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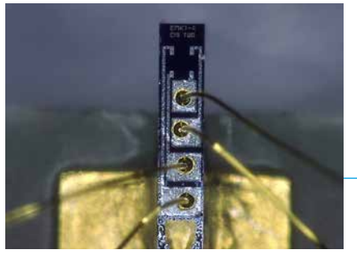
*Cover: AG Krämer*

***Arabidopsis halleri* in the Giebelwald in the Siegerland region. Understanding the plant's ability to store high amounts of heavy metals leads researchers to modern-day applications.**

Péter Maitz and other authors*

# Rediscovering a German Creole

„Unserdeutsch“, a creole spoken in a former German South Pacific colony, and what is now Papua New Guinea, is being extensively documented and studied by linguists for the first time. There is no time to lose, because after a chequered history the world's only German-based creole – long ignored – is facing extinction.

Learning about the language was a matter of pure chance. In the late 1970s, a young high school teacher, Craig Volker, was teaching German on the Queensland Gold Coast, in Australia. In his class, there was a Melanesian student whose family had come from Papua New Guinea. She seemed to speak a strange-sounding kind of German. His curiosity was piqued and steadily grew. He travelled to Rabaul in the Bismarck Archipelago to discover the language spoken by its people.

His interviews there formed the basis for his master's dissertation, as yet unpublished. They described for the first time the main features of the newly discovered language. But for thirty years, Germanists showed virtually no interest in this linguistic heritage of the German colonial era.

Briefly, its history is as follows. Unserdeutsch, also known as Rabaul Creole German, developed around a Catholic mission at Vunapope, today part of the town of Kokopo, near Rabaul in the north-eastern part of New Britain. This island, which in the German era between 1884 and 1914 was known as Neupommern (“New Pomerania”), is the largest in the Bismarck


*Unserdeutsch speakers in Brisbane, Australia, 2016.*

Illustration: Péter Maitz

Archipelago and is now part of Papua New Guinea. The Missionaries of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Vunapope came from Hiltrup, near Münster in Westphalia.

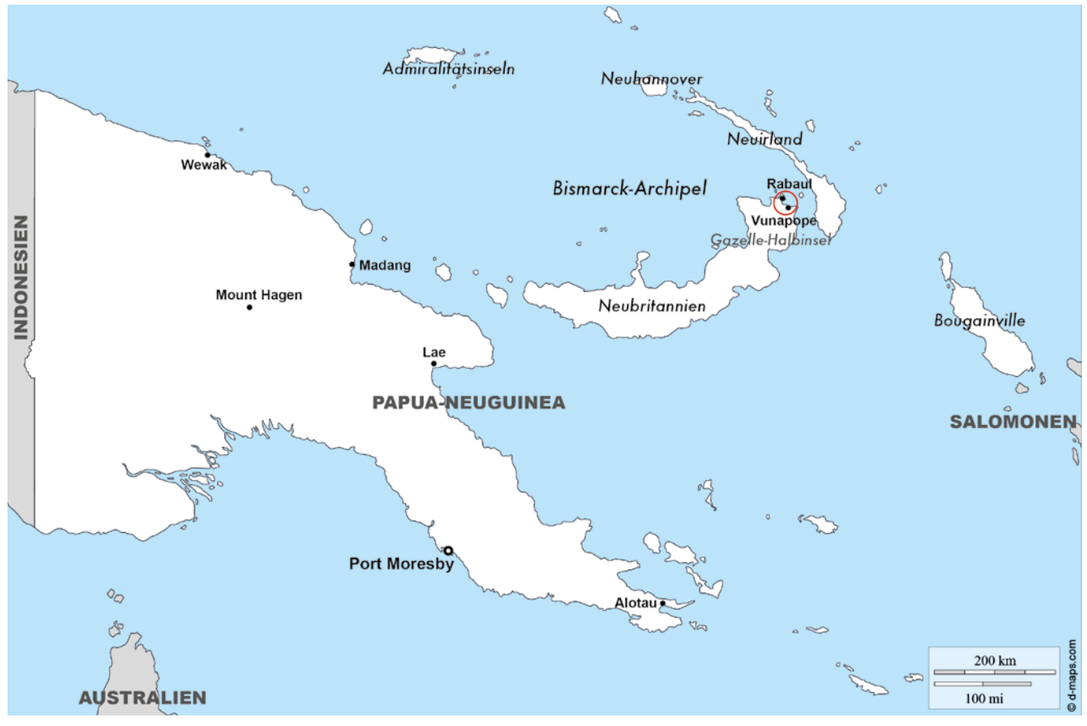
The missionaries' efforts to Christianise the local population were largely unsuccessful and at times, bloody violence even broke out. Louis Couppé, the French bishop at Vunapope from 1889, therefore adopted a new strategy: to form a new young "Christian core" at the mission in order to, as one historian puts it, "let Christianity work through the old society like yeast in dough".

