

Creating secret pidgin languages as an act of indigenous resistance? A case study from Papua New Guinea

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Overview

- Introduction: History and origin of Unserdeutsch/RCG
- Motivations and reasons
- Hypothesis and discussion
- Further examples: slavery and prisons
- Conclusion

Introduction: History and origin

1897: Boarding school for “half-white children”
founded in Vunapope by Missionaries of the
Sacred Heart

1910: Former students move to Rabaul

1945: Emigration to Australia

Today: Rabaul, Brisbane, Sydney

Number of speakers: unknown



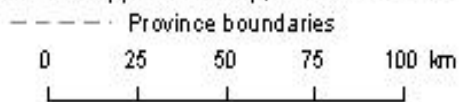
PAPUA NEW GUINEA

MAP 12

Language Families

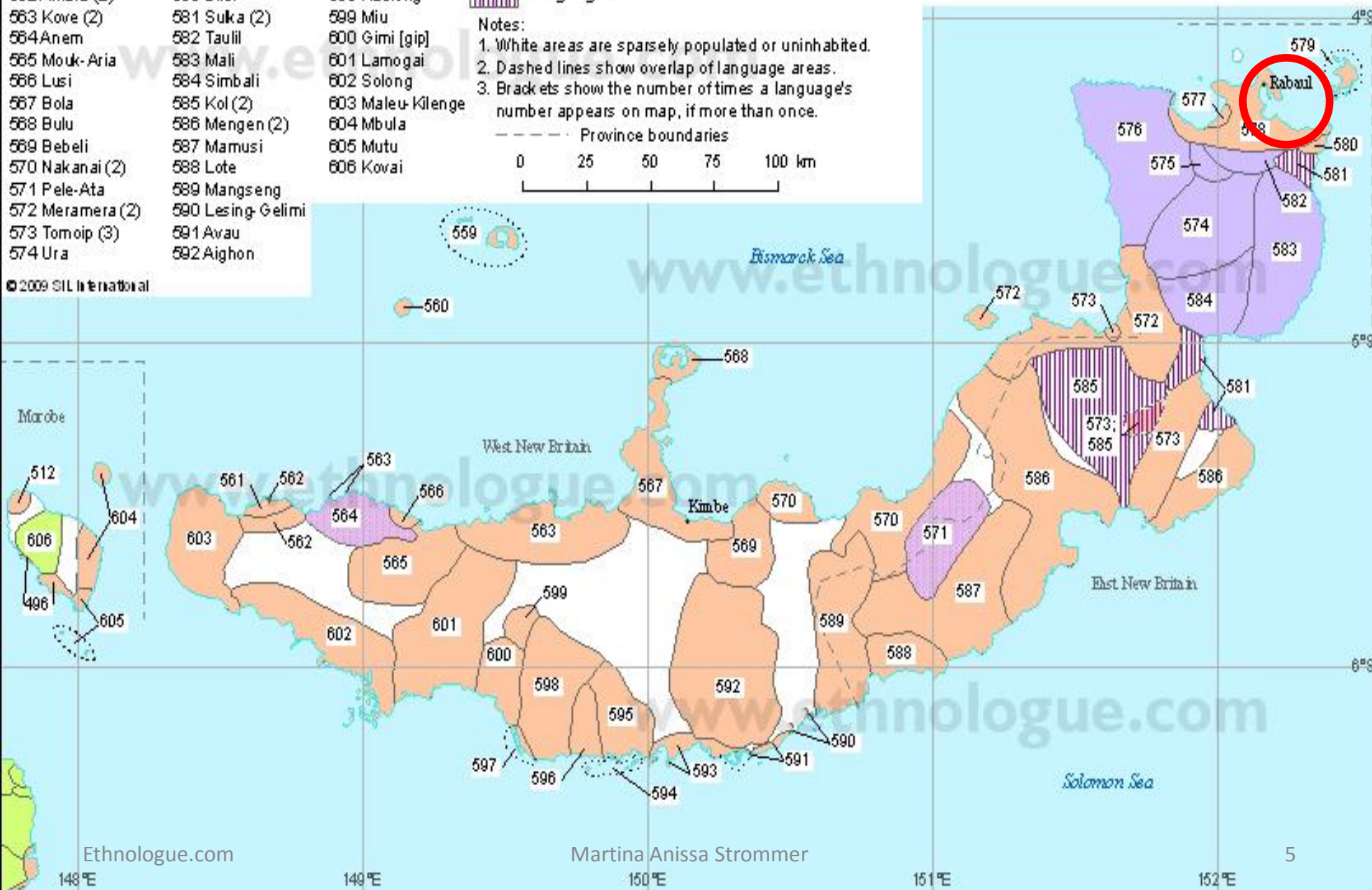


- Notes:
1. White areas are sparsely populated or uninhabited.
 2. Dashed lines show overlap of language areas.
 3. Brackets show the number of times a language's number appears on map, if more than once.



