



Journal of the Linguistic Society of Papua New Guinea  
ISSN 0023-1959

**Special Issue 2017**

**Péter Maitz & Craig A. Volker (eds.):**

**Language Contact in the German Colonies:  
Papua New Guinea and beyond**

**VARIETIES OF LANGUAGE POLICIES AND THEIR  
CONSEQUENCES IN THE GERMAN COLONIES OF THE  
PACIFIC AREA**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper surveys the brief history of language practices and policies in Germany's Pacific colonies, in particular policies aimed at spreading the German language. It identifies a major contrast between the inefficient, under-financed ad hoc policies of German New Guinea, Samoa and German Micronesia and contrast these with the well thought-out policies of Kiautschou. It notes that different approaches were adopted by different policy-making bodies (missions, private firms, German government officials) at different times and in different regions, preventing the emergence of a uniform language policy. Importantly, whilst germanisation was the expressed aim in Kiautschou, it was far less in evidence in Germany's South Seas colonies.

**KEYWORDS**

language policy, colonial linguistics, German language in the Pacific, German language in China, language and education

## 1 INTRODUCTION

There are two ways of producing language policies i) the bottom up or ‘From practice to Policy’ approach advocated, for instance by Kaplan & Baldauf (1997) or ii) an ideology-driven top-down approach favoured by the vast majority of colonial governments and colonial agents. Between these two extremes there are numerous other approaches, mixing experience and ideology. Germany had a number of colonies and protectorates in the Pacific area, including the following:

- Kiautschou<sup>1</sup>
- German New Guinea (Kaiser-Wilhelmsland and Bismarck Archipelago)
- Marianas
- Carolines
- Marshall Islands
- (Western) Samoa

Common to all of them were their enormous distance from the German Reich, and, with the exception of Kiautschou and Samoa, enormous internal distances, low population density and great cultural diversity. The German Pacific, including Kiautschou occupied an area of 245,600 square kilometres (Reichskolonialbund 1936 appendix), of which the biggest landmass was Kaiser-Wilhelmsland with 181,000 square kilometres. In each of these territories, German colonial agents developed different language policies and practices. These reflect the constraints on policy making imposed by differing social and linguistic ecologies. German colonial linguistics remained a taboo topic until quite recently. A number of single-territory studies have become available in recent times (e.g., Mühlhäusler 2011 for Kiautschou and 2012 for missionary policies in New Guinea; Stolz 2011 for the Marianas), as has a more comprehensive survey by Engelberg (2008) and an earlier paper of mine (Mühlhäusler 2001) on the German language in the Pacific. Detailed historical information on language and educational policies in the German Pacific can be found in Hiery (2001) and Wurm (1977) and in Wurm, Mühlhäusler and Tryon (1996).

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<sup>1</sup> Chinese *Jiāozhōu*, often referred to as Kiauchow, Kiauchau or Kiao-Chau in older English texts.

## 2 DIFFERING SOCIAL AND LINGUISTIC ECOLOGIES

### 2.1 Social ecologies

For language policies to become effective, they require a social and linguistic ecology in which they can thrive. Such an ecological support system was initially absent in the German Pacific and there was insufficient time for Germany to develop a colonial society in which such policies could gain a foothold. Germany's colonial experiment lasted from 1884 to 1914 and, in the case of the Pacific mainly from 1899 to 1914. German missionaries and traders had established themselves in some territories before official German control was imposed, but their influence was local and intermittent and language policy was of little concern to them. Importantly, there were no non-traditional settlements in which German was used as a lingua franca. In most instances, the Germans were not the first colonizers but merely took over from other colonial powers (such as in the case of its three Micronesian colonies, which up to 1899 were under Spanish control) or imposed colonial control on informal English-speaking settlements such as those of Samoa, Ponape, New Britain, and the Duke of York Islands.

Only the New Guinea mainland and some of the smaller adjacent islands had not experienced contacts with Europeans, though parts of the coastal New Guinea mainland had come under the influence of Malay traders and bird-of-paradise hunters (Seiler 1982) operating from the Dutch East Indies.

