TORRES STRAIT CREOLE: THE GROWTH OF A NEW TORRES STRAIT LANGUAGE*

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Tracing the history of any language is a complex, many-stranded task that involves the weaving together of both internal linguistic developments and concomitant external – historical, social, economic and political – events. This paper, part of an ongoing study of the history of the English-based creole lingua franca of Torres Strait, briefly discusses a crucial period in its external development: the fifty years between 1890 and 1940.

In examining this period of indigenisation of the language, whose ancestor was the Pacific Pidgin English (also known as Sandalwood English and Beach-la-mar) spoken by South Sea Islanders and imported by them into the Strait during the first half of the nineteenth century, it became necessary to take account of Torres Strait Islanders' interpretation and response to isochronistic events and find a way of reconciling these with what I came to see as the Eurocentric bias of written history of the period. For it was only by attempting to understand the dynamics of Islander society during this time that I could explain the unexpected phenomenon of initial creolisation of the pidgin on two widely separated islands in Torres Strait, where it became the primary language of children born to Torres Strait Islander mothers and immigrant South Sea Islander fathers.¹

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The language under discussion here is an English-based creole spoken either as a first or second language by almost all Torres Strait Islanders. According to the 1971

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¹ The expected sociolinguistic development, as we can see today in Australia, Canada, the United States and so on, is for children to prefer to speak the community language, especially when one parent is native-born.

All Saints Anglican Church, Erub (Darnley Island).

Main road, Erub (Darnley Island).

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census, some 10,000 Torres Strait Islanders were enumerated throughout Australia. However, 1981 Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs figures indicate that there are at least double that number. About 5,000 Islanders (who are Australian citizens) still make their home in the Strait, the majority on Thursday Island, the administrative and commercial centre, but perhaps as many as 17,000 now live on the mainland of Australia, largely in the coastal cities and towns of Queensland.

At present, the creole is spoken as a first language by four generations of Islanders on Erub (Darnley Island) and Ugar (Stephens Island); three to four generations on St Paul's, Moa Island, Yam Island, and Masig (Yorke Island); two to three generations on Waraber (Sue Island), Purma (Coconut Island) and Hammond Island; two generations on Mer (Murray Island); and one generation at Kubin village, Moa Island and at Bamaga, Cape York. It is the lingua franca of Torres Strait, invariably used between Islanders who speak different traditional languages.

Islanders themselves refer to the language in question by various names: *Broken*; *Pizin*; *Big Thap*; *Blaikman*, but never as *Langgus* ('language'). This latter term is reserved for either of the two traditional languages of Torres Strait. Technically, however, it is a creole, having developed from an early form of the English-based pidgin of the Pacific and having acquired first language speakers in Torres Strait.² It also acquired much of its phonology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics from the traditional Torres Strait languages, and for those reasons I shall refer to it here as Torres Strait Creole (TSC).

A CRUCIAL PERIOD

The years between 1890 and 1940 are significant in the history of the creole because it was during that time that it was adopted as a *de facto* Torres Strait language.

I have chosen 1890, since it is roughly from this date, as far as I can gather, that the pidgin lingua franca of the Pacific, brought to Torres Strait by South Sea Island crews on the beche de mer and pearling boats in the 1840s began to acquire native speakers among the children on the eastern island of Erub. By 1940, it had become the first language, both chronologically and in the sense of primary language,³ of the children on all the central islands of Torres Strait: Yam, Masig, Waraber and Purma, as well as on St Paul's Anglican Mission, Moa, and the Catholic Mission on Hammond, two lower western islands of the Strait.

² A rather simplistic definition of a pidgin is that it is a code formed through the fusion of two or more languages. It typically has a small vocabulary and is functionally restricted, being most often used in trade or commercial contexts. Most importantly, it has no native speakers. A pidgin, however, becomes a creole if it 'acquires native speakers', that is, if, through social factors, it becomes the first language of a group of children. In such a case, it quickly develops the means of encoding all the (actual and potential) communicative needs of its speakers and becomes a fully expressive language in its own right.

³ Mühlhäusler 1974:13.

PRE-EUROPEAN CONTACT⁴

When Europeans made their way into the area, only two indigenous languages were spoken in Torres Strait: *Meriam Mir*, a Papuan language spoken in the eastern islands; and *Kala Lagaw Ya* (often referred to as Mabuiag in early texts), an Australian language of the western and central islands.

