

WANEM BISLAMA?

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1. INTRODUCTION

Much of the current debate about the genesis and development of Pacific pidgins centres around the recent work of Peter Mühlhäusler and Roger Keesing, although to be fair one should not forget the contributions of other scholars such as Bickerton (1975, 1981), Charpentier (1979), Charpentier and Tryon (1989), Clark (1979), Crowley (1989), (1990), Dutton (1985), Jourdan (1985), Mosel (1980), Siegel (1987) and Tryon (1987, in press).

We will first look at the substance of the debate which is currently exercising the minds of Keesing and Mühlhäusler. In 1986 Mühlhäusler published his *Pidgin and Creole linguistics*, while in 1988 Keesing replied with his *Melanesian Pidgin and the Oceanic substrate*. Since that time, Mühlhäusler has reviewed Keesing (Mühlhäusler 1989) and Keesing has replied to a number of critics and reviewers, namely Belikov, Bickerton, Mühlhäusler, Romaine and Siegel (Keesing, in press).

Mühlhäusler maintained, inter alia, that the principal features of Melanesian pidgins are attributable to language universal forces, with little substrate influence, while Keesing takes the view that Melanesian pidgins are largely calques based on the morpho-syntax common to Oceanic Austronesian languages. Although both Mühlhäusler and Keesing make a large number of claims about the development of Pacific pidgins, one significant gap in the linguistic evidence upon which they base their arguments is the almost total absence of the evidence which may be adduced from Vanuatu Bislama, both current and historical. Indeed, Keesing (1988:vi) makes the rather surprising statement that "there seems no virtue in trying to do a final and definitive study, or waiting until all the relevant evidence is in". Admittedly little detailed or systematic data was available to them at the time they published their views. Since Vanuatu Bislama predates by some time both Solomons Pijin and Tok Pisin, we will examine here some of the evidence provided by that variety of Melanesian Pidgin, after looking at the major claims of Mühlhäusler and Keesing and consider how this Vanuatu evidence can inform the debate.

For those not familiar with the key dates in the development of Melanesian pidgins, it is important to be aware that recruiting of labour for work in the plantations in Queensland, Samoa, Fiji and New Caledonia began in southern Vanuatu in 1863, in the Solomon Islands in 1872 and in what is now

Papua New Guinea in 1880. However, as early as 1847 Ben Boyd, who ran a whaling station at Twofold Bay in NSW, had recruited some 150 Melanesian labourers from Tanna (Vanuatu) and Lifou (Loyalty Islands, New Caledonia). Even at that time an early form of Bislama was spoken.

The *Australian* newspaper of 17 December 1847 describes a Tannese man in Sydney as “a quiet, unassuming, intelligent fellow, possessing a sufficient knowledge of broken English to make himself understood on a variety of occasions”. He is quoted as saying that life in Sydney was not easy: “man Tanna no wife no nothing”, whereas on Tanna there were “plenty bananas, plenty yams, plenty breadfruit, plenty sugar cane, plenty cocoa-nut and plenty pork – but in Sydney no nothing”.

2. MÜHLHÄUSLER AND KEESING

The main areas of disagreement between Keesing and Mühlhäusler revolve around:

- (a) the status of Tok Pisin;
- (b) the role of substratum influence/calquing in the development of the various Melanesian pidgins;
- (c) the interpretation of features shared by languages such as Tok Pisin, Solomons Pijin and Bislama;
- (d) the time-scale of the expansion and stabilisation of what became Melanesian Pidgin;
- (e) the nature of the Pidgin pronominal system and the predicate marker.

Mühlhäusler has claimed a special and separate development for Tok Pisin as opposed to the other Melanesian pidgins (Bislama and Solomons Pijin). He attributes the distinctive features of Tok Pisin to the separate development of that language on the plantations of German Samoa in the 1860s and 1870s.