The term 'German colonies', which is sometimes used to refer to overseas territories controlled by Germany conceals a number of important differences. Up to 1899, private trading companies rather than the German Reich controlled Germany's Pacific 'colonies'. Thus, the majority of plantations of Western Samoa were controlled by the firm of *J. C. Godeffroy und Sohn Hamburg* from 1867 and after its insolvency in 1870 the *Deutsche Handels- und Plantagen-Gesellschaft* (DH&PG) took over control. After many frictions with the USA and Britain, Germany formally took over Western Samoa as a protectorate.

It is noted that there were fluctuating numbers of trading and plantation companies at different times and even within the same territory, which precluded the emergence of shared practices and policies.

The DH&PG and other German trading companies succeeded in convincing the German Reich to annex German New Guinea in 1884 (as a pool of labour for the Samoan plantations) and the Marshall Islands in 1885. Again, the administration of both Kaiser-Wilhelmsland and the Bismarck Archipelago was in the hands of private trading companies until the Reich took over in 1899. In 1899 the Carolines and Marianas were added to Germany's colonial possession, with trading companies playing a major role in administration and language policy, though German Micronesia was nominally administered as part of German New Guinea. Kiautschou became a colony of the Imperial Navy (*Marinekolonie*) in 1899 and was not under the control of the Reichskolonialamt like Germany's other Pacific possessions.

Besides the trading companies, a number of mission organizations exercised considerable influence on the social life in Germany's Pacific colonies. Several of them predated German colonial control, which accounts for their divergent practices and policies.

In New Guinea, the Wesleyan Methodist missionaries began to operate in 1875 and French Catholic missionaries in 1882. The Christian Church in Samoa traces its beginnings to the arrival of missionaries sent by the London Missionary Society in 1830. Within a few years, virtually the whole of Samoa was converted to Christianity. Malua Theological College was established in 1844. German traders, missionaries and plantation owners lived and operated around the urban settlement of Apia and three large plantations. Importantly, few Samoans lived on these plantations. The labour force came from Melanesia.

The Shantung<sup>2</sup> Peninsula where Kiautschou is situated, had been under the influence of Italian and French Catholic missionaries, but German-speaking missionaries of the SVD (*Societas Verbi Dei*) established themselves in 1879 and in 1890 they officially came under the protectorate of the German empire. As Mühlhahn (2000: 190ff.) demonstrates, the mission was used as an instrument of establishing colonial control over the Shantung peninsula. English speaking missionaries and traders played only a minor role in this part of China.

Catholic Spanish missionaries operated on some of the larger islands of Micronesia. However, the influence of the American congregational Missions was far greater and by the time Germany assumed control, many of

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<sup>2</sup> Chinese *Jiāodōng*, often also referred to as Shandong in English.

the local social customs and structures had been changed by the Congregationalists (Knoll 2001). The activities of both the missions and the trading companies were restricted to a small number of locations, rather than evenly spread over the colonial territory.

In the Bismarck Archipelago, both the missions and trading companies were concentrated around the Gazelle Peninsula of New Britain. In Kaiser-Wilhelmsland the central coastal area featured both the majority of mission stations as well as the various administrative headquarters of first the New Guinea Company and then the Reich: Finschhafen, Stephansort and Friedrich-Wilhelmshafen (Madang). In both New Britain and Kaiser-Wilhelmsland the labour force on the plantations was not recruited among the local population but brought from elsewhere (see maps 49 and 50 in Wurm, Mühlhäusler & Tryon 1996). In German Micronesia German influence was restricted to Palau, Nauru, Truk, Ponape and Yap (Carolines), Yaluit (Marshall Islands), and Saipan (Marianas). German settlers and military were concentrated in urban Tsingtau<sup>3</sup>, the capital of Kiautschou, but they also used the outlying areas of the territory for recreation (hunting, hiking) and to establish a thriving forest industry.

## 2.2 Linguistic Ecologies

The linguistic situation, both of the traditional indigenous languages and more recent introduced ones differed greatly from territory to territory, ranging from a quasi-monolingual Samoa and Kiautschou to a highly multilingual German New Guinea. German New Guinea (Kaiser-Wilhelmsland and Bismarck Archipelago) was often referred to by German missionaries and administrators as ‘Babel’, as several hundred languages belonging either to the Melanesian language group or to other groups that were lumped together as non-Melanesian or Papuan languages. Speaker numbers rarely exceeded 500 per language.

