

# The Birth and Decline of Rabaul Creole German\*

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## 1. Introduction

Often when one speaks of language loss in Papua New Guinea, this is attributed to the influence of modern education in an introduced language or to the greater utility of Tok Pisin or Hiri Motu. Rabaul Creole German, however, is an interesting example of a language which owes its genesis both to the establishment of modern education and the presence of Tok Pisin, as well as to the perceived need for a secret language. Moreover, it is probably the only language from Papua New Guinea which faces extinction as a result of the emigration of its speakers overseas.

Descriptions of Rabaul Creole German can be found in Volker (1982 and forthcoming). Although most of the lexicon of Rabaul Creole German is of German origin, there are quite noticeable similarities between the grammatical structures of Rabaul Creole German and Tok Pisin. For example, like Tok Pisin (and the Austronesian languages of New Britain), Rabaul Creole German differentiates between an inclusive first per-

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PL	Plural	SG	Standard German	IN	inclusive
PPT	Present participle marker	TP	Tok Pisin	EX	exclusive
RCG	Rabaul Creole German ( <i>Unserdeutsch</i> )	SNG	Singular		

son plural pronoun *uns* (Tok Pisin *yumi*) and its exclusive equivalent *wir* (Tok Pisin *mipela*). Similarly, the plural is marked by *alle*, Standard German 'all', and cognate with the Tok Pisin plural marker *ol*, e.g.:

RCG: *Alle Boi komm zu er*  
 TP: Ol boi kam long em.  
 PL male come to he  
 'The males come to him.'

As in Tok Pisin, interrogatives are usually placed at the end of a sentence and serial verbs are common, e.g.:

RCG: *Du laufen geht wo?*  
 TP: Yu ran go we?  
 You-SG run go where  
 'Where are you running to?'

But some forms appear to have been borrowed from English. For example, Rabaul Creole German has a durative form which is formed with the copula and a present participle, and which is used in a way similar to the English continuous:

*Der Mensch, wo is am bauen de Haus, hat gehauen sein Finger*  
 the person who is PPT build the house has hit his finger  
 'The person who's building the house has hit his finger.'

Even more striking is the existence of an English-like passive construction, using the copula, the past participle and the preposition *bei* (Standard German 'at the home of'), which has the same pronunciation as the English passive agent marker *by*, e.g.:

*De Chicken war gestohlen bei alle Raskol*  
 the chicken was stolen by PL thief  
 'The chicken was stolen by the thieves.'

As Derek Bickerton (personal communication) has pointed out, the existence of this passive construction and a copula, two features rarely found in creole languages, indicates that there was close proximity between the speakers of Rabaul Creole German and the superstrate language in the early days of the language and that this close proximity continued at least until the creole had stabilised. The apparent use of English

models for the durative and passive constructions also suggests that at some stage there was an early, perhaps conscious, modelling of English forms.

## 2. Birth of Rabaul Creole German (1897-1914)

The history of Rabaul Creole German is closely linked to the colonial history of the Gazelle Peninsula of East New Britain, especially the area around the Vunapope Catholic Mission near Kokopo. 'Michael' (1957) and Hueskes (1932) provide historical information about the mission, while Gash and Whittacker (1975) provide general information about the area in general, as well as early photographs of the mission at Vunapope. Mühlhäusler (1977, 1984) discusses the status of German in New Guinea during the German colonial era. As he points out, the early German administration under the New Guinea Company did nothing to arrest the spread of Tok Pisin, and in the early years, Malay, as *lingua franca*. It was only at the turn of the century that any attempt was made to introduce German into the few state schools in the colony. Similarly, few workers had a need to use German, so that, while German was the source for many lexical items in Tok Pisin, it was not widely used among New Guineans or even between New Guineans and Germans. The examples of Pidgin German that Mühlhäusler gives are variable jargons rather than stable pidgins. Thus, with one exception, German in either its standard form or as a pidgin, never became the language of everyday use by any cohesive group of New Guineans. The exception was with the children of the mixed race orphanage at Vunapope in East New Britain.

