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The Etymology of “*maski*” in Tok Pisin

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Abstract

I examine the etymology of *maski* in Tok Pisin (TP) and suggest that the Mihalic’s (1971:131) historical source for it is inadequate. I follow Mühlhäusler’s hint (1985:200) that it comes from Chinese Pidgin (CP). For detailed examples, I turn to Leland (1876) and conclude that the TP word is indeed derived historically from CP, which, in turn, found its source in Portuguese.

Key Terms: Leland; etymology; Chinese Pidgin; Tok Pisin; *maskee*

A Background Note

Chinese Pidgin English (CPE) developed in the early 1700s, when the British began trade activities with the Chinese. The trade centered in the environs of Canton, where a small number of foreign men interacted with large groups of Chinese, sometimes from their sampans.¹ The language of contact that developed was Chinese Pidgin English. Vestiges of it were carried across the Pacific by the Portuguese, who frequently sailed out of a colony in Macau (from the mid-16th century until late 1999²), repeatedly with Chinese laborers.

The Etymology of *maski*

Mihalic, in his dictionary and grammar of Melanesia Pidgin (now called Tok Pisin, TP), derives *maski* from the German *Es macht nichts* (1971:131) ‘It doesn’t matter’. He gives the English meanings as follows:

- 1) “To be indifferent: it does not matter; no matter; who cares?

Bilong mi, *maski*. – As far as I am concerned, it doesn’t matter. I am indifferent. I don’t care.

Maski, yu stap we, God i lukim yu. No matter where you are, God can see you.

Maski ren. Yumi go! – Who cares about rain? Let’s go!

- 2) In spite of, despite

Maski long kukim kaikai. – Never mind the cooking. Don’t bother to cook anything.

¹ See http://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/rise_fall_canton_03/cw_essay02.html for details.

² See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Macau> for additional information.

Maski long planti hambak. – Not too much foolishness now! Never mind all the foolishness! Skip the foolishness!

Maski planti toktok. – Never mind all the talking, the criticism.”

Other TP dictionaries, such as Schebeste (1945), Murphy (5th edition, 1956), Steinbauer (1969) and Volker (2008) provide similar glosses. Additionally, Schebeste identifies the form as an interjection (p.114).

It seems clear, however, that TP *maski* has a much earlier origin and that it is unlikely that German played any part in its etymology. Leland, in his Chinese Pidgin English (CPE) dictionary, lists *maskee*, *maszeke*, and *mashkee*, with the glosses: all right; correct; never mind; notwithstanding; nevertheless; but; anyhow; and ‘it is all good’ (1876:12; 128-129). He notes that the form is used “in a very irregular manner. It is not Chinese, its equivalent in Mandarin being *poo-yoo-cheen*” (p. 128).³ However, my analysis demonstrates that *maskee* is used in a very regular manner and formed the basis for *maski* in TP.

Although the forms and meanings Leland provides for *maskee* are very similar to the ones in Mihalic for *maski*, the CP stories spell *maskee* in a variety of ways and Leland makes no attempt to regularize them. He further notes that “This form of spelling and definition, as given in the Chinese ‘Vocabulary of Words in Use among the Red-Haired People’ indicates the original pronunciation of this perplexing word”⁴.

³ There are 22 “ballads” and 12 “stories” in Leland’s little book. Some are the work of expatriate authors who are probably having some “fun” (some were in England or California) trying to compose poems or ballads in CP. Ah Chung, a native speaker of CP, often supplies editorial comments that prove helpful. Leland generally provides notes when an unusual English or Chinese word or expression is used. He includes many Mandarin and Cantonese words in his dictionary (as well as some Hindu forms). It seems obvious that some of the stories and ballads are not “good” CP, but for the purpose of this article I have consulted all of them, with their full range of uses of *maskee*. I use a bold italic font for the CP form and an italic for the TP. I am grateful to George Huttar for reading and commenting on this paper.