Keesing maintains that until the late 1880s the same dialect of Pidgin was spoken over a large region of the south-western and central Pacific, including the plantation areas of Queensland, Samoa, Fiji and New Caledonia and the recruiting areas (Vanuatu, the Solomons, and the Bismarks in Papua New Guinea). In other words he is denying Tok Pisin any special evolution prior to that time.

One of Keesing's major claims is that by the end of the 1880s, this regional Pidgin had acquired much of the syntactic complexity (and many of the specific lexical forms) characteristic of its daughter dialects in Papua New Guinea, the Solomons and Vanuatu (formerly the New Hebrides) in the twentieth century.

According to his reckoning (1988:112-113), the features common to all three daughter dialects of the late 1880s include not only a very substantial core of lexical items, but core syntactic patterns. These include:

- (a) the basic structure of the pronominal system including many patterns supposed to have developed in Tok Pisin since 1900; pronoun forms (if we view *olgeta* and *ol* as old variants of the same form) are essentially identical in all three dialects, and so is the structure of the paradigm itself, (including dual and plural sets, and a distinction between a first person non-singular inclusive and exclusive); so too are what have been taken to be specific historical anomalies in the Tok Pisin system, such as the use of the so-called ‘predicate marker’ *i* to maintain reference across clauses in discourse, specific constructional patterns such as *hem i* using this predicate marker, and the use of the third person plural pronoun (*ol* or *olgeta*) as a generalised plural marker;

- (b) the use of pronouns to embed relative clauses;
- (c) the systematic use of the transitive suffix *-im* to mark transitive verbs, and many of its specific uses (for example to create transitive verbs from statives);
- (d) the grammaticalisation of tense/aspect markers, such as the irrealis-marking *bai* (*babae*);
- (e) the use of periphrastic causatives using *mek-* and grammaticalised causatives using the transitive suffix *-im*;
- (f) a number of complementising and relativising constructions, using such forms as *see* and *wea* and *bulong*;
- (g) the use of *-fela/-pela* in a particular set of interconnected slots: suffixed to quantifiers (*tu-fela*, *sam-fela*); suffixed to a smallish class of attributive statives (*big-fela*, *gud-fela*); suffixed to demonstratives (*dis-fela*, *dat-fela*), used both as determiners and as pronouns; adverbially, apparently as a second, stative verb in compound-verbal constructions (*kilim strong-fela*); suffixed to pronouns or numerals, to indicate plurality of pronouns (*mifela*, *tufela*);
- (h) a whole set of clause-initial phrasal interrogatives (derived from English *what name*, *which way*, *what time* etc.);
- (i) a distinctive system of marking possession, using *bilong* to conjoin nouns, and nouns with pronouns to mark a genitive relationship metaphorically based on proximity;
- (j) what has been termed *ia bracketing* with relative clauses.

Keesing admits that a few of these features may represent parallel developments in Tok Pisin, Bislama and Solomons Pidgin, but that if this is the case, they could only have emerged out of a common dialect that already contained the essential materials. In fact the evidence adduced from Bislama will demonstrate the validity of this claim, although for reasons other than those which Keesing puts forward.

Keesing concedes, however, that while his hypothesis of a highly expanded Pidgin by the start of the 1890s is supported by what he terms "bits and pieces of textual evidence" attesting many of the features of subsequent Melanesian Pidgin, and by two substantial texts from the 1890s (Pionnier 1913, recording the Vanuatu Bislama of the 1890s, and Somerville 1893 for the Solomons), much of his case rests on distributional evidence. He states that where specific constructional patterns and forms are found in all three pidgin dialects, there are fairly strong grounds for their incorporation in the pidgin of the 1880s (since the New Guinea dialect was separated from the others in the latter years of that decade). As an example, Keesing inferred that on these distributional grounds *hem i* must have been present in the regional pidgin of the late 1880s. He reports (1990:3) that his claim was vindicated by the discovery of this sequence in a naval report by Commander E.G. Rason in 1895 after a visit to the Western Solomons. We will see later in the paper a kind of mirror image of Keesing's hypothesis, namely that the characteristics which distinguish each of the three Melanesian pidgins still exist in Bislama regional speech today, and that these same characteristics for the same areas of Vanuatu are recorded in the literature of the nineteenth century.

