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A Further Note on “*maskee*” and Chinese Pidgin English

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In an earlier article published in *Language and Linguistics in Melanesia* (Vol. 33/1, 2015), I outlined how the etymology of *maski* in Tok Pisin (TP) was historically related to *maskee* in Chinese Pidgin English (CPE) where it, in turn, had entered from Portuguese.

I now have access to two further sources (kindly pointed out to me by Don Niles) that document conclusively that the CPE form *maskee* came from Portuguese.

The first is by Hunter (1882), who wrote about the days of Old Canton, which was the only port open to foreigners for their trade with the Chinese. Foreigners were not allowed to learn Chinese and any teacher who gave lessons in it was subject to beheading. Hunter relates this on the authority of a “Dr. Morrison” (presumably Dr. Robert Morrison, the man who was instrumental in the translation of the Bible into Chinese), who had arrived in Canton in 1807. The business transactions mainly concerned opium and, for intercourse between the merchants and the English, CPE was used. Hunter claims that it was mainly at the invention of the Chinese because extensive use of the English language was not until a hundred years later.

Hunter is probably the first to claim that ‘pigeon’ (as he spelled it) is a corruption of the English word ‘business’.¹ He does not provide any substantial evidence, but he does relate a number of Portuguese words that found their way into CPE, including *joss* (from *Deös*), *patele* (from *padre*) and *maskei* (from *masque*, ‘never mind’), *laleloon* (from *ladraö*, ‘a thief’), and *grand* (from *grande*, ‘the chief’). He also gives a number of Indian words that were incorporated into CP.

The Chinese called all foreigners Fan Kwaes, ‘foreign devils’ and the English (in particular) were known as ‘red-haired devils’². Some of the book shops near the “Factories” (individual trading places, or ‘kongs’) sold a small pamphlet called ‘Devils Talk’ and on the cover was a caricature drawing of a foreigner or barbarian. The CPE pamphlet cost “a penny or two” and was used by servants, coolies and shopkeepers. Unfortunately, there are no such pamphlets known to be in existence.

Scattered through Hunter’s book are numerous examples of CPE. Here are a few of them:

¹ Repeated by Degaldo (p. xcvi), also with reference to Leland’s claim. He hedges by saying “There are those, however, who think that ‘pidgin’ is derived from the Portuguese ‘*ocupação*.’ It is unclear the path this word would take to become ‘pidgin’ or ‘pidgeon’, as it is sometimes spelled. Leland also feels that ‘pidgin’ may have come from the Chinese word for ‘business’ – *pi-tzin*, (identified by him as ‘Canton Vocabulary’, p.131).

² “Some among these different nationalities (English, Dutch, Danes, Swedes, Austrians) had red hair, which led the Chinese facetiously to apply this term ‘Red-haired Devils’ ever after to all foreigners alike” (Hunter 1882:27-28).

1. *He no come see my, he sendee com one piece 'chop'. He com to-mollo...* "He [Mr. Houqua, a security merchant] didn't come to see me. He sent a note. He will come tomorrow." (pp. 36-37)
2. *Just now hav settee countee alla finishee, you go, you please.* "Our accounts are now settled, you can leave when you like." (p. 44)
3. *My chin-chin you.* "My compliments to you." (p.52)
4. *What for he make so muchee noise?* "Why is he making so much noise?" (p.105)
5. *How fashion? All thing no hav change.* "Why? Nothing has changed." (p. 107).

The English had arrived in 1630 and established their first trading post in Canton in 1664. CP was first spoken in Macao and Guangzhou (Canton) shortly after their arrival and had spread to Shanghai by the 1830s. There are vestiges of it today in Nauru.³

The second source is by Dalgado, translated by Soares from the Portuguese original (1913 and published in English in 1936). Dalgado examined about 50 "Asiatic" languages and gives information on each of them, including Chinese Pidgin English, although his information seems mainly to be from Leland (1876).⁴ The word we are concerned with is described in the dictionary section (pp. 221-222) as follows:

"**Mas que** (conj., but that). Mal[ay]. Maski, *maski*. – Jav[anese]. *Maski, meski*. – Tet[to]. *Maske*. – Pid[gin]-Engl[ish]. *Maskee, mashkee, ma-sze-ki*, be it so, all the same, it does not matter; never mind; it is alright, perfectly; just, correct. "This word is used in a very irregular manner. It is not Chinese, its equivalent in Mandarin being *pvo-yow-cheen*" Leland [1876].

Masqui (Port. Dialect of Macau), *masque* (Port. Dialect of Ceylon, 'but, for all that, even'). In these meanings, it is used in Portuguese classics: "Contae, **mas que** me deixem congelado". "Por Deos **mas que** me fudam, **mas que** me confundam, en he de tanger sempre a verdade." D. Francisco de Melo, *Dialogos Apologaes*."

Elsewhere (p. 495), Delgado lists 15 CP words that he believes reflect a Portuguese origin, including 1) **maskee mashkee** or **ma-sze-ki** (from *mas que*) and 2) possibly **pidgin** from *ocupação*.

There is little doubt about the early historical influence of Portuguese throughout coastal areas of China (and India), and, as Delgado suggests, it "spread to...an incredible extent, thus preparing the ground to make English the language of the Pacific." (1936:xcvi).

In summary, evidence from both Hunter and Delgado demonstrate conclusively that the etymology of *maskee* in CP dates back to Portuguese.

³ According to http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_Pidgin_English, and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nauruan_Pidgin_English, accessed February, 2015.

⁴ In Delgado's introduction he outlines the scope of his study: It embraces nine "Families" of languages, one of which is "Anglo-Chinese or Pidgin-English" (p. xli).

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