

Bislama: Pidgin English in the New Hebrides

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DESCENDANT CALLS IN NH

A descendant from the New Hebrides who has been living in Queensland, Australia, with several hundred others paid a brief visit to the New Hebrides recently. She is Mrs Olive Daar, whose mother came from Tongoa and father from Epi. Her family were taken to Australia during the last century to work in the sugarcane plantations in Queensland.

KAM BLONG LUKLUK

Wanfala woman we emi kam long Niu Hebridis long las manis from Ostrelya, emi wan pikinini blong ol man blong Niu Hebridis we oli bin go wok long Ostrelya bifo. Bubu blong em i blong Tongoa --- mo Jif Tom Tipoloamata emi wan famle blong em.

Woman ia emi mared mo emi kat tu pikinini we tufala i stap long Ostrelyg. Woman ia emi kam sot taem nomo blong lukluk ples mo nacia emi go bak finis long Ostrelya. Woman ia emi stap long Ostrelya wetem plante moa we olgeta i haf blong Niu Hebridis.

New Hebrides is an area in the throes of rapid culture change. Being propelled into articulation with the Western world by the Age of Exploration, being exploited by both the blackbirders and the early settlers, and being a major stage for the Pacific Theater in the Second World War, have all had profound effects upon the aboriginal culture of this archipelago. In concert with social change has come linguistic innovation; Pidgin English (Bislama) and creole languages are spoken throughout the group and are direct products of early contact with Europeans.

The term pidgin is thought to have been derived from the English word business. It was first applied to Chinese Pidgin English, and later came to denote languages of similar type. Creole, however, comes originally from the Portuguese *crioulo* and initially referred to a white man of European descent who had been born and raised in a tropical or semi-tropical colony. Later, the term was extended to include natives and other people of non-European background. Finally, creole was applied to some of the languages spoken around the Caribbean and in West Africa and was then extended to include all similar languages throughout the world.

Main Street of Santo Town, Espiritu Santo Island.



As language types, pidgins and creoles were first distinguished and defined by Leonard Bloomfield over forty years ago. His definition, although subject to much recent debate, embodies the essence of the current concepts concerning these languages. Pidgin was defined as a makeshift adaptation, reduced in structure and limited in use, and most importantly no one's first language, i.e., a contact vernacular; creole was a pidgin that had become a primary language in that it was a language of the home and learned by children directly from their parents. The essential linguistic processes involved are reduction and restriction in form and use for pidgins, and later expansion and extension in form and use for creoles. Thus, pidgin and creole are not easily separated into discrete categories but form a dynamic continuum.

Historically, the earliest pidgin for which there is direct evidence is the pidginized Romance vernacular spoken between the European Crusaders and traders during the Middle Ages along the coast between Marseilles and Genoa. As the Crusades were dominated by the French, the language formed to communicate with the Levantines was called the *lingua franca*. Beginning as a specific descriptive term, the meaning of *lingua franca* has been expanded to include any language that is used as a means of communication between people who do not share a common language.

As a result of a similar contact situation brought about by European trading throughout the world during the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries, pidgin languages are present on all continents. Areas in direct contact with Europeans have the highest incidence and maintenance of pidgin, but it has spread to remote areas as a *lingua franca* among natives. Thus, pidgins in the Pacific, as with other pidgins, were a direct result of the influences of trade, conquest, plantation labor, migration, and colonialism generated during the Age of Exploration.

Present theory holds that pidgins are created in a multilingual situation; that is, one where more than two languages are spoken, and where there is a dominant language that supplies much of the vocabulary. Whinnom has further suggested that pidgins may be an

outgrowth of a plantation setting where the natives who worked together did not speak a common language. For example, indentured native labor was used on the newly created plantations in Queensland, Samoa, and Fiji, and in the mines of New Caledonia. It is estimated that between 1868 and 1906 more than sixty thousand natives went to the Queensland Colony in Australia. Of these, the majority were from the New Hebrides and Solomon Islands. Once on the plantations, natives who spoke the same language were kept separated, to minimize collusion and insurrection. The creation of pidgin can therefore be seen as a *lingua franca* between natives, and not a result of plantation owners' simplified attempts to communicate their desires to natives in "baby-talk."

Because of this evolution, the vocabulary of pidgins in the Pacific is derived almost entirely from one or more European languages. In many instances, the words, in their European sense, are crude and often obscene, because natives adopted vocabulary used in the harsh plantation setting. Fortunately, these expressions have acquired modified meanings and express the ordinary and not the profane. An example is the expression *bagerap* ("buggered up," an Australian slang expression) which now means "to be spoiled, ruined."