There was probably more contact between these two linguistic groups than was formerly believed to be the case.⁵ We know, for example, that there was some trade, name exchange and intermarriage between Saibai and Mer⁶ and the central Islanders had intermittent trading contacts with the eastern islanders. However, although some adults were bilingual, there were no bilingual communities in which every member had at least a passive knowledge of two languages (as there are today on Badu, Mabuiag, Kubin and Mer).

EARLY EUROPEAN CONTACT

From around 1770, European ships began to pass through the Strait, sometimes trading with Islanders who thereby learned a few words of English,⁷ but it was only from the late 1840s, after surveys by British navy ships and the discovery first of beche de mer and then of pearlshell, that there was an influx of vessels. These were generally captained by Europeans but manned predominantly by South Sea Island crews. The men came from all parts of the Pacific and included both Polynesians (chiefly from Rotumah, Samoa and Niue) and Melanesians (from the Loyalty group, New Hebrides and Solomons) and they arrived in the Strait by various routes: some came direct from Sydney; others via the canefields of northern Queensland; yet others jumped ship at Thursday Island. All were attracted by the possibility of great wealth to be had from the waters of Torres Strait.⁸ From the beginning, the common language of these men, who spoke many different tongues, was a variety of Pacific Pidgin English, established as the lingua franca of the marine industry in the Strait.⁹

It is important to note that the South Sea Islanders at this time were regarded as aliens, allies of the white invaders, and that they were largely responsible for the disruption of Islander lives — raiding the islands for garden produce, water and women. In 1888 a missionary of the London Missionary Society (LMS), Samuel McFarlane,

⁴ For the most detailed and accurate accounts of the social, cultural and economic organisation of Torres Strait Islanders during this period, see Haddon 1901-1935 and Moore 1979.

⁵ Haddon 1904:233-5, 296-7; 1908:120-1, 185; 1935:350.

⁶ Nonie Sharp, personal communication.

⁷ Haddon 1935:186.

⁸ The most thorough accounts of the events of this period can be found in Allen and Corris 1977, Jack 1922, and the reports of the 1898 Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Strait. The Islanders, with their 'bad reputation for ferocity and treachery' (Haddon 1904:295) were generally feared by Europeans at the time, hence their preference for South Sea crews with whom many had previously worked in the Pacific. Moreover, the pool of Islander labour was never sufficient for the needs of the industry, although men and women were soon employed as shallow water gatherers of beche de mer and pearlshell.

⁹ Murray 1876:450.

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described an incident which appears typical of those early clashes between Torres Strait Islanders and the newcomers. Two days after the LMS had landed South Sea teachers at Dauan, a trading vessel called there in search of pearl shell.

The captain, ignorant of our arrival in Torres Straits, sent two boats with armed crews of South Sea islanders, in charge of two white men, to plunder the plantations of the natives. Some of these men stood guard with loaded muskets, whilst the others helped themselves to yams, bananas, cocoanuts, etc., filling their boats, and returning to the ship without giving the plundered people anything in return. As a natural consequence, the savages were enraged, and thirsting for blood.¹⁰

They determined to take revenge on the LMS teachers, assuming that they were of the same tribe as the plunderers and probably associated with them.

By the early 1860s land had been leased to Europeans on some islands for the establishment of *beche de mer*, and later pearling, stations.¹¹ Many South Sea men lived on those stations, often contracting marriages with Torres Strait women, although the majority of these were later dissolved.¹² Nevertheless, although now living on the islands, these men continued to be viewed as intruders, called *nog le* ('outside people' or 'foreigners') by the Eastern Islanders and they were marginal men. As marginal men, the language they had adopted for intergroup communication, the Pacific pidgin, had little influence on community language choice.

With the coming of greater numbers of foreigners (South Sea Islanders outnumbered Europeans by at least five to one), the traditional life style of the Torres Strait Islanders came under siege. Primarily through disease, the population declined by half during this period, falling to between 1,500 and 2,000.¹³ Thus when the London Missionary Society sought to place South Sea Island teachers on several of the islands during the decade following 1871 as a first step in the planned conversion of New Guinea to Christianity, the Torres Strait Islanders agreed, although reluctantly. After all, the LMS teachers were under white protection; their presence provided a curb on exploitation; and they offered in exchange to teach the Islanders the ways and language of the Europeans.