The indigenous languages of *German Micronesia* belonged to four language groups: Nauruan, Kosraean, Trukic, Marshallese and Ponapeic. The only language of wider currency was Chamorro (Stolz 2011: 201), which was used by some German officials in preference to English and Spanish. English

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<sup>3</sup> Today Qīngdǎo.

speaking traders, whalers and beachcombers had operated whilst under Spanish control, and a pidginized English was dominant in beach communities such as Ponape, Kosrae, and Ngatik (see Tryon, Mühlhäusler & Baker 1996: 472–474). Much of the information gathered by the Thielenius expedition to German Micronesia (1908–1910) was obtained through the medium of Pidgin English, which continued to be widely spoken in spite of German efforts to eradicate it. English influence was strengthened by a number of Protestant missions (mainly American), which had begun to operate in the 1850s.

Spanish language use and influence was most notable on Guam which, however, did not become part of German Micronesia but came under US control. Spanish missionization outside Guam only began in the 1850s and remained on a small scale. German Samoa was the last German colonial acquisition in the Pacific. Prior to the arrival of Europeans, it had been a monolingual Polynesian society. The status of Samoan was greatly enhanced by its use as missionary language. Within the first years of their work, the London Missionary society (LMS) missionaries developed a Samoan alphabet and put the language into written form. The setting-up of the first printing press in Samoa (1839), only the second in the Pacific region, was a mark of the missionary zeal to bring the people to understand the gospel through the written word. By 1855 the whole Bible was translated into Samoan. The missionaries also introduced a monthly journal, the *Church Chronicle*.

German presence in Samoa predates the establishment of a protectorate. The Hamburg firm of J. C. Godeffroy und Sohn established a trading base in Samoa in 1857 and ten years later established its first copra plantation. By 1879 their cotton and copra plantations employed 1210 labourers, mostly Gilbertese and New Hebrideans. On these plantations, a Pidgin English developed (documented by Mühlhäusler 1978), which remained confined to plantations and the domestic context. It was rarely spoken by Samoans and did not become a lingua franca outside the plantations. From the 1830s Britain and the USA also established trading posts, consulates and plantation in Samoa and remained in competition with the Germans until the official establishment of American Samoa and the German protectorate in 1900. Significant numbers of English speakers dominated commerce, social life and the mission domain in the German protectorate.

### 2.3 The number of German speakers

The success of language policies depends not only on the skills and power of the organizations making them (trading companies, missions, administrations) but also on their usefulness as perceived by the local population. This in turn is influenced by the number of native speakers of the target language German and their willingness to use it in their dealings with local populations. The absolute number and proportion of Germans in their Pacific possessions in all instances was very low. Unlike some of Germany's African colonies, the Pacific colonies were not regarded as settlers' colonies. Hiery (2001: 18) estimates that between 1884 and 1918 about 3,800 Germans (cumulatively) had lived in New Guinea, but fewer than 400 in Germany's Micronesian possessions. The percentage of Germans among the expatriate population again was not initially dominant, and English-speaking colonists continued to play a major role in most colonies until the outbreak of WWI.

In 1902 there were 151 German and 129 British and American settlers in German Samoa. The proportion of English speakers remained high until the end of German colonial control in 1914, when the respective numbers were 373 and 179 (Hiery 2001: 650). Though precise figures are difficult to obtain, the best guess is that in 1914 about 1,400 Germans lived in its Pacific colonies with an estimated local population of 820,000, a miniscule proportion. The situation was quite different in Kiautschou. The Chinese population of this colony was around 161,000 in 1910, 34,000 of which resided in urban Tsingtau. The German civilian population comprised 1,531 and navy personnel 2,275, most of them residing in Tsingtau. This means that about 10% of the inhabitants of urban Tsingtau were German speakers. In contrast to Germany's other Pacific possessions, there were very few English speakers: only 32 British and 19 Americans resided in Kiautschou in 1910 (Mohr 1910: 443–444).