While the New Hebrides Pidgin similarly developed as a result of the historical processes described above, it has a particularly interesting history which bears closer examination. When describing New Hebridean Pidgin, the terms Bislama, Bichelamar, *Bêche-de-mer*, or Beach-la-mar are often used interchangeably in colloquial speech. The commonly used term Bislama will be employed in this paper when referring to New Hebridean Pidgin. Taxonomically, Bislama is subsumed under Melanesian Pidgin English, of which there appear to be two main types: an eastern variety, centered in New Guinea, and a western variety, centered in the British Solomon Islands. The New Hebridean Pidgin is a sub-dialect of the latter. Bislama was very similar to the New Caledonian Pidgin English before it became "relexified" in some areas to Pidgin French (retaining the name Bislama). Historically Bislama seems to be an example

of "relexification" of Chinese Pidgin English. ("Relexification" is the process of taking an already pidginized language and replacing one vocabulary with another, usually maintaining the structure of the original.)

The probable course of development of Bislama began in the 16th century with the Portuguese, who engaged in worldwide trade. The China Coast was an important trade area and it was there that Portuguese Pidgin was born. It is postulated that, when other nations started trading with China, they followed the model of Portuguese Pidgin and through the process of "relexification" new pidgin languages were created. These new pidgins were formed, in part directly from Portuguese Pidgin, in part by replacement of Portuguese terms with English (or Dutch or French depending on the area), in part by additions from other sources, e.g., the local native dialect.

One result of this miscegenation was Chinese Pidgin English. The first variety of Pidgin English arose in Canton after the founding, in 1664, of the English trading post ("factory"). From Canton, Chinese Pidgin English spread along the southeast coast of China and into the Yang-tze River Valley as the "Treaty Ports" were established. Trade to and from China came from all corners of the world, and it was the sea trade between China and the Pacific Islands that was the crucial factor in the formation of a South Seas Pidgin.

This South Seas Pidgin came to be known as Bislama. The name was an Anglicized version of *bêche-de-mer*, the name given to a kind of sea slug or trepang, which was the main article of trade between China and the Pacific, since trepang was considered to be a great delicacy in soups. The *bêche-de-mer* traders took Chinese Pidgin English and adapted it to their needs, and Bislama became the basis of the development of other forms of Pidgin English spoken throughout the Pacific from New Caledonia to the Caroline Islands.

The history of Bislama is reflected semantically and the etymology of some of the very common and basic words has been traced. The omnipresent *save* ("savvy"), meaning "to know" or "to be able" is derived from the Portuguese *saber* ("to know"). The

change from *b* to *v* reflects the French influence, most likely from *savoir*. *Pikinini* ("pickaninny"), usually meaning "small child," entered English Pidgin from the Portuguese *pequeño* ("small") and *pequeñino* ("diminutive"); however, in the Pacific the longer form (*pequeñino*) was favored, but the restricted meaning of "small child" was attached. The word *bambae* ("by-and-by") is from English Pidgin but it may possibly be a "relexification" of the Portuguese *logo*. The word *tumas* ("too much") has the modified meaning of "very much, a great deal" and is derived directly from English Pidgin. A word from the same source modified similarly is *samting* ("something"). The Bislama meaning is simply "thing." Early contacts with Polynesia have also left their mark in words like *kaikai* ("to eat") from the Polynesian *kai* ("to eat").

Besides reflecting its multilingual history, Bislama mirrors the social relations that exist in a colonial setting. In the town of Santo (Luganville), it is not uncommon to hear a black man addressed as *boi* ("boy"). The reciprocal term of address to a white man is usually *masta* ("master," "mister"?). The plantation heritage and the blackbird's mark have yet to be erased from the lexicon.

Although Bislama historically is derived almost entirely from English, maintaining the same basic linguistic categories and vocabulary, the phonology and much of the grammar reflect a Malayo-Polynesian influence. Phonetically, the English sounds of *sh* as in "shine" and *z* as in "buzz" are not used by New Hebrideans, so words like "rubbish" and "dances" become *rabis* and *tanis*, respectively. Phonemically, English speakers distinguish between words on the basis of whether or not consonant sounds are voiced, as with "pat" and "bat," "ten" and "den," and "kale" and "gale." Although New Hebridean speakers can hear these differences, the distinction between unvoiced and voiced consonants is not significant in their native dialects. This non-differentiation is carried over to their pronunciation of Pidgin English. The result is that a word like *olgeta* can be pronounced as *olgeta*, *olketa*, *olgeda*, and *olkeda* and retain the same meaning, "all" (from "all together"). The vowel system of Bislama is similarly derived from the

Melanesian.

