SOME OBSERVATIONS ON PHONETICAL HISTORY OF MELANESIAN PIDGINS

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ABSTRACT

The analysis of phonetic correspondences in two Melanesian pidgins (Tok Pisin and Bislama) against the background of English data is undertaken. The phonetic correspondences are shown to be regular for the modern state of the vocabulary, i.e. with all loans considered, and display almost no regularity for the early pidgin stage.

Linguistically Western Melanesia seems to be the most heterogenous part of the world. The total number of languages spoken here reaches nearly a thousand. Bi- and multilingualism was widely spread here, but there had been no lingua francae known on large territories up to the end of the nineteenth century. From that time on the official functions in the area have been hold by the metropolitan European languages: German succeeded by English in New Guinea, English in Papua and British Solomon Islands, English and French in New Hebrides. Yet the natives acquired almost no knowledge of the European languages, the function of interethnic communication media being gained by the English-based pidgins. All those pidgins descend from Bichlamar, a trade jargon spread during the middle of the last century on the Melanesian seashore, in Micronesia and Western Polynesia. In the second half of the nineteenth century Bichlamar arose as the only means of communication between the Melanesian labourers on the European plantations in Queensland, Samoa, Fiji, New Caledonia. Different variants of the jargon stabilized in different parts of the Pacific, thus leading to the resulting divergence.

These stabilized pidgins came into common use as linguae francae due to Melanesians returning home after the completion of their contracts. Beginning from the first decades of our century interethnic marriages resulted in the creolization of the pidgin in New Guinea, and later - in the New Hebrides and in the Solomon Islands. Meanwhile missionaries began applying pidgins in church and at school. Thus the process of lexical enrichment and sophistication of grammatical structure of non-creolized pidgin variants started. The number of native speakers of the newly formed languages is not great, and up to now they exist chiefly in the forms of expanded pidjins (in the terms of Mühlhäuser /6/), nevertheless in the last decades, being used in press, radio, TV, and fiction, they began to acquire new communicative functions; in the 1970's they got the official status. Now a linguistic family consisting of three closely related Neomelanesian languages has formed, including Tok Pisin (Papua New Guinea), Bislama (Republic of Vanuatu and Neosolomonic or Pijin (Solomon Islands).
the report deals with some aspects of Neo-
melanesian comparative phonetics and is
based on the data of Tok Pisin and Bislam-
a, the languages that have representative-
dictionaries and a number of available-
texts.¹

In the formation of Neomelanesian lan-
geages, English segmental forms were applied
to the semantic system of Melanesian and
underwent the influence of the aboriginal
pronouncing habits. mother tongues of the
early pidgin speakers belong to the Oce-
nic branch of the Austroasiatic. Phonolo-
gical structure of the majority of the
Oceanic languages is rather simple. Usu-
ally a five vowel system is present: i, e, o, u, a.
the opposition of voiced – voiceless stops is generally accompanied
by the pressominalisation of the former;
labio-velar p and k are common; the
phonological r/l opposition may be absent.

Languages may have stop and fricative allo-
phones p~b~v opposed to the sono-
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Any standards seem hard to be found
here, for, on the one hand, Neomelanesian
languages exist in the form of different
tholects, and on the other, the degree of
proximity to the English models varies
greatly depending on the socioclect.²

Regular correspondences are rather trivi-
and coincide in Tok Pisin and Bislama
for the majority of the English phonemes.

Wendows, I, i > e: o, e > e: w, a, a, a;
ou > e: ur, uw > eo, ea, ia, ia;
wa: difference between the reflexes of
the English diphthongs ai, oi, au exists only
when written ai, oi, au in Tok Pisin and
ae, oe in Bislama. English ø is irregu-
larly reflected as œ, ø; in particular item
of the basic vocabulary, traceable back to the trade jargon, the reflexes in
Tok Pisin and Bislama are identical: doti
= toti 'dirty', tanu = tan 'to turn',
egel = kel 'girl', sket = sket 'skirt'.

In Bislama, which could be a result of
the inherent and the borrowed in pidgins
and creoles. In spite of the obvious lan-
guage similarity of Neomelanesian lan-
geages and of English, the latter cannot be
regarded as their direct ancestor: "Proto-
neomelanesian" was an early trade jargon
with unstable grammar and a scarce vocabu-
lar of some three to four hundreds of
items not necessarily of English descent.

For many words of English origin it is
difficult to define the exact period of
their arising in the trade jargon / stabili-
ized pidgin / expanded pidgin / creole,
and to determine, therefore, whether
these words can be treated as inherent in
any sense. It seems doubtful if words of
the German origin adopted at the beginning
of the stabilised pidgin stage, should be
regarded as loans.

let us first consider English-to-creole
sound correspondences taking into account
all the creole lexies of the English ori-

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of regularizing sound correspondences. Therefore, the following conclusions can be arrived at. In Neomelanesian, the English-based lexicon taken as a whole permits to establish regular phonetic correspondences. However, in the vocabulary arising from the trade jargon the seeming irregularities prove to be systematic. So in early pidgin Bichelamar phonetic correspondences display almost no regularity. It would be desirable to verify these findings on the data of other pidgins.

Notes.

1. Tok Pisin sources: Rev.F.Mihalic's dictionary /5/, texts narrated by speakers of different Tok Pisin variants /4, 10/, a play /7/ and poems /3/. Bislama sources: J.-B.-M.Guy's dictionary /2/, agricultural show booklet /1/, the book on current problems of Vanuatu /8/, poems /9/.

2. The number of coincidences in the Swadesh 100 word list is: Tok Pisin - English - 70, Bislama - English - 77, Tok Pisin - Bislama - 80.

3. Tok Pisin has standard orthography, but there are many deviations in printed sources. Orthographical practice in Bislama abounds in rough anglicisms. Even the text of national hymn in the book edited under the direction of the Vanuatu prime minister W.H.Lini includes the word klat 'to be glad' in two different Anglicized forms: glat and glad /8, p.4/.

4. wo>wa in both languages: wasim - wasem 'to wash', was - waj 'to watch'. Here and further Tok Pisin word appears first in a pair, Bislama word - the second.

5. In many Oceanic languages the prenasalization of the initial voiced is very slight or absent altogether. Besides, the phenomenon described can arise due to fricativization b > b.

Bibliography.