While Keesing maintains that until the 1880s there was spoken in island Melanesia an essentially unified Pacific Pidgin, characterised by a common grammar and lexicon, thus denying the separate genesis accorded to New Guinea Tok Pisin by Mühlhäusler, he argues that when the Solomons were separated from the New Hebrides (Vanuatu) and Queensland at the turn of the century, a fine tuning of the Solomons Pidgin pronominal system took place so as to match patterns in substratum

languages (having been generally based on an Oceanic substrate in the first place). Again, Vanuatu Bislama can inform this discussion (see below). He concludes, however, that the development of this pidgin is a phenomenon primarily of the nineteenth century, not of the twentieth (1990:15).

Mühlhäusler (1989a, 1989b)¹ disagrees with much of Keesing's hypothesis and conclusions. He states first of all (1989a:1) that Keesing misinterprets the nature of whaling, sandalwood and the beche-de-mer trade by arguing that they led to a "single early-Pidgin speech community" or "the linguistic community". Mühlhäusler maintains, rather, that there was very tenuous and often only indirect (via visiting Europeans) contact between the members of this postulated speech community. The nature of transmission of early Pacific Pidgin differed considerably from place to place and time to time: on board whaling and other vessels, adults learning from other adults in the plantations, children learning pidgin from returning adults as a second language, and in the early mixed beach communities. "That such different modes of transmission and crystallisation are signs of a single speech community or likely indices of a shared core grammar seems implausible" (1989a:1).

Mühlhäusler has more serious objections, however. He magnanimously states (1989a:2): "let us assume...with Keesing that the first occurrence of certain diagnostic constructions was followed by continuous diffusion and transmission". Of the ten constructions (listed above) which Keesing claims to have been common to South Western Pacific Pidgins in the late 1880s, Mühlhäusler maintains that the majority turns out not to have originated among speakers of Oceanic languages at all. He states that Philip Baker's provisional analysis of the corpus of data which he has collected suggests that the majority of them originated in Australia before Melanesian immigration to that country. He cites (1989a:2) the following:

1. The basic pronouns were first documented as follows:

<i>me</i>	I	New South Wales 1817
<i>yumi</i>	we incl	Queensland 1814
<i>yufela</i>	you pl	Queensland 1880
<i>altogether</i>	they	Queensland 1858

2. The systematic use of the transitive suffix *-im* is first documented for New South Wales in 1826.
3. *-fela* as a suffix for quantifiers occurs in Queensland in 1848, with attributive adjectives in New South Wales in 1842 and with demonstratives in Queensland in 1842. Contrary to Keesing's assumption (1988:113), *-fela* was not introduced from China Coast Pidgin.
4. Phrasal interrogatives of the *whatname* type are first documented in Queensland in 1868.
5. The marking of possession by means of *bilong* first appears in New South Wales in 1826.

Mühlhäusler is not suggesting that there was a continuous transmission of these and other features. Rather, he is at pains to point out that such constructions could arise even where Oceanic substratum is absent. Given the quite considerable typological differences between Australian Aboriginal and Oceanic languages, the similarities of the Pidgin English used by their speakers will have to be explained in terms of linguistic universals or shared superstrate influence according to Mühlhäusler, rather than through the influence of substratum languages. The Australian materials presented by Mühlhäusler, however, run counter to his own earlier claim that most of these features

¹Substantially two versions of the same article.

developed in Tok Pisin only in the twentieth century.² In the light of this, together with the evidence produced by Keesing, and the Bislama evidence discussed below, it would seem difficult to separate Tok Pisin from the mainstream developments in Melanesian Pidgins.