Grammatically the system is mainly New Hebridean. A clear instance of this is the use of three suffixes, *-fala₁*, meaning "more than one," *-fala₂*, meaning "specific" or "definite" rather than "general," and *-im*, meaning that "a direct object is involved."

-fala₁:

<i>mi kaikai</i>	"I eat"
<i>mifala kaikai</i>	"we eat"
<i>yu lukim mi</i>	"you see me"
<i>yu lukim mifala</i>	"you see us"
<i>haus blong yu</i>	"your (singular) house"
<i>haus blong yufala</i>	"your (plural) house"

-fala₂:

<i>gudfala man</i>	"(a) good man"
<i>smolfala haus</i>	"(a) little house"

-im:

<i>mi rid</i>	"I read"
<i>mi ridim buk</i>	"I read a book"
<i>mi ridim</i>	"I read it"
<i>ol i kros</i>	"they are angry"
<i>ol i krosim disfala boi</i>	"they are angry at this native"
<i>ol i krosim</i>	"they are angry at him"

The formation of new words by joining two or more words already present in the lexicon is also a New Hebridean pattern. Three common words thus used are *ap* ("up"), *daun* ("down"), and *we* ("away"), as with the verb *go* ("go") in *goap* "go up," *godau* "go down," and *gowe* "go away." Of the compound words, the most important types are those that are noun + noun and adjective + noun. The following are examples:

noun + noun

<i>haus boi</i>	"house for the 'boys' or native workers"
<i>hausboi</i>	"house-boy"
<i>hed man</i>	"the head of a man"
<i>hedman</i>	"headman"

adjective + noun

<i>wanfala tok</i>	"one language"
<i>wantok</i>	"person from the same village (literally having the same language)"
<i>waitfala man</i>	"light colored man"
<i>waitman</i>	"European"

Although most of its vocabulary is of European origin, the grammar of Bislama, as spoken in Santo and on Malo, is mostly Melanesian, often taking on the characteristics of the speaker's native language. Geographical variation of spoken Pidgin exists, but as literacy increases and as communications networks expand, the differences will undoubtedly decrease. There are many factors standardizing Pidgin within the New Hebrides. For example, the spelling of the language is becoming standardized. The *English-Bislama Dictionary* by the Rev. William Camden has

set forward an orthography based on phonemics, following the phonetic guidelines set down by the IPA (The International Phonetic Association). In addition to the dictionary, the Four Gospels of the New Testament have been translated into Bislama under the auspices of Rev. Camden. The monthly *British Newsletter* invariably contains articles written in Bislama which are consistent with Rev. Camden's orthography.

A typical example of a passage written in standardized Bislama is from the Pidgin Bible, *Gud Nyus Bilong Jisas Krai* ("Good News Belong Jesus Christ"):

Ale, sipos wan man i talem long yufala, i se "Yufala i luk, emia Mesaya ia," no i se "Yufala i lik, em i stap long ples ia longwe," bambae yufala i mas no biliv long tok ia.

Matyu 24:23

Literally transcribed in English the Bislama reads:

Aller, suppose one man he tells to you-fella, he say "You-fella he look, Messiah here," no he say "You-fella he look, then he stop along place here longway," by-and-by you-fella he must no believe along talk here.

Compare this to the same passage in the New Testament (Matthew 24:23):