## 3 COMMUNICATION NETWORKS

The question of who communicated with whom in what language in Germany's Pacific possessions deserves attention. Before the arrival of outside colonizers, communication between different groups of local inhabitants tended to be restricted to small areas and communication with



visitors from the outside was very rare. Intercommunication with other nearby groups, by contrast, was achieved by a number of means: bilingualism, dual-lingualism, local inter-village pidgins and sign languages (see Mühlhäusler et al. 1996). The colonizers created new conditions involving mass movement of plantation workers and they founded a number of non-traditional settlements in which new types of intercommunication developed. As a consequence, traditional forms of intercommunication rapidly disappeared. Pidgin English developed from a small contact medium used between Europeans and locals (Tok Boi) to an interethnic pidgin (Tok Pisin), which was used on most plantations, in non-traditional professions (e.g., police force, domestic employment) and which eventually became the major lingua franca of former German New Guinea but was replaced by other languages of intercommunication in other colonies.

Many of the non-traditional settlements (beach communities, administrative centres, mission stations, plantations) developed their language practices in isolation from other centres. Thus, Kate and Yabem were chosen as the *lingue franche* of the Protestant Missions on the New Guinea mainland and Pidgin German was used on the Catholic mission stations of the SVD (cf. Mühlhäusler 2012). Pidgin English was used by the Melanesian workers on the plantations of the DH&PG in Samoa and a contact Samoan Pidgin in the Chinese-owned shops of German Samoa. The beach communities in German Micronesia favoured Pidgin English and the mission educated Micronesians often communicated in English with outsiders:

Every decent German must feel sad when he encounters the English language everywhere among the local population of the Marshall Islands. On Ebon Island, for instance, almost all grown up natives speak an almost perfect English. Not a single one among them understood German. Even the German officials who, because of the brevity of their placement, rarely bother to learn the local language, speak English with the natives and use English-speaking translators when communicating with the chiefs. To make things worse, the Melanesian police have brought with them the horrible Pidgin English, which happily has not been understood here thus far. (Born n. d., translated from Hiery 2001: 205)

### 3.1 Communication among Europeans

The European population of the German Pacific was far more heterogeneous than in metropolitan Germany, with English speaking traders and planters dominant in Samoa and the Bismarck Archipelago and with a high percentage of missionaries from a non-German speaking background active in Samoa, Micronesia and parts of New Britain. As regards the missions in New Guinea, Governor Hahl, in a circular of 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1913, wrote:

From the very structure of mission organization, it follows that the guiding thoughts for the nation's schooling cannot be formed from unitary plans. The diversity of mission staff with regard to nationality and denomination increases this existing lack of uniformity. (Mühlhäusler 1979: 114)

In social events there was a tradition – much deplored by some German officials and the colonial lobby at home – to employ English as the medium of intercommunication when English speakers were present:

A single Englishman who joins the company of four or five Germans who all are more or less poorly proficient in English suffices to make the Germans feel obliged to continue their conversation in English. Noblesse oblige. (*Samoanische Zeitung* 12.10.1912, author's translation)

The practice of employing English as a language of intercommunication was also found in other official bodies.

### 3.2 Communication with indigenous workers

The languages chosen by the Germans to communicate with their indigenous workforce on the plantations, ships, government stations and in the domestic context was determined both by ideology and by pragmatic factors. There are repeated reports of the German residents not wishing their local servants to understand German but, unlike in the Dutch East Indies, this never became the official approach. Friederici (1911: 97) comments on the

[...] inconvenience of not having a language at the disposal of the master race once German had become generally known, a language in which one could not be understood or overheard by unauthorized natives. Presumably the government only partially supports this opinion with which many officials and certainly a large

proportion of the settlers would, however, agree. (Friederici 1911: 97, author's translation)

Pragmatic and economic factors were more important, however: The workers recruited for the Samoan plantations from 1867 to 1880 came predominantly from the Gilbert Island (Kiribati) and spoke Pidgin English, followed by recruits from Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands and only after 1882 from New Guinea. By that time, there was considerable mobility of labourers between the principal plantations of Queensland, Fiji, and Samoa and Pidgin English had become an international language for the plantation workforce. By the time Germany established political control over Samoa, Pidgin English was firmly established as the working language of all German-owned plantations. The first plantations on the Gazelle Peninsula of New Britain were organised from Samoa and employed Pidgin English speaking overseers and workers. The same linguistic model was followed in the other plantations established in the Bismarck Archipelago, and proposals to replace Pidgin English with simplified Tolai or simplified German never were implemented due to cost factors and resistance to change a system that worked well for the plantation owners. There were a few early exceptions. Malay was chosen by the New Guinea Company in Kaiser-Wilhelmsland for a few years because the recruits had previously worked on plantations in the Dutch East Indies and the Company had more important problems than spreading German among its workers (Seiler 1982). When the Malay workers were replaced by workers who had previously worked in New Britain, Pidgin English became the plantation language. As a consequence,

[w]hen the New Guinea Company assumed sovereignty it encountered Pidgin English and, as a representative of the German empire, faced a task, which, at the time, would probably not have been difficult to solve in the national interest. Yet nothing, or virtually nothing, happened in this respect. (Friederici 1911: 94).

