* ‘male child’ and *cow-chilo* ‘female child’, both of which he reported were “becoming obsolete”. In other words, ‘bull’ and ‘cow’, as masculine and feminine classifiers, were in use before appearing in Tok Pisin. There were about 1,400 Chinese in Rabaul by 1914 (Mühlhäusler 1985:199), shortly after the time the Germans introduced cattle, so CPE is also a possible historical source for the etymology. Mühlhäusler, in fact, credits Chinese Pidgin as being a direct influence on South Seas Pidgin in his diagram of proto-Pidgin English (1985:179 and elsewhere).

It is clear that the etymology of “*bulmakau*” has an uncertain past and that two etyma are more likely—one finding its way into TP and the other into HM.

References

- Dutton, Tom. 1980. *Queensland Canefields English of the late Nineteenth Century: (A record of interview with two of the last surviving kanakas in North Queensland, 1964)*. *Pacific Linguistics* D-29. Canberra: Australian National University.
- Dutton, T.E. 1985. *Police Motu: Iena sivarai (its story)*. Waigani: University of Papua New Guinea Press.
- Dutton, T. E. and C.L. Voorhoeve. 1974. *Beginning Hiri Motu*. *Pacific Linguistics* D-24. Canberra: Australian National University.
- Hockett, Charles F. 1958. *A course in modern linguistics*. NY: The Macmillan Company.
- Holmes, J.H. 1924. *In primitive New Guinea: An account of a quarter of a century spent amongst the primitive Ipi & Namau groups of tribes of the Gulf of Papua, with an interesting description of their manner of living, their customs & habits, feasts & festivals, totems & cults*. With an Introduction by Dr. A.C. Haddon, M.A., F.R.S. With many illustrations & a map. London: Seeley, Service & Co. Limited.
- Leland, Charles G. 1897. Fourth Edition. *Pidgin-English Sing-Song: Songs and stories in the China-English dialect. With a vocabulary*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, & Co. Ltd.
- Lawes, William George. 1885. *Grammar and vocabulary of language spoken by Motu Tribe, New Guinea*. Introduction by Rev. Geo Pratt. Sydney: Thomas Richards, Government Printer.
- Mihalic, F. 1971. *The Jacaranda dictionary and grammar of Melanesian Pidgin*. Milton, Qld: The Jacaranda Press.
- Mühlhäusler, P. 1985. Etymologising and Tok Pisin. In S.A. Wurm and P. Mühlhäusler, eds. *Handbook of Tok Pisin (New Guinea Pidgin)*. *Pacific Linguistics* C-70: 177-219.
- Murphy, John J. 1943. *The book of Pidgin English*. Fifth edition. Port Moresby, The Territory of New Guinea.
- Schebesta, Father J. and Father Leo Meiser. 1945. *Dictionary of "Bisnis-English" (Pidgin-English)*. Armidale, Australia. Mimeographed.
- Steinbauer, Friedrich, Compiler. 1968. *Concise dictionary of New Guinea Pidgin (Neo-Melanesian) with translations in English and German*. Madang, New Guinea: Kristen Pres Inc.
- Volker, C.A. 2008. General Editor. *Papua New Guinea Tok Pisin English dictionary*. Oxford University Press in association with Wantok Niuspepa.
- Wurm, S.A. and P. Mühlhäusler, eds. 1985. *Handbook of Tok Pisin (New Guinea Pidgin)*. *Pacific Linguistics* C-70. Canberra: Australian National University.