The arrival of the LMS is still referred to as the 'Coming of the Light', and is celebrated each year on 1 July as the Torres Strait national day. For the two decades that followed 1871, during which the Queensland Government formally annexed the islands in 1879, the South Sea teachers were the *de facto* rulers on most of the major islands where they had been deposited by the European missionaries. There is no doubt that the LMS deliberately chose South Sea Islanders for this work. Langbridge comments that the 'colour' of the LMS teachers 'made them immediately more acceptable [to Torres Strait Islanders] than the [white] missionaries', and McFarlane explicitly states that the South Sea teachers were 'well adapted to fill the gap between

¹⁰ McFarlane 1888:45-6.

¹¹ Moresby 1876:25, 135; Murray 1876:447, 450.

¹² Haddon 1904:235; 1908:121.

¹³ Langbridge 1977:73. For estimated populations for twelve of the nineteen islands inhabited at the time, see Beckett 1963:40.

the debased savage and the European missionary', believing that they could 'get at the heathen of their class, and influence them in favour of Christianity, quicker than European missionaries'.¹⁴ They were the interpreters of European ways to the Torres Strait people, as well as the mediators between the new power structure, in which the LMS and the Queensland Government were seen as working in concert, and those on whom it was imposed. From this they derived great prestige and authority. They are still regarded by Islanders as the bringers of 'civilisation' to Torres Strait. The time before their arrival is known as *bipotaim*, whereas *pastaim* events happened long ago but after the coming of LMS.

As younger Torres Strait men became more involved in the marine industry, links between them and the South Sea pearlers were increased. Those Islanders, many encouraged by their families, who wished to learn the white man's ways, sought information from the South Sea Islanders, many of whom were quite Europeanised and sophisticated.¹⁵ A majority of the Rotumans and Samoans, it seems, could read and write. Many had lived among whites for years and some were world travellers.

The status of the South Sea pearlers and the South Sea teachers was thus mutually reinforced. As we have seen, the South Sea Islanders were all seen as belonging to the same 'tribe'. Haddon mentions that the teachers invariably took the part of the South Sea men in any dispute with the Torres Strait Islanders, and I was told that there was frequent visiting between the teachers and their families and the other Pacific Islanders living on Erub. There are, moreover, numerous indications of South Sea Islander 'solidarity' in the writings of European missionaries, both LMS and Anglican. One may infer such solidarity in stories such as that of the Lifuan, Mataika, one of the South Sea Island teachers left at Erub with instructions to proceed to Mer. Having no boat, he set about constructing a canoe 'with the aid of his brother teacher [also from Lifu], and two Lifu men who were on the island'. Not only did two Lifuans accompany him to Mer, but a South Sea Islander living on the islands provided him with a boat in which to make the return journey.¹⁶

By the 1880s and 1890s, the pidgin was widely spoken in Torres Strait, particularly by male Islanders on those islands close to pearling stations: Mabuiag, Badu and Moa in the west, Tudu, Gebar and Nagi in the centre, and Erub, Ugar and Mer in the east. An important aspect of this spread was that the Islanders thought they were speaking 'proper' English. After all, they knew that the language of the Europeans was English and saw that the Europeans and Pacific Islanders communicated by means of a language which both understood. The obvious conclusion was that this language was, in fact, English. There is considerable oral evidence for this. In the early 1920s, for example, the Murray Islanders became aware that Erub people had abandoned *Meriam Mir*, their traditional tongue, and adopted *Kole Mir* ('whiteman's talk'). Even today older Islanders from the western and central islands who rarely interact with whites

¹⁴ Langbridge 1977:65. McFarlane 1888:138.

¹⁵ Several elderly Eastern Islanders have told me how their mothers encouraged them to 'copy the white man'. However, close contact between Islanders and Europeans was rare, such contacts as there were usually being carried out through the mediation of the South Sea men.

¹⁶ Murray 1876:471.

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		DATES						
		1870-80	1880-90	1890-1900	1900-10	1910-20	1920-30	1930-40
ISLAND COMMUNITY	Erub	MM/PPE	MM/BE	MM/TSC	MM/TSC	TSC/MM	TSC/MM	TSC
	St Paul's, Moa					BE/TSC	TSC	TSC
	Masig	KLY	KLY	KLY	KLY/BE	KLY/BE	KLY/TSC	TSC/KLY
	Yam	KLY	KLY	KLY	KLY	KLY/BE	KLY/TSC	TSC/KLY
	Waraber	KLY	KLY	KLY	KLY	KLY/BE	KLY/BE	KLY/TSC
	Purma	KLY	KLY	KLY	KLY	KLY/BE	KLY/BE	KLY/TSC
	Hammond							TSC

A simplified diagram illustrating community language use on seven Torres Strait island communities between 1870 and 1940. Where two languages are shown, the first refers to the dominant or more widely used community language.