⁴ Reference to such a group of people can be found at <http://www.ultimatehistoryproject.com/pidgin.html>, on the “The Opium wars and ‘red-haired’ English”. Alexander Williamson, a Scot, arrived in the largest city [Xi’an] late in 1866 and, one day, “while touring the city wall, he met a Chinese man who spoke to him in ‘pigeon English’”. The language was a result of a ban on foreigners learning Chinese, so an emerging class of pidgin speakers, known as linguists, were employed to negotiate for merchants and customs officers. In 1835 the first Chinese-English vocabulary book, 16 pages long, appeared in Canton and was entitled *The Common Foreign Language of the Red hairs* and was “in the hands of servants, coolies, and shopkeepers”. The term “red-haired” in Chinese referred to

The influence of English, arising as it did from the British colonial contact and rule, is obvious throughout CP. Leland (p.2) believed that, “had it not been for the Pidgin jargon, a corrupt Portuguese would have formed the popular medium of communication between foreigners and natives. The number of Portuguese words which now exist in Pidgin-English seem to prove this.”⁵

Mühlhäusler (1985:210) cautions against suggesting relexification of present day TP words from Portuguese or Spanish, because “they were probably borrowed from a variety of English”. However, in the case of TP *maski*, there seems to be no evidence of English influence, and certainly none from German. The path of Portuguese⁶ > Chinese Pidgin English > TP seems more likely.⁷

Examples of *maskee* from Leland

The form *maskee* is ubiquitous in Leland, occurring finally, initially and medially in clauses, expressions or sentences. In the examples that follow—a full inventory from Leland—I suggest that, despite various contexts, it has one underlying meaning, simply “never mind”, although it can sometimes be translated freely with other words or expressions. Although sentences (1-9) illustrate *maskee* in the final sentence or clause position, I have often freely translated it as introducing the sentence.

When *maskee* occurs finally in sentences, the speaker includes the hearer in the discussion and infers his or her agreement or acknowledgment. In our translations, *maskee* indicates that the hearer should therefore “never mind” and implies that the action “doesn’t matter”.

white people and is documented in Malaysia and Singapore—for more details see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Red_hair#Use_of_term_in_Singapore_and_Malaysia.

⁵ In Leland, I find only *Joss* ‘god’ and *savvy* ‘to understand’ that are obviously from Portuguese.

⁶ It seems that Spanish or Portuguese initially contributed to CP *maskee*, most likely as a relexified form from the Spanish *mas* ‘but’ and *que* ‘what’ (as a compound *mas-que* ‘but what?’), or from the Portuguese *mais-ki*.

⁷ Mühlhäusler (1985:210) and Hall provide a more circuitous route from CP to TP. Hall (cited in Mühlhäusler 1985:179) provides a tree diagram of Proto-Pidgin with CP and many other “pidgin” varieties influencing TP. Mühlhäusler (1985:180) draws a more complex diagram of TP historical influences, that includes CP, Queensland Plantation Pidgin, Tolai and related languages, English and German, each with different levels of impact. Regardless of the intermediate steps, CP **maskee* > TP *maski* seems certain; Mühlhäusler (1985:200) is more cautious, noting that “The item *maski* *never mind* may also have found its way into Tok Pisin via Chinese Pidgin English”, although he does not provide any evidence.

- 1) *Wang-ti hab got t'hat ting maskee—Wang-ti he mighty gland.* (p. 22, “Never mind, Wang-ti got that thing anyhow—Wang-ti was especially great.”)
- 2) *T'hat allo-way flom that day, maskee.* (p. 30, “Never mind, it went on like that from that day forward.”)
- 3) *T'hey talk all-same t'hey savvy you—t'hey all can do, maskee.* (p. 36, “Never mind, they all say they understand you; they all can.”)
- 4) *He make dancee galantee, maskee.* (p. 57, “Never mind, it [referring to a cat] made a great dance.”)
- 5) *My tink he hood—he be too bad, maskee.* (p. 58, “I thought it was good—never mind that it was so bad.”)
- 6) *Or no can do maskee.* (p. 65, “If it can't be done, never mind.”)
- 7) *One piecee blind man healee best, maskee.* (p. 66, “Never mind, a blind man heals best”)
- 8) *...he duckey talkee, you make plopa pidgin-maskee.* (p. 105, “...the duck said, never mind, you did it the correct way”)⁸
- 9) *How hab go t'is pidgin allo maskee!* (p. 90, “Never mind how this kind of thing got around!”)