Another of the principal bones of contention for Mühlhäusler, though, is Keesing's claim that Pacific pidgins achieved a degree of stabilisation at a relatively early period. This is a matter of concern to Siegel also. Mühlhäusler finds that generally speaking, Keesing's approach suffers from a lack of distinction between chronological time and relative time. In Mühlhäusler's opinion, the former concept is needed to answer questions such as:

- (a) When did Tok Pisin become severed from the Melanesian Pidgin tradition (1880, 1890, 1900)?
- (b) When is a construction first documented for a particular area?
- (c) When were the first Pacific islanders repatriated from Queensland?

Separate from these issues is that of relative time. Mühlhäusler maintains that underlying his entire body of writings on the development of Pidgin English in the Pacific is the implicational or quantum-linguistic model which asks:

- (a) In what order do constructions (rule or rule environments) emerge in a pidgin language?
- (b) Does the presence of C imply that of B and A for a given lect?

Thus, with the third person plural pronoun, for instance, the question is not so much the chronological one of 'When is it first documented?' but rather 'If speakers use the third person plural pronoun will they also use the second person plural and the first person plural pronouns?'; 'If speakers use plural pronouns, will they also use dual pronouns?' Thus Mühlhäusler claims that he has found that for speakers of different ages in the same location, one could establish patterns such as:

D implies C implies B implies A

but that, at the same time, not all speakers have reached stages D and C. The importance of the implicational argument for the universals versus substratum debate is considerable. The claim is that such implicational patterns as the animacy or accessibility hierarchies, to use Mühlhäusler's words, provide principled limitations on what can be transferred from another language in what order (not, as Keesing (1988:171) interpreted it: "that substratum models will have an impact on a developing pidgin only at certain crucial points in its development"). It can thus provide a question that neither Keesing nor any other substratophile can answer: why is it that many constructions, rules or rule environments found in the substratum languages are not borrowed by pidgins, and why do those that are adopted get borrowed in a particular sequence rather than all at once?

The next problem which Mühlhäusler raises concerns continuity. He quotes (1989b:461) Hoenigswald (1971:476):

It is difficult enough to be quite sure, both in theory and in practice, when a given ordinary language is a descendant (under change) rather than a collateral relative of a given older language. It has been said that to discover a line of descent is to discriminate what has got handed down from mother to infant over the generations from what has passed through other channels. If this is true, the pidgins with their special mechanism of

²For this reason, perhaps, this Australian evidence does not appear in Mühlhäusler 1989b, a later version of the same review article.

exclusively secondary transmittal should indeed be troublesome to place on a family tree. And if it is further the case that pidgins are typically born and then again dropped from use in shortlived bursts of activity, the whole linear notion of 'gradual' change is not even a superficially useful approximation to the truth, as it is for normal, primary languages.

Thus the question of whether Pacific or Melanesian Pidgin is the same language either diachronically or geographically is one which has no easy answers.

As we have already seen, early in his book Keesing posits the existence of a Pacific pidgin which became fairly homogeneous and stable within less than a decade after 1845, that local dialects including Melanesian Pidgin began to emerge in the 1870s and that Tok Pisin became a separate dialect of Melanesian Pidgin around 1890. In addition he claims that most of the shared grammar of the various dialects of Melanesian Pidgin is of Eastern Oceanic origin.

Mühlhäusler (1989b:462) considers that there are three possible scenarios which could explain the position recognised by Keesing, as follows:

- (a) shared development up to 1880 with the additional stipulation that a number of crucial constructions were established firmly by 1880;
- (b) parallel development resulting from universal forces;
- (c) parallel development through continued borrowing from typologically similar Oceanic languages after 1880.

Mühlhäusler maintains that Keesing's line of reasoning often begs the question and that he indulges in circular arguments. He cites, for example, Keesing's statement:

Him he gammon too much was recorded in the Solomons in 1895. But the existence of these sequences in all the daughter dialects makes it almost certain that islanders were using such constructions by the 1880s. (1988:149)

Mühlhäusler warns of the dangers of using evidence from comparison of arbitrarily chosen synchronic states. In this context he demonstrates that some of what Keesing attributes to nineteenth century Melanesian Pidgin is lacking in Tok Pisin until the 1920s – the examples he chooses involve the use of *winim* in comparative constructions and the sequences *mi mi* and *yu yu*. Mühlhäusler concludes that the kind of evidence Keesing produces can neither be taken seriously as a disconfirmation of the view that parallel development occurred as a result of universal factors nor as a proof of borrowing from substratum sources after 1880.