MM Meriam Mir KLY Kala Lagaw Ya PPE Pacific Pidgin English
BE Broken English TSC Torres Strait Creole

believe the creole to be English, a belief reinforced by its usual names of *Broken (Inglis)* ('broken English') and *Pizin (Inglis)* ('pidgin English'). The prevailing opinion among Europeans, too, now as in earlier times, is that the creole is merely an ungrammatical or nonstandard form of English.

In 1898, the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition spent several months on Mer and Mabuiag studying the traditional life of the Islanders. They did not visit Erub, since traditional customs there were believed to have almost entirely disappeared following prolonged contact with foreigners.¹⁷ If the men of the expedition had visited Erub, they would have found that the so-called 'Jargon English' of Torres Strait¹⁸ had already become the first language acquired by the children of the South Sea Island men living there.¹⁹

How had this come about?

When we examine the situation in retrospect, four factors appear to have produced the change: (1) the numerical superiority of the South Sea people on Erub after 1885;

¹⁷ Haddon 1935:193.

¹⁸ Haddon 1907:251.

¹⁹ Information from Mapoo Gela, Francis Guivarra, Harry Kiwat, Ettie pau, Rebecca Sam, James Williams.

(2) their integration into the community; (3) their high status among Islanders; and (4) the fact that the immigrants were of the 'same colour' as the original inhabitants. The first two, which do not appear to have been reproduced elsewhere except (later) at the Anglican Mission for South Sea Islanders on Moa, therefore appear critical in explaining what happened.²⁰

Erub seems always to have been less socially cohesive than Mer, the centre of the Bumeo-Malo religious cult and the acknowledged cultural focus of the *Meriam* people. One oral tradition has it that these people migrated to Mer from the Fly River area of New Guinea, and later spread to the surrounding islands of Dauar, Erub and Ugar, whose inhabitants spoke *Meriam Mir* ('the language of Mer'). Erub people also have long had a reputation as outward-looking. They are known as the innovators of the Strait, a reputation which contrasts with that of the more conservative Mer people. They tended to be the middle men in the canoe trade between the eastern islanders and New Guinea and in contacts with the central islanders.²¹ Moreover, they had had a longer period of contact with foreigners, as Europeans and Pacific Islanders had lived there quite peacefully for some twenty years before the arrival of the missionaries in 1871.²²

By that date though, the Islander population of Erub had been reduced from some 400 people to 120.²³ Increasing numbers of South Sea men had settled there, but, as I have already mentioned, they generally lived apart from the Islanders. However, in 1885, the Government Representative in Torres Strait expelled sixteen South Sea men and their families (thirty people altogether) from Mer after a series of disputes.²⁴ They were sent to Erub and given land by the government, which thereby created, I would argue, a *de facto* South Sea Island settlement on Erub. By 1888, they constituted a majority of the population there, in contrast to the situation on other islands.²⁵ By 1894, for example, only seven South Sea men remained on Mer, living amongst 400 Islanders.²⁶

Perhaps because of their long association with foreigners and their eagerness to acquire European goods, the Erub people appear to have quickly established a closer relationship with the Pacific Islanders than was the case on other islands. Many of the newcomers were taken as 'brother' or 'son' and those fictive kin ties remain to this day, still constraining terms of address and possible marriage partners, for example. The South Sea men were given land to cultivate, not only by the government in 1885

²⁰ I discuss Erub here, but the same factors operated on neighbouring Ugar at about the same time. The peoples of Erub and Ugar have always had close ties and consider themselves to be members of 'the one family'. Ugar, however, has always had a much smaller population than Erub and has thus been even more vulnerable to outside influence.

²¹ Haddon 1908:186-7; 1935:350.

²² Murray 1876:450.

²³ Murray 1876:451.

²⁴ Report of Mr Douglas on Visit to Murray Island 1885:1. I am most grateful to Nonie Sharp for drawing my attention to this document and sending me a copy.

²⁵ Haddon 1935:193.

²⁶ Bruce 1894.

