

Language formation as identity formation: The case of Unserdeutsch/Rabaul Creole German

In my presentation, I would like to explore the significance of language for identity formation using the example of Unserdeutsch, later called Rabaul Creole German (RCG). Drawing on historical sources and linguistic research, I will describe the multilingual and highly restricted context in which Unserdeutsch was developed and discuss its role as a mixed secret language. The RCG community is indicative of language emergence, language contact and language choice in colonial and postcolonial settings as well as of the influence of migration and citizenship on the perception of one's own identity.

Compared to other empires, the marks left by German colonialism are rather insignificant. However, one of its few linguistic consequences is RCG, which gained fame as the only German-based creole language. It originated as a secret language among the children living in a catholic boarding school in Vunapope after 1897, which they called "Unserdeutsch", "our German". As the hybrid community of students did not have a *lingua franca* due to their various first languages and the often changing language policies both in the colony in general and at the school in particular, they created their own code. They started putting the German words they had learned in school into Papuan or Tok Pisin sentences and, through this method of relexification, developed a mixed secret language which was unintelligible for those without any knowledge of Papuan languages. In fact, the teachers might not even have realized when the students used Unserdeutsch and probably thought they were just speaking "funny German". Later, many students married former classmates and passed Unserdeutsch on to their children as their first language, thereby establishing RCG. After World War II and especially upon Papua New Guinea's independence in 1975, almost the entire RCG community migrated to Australia, where considerable language shift towards English took place. Consequently, RCG is *de facto* extinct today; however, although several linguists have conducted research on its syntax and other linguistic features, many of its anthropological and sociolinguistic contexts still have to be investigated and documented.

While developing Unserdeutsch can be seen as an act of indigenous resistance or as creating a "third space" in which the children could express themselves freely on an emotional level, I argue that Unserdeutsch was mainly an attempt to create an identity through creating a group language: the individuals involved were not plantation workers or prisoners, but children who were separated from their mothers at a very young age and who had never met their fathers. Therefore, I argue that the emergence of Unserdeutsch was not a consequence of indigenous anti-colonial struggle but that the students needed a secret language to establish solidarity in a time when people of mixed-ethnic background did not have a place in German society. Using elements from various Papuan and European languages, Unserdeutsch perfectly resembled the various ethnic backgrounds of the children, unifying them at the same time.