He goes on to attack the use of hypothetical data, especially with respect to pronouns, stating that what Keesing fails to present is hard and fast evidence that the inclusive/exclusive distinction with first person non-singular pronouns in fact existed at the time of his postulated crystallisation and splitting of Melanesian Pidgin. (It is in fact lacking from Pionnier's material of the early 1890s.) He argues further (1989b:467) that Borchardt's 'Guidance for Learning of Tok Boi' (1930) notes that the inclusive/exclusive distinction is "not commonly used" in the Tok Pisin of New Britain, although he lists it for plural pronouns. This he takes as evidence that the inclusive/exclusive distinction did not exist prior to 1890. (It is well and truly present in Jacomb 1914 for the New Hebrides, and in Fletcher 1923, reporting on the period 1912-1919).

Mühlhäusler also points out that the inclusive/exclusive distinction with non-singular first person pronouns is also lacking from Pidgin Fijian, where in fact it should have occurred as the speech community was composed almost entirely of speakers of Oceanic languages. He stresses also that

such a distinction was lacking from Samoan Plantation Pidgin as late as 1915, according to the most comprehensive source on this language. (I note however that the inclusive/exclusive distinction is lacking in Gilbertese, quite exceptionally, and that perhaps the pattern established in Samoa and some other areas was strongly influenced by Gilbertese speakers, who were known to have played an important part in the early formative years of Pacific Pidgin in Micronesia.)

Mühlhäusler raises a number of other objections to the evidence adduced and interpreted by Keesing, including the status of *-fela*. Do forms such as *me fello* or *him fello* (Keesing 1988:139) indeed stand for first person plural exclusive or third person plural as suggested by Keesing? Indeed the material and interpretations produced by both Mühlhäusler and Keesing are often ambiguous and cannot always be regarded as satisfactory.

Mühlhäusler concludes by challenging Keesing's earlier statements about the stabilisation of Melanesian Pidgin and the implication that by 1890 all Pacific Pidgins were at a relatively sophisticated level of development:

The amount of fluctuation and quite rudimentary pidgin documented (for Samoa and German New Guinea) for this period would seem strongly to contradict Keesing's suggestion. For instance many of the inhabitants of the Bismarck archipelago who worked in Queensland appear to have been unable to speak any form of pidgin and had to be interrogated via an interpreter by the 1885 Royal Commission. Other contemporary records, such as the Magisterial Records that I have examined, suggest a very limited knowledge of Pidgin English. (1989b:472)

Keesing (1990) replies to Mühlhäusler's criticisms, and those of a number of other reviewers, with a few noticeable shifts of ground from positions taken in his 1988 work, most notably in respect to claims of early stabilisation of Pacific Pidgin. (Siegel also takes Keesing to task for claiming that stabilisation had occurred by about 1860.) Keesing (1990:5) maintains that "stabilization (in the sense that I use the term) was a gradual process that was certainly still going on (in the New Hebrides, Solomons and New Guinea) in the early years of this century". I interpret this as an admission that we are still some way from being able to resolve many of the important questions concerning the development of Pacific/Melanesian pidgins, and that a *festina lente* approach might be more in order, rather than trying to have the last word as every tiny snippet of new information comes to hand. What is most striking is that the whole debate conducted by Mühlhäusler and Keesing, regardless of the stances taken, omits any but the most passing reference to Bislama, the pidgin variety spoken in Vanuatu, which was established some little time before either Solomons Pidgin or Tok Pisin. It is this situation which Tryon and Charpentier seek to rectify in their upcoming *Bislama and the development of Melanesian Pidgin*, a fine-grained study resulting from a data collection process which has been in progress for some 20 years, complemented by a fairly exhaustive search of archival documentary sources.