At the turn of the century under German administration, the Gazelle Peninsula quickly became the most prosperous part of the colony, so that the capital moved there from the mainland, first to Herbertshoche (Kokopo) and then Rabaul. These towns were quite cosmopolitan, with the Germans bringing in Micronesian overseers and policemen, Filipino sailors, Ambonese clerks, Chinese labourers and artisans, and Melanesian workers from many areas elsewhere in the colony. The European population was also heterogeneous, with German missionaries, colonial employers, traders, and plantation owners being joined by others from other European countries and Australia. Most of these migrant workers, colonists and visitors were men without their families, and as relations with local women, both Tolais and non-Tolais developed, soon there were mixed-race children. In 1897 Catholic missionaries established a school for these children at Vunapope ('Michael' 1957). It is not clear to what extent

the school began as a boarding school. Father Arnold Janssen (1932), a director of the school during and after World War I, writes that until 1903 there were problems caused by the children being away from school for long periods to attend village festivals (*singsings*) with their mothers' families, and that there were conflicts between the way that their mothers 'spoiled' them and the expectations of the German missionaries. By 1903, in any case, the school was organised to permit visits home only on holidays, loosening the ties which the children had with life in their mothers' villages.

This meant that at least by 1903, the children did not have the opportunity for regular contact either with their mothers' languages or, where there was a family relationship with their nonindigenous fathers, their fathers' languages. Many, in fact, would have been toddlers too young to come to the school with much command of any language. Others were old enough to know their mothers' language, although in families where the nonindigenous father was present, the home language was probably Tok Pisin. Older persons I interviewed who attended the school before 1930 told me no children knew their fathers' languages well, although many had picked up occasional phrases or words. Janssen (1932:150) writes that all the children came to the school knowing Tok Pisin and only 'a smattering' of their mothers' languages, indicating that the first Rabaul Creole German speakers may also have been among the first native speakers of Tok Pisin, many years before creolisation is thought to have occurred.

The students were not allowed to use Tok Pisin at the school, and were taught in German. The oldest speakers of Rabaul Creole German I was able to interview would not have been at the school when it was first started, but they said they had been told that the language began when students started 'putting German words in Pidgin sentences', and in the dormitories students would consciously make up new expressions and constructions using the words they were learning in class. It appears that given the students' relative isolation in the dormitories, this relexified Tok Pisin stabilised quickly and remained a favourite vehicle of communication amongst the students, even though their command of Standard German continued to improve in the classroom. This is not unlike the situation in many Papua New Guinean schools today, where students learn Tok Pisin from their peers at the same time that they learn English in the classroom.

### 3. Changes under Australian rule (1914-1945)

By the time of the Australian invasion in 1914, the first students were already young adults and their use of German was analogous to that in a typical German country town. Among themselves they spoke a 'dialect' (*Mundart*), the creole which they called *Unserdeutsch* (literally 'Our German'). With their teachers and other Germans they spoke a local colloquial form of Standard German with a local accent, which they called *Normaldeutsch*, and in writing they attempted to use standard written German, *Schriftsprache*.

The Australian invasion caused a number of changes at Vunapope. Nearly all the children's European fathers were repatriated and only a very few took their children or indigenous wives with them to Europe. Most took their wives to their home villages and placed the children with the mission school. In addition, apparently with the permission of the new authorities, the school began a policy of having mixed-race children from Catholic villages taken into the school as early as possible, preferably as soon as they could be weaned, to avoid 'vile habits...which can only be rooted out with great difficulty' (Janssen 1932:151). These two developments meant that the school grew rapidly with between one and two hundred students at any given time in the interwar years.