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Torres Strait (adapted from Reports of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Strait, Vol. III, 1907). Currently inhabited reserve islands are in bold and the English names of all inhabited islands are given in brackets. (Courtesy of Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies.)

as I have indicated, but apparently even before that. Even more remarkable was that the sons of the last headmen of both Erub and Ugar married daughters of Pacific Islanders. For financial and status reasons, such women were almost invariably permitted to marry only other Pacific Islanders or their descendants.

Thus it seems that the South Sea Islanders and their families were fairly rapidly integrated into the Erub community. Disputes continued to occur, mainly about land, but the newcomers were no longer the marginal men of before. They were now recognised as full and valuable members of the community with high prestige and skills (including language) greatly in demand by the Erub people.

Yet another factor appears significant. Although the Pacific Islanders gained prestige through their usefulness to Europeans as allies and mediators and were also considered more 'civilised' than the Torres Strait people, they could never, in European eyes, attain the status of whites. Their housing was better than that of the Torres Strait Islanders; their clothes, songs, dances, food, and gardens were more acceptable to European tastes (and quickly copied by the Islanders); they received higher wages than the Islanders; and yet they would always have less prestige than whites. On the other hand, the Islanders, on whom none of this status differentiation was lost, could therefore feel closer to the newcomers, who represented, as it were, an attainable goal.

These four factors, then, explain the adoption of the language of the newcomers as somehow more appropriate to the future and more potentially useful to the coming generation. Along with traditional custom, the traditional language became identified with 'lack of civilisation'. It should also be borne in mind that Torres Strait Island societies (like those of the Pacific) were societies in which a high degree of social (and linguistic) conformity was maintained through sanctions, the pressure of public opinion and the fear of being shamed.

Moreover, the factors which I have just outlined satisfactorily account for the adoption of the pidgin as their first language by the children of St Paul's village on Moa Island. This was officially founded in 1908 as a Church of England mission for those South Sea Islanders and their families who were allowed to remain in Queensland after the deportation of most of their countrymen in 1906. Actually, it had been established in 1905, when two South Sea men and their families had left Mabuiag after years of dissension. (The final quarrel concerned the refusal of one man to allow his daughter to marry a 'full native', the son of the headman.) Many South Sea families moved to St Paul's after 1908, and the privileged position they were accorded by both church and government during the years that followed led to resentment and envy on the part of their Torres Strait affinal kin.

From the beginning, the pidgin was the dominant language on St Paul's, where Pacific Islanders predominated. Because this was now their own community, the immigrants ran it according to their own ways of doing things. They were in authority, subject always to the Government Resident and the Anglican Bishop on Thursday Island, and their prestige continued to be reinforced by both church and state. From conversations with older St Paul people, it is clear that the pidgin was adopted here not only because of its utility as lingua franca among the Pacific Island men, but also to reinforce feelings of identity and separateness.

The effect of this is most evident in those early families who emigrated from Mabuia. The children born on Mabuia spoke Kala Lagaw Ya, their mothers' language and the language of Mabuia, whereas those born after the move to St Paul's spoke the pidgin as their first language even though they could understand their mothers' language. (This, of course, is not an unusual phenomenon among immigrant families everywhere.) Moreover, the adoption of the pidgin was supported by European teachers, who discouraged the use of the traditional language and encouraged what they mistakenly believed was a 'quaint' form of English, although their observations make it clear that this was, in fact, not English but a developing creole.²⁷

Thus by 1910 the Pacific pidgin was spoken as a first language by the children on Erub, Ugar and St Paul's, but nowhere else. It had earlier become the lingua franca of the marine industry (among Torres Strait Islanders, Aborigines, New Guineans and Europeans) and then, by common consent, the language used between eastern and western language speakers in the Strait. To have spoken either one of the traditional languages would have implied the superiority of one over the other, an impolite and unacceptable implication, whereas the pidgin was perceived as neutral in this regard and therefore a suitable compromise. Besides, those situations which required cross-linguistic communication would have tended to be non-traditional ones, thus favouring the pidgin in any case.

DIFFUSION OF THE CREOLE

The use of TSC as inter-island lingua franca seems to have been the impetus for its diffusion to the central islands of the Strait and to Hammond Island. It became the first language of children born during the second decade of this century on Masig and Yam and of those born after about 1930 on Waraber, Purma and Hammond.