496 Karnai	575 Kairak	593 Akorak
512 Arop-Lokep	576 Qaqet	594 Apalik
559 Muduapa	577 Minigir	595 Karore
560 Uneapa	578 Kuanua	596 Sengeng
561 Bariai	579 Ramoaina	597 Aklep
562 Amara (2)	580 Bilur	598 Kaulong
563 Kove (2)	581 Suka (2)	599 Miu
564 Anem	582 Taulil	600 Gimi [gip]
565 Mouk-Aria	583 Mali	601 Lamogai
566 Lusi	584 Simbali	602 Solong
567 Bola	585 Kol (2)	603 Maleu-Kleng
568 Bulu	586 Mengen (2)	604 Mbula
569 Bebeli	587 Mamusi	605 Mutu
570 Nakanai (2)	588 Lote	606 Kovai
571 Pele-Ata	589 Mangseng	
572 Meramera (2)	590 Lesing-Gelimi	
573 Tomoip (3)	591 Avau	
574 Ura	592 Aighon	

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Motivations and reasons I

- Unserdeutsch served as a third space for the children, providing an alternative to the dichotomy of Papuan vs. German, black vs. white. Using elements from various Papuan and European languages, RCG resembles the mixed ethnic background of its speakers, unifying them at the same time.
- The children were separated from their mothers at a very young age and had never met their fathers. Among the students, a sense of non-belonging was dominant, so creating Unserdeutsch was an attempt to create an identity because they felt they didn't have one.

Motivations and reasons II

- Unserdeutsch is a learner language: The children did not master Standard German, so they labeled their corrupted version of it “Unserdeutsch”.
- Mimicry: The children defined themselves through the difference from the missionaries – almost the same but not quite.
- The children needed to communicate without being understood by the missionaries. To this end, they created Unserdeutsch as a secret code.
- Unserdeutsch was word play among children.
- Creating Unserdeutsch was an act of indigenous resistance and anti-colonial struggle.

Hypothesis and discussion I

Indigenous resistance and anti-colonial struggle were the main factors in the emergence of secret mixed languages such as Unserdeutsch.

Is this approach appropriate for a language developed by young children in an orphanage?

Hypothesis and discussion II

Anti-language (Giblett 1991, Halliday 1976)

- Emphasis on social structure because speakers occupy a low position in it
- Constituting and maintaining the anti-society's identity by differentiating it from the norm society
- Usually: same grammar, different vocabulary
- Anti-language is secret because the anti-society is secret; secrecy is a feature rather than the major cause
- Nobody's L1

Does resistance (and creating an anti-language, anti-society) have to be a deliberate act or can it be implied in the action?

Do the circumstances generate the language, or does the language generate the circumstances?

Further examples I: Slavery

Transatlantic slave trade, plantations, ...

- Multilingual society, highly sanctioned transgressions
- Desire to preserve African heritage
- Lexicon, phonology, syntax, discourse
- Underground Railroad

Further examples II: Prisons

NS concentration camps: Esperanto of the crematorium,
35 nations

South African apartheid prisons: 11 languages

- Isolated, restrictive, multilingual environment
- L1 use forbidden, suspicious, “divide and rule” policy
- Communicative, psychological and social necessity
- Relexification, euphemisms
- Ethnic composition, regional and social differences
- Tied to environment and context, reflecting the situation and conditions (e. g. meetings of survivors)
- Self-defense, self-irony, gallows humor, coming to terms with the past and presence

Parallels

- Multilingual and hybrid community
- Very restrictive, language usage sanctioned
- Language as sign of group solidarity, challenging an established norm, developing a psychological distance to authorities, negotiating identity
- Maintain inner solidarity under pressure
- Linguistic parasites

Conclusion

No mono-causal explanation for Unserdeutsch

How secret are these languages?

Understanding language choice in colonial contexts is essential for understanding the social make-up of the community.

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Thank you!

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