At the same time that the school was absorbing a greater number of students, the medium of instruction was officially changed from German to English. This change was as hard for the German teachers as for their students, since the teachers themselves often had only a poor command of English. German was therefore still used as an 'emergency language' to fall back on when either the teachers' or the students' grasp of English failed them. In some subjects, such as mathematics, even though the lesson was supposedly given in English, the old textbooks in German continued to be used for a number of years. Students continued to receive lessons in German grammar and handwriting, with those of part-European background having more classes than the others.

As the students became adults, they tended to marry other former students, and settle around the mission, with many remaining at the mission as employees. As at the school, *Unserdeutsch* was usually used at home, while *Normaldeutsch* was used with the

missionaries, and pride was taken in the ability to speak Standard German well. Tok Pisin remained the lingua franca with other New Guineans.

There was little opportunity to use English at the mission, although the high standard of the English of older persons from the school indicates that some at least had contacts with speakers of English in Rabaul.

#### 4. The demise of Rabaul Creole German

The isolation of the Vunapope community was broken by World War II and the changes in postwar society. When the school was reorganised after the war, the teaching of German even as a subject was prohibited, and the school was reorganised to be more in conformity with the Australian syllabus. New teaching sisters were brought in from America and, to a lesser extent, Australia. As the German missionaries grew older and retired from active pastoral duties, contact with Standard German declined, as did the missionaries' expectations that the younger generation speak Standard German. In fact, at least one American sister of German background learned to speak Rabaul Creole German well and used it, instead of English, in her contact with the community.

With increased education and changes in colonial society, the community became more mobile, and a number moved away from Vunapope, both to Rabaul and to other centres in the country, often marrying outside the group. Most took advantage of changes in immigration laws to become Australian citizens in the 1960s. The developments on the Gazelle Peninsula leading up to Independence were unsettling for many Chinese and mixed-race residents, and at Independence, even though most Rabaul Creole German speakers were eligible to become automatic Papua New Guinean citizens, most retained Australian citizenship and moved to Australia. Today most, about a thousand, live in southeastern Queensland, while only a few remain in Papua New Guinea. Even these usually send their children to school in Australia.

Today the descendants of Rabaul Creole German speakers remain a cohesive group because of strong kinship ties. German culture, as expressed in traditional German values and German cooking, is important to those who grew up before Independence. Some older persons even still refer to the Germany they have never seen as the *Vaterland*. But to younger persons in Australia, assimilation to Australian ways is important,

and any ethnic nostalgia is directed more towards Papua New Guinea than to Germany. Many younger persons have married outside the group and in these families English, or occasionally Tok Pisin, is normally used. Rabaul Creole German is used only in families where both parents grew up speaking the language and where a grandparent plays a constant role in child rearing. Thus few younger people use or understand the language, and very few, if any, children speak it today as a first language. In 1980 a group of older speakers estimated that probably less than a hundred speakers could use the language fluently, less than two dozen of whom were still in New Britain. However, younger people do use occasional phrases as a 'fun language' for sarcasm or to hide something from outsiders who do not speak German.

## 5. The functions of Rabaul Creole German

In reviewing the history of Rabaul Creole German, it is interesting to examine the reasons why it developed, the functions it fulfilled for the community, and the reasons why it is no longer used. Normally creole languages develop in multilingual situations where there is a minority dominant group that is socially distant from other groups who speak distinct languages. In some ways this was the situation in the dormitories of the Vunapope boarding school where the German missionary teachers were a dominant minority and the students came from homes where a number of indigenous and nonindigenous languages were used.

There is, however, one important difference between the classic creole situation and that of the first Rabaul Creole German speakers: as a former supervisor of the school (Janssen 1932:150) reports, the first Rabaul Creole German speakers already had a common language, Tok Pisin, and it appears they may even have been its first native speakers. In fact, there have never been any monolingual speakers of Rabaul Creole German, with all having had a command of Tok Pisin, and either Standard German or English, or both.