For pragmatic reasons the German administration reluctantly rather than officially, as claimed by Hall (1959), employed Pidgin English in village administration, in the prisons, in the police force and law courts and for official proclamations. Importantly, Pidgin English was seen by the local population as a key to employment, social advancement and travel, and those who returned to their villages after a stint on the plantations began to teach

Pidgin English to the male children of their villages (see Mühlhäusler 1979, chapter 3).

#### 4 EDUCATION

Education of the local population of the German South Seas largely remained a task of the numerous missions for most of the German colonial period. A detailed account is found in Hiery (2001). Language practices and policies varied from mission to mission, with only sporadic attempts to teach German and to make German the language of wider communication. The practices and policies of the Divine Word Mission in Kaiser-Wilhelmsland that led to the development of a Pidgin German have been detailed in Mühlhäusler (2012). The Catholic Sacred Heart missionaries at Vunapope (Gazelle Peninsula of New Britain) opened an orphanage for mixed race children (Mühlhäusler 1894, Volker 1989). The language of the classroom and workshops was German (Normaldeutsch) but in the dormitories a German Creole, *Unserdeutsch*, developed as an unintended consequence of the mission language policy.<sup>4</sup>

German state schools were established after 1900 and because of their small size, short-life-span and varying language policies only had a minimal effect on the use of German. Hiery (2001: 212–213) provides statistics for 1911. In the German Pacific a total of 26,962 students attended primary school and 1,872 a secondary school. How many of these received their instruction in German is difficult to ascertain. In German New Guinea the First State school was founded in 1907 at Namanula (New Britain). The initial intake was 27 pupils. By 1913/4 this number had grown to 120. The language of instruction was Tolai (Kuanua) in line with governor Hahl's concept of making the language spoken around the colony's capital Rabaul the lingua franca of the entire colony (Hiery 2001: 223–224). From 1911 German became the language of instruction. Hahl planned further state schools where German and the predominant local language were to be languages of instruction. This approach of giving recognition to a local

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<sup>4</sup>See [https://www.philhist.uni-augsburg.de/en/lehrstuehle/germanistik/sprachwissenschaft/rabaul\\_creole\\_german/](https://www.philhist.uni-augsburg.de/en/lehrstuehle/germanistik/sprachwissenschaft/rabaul_creole_german/)

language differed from the approaches of other colonial powers in the Pacific. As Hiery observed (2001: 206) with regard to New Guinea:

There is absolutely no truth in the often asserted attempts by the German colonial administration to impose germanization. In fact, there was no German language policy in New Guinea until shortly before the outbreak of WWI. (Hiery 2001: 206, author's translation)

The first German government school in German Micronesia was opened in Saipan in 1905 with an initial number of 190 students. By 1913/14 517 local children were enrolled. The medium of education initially was Chamorro and subsequently Chamorro and German.

In Samoa, a private school for mixed-race and European children was established in 1888. It became a German state school in 1903. By 1913/14 97 pupils were enrolled. Initially lessons were given in English, but German became the language of tuition after 1903. By contrast, the state school for indigenous Samoan children employed Samoan as the language of tuition, with German and English being taught as foreign languages.

The small number of locals who had become competent in German by 1914 found employment in the administrative and educational domains. The objective to have a class of indigenous bilinguals was only partially achieved, with Pidgin English remaining the lingua franca of necessity. The aim to train sufficient numbers of bilinguals for jobs in administration and private trading firms again is in evidence in Kiautschou (Mühlhans 2000: 241). The situation here differs from the South Seas colonies in three respects:

- The number of state schools was far greater than in Germany's South Seas possessions;
- German language was central in the schools run by the missions;
- German was taught from primary school to university. (see Schnee 1920 and Mühlhans 2000).