Mixed-race children born to European colonists or Asian immigrants and indigenous women were gathered at the mission. They were brought to the orphanage, founded in 1897, at as young an age as possible. At a later age, as Missionary Arnold Janssen (1869–1938) lamented, in a manner typical of the racist attitudes of the colonial era, "they bring with them evil habits which are difficult to eradicate; moreover, the learning of a European language becomes more arduous the older they are". In the orphanage and the boarding school that was associated with it, children received German lessons and German was also the everyday language of the mission.

The linguistic diversity of Papua New Guinea is globally unique: no less than 840 different languages are spoken here by a population of just 7.6 million people. As a result, the children brought to Vunapope had different linguistic backgrounds. The only thing they had in common was Tok Pisin, an English-based pidgin, which they spoke with differing degrees of fluency according to age. However, the children were forbidden to use the lingua franca of Tok Pisin, which was denigrated at the mission as the language of the indigenous *Kanaken*. The only option that remained was German.

The young people developed their own language which had the advantage of expressing their separate identity while distancing them from the language of the missionaries. This language was Unserdeutsch ("Our German"). As well as its communicative function, it fulfilled an important social function in the community, marking and stabilising group awareness in the uprooted, small and socially isolated mixed-race community. Because Unserdeutsch functioned from the beginning as an "in-group" language within an isolated community with a dense social network, it evolved quickly.

*Map of Papua New Guinea. Unserdeutsch developed at the Catholic mission in Vunapope on the Gazelle Peninsula.*




Graphic: AG Maitz/Template: d-maps.com)