The much greater utility of Tok Pisin over Rabaul Creole German is shown by the fact that no other New Guineans with whom the community was in contact seem to have learnt Rabaul Creole German. Given the availability of Tok Pisin as a common language among the students, the question arises as to why a further language was necessary. A partial answer may lie in the fact that the students were prohibited from

speaking Tok Pisin at the school. But the failure of hundreds of expatriate school teachers to eradicate Tok Pisin at schools elsewhere in the country indicates that this is at best only a partial explanation.

A more probable explanation lies in the parallel with secret languages. Secret languages are common in societies in many parts of Melanesia, so much so that Father Albert Anfinger (1957) makes the claim that all Papua New Guinean languages are composed of a 'straight language' component and a 'secret language' component. As Laycock (1977) reports, the most common purpose for a secret language is to create a feeling of solidarity when forced to deal with outsiders, and some groups will use a secret language whenever speaking with foreigners.

In other societies a secret language sets apart a particular group within the society, such as initiated men. For example, in the secret language of one of the Tolai men's societies, if one wants to warn a dancer of a drain ahead, a man says *A tumarang a kaina pi*, literally 'the warning the bad ground'. In this sentence only the article *a* and *kaina* 'bad' are the same as in ordinary speech. Certainly at least the half-Tolai children would have known of this secret language used by men initiated into traditional *dukduk* and other secret societies, especially since in the early days of the school Janssen complains the students were often absent because they were with their families at village festivals

All secret languages are created by various processes of lexical change. In some cases, words from a foreign language are inserted into sentences constructed according to rules in the 'straight' variety of the language. In some cases the grammatical structure as well as the lexeme is changed, i.e., the grammar is regularised and the meanings of words become much broader.

The similarity between this process and the genesis of Rabaul Creole German is striking. Older speakers report that German words were placed in Tok Pisin sentences, and these German forms show a reduction of grammatical irregularities, such as verb conjugations and morphological plurals.

This does not mean that Rabaul Creole German can be viewed simply as a relexified and Germanised Tok Pisin. If that were so, there would be no explanation for grammatical constructions which resemble features of Standard German or English, or for constructions which are unique to Rabaul Creole German. As Mühlhäusler (1984:40) sug-



gests, Rabaul Creole German 'must be regarded as a creole which became a postcreole continuum before stable creole norms could establish themselves.' Relexification was therefore an important factor in the genesis of the language, but it is by no means the only factor.

In the history of the group there is some indication that a major function of the language in its early days was to enhance solidarity among the in-group and establish an identity separate from both their German-speaking guardians and other New Guineans. This was expressed by a middle aged speaker of the language who told me 'we needed our own language' because 'after all, we are not really German, but we're not *kanakas* either.'

This statement reflects the social isolation of mixed-race communities in colonial Papua New Guinea as a whole. While they were usually too Westernised to be part of the indigenous society around them, they were prevented by social, and often legal, barriers from full integration with the European community. For example, while indigenes were not permitted to drink alcohol, mixed-race persons could, but, unlike Europeans, only with a special police permit. Similarly, they were often paid salaries above those paid to indigenes, but below those paid to Europeans doing similar work.

As Independence approached, these barriers began to disappear and an increasing number of mixed-race persons, including the speakers of Rabaul Creole German, began to assimilate into either European Australian society or the emerging indigenous middle class. For many, this assimilation was formalised when a choice had to be made between Papua New Guinean and Australian citizenship.

This function of Rabaul Creole German as an in-group language is remarkably similar to that described by Laycock (1989) for Pitcairn-Norfolk. Laycock notes the fact that, as with German for the early speakers of Rabaul Creole German, English on Pitcairn and Norfolk has always been a primary language learned by all at a very early age. This, along with the several marked 'survivals' of English grammar which he describes, leads Laycock to describe Pitcairn-Norfolk as a cant, i.e., a deliberate creation to exclude outsiders linguistically.

Rabaul Creole German also appears to have acted as a cant for most, if not all, of its existence. Since the community has always had Tok Pisin and, in recent years,

English, as a common language, the demise of Rabaul Creole German must have little to do with its necessity as a tool for communication within the community.

