

Squibs, Notes and Discussion

On the Origin of Tok Pisin *na*

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In a perceptive article in an earlier volume of this journal, John Verhaar shows that Tok Pisin *na* ‘and’ has not only the generally recognised coordinative function but also what he refers to as a ‘serial’ function, as in (1-4) (Verhaar 1991:127).

- 1) *Yu stap we na yu kam?*
‘Where did you come from?’
- 2) *Em i mekim wanem na yu gat sik?*
‘What did he do [to you] that you got sick?’
- 3) *Nogut yu hariap tasol na yu mekim nating.*
‘Don’t do this hurriedly, or it’ll be no use your doing it’
- 4) *Watpo na skul fi i save go antap tru?*
‘Why does tuition have to be raised all the time?’

In discussing this noncoordinative function of *na*, he says that

na as used in constructions like those of (1) through (4) is not, I suggest to be considered as “interclausal” at all (whether coordinative or subordinative) but as “interverbal” or “serial”, in what is one clause (Verhaar 1991:129).

¹ *An* presumably derives from English *and* and *mo* from *more*, although the latter may have been reinforced by reflexes of Proto Oceanic **ma* ‘and’ in a number of Vanuatu languages. I am grateful to Terry Crowley, Hollingsworth Ala Ngwele, and Noel Willie for some assistance with the Bislama data in this paper.

However, he is puzzled about the origins of *na*, both with this and the better-known coordinative use. He says that

the origin of *na* seems obscure. Earlier texts (and one of the earliest recordings; Tom Dutton p.c.) had *nau* (also spelled *nao*) for both *na* and *o* ‘o’ ... Bislama has no *na* and uses *mo* for ‘and’, which, however, is never used “serially” (Verhaar 1991:130).

This puzzle has two aspects to it. First, although the coordinating conjunctions *an* in Solomons Pijin and *mo* in Bislama presumably have an English origin,¹ Tok Pisin *na* does not. And second, *na* also has the serial function described by Verhaar, whereas *an* and *mo* do not.

Let us look at the second aspect first. Bislama *nao*, for example, has functions similar to those of Tok Pisin serial *na*. In his Bislama dictionary, Crowley (1990) glosses *nao* as “1. and then, 2. focus marker”—note that Bislama *naoia* translates ‘now’. Rough Bislama equivalents of the four Tok Pisin sentences given above are acceptable with *nao* replacing *na* (only sentence (6) being viewed with a little suspicion by some Bislama-speakers with whom I checked these sentences.

- 5) *Yu stap we nao yu kam?*
‘Where did you come from?’
- 6) *Hem i mekem wanem nao yu gat sik?*
‘What did he do to you that you got sick?’
- 7) *Nogud yu hariap nao yu mekem nating.*
‘Don’t rush it or it will be no use.’
- 8) *From wanem nao skulfi i go antap tumas?*
‘Why are school fees being increased?’

So a possible origin of serial *na* is from earlier *nao*: i.e., that Bislama reflects the earlier state of affairs but presumably transformed *nao* meaning ‘now’ into *naoia*, whereas Tok Pisin changed serial *nao* to *na* and retains *nao* (i.e., *nau*) for ‘now’.

The serial use of *nao* does have some coordinative aspects to it, as the following examples from Crowley’s dictionary shows.

- 9) *Hem i tekem masket nao hem i sutum pig.*
‘He took the rifle and then he shot the pig.’

But while an abbreviation of *nao* as *na* might explain the serial usage, it does not at first glance explain why the “straight” coordinating conjunction also has the form *na*.

There is some intriguing evidence from New Guinea Islands languages which suggests how this may have developed. Although Tolai (the major Melanesian lexical source language for Tok Pisin) and many other languages in this region have *ma* as the coordinating conjunction, there are at least two languages in this area in which the coordinating conjunction is *na*:

Lavongai, spoken in New Ireland (Beaumont 1980), and Halia, in Buka (Allen et al. 1982:108). There may well be others.

A possible scenario, then, is as follows. Early Melanesian Pidgin had *nao* meaning 'now' as well as 'and then'. It may have had some other coordinating conjunction (e.g., *an* or *mo*), but it is more likely that it used *na* for this function as well (as suggested by Verhaar's reference to "earlier texts" and "one of the earliest recordings" quoted above). In Bislama, the development would have been as follows.

nao 'no' > *naoia*
nao 'serial' > *nao*
 [*nao*?] 'and' > *mo*

In Tok Pisin, however, the development was quite different.

nao 'now' > *nau*
nao 'serial' > *na*
 [*nao*?] 'and' > *na*

with the use of *na* 'and' being reinforced by the presence of a phonologically identical coordinating conjunction in at least some of the languages spoken by the earliest speakers of Tok Pisin.

References

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