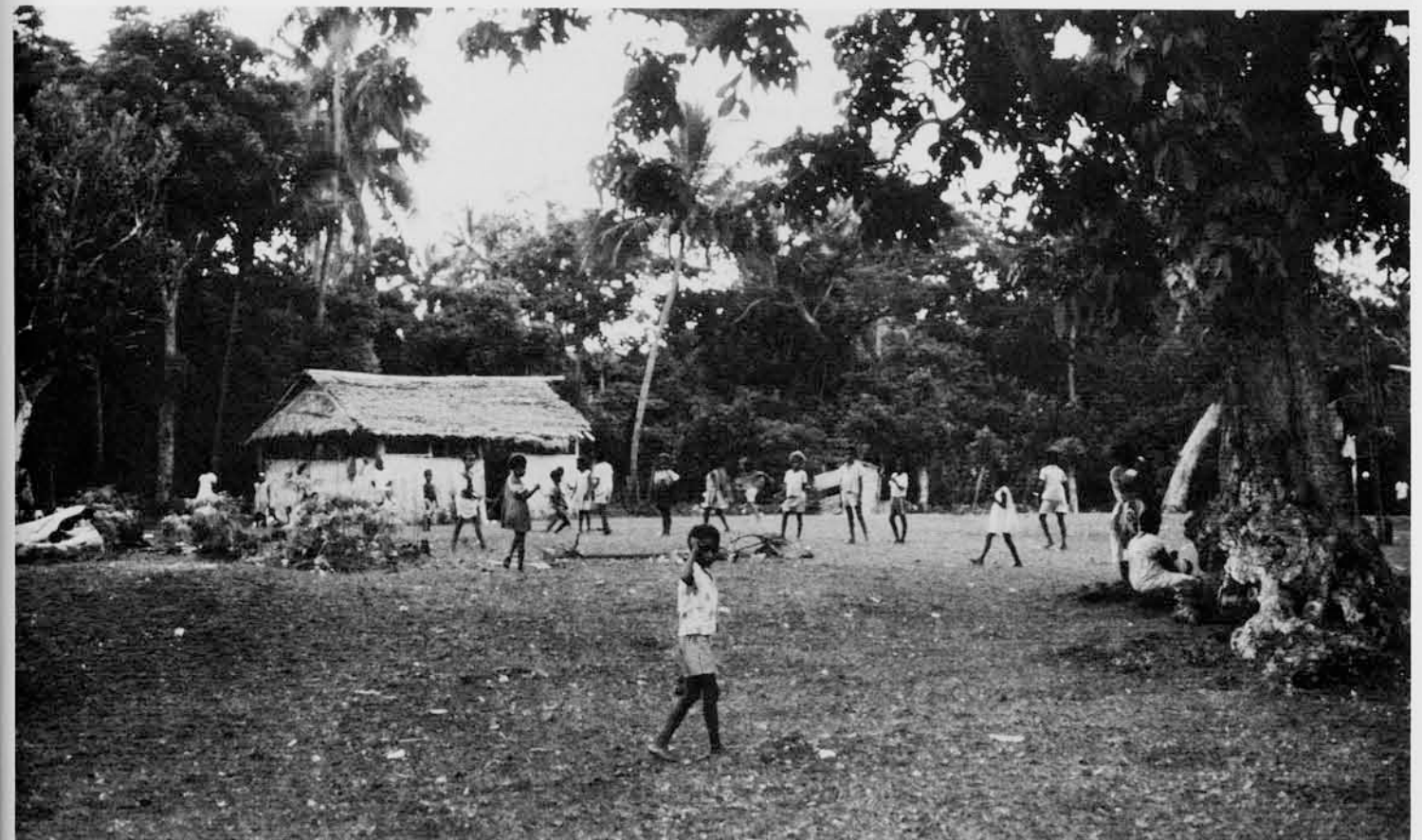
Then if any man shall say unto you, Lo, here is Christ, or there; believe it not.

In addition to the standardization of spelling, the spoken forms of Bislama are becoming regularized due to the influence of radio broadcasts. Throughout the New Hebrides, natives have acquired and are listening to short-wave radios. A day in the remote Small Nambas village of Boutin is not complete without listening to the noon broadcast of Radio Vila, in English, French, and Pidgin.

Bislama is of interest to the anthropologist as well as to the linguist. The sociolinguistic aspects of Pidgin (*i.e.*, how and when the language is spoken) are of importance because within the New Hebrides a form of either pidgin or creole language is spoken on every island. The pidgins are the most prevalent, but creolization has occurred in the southern part of the archipelago, especially around the city of Port Vila on Efate.

The natives of the northern islands of Espiritu Santo, Malo, and Malekula speak a pidgin. In the town of Santo, as one walks up and down the main road, one hears people conversing in French, English, Chinese, and Bislama, as well as the South Santo and Malo dialects. However, as soon as a shop is entered, the *lingua franca* between merchant and customer is usually Bislama.