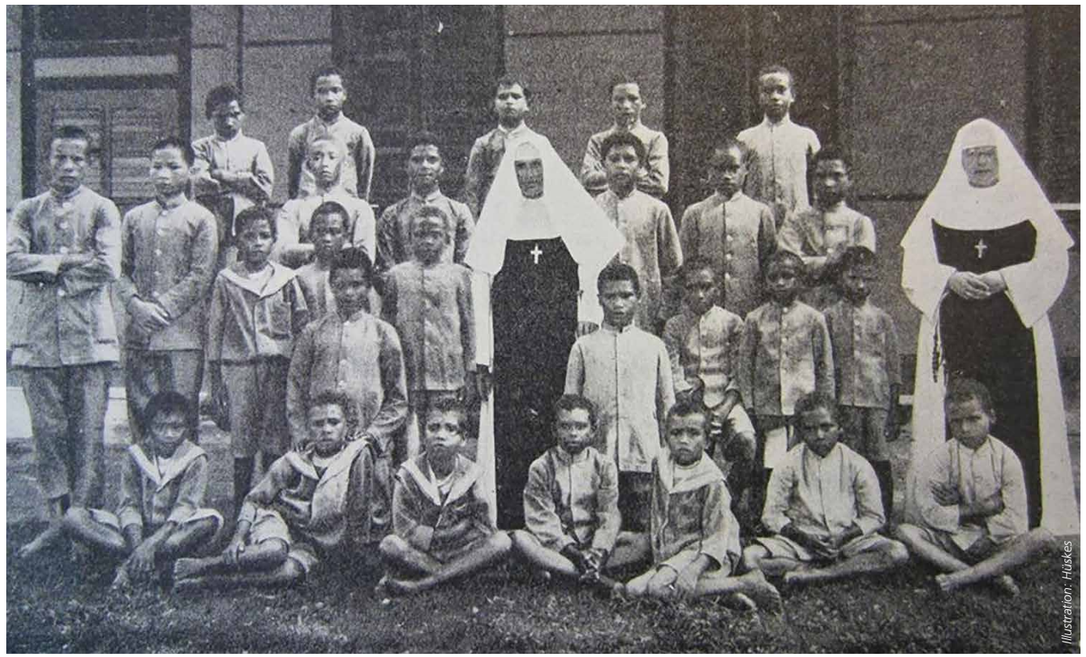


Illustration: Huskes

*A historical document from 1932: children at the Vunapope boys' school in East New Britain.*

What are the characteristics of Unserdeutsch? While the vocabulary is identical to the Standard German of the time, with traces of Tok Pisin (e.g. *kakaruk*, "chicken") and English (e.g. *schtor*, "shop"), the pronunciation and grammar show clear influences from Tok Pisin. Vowels are usually short (hence Standard German *geht* is pronounced *gätt*) and fully articulated even in unstressed syllables (thus *kochen* becomes *kohän*). Some sounds are replaced, for example ü and ö (*Frühstück/frihstick*, *größere/gresere*) and the complex sounds *pf* and *ts* are simplified (*Pflanzung/flansung*). Consonant clusters are normally simplified and often omitted completely at the end of a word, as in *am aben*, "am Abend" or *i nu sa*, "ich sag nur".

In terms of grammar, nouns are not declined. There is only one definite article, which always remains the same: *de knabe* (der Knabe, boy), *de mädhen* (das Mädchen, girl), *de kokonuss* (die Kokosnuss, coconut). The plural of nouns is formed by preceding the word with *alle*: *s(ch)westä*, "(one) missionary sister" versus *alle s(ch)westä*, "missionary sisters". This corresponds to the pattern of plural formation in Tok Pisin. Both languages have few inflected endings. Unserdeutsch typically makes no formal distinction between main and subordinate clauses, so unlike Standard German, even a subordinate clause follows the order subject–predicate–object. This also applies in imperative sentences (*du komm sitzen in mein office!* – "Come and sit in my office") and in questions, where the interrogative can occur at the end of a sentence: *i hat gemahen was?* – "What did I do?". This phenomenon is also observed in Tok Pisin.

So how was Unserdeutsch able to survive until the present day? On completion of their schooling, the young people stayed on at the mission and learned a trade or domestic skills. Many of them spent

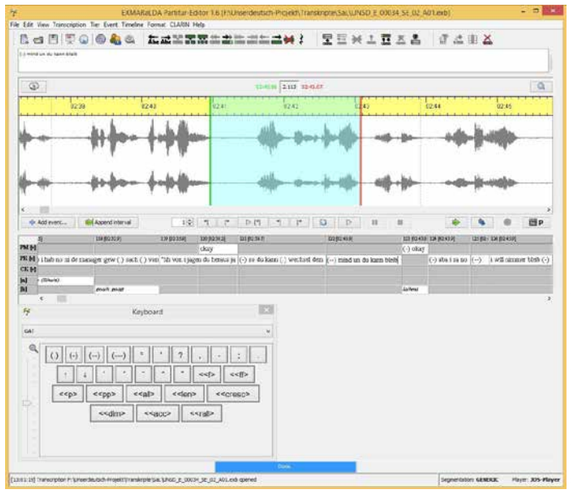


Illustration & Screenshot: Péter Maitz

*Left: Recording speech and video with an Unserdeutsch speaker in Brisbane, 2016. Right: The recordings are transcribed with the help of the EXMARaLDA software. Below: A cloud of Unserdeutsch words and phrases.*

the rest of their lives working in the mission's workshops or on its plantations. The missionaries also arranged marriages between them. As a result, Unserdeutsch became a shared language in the home and within families, and children of the first generation of speakers grew up with Unserdeutsch as their mother tongue. The language thus became a creole, a grammatically simplified contact language that develops a native-language function.

