

Rabaul Creole German: What documentation is showing us

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During most of the short German colonial period, Rabaul, on the Gazelle Peninsula of the island of New Britain, was its administrative and commercial capital. The intense and sudden mixture of local Tolais, 'foreign' Melanesians, Europeans, Australians, Chinese, Malays, and others gave rise to three new contact language varieties: Tok Pisin, a Chinese koine, and Rabaul Creole German, known to its speakers as Unserdeutsch ('Our German'). Unserdeutsch is unique as the only known German-lexifier creole and is unusual in being one of a very small group of creoles having their genesis in boarding school dormitories. It is currently the object of an extensive documentation project supported by the German Research Association initially from 2015 through the University of Augsburg and now through the University of Bern.

Unserdeutsch has its origin in an orphanage for so-called mixed-race children at the Vunapope Catholic Mission near Rabaul. In the Eurocentric philosophy of the colonial era, mixed-race children were separated from their indigenous mothers, sometimes by force, and placed in a boarding school to give them a German and Christian identity. There the children learned Standard German but developed a pidgin German as a 'secret language' to use amongst themselves that was in part a relexified Tok Pisin. As these children usually married each other, the language was a true creole in the next generation.

The racial segregation of the German and then Australian colonial eras meant that the mixed-race community tended to socialise in isolation, reinforcing the use of Unserdeutsch as an in-group language. With the coming of Papua New Guinea independence, almost all speakers emigrated to Australia, where they have successfully integrated, often marrying persons from other ethnic backgrounds. Today there are not more than 120 speakers, the youngest in their fifties.

Unserdeutsch was first documented in an unpublished masters thesis in 1983, but was not intensely documented until the current study. This study has confirmed the creole nature of Unserdeutsch, and given a more accurate description of the phonological system than earlier research did. The extent to which morphological and syntactic structures in the basilect reflect a relexification of Tok Pisin has been better understood, with the identification of certain structures that were not described earlier. The language is now one of the best described languages of Papua New Guinea.

The study has also stimulated media attention about the history and current status of the community in Papua New Guinea, Australia, and Europe. Whereas in the past the community tended to feel marginalised for speaking a 'broken German', there is now a greater awareness of how the language is a reflection of Melanesian and German interaction. This in turn has contributed to the cohesion of the geographically scattered Unserdeutsch community, as shown by the establishment of an Unserdeutsch Facebook page and a committee to represent the community to the wider public. At the same time, publicity related to the project has helped to stimulate interest in Germany about its 'colonial amnesia' regarding its former empire in the Pacific.