We now turn to the use of *maskee* at the beginning of a sentence or clause, which in every case again suggests that the hearer should pay little attention to, or at least not take too seriously, the action or circumstance that the speaker is relating:

- 10) *Maskee t'hat China junk he floggum much....* (p. 77, “Never mind that he sold a lot to that Chinese boat....”)
- 11) *Maskee my talkee you what can do.* (p. 89, “Never mind my telling you what to do.”)
- 12) *Maskee my savvy how muchee madein one piecee man one-tim belongey chow-chow.* (p. 90, “Never mind my knowing how much a person pays when he eats/gets food.”)
- 13) *Maskee, he talkee, suppose Massa pay my tunti, tatti dolla...* (p. 101, “Never mind, he said, if the Master pays me twenty, thirty dollar...”)

⁸ In a forthcoming article, I examine the etymology of “pidgin” and conclude that it is unlikely that its source is from the CP speaker’s inability to pronounce the English word “business” correctly (the most common explanation). Examples 8 and 9 hint that its source meaning may be more closely related to “fashion” (*pasin* in TP).

14) *Maskee* he no give that Chinaman cumshaw... (p. 104, "Never mind, he didn't give that Chinese man a present...")

15) *Maskee* snow, *maskee* ice... (p. 114, "Never mind the snow, never mind the ice...")

We again note the general meaning of "never mind" when *maskee* occurs elsewhere in a sentence or clause:

16) *Sometim maskee* he too muchee good, galaw. (p. 92, "Never mind, sometimes it is just too good!")

17) *Come, maskee* wit'h no stockin'! (p. 92, "Come on, never mind (that you have) no stockings on")

18) *My savee, maskee* plenty t'at ting belongey Chinaside. (p. 100, "I know, never mind, there are plenty of such things that happen in China.")

19) *Chinee* he makee allo *maskee*, he make sit-tsik, he catchee hab-tim... (p. 103, "The Chinese man didn't mind about it, he was sick and he took it easy...")

20) *Melican talkee*, 'S'posey t'hat allo *maskee*, betta my save t'hat ting t'han catchee tausand dolla. (p. 104, "The American said, 'Never mind about all that, it is better I understand it than to get a thousand dollars.'")

21) *Chinee* he wailo, *Melican* he tinkey t'hat ting allo *maskee* he make dig... (p. 105, "The Chinese man left and the American thought that he would disregard all those things and dig...")

22) *Chinee* he make laughee inside he mouth, *maskee* he no make show, he no talkee... (p.105, "The Chinese man laughed to himself but, never mind, he didn't show it, and he didn't speak.")

23) ...s'posee you tinkey t'hat allo *maskee*, you one piecee big foolo... (p. 105, "If you think all that can be disregarded, you are a real fool.")

24) ...by'mby *maskee* he gettee nother piece waifo. (p. 107, "Never mind, later he will get another wife.")

25) *An' ask* he flin to talk *maskee* wat devilo he can do. (p. 34, "So he asked his friend to say never mind what the devil he could do.")

26) *He make hole thloo wall **maskee**, an' steal he neighbour light* (p. 35, "Never mind, he made a hole through the wall and stole his neighbour's light.")

Concluding Comment

By examining the uses of **maskee** in Leland, it seems certain that the TP etymology of *maski* does not come from German, but from an early variety of Chinese Pidgin English. In every case it implies that what is said can either be disregarded or not taken at face value—exactly what we find in TP.

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