The next generation was also educated at the mission school. After the start of the Australian occupation of New Britain in 1914, the influence of English increased, but at the mission German remained the dominant language because the German missionaries were not obliged to leave. It was only following the Japanese invasion in 1942 that German was consistently removed from school life. From this point on, Unserdeutsch was only spoken at home, between friends and at work.

The independence of Papua New Guinea in 1975 marked the next major change for its speakers. Following the introduction of the government's localisation policy, which promoted indigenous workers and businesses, the mixed-race community of Vunapope feared denigration and discrimination. Even at the mission, they lost their jobs. Many emigrated to Australia in the hope of finding a better life for themselves and their children. Today, most of the remaining 100 or so speakers are scattered throughout the states of Queensland and New South Wales in eastern Australia. This was what brought Craig Volker into contact with Unserdeutsch and its unique linguistic features.

The surviving speakers of Unserdeutsch are nearly all over 65 years old. They have not passed the language on to their children. Unless it undergoes a revival, Unserdeutsch will die out in 20 or 30 years' time.

In the project "Unserdeutsch – Documentation of an endangered creole language in Papua New Guinea", linguists are building up a corpus of the language. Thanks to multiple field research trips between 2014 and 2017, over 50 hours of recordings have been made of Unserdeutsch speakers. The purpose of the project is the systematic documentation of the language. Fieldwork has revealed that time is of the essence: two of the speakers interviewed in the early stages have already passed away. The language data collected at various locations in Australia and Papua New Guinea is now being transcribed and analysed. Later, it will be made accessible to international researchers through the Database of Spoken German at the Institute for the German Language (IDS) in Mannheim.

The database complies with current international standards. In addition to sound recordings and transcripts, it includes biographical metadata on the speakers. It is designed to allow language data to be searched efficiently for grammatical phenomena. A follow-up project will involve the detailed linguistic description, primarily in the form of a grammar, of what is possibly the last Germanic language to be described.


Graphic: Herling

In parallel to the corpus work, research is being carried out to reconstruct the history of the development of Unserdeutsch. Here, researchers are presented with the rare situation of being able to trace the emergence and evolution of a language through to its death. What is possibly also unique is the fact that, thanks to the mission school archive, the names of all the individuals who once created this language are known.

The fact that virtually all of the surviving speakers have been located during the course of the project is partly thanks to Facebook. In a closed group set up by the project team, the Unserdeutsch speakers, separated by long distances since their exodus from the island, have joined together in a large network. The group shares news relating to the project and the language community. The project also has its own website which, in addition to information about the project, offers sample recordings to listen to.

The project team perceives a positive change in the speakers' attitude towards their mother tongue and heritage, partly due to the interest and attention of outsiders. Before the researchers arrived, they saw their language through the lens of the widespread, standard colonial-era ideology. They most often described their own language as bad German, incorrect German, or broken German. Now they are developing an awareness of being speakers of a unique language and thus "culture-bearers". This is associated with a desire to use the language more, and with greater awareness.

The old community spirit that permeates the history of Unserdeutsch speakers also appears to be regaining its strength. The project has attracted much international media coverage, being reported in newspapers, on the radio and on television. This also gives grounds for optimism as to the perception, documentation and perhaps even revival of the world's only German-based creole.

Illustration: Zentrale Fotostelle U Augsburg

**Prof. Dr. Péter Maitz**
is the project leader and Professor of German Linguistics at Augsburg University.

*Other authors:

**Prof. Dr. Werner König**
is a retired academic director at Augsburg University.

**Prof. Dr. Craig Alan Volker**
is advisor to the project and Adjunct Professor, The Cairns Institute, James Cook University.

**Siegwalt Lindenfelser, M.A.**
is a doctoral researcher on the DFG project.

**Angelika Götze, M.A.**
was a research assistant on the DFG project.

**Salome Lipfert, B.A.**
and
**Katharina Neumeier, B.A.**
are research assistants on the DFG project.

Contact: Universität Augsburg, Lehrstuhl für Deutsche Sprachwissenschaft unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des Neuhochdeutschen, Universitätsstraße 10, 86159 Augsburg, Germany

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