On Malo, the situation is slightly different. Tamambo, the local language, is the most commonly spoken, but most people also know Bislama. Children learn either English or

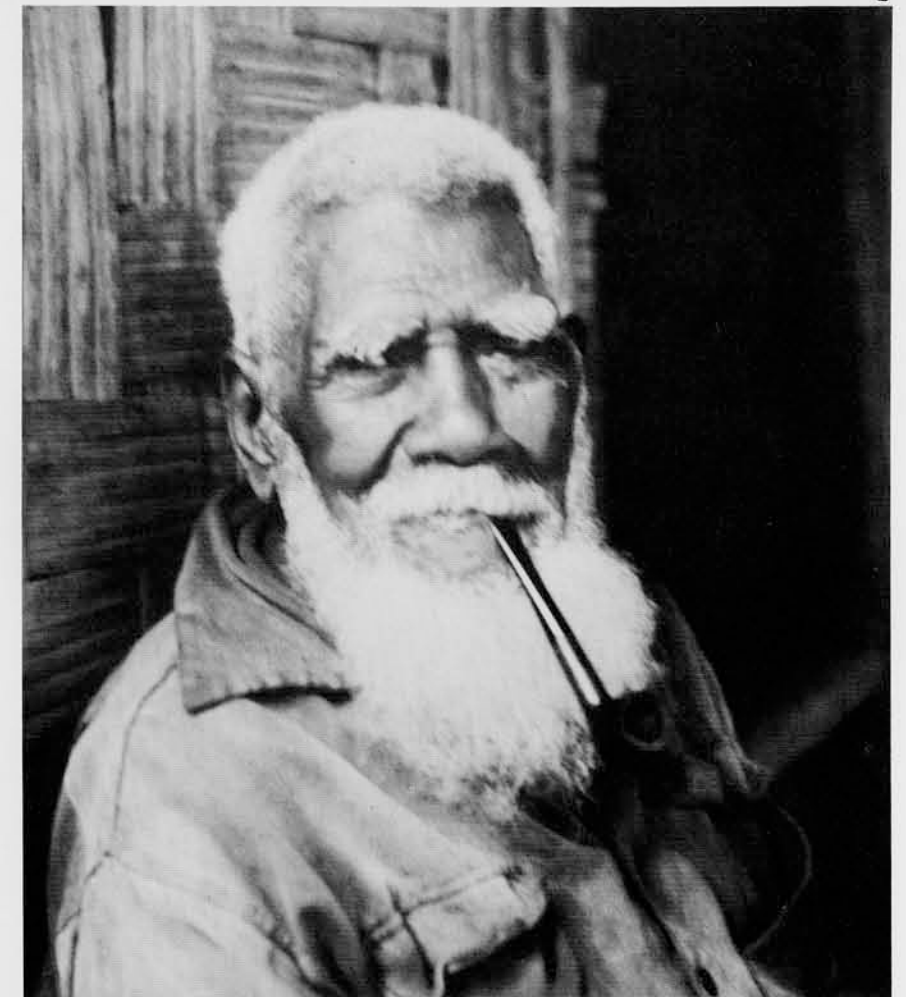


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1

First grade room at the British School, Avunatari village, Malo. Children learn English in the classroom but speak Pidgin outside because they come from several islands and have no common language.

2
Ange, who speaks many languages, was born in 1874, only two years after the first missionary arrived at Avunatari village.



2



With my good friend,
Vomble.

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French in school, but also have a command of Pidgin. As men have more occasions to visit Santo where they deal with people who do not speak their language, they tend to be more proficient in Pidgin than women.

Malekula is similar to Santo and Malo in language usage. In the administrative headquarters of Norsup and Lakatoro, Pidgin is read and spoken by most of the inhabitants. Proficiency decreases in the more isolated bush villages.

The situation on Efate is very different. Port Vila is the administrative capital and the international port of entry. Of all the islands, moreover, Efate has been subject to the most concentrated European influence. It is here that Bislama has become creolized. As in many other areas of the world where pidgins have become primary languages, there is a social correlate that accompanies creolization. Speaking Bislama is considered to be a mark of inferior social status. When addressing a native in Vila, one avoids using Bislama. Many natives there have learned either French or English, which they use with Europeans, and communicate in Bislama Creole only among themselves.

Bislama is clearly a language in its own right and its uses in the New Hebrides should be studied further. Its importance is great, for its advantages are many. It serves as a *lingua franca* in a region where more than a hundred different languages are spoken.

Until recently the study of pidgin and creole languages was neglected. They were considered to be, at best, marginal languages and, at worst, a "baby-talk" version of a European language. It was not until 1933 that the first attempt at formal classification of pidgins appeared. It now seems that the study of pidgins and creoles is valuable for linguistic theory. Some of the great literary languages of today probably had just such humble beginnings. 21