



Vunapope Housekeeping School 1932.

# How emigration is killing a language



Vunapope Trade School students and teacher in 1932.



**LANGUAGE TOKTOK**  
A monthly discussion  
about language in PNG  
and beyond

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**W**HICH Papua New Guinea language is becoming extinct through emigration?

IN this monthly discussion we answer questions about language in PNG and beyond. This month we are looking at Unserdeutsch, a language that is nearly extinct in this country because of emigration to Australia.

My own engagement with Unserdeutsch started when I was studying at the University of Queensland and teaching German at a high school on the Gold Coast. A new student, Yvonne Lündin, came to enrol and wanted to take German. She was a Melanesian girl with a Swedish name and spoke German with a perfect accent, but really strange grammar. I asked her where she had studied German and she answered that she had never studied it. She just spoke it at home in Rabaul. That's when I started to learn just how much PNG can be the land of the unexpected.

It turns out that she was part of the Vunapope mixed-race community and that the language she spoke was a creolised German as different from standard German as Tok Pisin is from

standard English. No one had documented the language so this became both the topic of my masters thesis and my own personal introduction into the complex web of language diversity in Melanesia. The roots of this community and its language go back to the late 1800s when missionaries at the newly established Vunapope Catholic Mission near what was then called Herbertshöhe (today Kokopo) set up a boarding school for mixed-race children whom they collected from villages and plantations in the area.

The mothers came from all over the Bismarck Archipelago and the fathers from Germany, other European countries, China, Japan, Guam, and what is today eastern Indonesia. At the school everything was in German, a language the children almost never spoke when they arrived. Older speakers told me that their parents said the children were strictly prohibited from speaking Tok Pisin, but they got around this rule by speaking in Tok Pisin sentences with German words, making a kind of pidgin German that quickly became the symbol and in-group language of their group. This is reflected in the name of the language; *unser* means "our" and *deutsch* means "German", so *Unserdeutsch* means "our German" (not "your European German").

As the children grew up, the nuns encouraged them to marry each other and work on plantations or at businesses owned by the church. In most families Unserdeutsch was the language used at home, so that within one generation PNG had yet another *tok ples*. When a pidgin language becomes the native language of a group of children, we call it a creole language. This is why Unserdeutsch is sometimes referred to as Rabaul Creole German. The language continued to be spoken even after the Australians invaded and took over from the Germans after World War I.

This small community was severely disrupted during the Japanese occupation in World War II, especially those with Chinese ancestry. For many, Unserdeutsch was helpful as a secret language that Japanese could not understand. After the Australians returned at the end of World War II, the colonial government had a strong desire to Australianise the territory more strongly. The Vunapope schools were



Professor Peter Maltz interviewing Unserdeutsch speakers in Sydney.

no longer allowed to teach German and teachers went to mixed-race families telling parents to use only English with their children. In the 1960s, mixed-race families were allowed to take Australian citizenship. This classified them as expatriates in the country where they were born, but it gave them financial assistance to send their children to boarding schools in Australia. These children came back to see their parents only once a year at Christmas. Because of all this and because of their immersion in Australian society, few of the children kept up an active use of their parents' language, and many stayed on in Australia after finishing school.

At PNG Independence most families kept their Australian citizenship and eventually moved to Australia. Today less than 10 elderly Unserdeutsch speakers still live in PNG, but more than 100 people still live in Australia who speak Unserdeutsch. But because they do not speak the language with their children and grandchildren, there are no speakers under 50 years of age today, and most are in their seventies or older.

Unserdeutsch is therefore a language that is practically extinct in PNG because of emigration and in a few decades it will be extinct in Australia because it is no longer spoken at home.

Because of this, the University of Augsburg in Germany is currently undertaking a large documentation effort under the leadership of Professor Péter Maltz. According to him, the language is unique because it is the only case we know of anywhere in the world where a creole language developed that is based on German.

It is also one of the few creole languages that we know of that developed among young children in a boarding school environment. And as he told an assembly of school children at Vunapope School, it is one of the few cases where we can pinpoint exactly where and exactly when a language started. Unserdeutsch is yet another reminder that linguistically, PNG is very much the land of the unexpected.

■ Professor Volker is a linguist living in New Ireland and an Adjunct Professor in The Cairns Institute, James Cook University, Queensland. He welcomes your language questions for this monthly discussion at [craig.volker@jcu.edu.au](mailto:craig.volker@jcu.edu.au). Or continue the discussion on the Facebook Language Toktok page.

You can get more information about Unserdeutsch and listen to recordings in it at: [www.philhist.uni-augsburg.de/en/lehrstuehle/germanistik/sprachwissenschaft/rabaul\\_creole\\_german/](http://www.philhist.uni-augsburg.de/en/lehrstuehle/germanistik/sprachwissenschaft/rabaul_creole_german/)



Above: Poster at the Ralum Club in Kokopo founded by Unserdeutsch speakers.

Below: Unserdeutsch gathering in Brisbane with the German New Guinea flag in 2016.