A German government school was established right at the beginning of colonization (1899) for German children, which became a Realgymnasium. A school for ship building apprentices and three other vocational schools were attended both by local Chinese and natives of the German South Seas colonies, who often acquired an excellent command of German in Kiautschou. In 1905 the plan to develop German language primary schools

throughout the colony began to be implemented. For details see *Das Leben im Pachtgebiet*<sup>5</sup>.

By 1913 there were 20 primary schools attended by 1050 Chinese students. In addition, the Berliner Mission maintained 7 primary schools, one middle school and one school for girls with an aggregate number of 256 students, whilst the Weimarer Mission catered for 127 students. This mission also ran a teacher training college with 43 male and 9 female students.

The Catholic mission ran 8 primary schools with 124 students and a German-Chinese middle school for 27 students. German language teaching played a prominent role in all of these schools. In 1908 a German-Chinese University was founded. It taught about 400 Chinese students through the medium of German. In 1913 there were about 800 Chinese, out of a population of 187,000 who received formal education in German. There were also 227 European, predominantly German, students out of a population of 2069 civilians and 2400 soldiers. Matzat (2001) has given a detailed account of the continuing role of German schools after 1914.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

There are two possible ways of looking at German language policies. The first, cynical, one is one I have elaborated on in a talk at the Colonial Linguistics Symposium in Bremen (Mühlhäusler 2012). The American poet John Godfrey Saxe (*Daily Cleveland Herald*, 29.03.1869) once observed: “Laws, like sausages, cease to inspire respect in proportion as we know how they are made.” I shall argue that very much the same applies to most colonial language descriptions and language policies. The sausage metaphor of language policy highlights a number of properties, including:

- introduction of a product not previously known in the colonies
- different sausage making traditions of German, English, and Dutch producers
- the cheapness of sausages
- the mix of natural and man-made ingredients

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<sup>5</sup> [www.dhm.de/archiv/ausstellungen/tsingtau/katalog/aus2\\_6.htm](http://www.dhm.de/archiv/ausstellungen/tsingtau/katalog/aus2_6.htm)

- non-transparency of ingredients
- cultural adaptation
- ad hoc ingredients
- competition between sausage makers

A more charitable way of summarizing German colonial language policies is to focus on the reasons why Germany never developed a single language policy for its South Seas colonies. These include:

- The administrative models for Samoa, Kiautschou and New Guinea (including Micronesia) differed;
- The social and linguistic ecologies of the different colonies varied considerably;
- Germany lacked experience. Language practices and policies were ad hoc and driven by short-term ideological positions rather than expertise. The experience of highly multilingual societies was unfamiliar and most administrators and missionaries struggled to come to term with this ‘Tower of Babel’;
- Language practices and policies were developed by a range of different players, governments, missions, trading and plantation companies, without any coordination;
- Germany was a late-comer in colonial expansion and by the time it imposed control English and Pidgin English had already been established as a language of inter-communication among the local labour force;
- The financial means to teach German to significant numbers of the local population were lacking, as were language teachers;
- The indigenous population had very few German linguistic role models and knowledge of German provided few advantages;
- Coherent plans to promote the German language as a lingua franca only emerged shortly before WWI and could never be implemented.

By contrast, relatively successful policies were developed in Kiautschou because:

- This colony was directly administered by the Imperial Navy;
- An efficient education system was established in a short period of time;

- A considerable financial investment to spread German was made;
- The proportion of German speakers was far greater, and English speakers were a small minority;
- Knowledge of German was seen as providing significant advantages by the local inhabitants.

That the German language played only a marginal role in Germany's South Seas possessions was inevitable as was its decline and disappearance after the end of colonial control. What remains are a few unintended effects:

- German words in some of the languages of the former colonies (Engelberg 2010);
- a few of the place names mentioned in Finsch (1901) and Werther (1903);
- a dying German Creole, Unserdeutsch, and
- some archival letters written in German and Pidgin German by a few members of the local population.

This survey suggests that the language policies in the German Pacific were by and large top-down. Their efficacy, however, was moderated by pragmatic factors. Once the German colonizers had gone, Pidgin English became the de facto lingua franca of government, missions and the local population of New Guinea. After an interlude of Japanese control, Micronesia adopted English, in Samoa Samoan and English continued to be the official languages and, again after a Japanese interlude, Mandarin Chinese became the official language of Kiautschou.

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