From 1904, when the Islanders came under the Aborigines Protection and Restriction on the Sale of Opium Act of 1897, their freedom of movement was increasingly curtailed. The limited measures of self-government instituted after annexation in 1879 were dismantled and day-to-day control passed to the European administrator-teachers. These officials had been appointed to the most populous islands from the turn of the century and, as representatives of the government, they quickly displaced the South Sea teachers as the foremost authorities on the islands.

During the years following 1904, the use of traditional languages was discouraged by the European teachers and parents were encouraged to speak to their children in English to improve their schooling, which was given in English. From my conversations with older Islanders, however, it is clear that parents used the (already creolised) pidgin English of the Pacific Islanders with their children. (There was never more than one European teacher on even the largest island to serve as a language model and his or her contacts with the Islanders were generally limited to a few formal situations.)

From the second decade of this century, Torres Strait Islanders began to be trained as assistant teachers, at first informally and later at a Teacher Training Institute established on Mabuia. These Islander teachers were soon being sent to communities

²⁷ See, for example, the account by a Miss Robson who visited Moa on several occasions before 1910 (*The Carpentarian*, 1 January 1910:299) and quoted in White 1918:196-198, together with various reports in *The Carpentarian*, 1909-1912.

other than their own home island, often across the major traditional linguistic barrier. They were therefore forced to use the pidgin not only in their teaching (which contributed to its prestige and to the general belief that it was English) but also in their daily encounters with the inhabitants of the island with whom they shared no traditional language. At the same time, Islander police were deliberately being posted to other islands, as were the newly trained clergy.

Therefore, at a time when inter-island movement was being restricted, only certain categories of Islanders were leaving their own islands to live elsewhere. Those same Islanders (many, incidentally, of South Sea descent) were people of authority who had made a place for themselves in the new order, and they were the ones who appear to have spread the language to other areas of the Strait.

Moreover, while east-west marriages had been extremely rare during pre-contact times, a few began to take place in the more peaceful period following the missionaries' arrival in 1871. The universalist philosophy of Christianity and the encouragement of (controlled) inter-island visiting for religious festivals, church openings and so on, contributed to the coming together of eastern and western Islanders and consequently to the spread of the lingua franca. South Sea people, for whom traditional tribal (and, consequently, linguistic) barriers were of small consideration in arranging marriages, sent their daughters to relatives or countrymen on far-away islands in order to find suitable (that is, South Sea descended) marriage partners.

These factors, together with the common experience of government control, were instrumental in creating and strengthening pan-Islander ties, and the language which represented these was, necessarily, the pidgin. When in 1929 a Roman Catholic mission was established on Hammond Island, primarily for the children of Filipinos and Malays who had come to Torres Strait to work in the marine industry, many Catholic families left their homes on islands throughout the Strait and resettled there. Almost immediately, the pidgin was adopted as the language of the community, and the new generation of children born there spoke it as their first language.

CONCLUSION

This paper has outlined part of a longer study of the history of Torres Strait Creole. That study came about because, when I began to examine the past linguistic situation on Erub, I found that it did not conform to the expected pattern. Before I went to Torres Strait, I had been told by Islanders and knowledgeable Europeans that the language had creolised a mere two generations before, presumably as the result of increasing European influence since World War II. What I found was therefore not what I had expected to find, and it was puzzling in that the European presence in Torres Strait (in terms of numbers and direct influence) had been quite negligible before World War II.

If my explanation of the development of Pacific Pidgin English in Torres Strait is correct, then the factors which led to its creolisation (i.e. to its acquisition of native speakers) are different from those which promoted its diffusion, which is an unusual phenomenon.

Furthermore, as I have explained, a particular set of historical and social circumstances was responsible for the creolisation and spread of Pacific Pidgin English,

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and the language developments discussed above cannot be understood without reference to those extra-linguistic factors.

It is evident too that, contrary to current general belief among Islanders and Europeans, the South Sea Island immigrant settlers played a crucial role in the indigenisation of the language. Most European historians concentrate on the effects of Europeanisation in the Strait. Perhaps it is time to reassess the influence of the South Sea Islanders on the cultural and social history of the area, an influence which seems to have been ignored or at best underrated. There is a great deal of evidence (both cultural and linguistic) that the dominant external influence in Torres Strait between 1870 and 1940 was not European. Rather, European-influenced South Sea Islanders assumed the role of cultural middle-men, transmitting their own version of European ways and language to the Islanders of Torres Strait.

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