

Creating secret pidgin languages as indigenous resistance? A case study from Papua New Guinea
(Subfield: Sociolinguistics)

Compared to other empires, the vestiges of German colonialism are rather insignificant: one of its few linguistic consequences is Unserdeutsch or Rabaul Creole German (RCG), which gained fame as the only German-based creole language. It originated as the ‘secret’ language of mixed-race children living in a catholic boarding school in Vunapope (today Papua New Guinea) after 1897 and is *de facto* extinct today. However, although several linguists have conducted research on some of its features (Engelberg 2006, Mühlhäusler 1976, Mühlhäusler 1977, Mühlhäusler 1984, Mühlhäusler 1996, Mühlhäusler 2001, Voeste 2005, Volker 1983, Volker 1989, Volker 1991, Volker 1997, Volker 2011), many of the sociolinguistic aspects still have to be investigated and documented, and especially the circumstances of its emergence have not been illuminated yet.

Drawing on the research for my dissertation in German Linguistics, I will try to reconstruct the linguistic situation at the school and the pragmatic purposes of early RCG in order to analyse the children’s motivations for creating it. While some argue (Aceto 1995, Giblett 1991, Halliday 1976) that certain – possibly secret – group languages are so-called antilanguages, arising to challenge an established norm and to develop a psychological distance to another community, this paper will explore to what extent creating RCG can be viewed as a sign of anti-colonial struggle.

The linguistic situation at the Vunapope boarding school will be compared to other multilingual settings in which secret pidgin languages have emerged in the past, such as slavery (Hancock 1986, Levine 1978, Morgan 1993, Turner 2002) or prisons (Jagoda 1987, Oshlies 1985, Oshlies 1986, Wesolowska 1998). Drawing on mission sources and previous linguistic research, the paper will examine whether the hypothesis assuming indigenous resistance as the main factor for the emergence of secret pidgins is also applicable to the context of children at a mission school. Further research, including in-depth archival investigation and interviews with the alleged last speakers, will attempt to illustrate whether developing RCG can be interpreted as creating group identity through creating a 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. This paper will provide valuable sociolinguistic background information not only for other research on RCG, but also on considerations for the role of language – and in particular secret pidgins – in anti-colonial struggle.

(415 words)