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The college of St. Barnabas on Norfolk Island and its languages: An early example of missionary language planning

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the difficulties of devising and implementing workable mission language policies in one of the world's linguistically most diverse regions. In spite of ample funding and the involvement of professional linguists, the ambitious project of making Mota the lingua franca of the south-western Pacific was a failure. One of the principal reasons for this was that the Melanesian missionaries saw intercommunication as a technical problem and failed to consider the social and cultural factors that determine the success or failure of any language plan.

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to explore the language policies and practices of the Melanesian Mission, in particular the factors that promoted the emergence of Mota as the mission lingua franca and the role of St. Barnabas College on Norfolk Island in its consolidation, spread and eventual decline.[1]

The topic of missionary language policies and missionary lingua francas has received a fair bit of attention in recent years (McElhanon, 1979; Mühlhäusler, 1999). The justification for a detailed account of the Mota language is that:

- it as the earliest attempt to develop a coherent language plan for Melanesia, one of the linguistically most diverse areas of the world;
- it involved a number of trained philologists and received regular advice and input from scholars in Europe;
- the development and implementation of the larger plan occurred outside Melanesia in a boarding school environment;
- those involved in the project have left a rich account of all aspects of their linguistic activities.

The advent of European missionaries, traders and colonisers in the 19th century had a dramatic effect on the linguistic ecology of the south-western Pacific (see Mühlhäusler, 1996, 2002). Much of this impact was unplanned and the accidental by-product of other agendas. A long time before other missions developed language policies and mission lingua francas in the south west Pacific, the Melanesian Mission adopted and implemented a rigorous policy of reducing the enormous linguistic diversity of the area by developing Mota as a universal medium of missionization, learning and intercommunication. St. Barnabas on the remote Norfolk Island played a central role in this.

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The aims of this paper are:

- To document the changing language policies and language practices of the Melanesian Mission.
- To examine the role that the College of St. Barnabas played.
- To assess the factors that made for the apparent initial success and eventual failure of the Mota language experiment.
- To relate the findings to more general issues of language planning and language teaching.

Missionary linguistics has only begun to be taken seriously by linguists and historians of linguistics quite recently, and the role of missions in shaping language planning remains poorly documented. A survey of mission language policies of the Pacific region is given in Mühlhäusler (1996). Tryon (1996) provides a more detailed paper focusing on Melanesia, which includes information about Mota. Good historical background to the Melanesian Mission including a detailed account of some of its language activities is found in Hilliard (1978)[2] and Nobbs (1990).

A study of the Mission's stand against Pidgin English and a brief survey of its Mota language policies was made by Mühlhäusler (2002). The present study differs from these in its focus on the practicalities of implementing language policies and in the breadth of its range of sources.

2. Background and language selection

Status planning has become recognised as an important component of the language planning process (see Kaplan and Baldauf, 1997) and there are a number of established principles for selecting languages for specific communicative requirements. Selecting a lingua franca for a linguistically heterogeneous area was a normal task for Christian missionaries in the 19th century Pacific. Missionization had begun in Polynesia, where a small number of closely related languages were spoken, and the experience gained in Hawaii and Tahiti could easily be transferred to Samoa, Tonga and the Marquesas. The situation in Melanesia was altogether different, as about a quarter of the World's languages were spoken by a population of only a few million islanders (Laycock, 1979). To complicate matters, these languages were less similar to one another than the Polynesian languages and many of them were typologically 'aberrant'. To make an informed choice of a lingua franca in this area was difficult, and the solutions adopted by various missions included adopting Pidgin English and simple English (Mühlhäusler and Mühlhäusler, 2005) as a mission medium (for instance the South Seas Evangelical Mission), elevating local languages (Yabêm and Kâte for speakers of Melanesian and Papuan language in German New Guinea respectively), using the metropolitan languages (French in New Caledonia) or a combination thereof. Importantly, at the time these choices were made, the missionaries lacked a clear understanding of the complexities of the linguistic situation, and this forced them to revise their decisions as their familiarity with the local conditions grew. The story of the linguistic choices made by the Melanesian Mission is no exception.

In 1841 Bishop Augustus Selwyn (Evans, 1964) was made Bishop of New Zealand and by administrative error, the boundaries of his bishopric included not only Norfolk Island but most of Melanesia, i.e. Vanuatu, Santa Cruz, the Solomons and various other islands. Selwyn saw as one of his principal tasks to christianize and civilize the inhabitants of these islands. This monumental task, it was felt, could not be approached in the conventional way of sending missionaries to each island. Instead, from its beginnings, the Mission adopted the extractive method, i.e. removing children from their home environment and educating them in mission-run boarding schools.

The first boarding school (St. John's College) was set up near Auckland, New Zealand where Maori and Melanesian students were trained together. Subsequently, a separate training college for Melanesians only was built at Kohimarama in 1859 on the foreshore of Mission Bay. Faced with the problem that Melanesia is one of the linguistically most diverse areas in the world, Bishop Selwyn 'had chosen English as the Mission's lingua franca in the absence of an alternative, hoping that it would someday occupy in the islands a position analogous to Latin in Medieval Europe' (Davidson and Scarr, 1970, p. 191).

Whiteman (1983, p. 102) comments on Selwyn's frustration with the extreme diversity of languages:

> To appoint a missionary for each speech community in Melanesia was impossible with the available resources and personnel. Thus, in a resolution passed by the Anglican bishops meeting in Sydney in 1850, it was declared that, 'The multiplicity of languages makes it necessary to conduct instruction in some one language common to all, which must be English'.

An interesting oversight in this resolution is that English was common to none of the Melanesians, only to the missionaries who wished to convert them.

The teaching of English and teaching through an English medium at St. John's turned out to be costly and largely ineffective, and Selwyn's successor Patteson abandoned it in favour of teaching in Melanesian languages, having concluded that English was 'nearly useless in any attempt to convey instructions to them' (Yonge, 1874, p. 351). Patteson was a linguistic genius and he managed to teach in four Melanesian languages, and 'get along fairly well in some 16 others' (Fox, 1958, p. 16). Patteson's cousin, Charlotte Yonge, the proceeds of whose writings helped finance the mission, comments on his linguistic abilities (1874, p. 476):

[2] I am grateful to Dr. Hilliard for granting me access to his collection of sources dealing with the Melanesian Mission.