3. THE EVIDENCE FROM BISLAMA

When discussing Bislama and Bislama usage throughout Vanuatu, once one gets past the initial impression of homogeneity, largely because of the importance of Radio Vanuatu, one becomes increasingly aware of the quite considerable range of variation at all levels. Quite apart from the striking differences between the urban and rural registers of this lingua franca, one becomes aware of regional differences in phonology, lexicon and morpho-syntax. Indeed, there is so much variation

that once one focuses on the differences rather than the similarities in the varieties one encounters, one begins to realise that it is not really meaningful to talk about Bislama in general. One could better speak of Bislamas, such are the variations encountered. Thus the question '*Wanem Bislama*'? We will now examine a few of the competing forms and structures from Vanuatu Bislama(s) and point up the important implications they have in the current debate about the evolution and development of Melanesian pidgins.

3.1 BISLAMA REGIONALISMS: MORPHO-SYNTAX

Nearly 30 Bislama morpho-syntactic regionalisms or departures from 'standard' Bislama are listed in summary form below. They have been observed particularly in the speech of older ni-Vanuatu (as citizens of Vanuatu choose to be called) in rural areas, although not necessarily limited to this category of speakers, since they are primarily regionalisms. The list is as follows:

	STANDARD	REGIONAL	MEANING	LOCALITY
1	<i>save</i>	<i>ken</i>	be able to know how to	NW Malekula
2	<i>ia</i>	<i>disfela</i>	this, that	Tanna, Ambrym, SE Pentecost
3	<i>wanem</i>	<i>wanti</i>	desiderative, want, like	Epi, NW Malekula
4	<i>stap + VB</i>	<i>VB + stap</i>	habitual, continuative	Epi
5	$\emptyset$	<i>bin</i>	narrative past tense	Efate, Erromango, Tanna, Aneityum
6	<i>olsem wanem</i>	<i>hao nao</i>	interrogative, how?	SW and NW Malekula
7	<i>ol i</i>	<i>olgeta i</i>	3 PL pronoun actor: they	SE Malekula
8	<i>wanem</i>	<i>laek</i>	desiderative, want to	Erromango, Maewo
9	<i>mi, yu</i>	<i>mi mi, yu yu</i>	1 SG and 2 SG actor: I, you	South Santo
10	<i>blong em</i>	<i>blong en</i>	3 SG possessive: his/her	Santo, Malekula
11	<i>luk</i>	<i>lukim</i>	see (Vtr)	Maewo, Malekula
12	<i>nomata</i>	<i>nating</i>	though, although	Malekula, Shepherd Is
13	<i>olsem wanem</i>	<i>wiswe</i>	interrogative, how, why?	Pentecost
14	<i>wea</i>	<i>weples</i>	interrogative, where?	Efate, Malekula
15	<i>wanem + N</i>	<i>eni + N</i>	whatever	Aneityum, Erromango
16	<i>yet</i>	<i>stil</i>	uncompleted action	Malekula
17	<i>we</i>	$\emptyset$	relativiser	Erromango, Malekula
18	<i>ova long</i>	<i>bitim/winim</i>	comparative, more than	Efate, Paama
19	<i>long</i>	<i>wetem</i>	instrument, agent, with	Malekula

20	<i>ol</i>	<i>olgeta</i>	noun pluraliser	SE Malekula
21	<i>maet</i>	<i>mebi/ating</i>	dubitative	Tanna
22	<i>be</i>	<i>bat</i>	adversative, but	Erromango, Aneityum, Tanna
23	<i>-fela</i>	<i>Ø</i>	adjective formant	Epi, Ambrym
24	<i>from we</i>	<i>bikos</i>	cause/reason, because, since	Efate/Shepherds
25	<i>N+gender</i>	<i>gender +N</i>	gender/sex, animals etc.	Malekula
26	<i>tastawe</i>	<i>from em ia</i>	consequence, therefore	Maewo, Epi
27	<i>kasem</i>	<i>tel</i>	until, as far as	Ambrym, Santo
28	<i>singsing</i>	<i>sing</i>	durative reduplication	Tanna
29	<i>talem long</i>	<i>talem</i>	verb + indirect object	Efate, Santo