Laycock (1989:627) states that 'a cant is a kind of linguistic parasite, in that it cannot exist in isolation, away from the language of the larger community that the cant-speakers are attempting to hide from.' This is borne out with Rabaul Creole German, whose decline coincided with the disappearance of the language of the larger community, German, after World War II.

More importantly, the reasons for 'hiding' from the wider community also disappeared. The community now has a confidence that was not possible in the racially stratified society of colonial New Guinea, so that the protection offered by a secret language is no longer necessary. This is indicated by increased marriage outside the group and a much greater geographic dispersal of the community so that today the tie that younger people in Australia have with the Rabaul Creole German-speaking community is more like a strong family tie than a strictly ethnic tie needing to be marked by a separate language, as was the case in New Guinea.

## 6. Conclusions

Among the languages which have arisen in Papua New Guinea, Rabaul Creole German is unusual in several respects. While school children often develop their own codes of communication, Rabaul Creole German must be unique in being a school code which has become the main language of a speech community actually larger than many of those speaking the vernacular languages of the country. Certainly it must be the only language in the country which has for all practical purposes disappeared as a result of emigration.

The similarities between Rabaul Creole German and secret languages indicate that, far from being an isolated case of pidginisation, Rabaul Creole German simply follows in the Melanesian tradition of secret languages. This, along with evidence from other creoles outside Melanesia which act as cants, such as Pitcairn-Norfolk, leads one to wonder whether our usual model of pidgin and creole languages developing because of a desire to facilitate communication between different language groups might need to be revised. Perhaps instead, one of the factors leading to the creation of pidgin and creole languages in at least some multilingual situations might be fear of strangers and the

subsequent desire to have a secret language when individual members of different language groups want to establish a new in-group with psychological distance from those around them.

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## Appendix

### Examples of Rabaul Creole German constructions

#### 1. Genitive constructions:

(a) *Haus fi Tom*  
house for T.  
'Tom's house'

(b) *Diese Car de Tyre*  
this car the tyre  
'this car's tyre'

(c) *mein Vater -s Haus*  
my father s house  
'my father's house'

#### 2. Comparative/superlative:

(a) *Maria is mehr klein denn Des.*  
M. is more small than D.  
'Maria is smaller than Des.'

(b) *Diese is de groesste.*  
this is the biggest  
'This is the biggest.'

#### 3. Inclusive/exclusive 'we':

(a) *Uns bis neben Salz-wasser.*  
we:IN are next.to salt water  
'We're next to the ocean.'

- (b) *Wir alle geht Rabaul.*  
 we:EX all go R  
 'We're all going to Rabaul.'

4. Word order with auxiliary verbs:

- I wird bleib zwei Woche in Lae.*  
 I will stay two week in L.  
 'I will stay two weeks in Lae.'

cf. Standard German:

- Ich werde zwei Wochen in Lae bleiben.*  
 I will two weeks in L. stay

5. Serial verbs:

- (a) *Du holen diese Eimer komm!*  
 You:SNG fetch this bucket come  
 'Bring this bucket.'
- (b) *Du laufen geht wo?*  
 You:SNG run go where  
 'Where are you running to?'

6. Durative forms:

- (a) *Er wollte wissen ob Yvonne is am spielen.*  
 he wanted know if Y. is PPT play  
 'He wanted to know if Yvonne was playing.'
- (b) *Nachher de Koenigin war de ganze Abend am*  
 afterwards the queen was the entire evening PPT  
*denken von alle Namen..*  
 think of PL name  
 'Afterwards the queen was thinking all night long of the names...'

## 7. Passive:

*Sein Schtoa war gefaerbt bei ein Chinesen.*

his store was painted by a Chinese

'His store was painted by a Chinese.'

8. Complementiser with *fi* 'for':

*I bin am denken fi kaufen ein Ferd.*

I am PPT think for buy a horse

'I'm thinking of buying a horse.'