The competing morpho-syntactic structures/functors listed above are indicative only and are far from representing the totality of morpho-syntactic variation in Vanuatu Bislama. In fact the table presented here is a considerable simplification since there are often more than two competing forms. They do however serve as an indication of the nature and extent of the variations encountered. At the same time, the distributional pattern of these morpho-syntactic competing forms is much more complex than the simple listing above suggests; for the geographical distributions of the morpho-syntactic isoglosses is not always clear-cut, since there are a number of overlaps. Yet again, there are often competing forms within a single geographical area, the variations being sometimes based on generational differences and sometimes seemingly genuine alternatives. A detailed survey is currently in progress, (Tryon and Charpentier, forthcoming) in terms of both synchronic and historical evidence for Bislama.

3.2 BISLAMA REGIONALISMS: LEXICON

There are also significant lexical differences for certain items in Bislama. While detailed isogloss maps are not yet completed, the following lexical differences between the Bislama of Santo and that of Malekula will serve to indicate the range of lexical regionalisms observed to this point:

ITEM	MALEKULA	SANTO
outside	<i>aotsaed</i>	<i>afsaed</i>
ocean	<i>blusi</i>	<i>dipsi</i>
community leader	<i>big man</i>	<i>haeman</i>
tarpaulin	<i>tapolen</i>	<i>kanwis</i>
boar	<i>man pig</i>	<i>pig man</i>
material, cloth	<i>pis kaliko</i>	<i>haf kaliko</i>
nearly, almost	<i>klosap</i>	<i>samwe long</i>
coconut crab	<i>bigbol</i>	<i>krab kokonas</i>
until	<i>kasem</i>	<i>tel</i>

4. BISLAMA REGIONALISMS AND MELANESIAN PIDGINS

The regional variations exemplified above are indicative only of the range and scope of this phenomenon. They are the subject of an ongoing fine-grained study, the results of which will contribute to our understanding of the history and development of Bislama in Vanuatu. They can also inform the debate on the genesis of the other Melanesian pidgins, Tok Pisin and Solomons Pidgin, since many of the non-standard usages observed in Vanuatu Bislama today are diagnostic items in both of these languages, for example *ken* instead of standard Bislama *save* 'abilitative' and *laek* instead of *wanem* 'desiderative' (both characteristic of Tok Pisin); *hao nao* instead of *olsem wanem* 'how?', characteristic of Solomons Pidgin.

A number of the non-standard regionalisms listed above were at first considered to have resulted from contact with pidgin speakers from both the Solomons and Papua New Guinea, since there has been increasing communication throughout Island Melanesia. This hypothesis had to be rejected, however, when it was realised that the regionalisms in question characterise the Bislama of elderly speakers from remote rural communities who have rarely if ever travelled beyond their own area, and who would not have had the opportunity for contact with Melanesians from either the Solomons or Papua New Guinea. Nor have they had any exposure to English. More important, especially in terms of the debate about the genesis of Tok Pisin and Solomons Pidgin, is the fact that the selfsame regionalisms recorded today are recorded in the literature and archival materials of the nineteenth century for precisely the same areas of Vanuatu.

This remarkable regional conservatism in Vanuatu Bislama has significant consequences in terms of both Tok Pisin and Solomons Pidgin. The concordance of the archival materials of the last century and the morpho-syntactic and lexical regionalisms of Vanuatu Bislama today suggests that the other Melanesian pidgins, Tok Pisin and Solomons Pidgin, indeed shared a lengthy period of common development with Bislama. The evidence further suggests that they separated only after a considerable degree of stability had been achieved, differentiation and individual stabilisation being achieved after separation late in the nineteenth century.

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