

TWENTY-SIX

The German Language in the South Seas *Language Contact and the Influence of Language Politics and Language Attitudes*



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Between 1884 and 1900, Germany established protectorates in large areas of the South Pacific. The authorities assumed that the linguistically extremely diverse areas would pose communication problems. Thus the question arose whether German should become the lingua franca in the South Pacific. After a controversial discussion, the German government implemented language policies to promote the German language in the colonies. This chapter shows why, on the one hand, German language policies were doomed to failure and why, on the other, they unintentionally supported other linguistic developments such as the introduction of borrowing from German into indigenous languages, the development of German settler varieties, and the spread of pidgin languages.

Historical Background of German Language Contact in Oceania

GERMAN SPEAKERS STARTED TO VISIT the South Pacific in the late eighteenth century. Explorers such as Georg Forster on James Cook's ship *Resolution*, Adelbert von Chamisso on Otto von Kotzebue's *Rurik*, or Ferdinand Hochstetter on the Austrian ship *Novara* raised awareness about the Pacific in Europe. They were followed by companies that were primarily trading in copra, but also in bêche-de-mer, sandalwood, coffee, and other plantation products. Companies such as Hershheim, Hennings, and, above all, Godeffroy & Son and its successor, the Deutsche Handels- und Plantagenesellschaft, dominated trade in the South Pacific in the

1860s and '70s and prepared the way for the annexation of large parts of the South Pacific by the German Empire. In 1884, the northeastern part of New Guinea, the Bismarck Archipelago, and the North Solomon Islands became a German protectorate, followed by the Marshall Islands in 1885, Nauru in 1888, the Carolines and the northern Marianas in 1889, and Western Samoa in 1900. All the islands mentioned above—except for Samoa, which became the province German Samoa—formed the province German New Guinea. The establishment of a German administration was accompanied by increasing efforts by German missions, which supplemented or replaced older missions from Spain, the United States, Australia, Great Britain, and France.

In the early twentieth century, the province of German New Guinea had an indigenous population of about 600,000. In German Samoa, 35,000 indigenous inhabitants were counted. The German population, however, was small. Toward the end of German rule in the South Pacific, about one thousand Germans lived in German New Guinea and three hundred and fifty in German Samoa.¹

The South Pacific, with its three major geographical areas of Micronesia, Polynesia, and Melanesia, is known for its linguistic diversity. There are more than one thousand languages of two language families—the Austronesian (spoken in most parts of the South Pacific) and Papuan languages (New Guinea and circumjacent islands). In the German provinces of the Pacific, between four hundred and five hundred different languages were spoken. English-based pidgins (i.e., structurally simplified languages, which develop in contact situations among people who do not share a language for communication) started to spread in the South Seas in the nineteenth century. They spread unevenly in the German provinces with a stronghold in parts of Melanesia.

This linguistic situation in which German traders, settlers, missionaries, and civil servants lived was the starting point for discussions among German colonialists about the role of the German language in the South Sea provinces. Should it become the *lingua franca*?

German Colonialist Language Policies

Beginning in the mid 1880s, colonial circles in Germany discussed which language might best meet the administrative, economical, and social needs of the German colonies. Among the options for a *lingua franca* were German, English, Pidgin English, and several indigenous languages.

Varieties of Pidgin English—despite their popularity among the indigenous and the European populations—did not have many supporters in politically influential circles. The bad reputation of pidgin is reflected in

numerous comments such as the following: "a rotten English, mixed with scraps from other languages"² and "the locals twist and muddle the words in flowery compositions into the few concepts their dim-witted mind uses."³ It was considered "gibberish" with a "cannibalistic primitivity of expression"⁴ that the Germans "learn in a ghastly shape from their own coloured workers."⁵ Thus, it was concluded that Pidgin English "should be suppressed the sooner the better" since "it could neither serve as a regular *lingua franca* nor as a carrier of culture."⁶

Indigenous languages as *lingua francas* were favoured by missionaries. According to mission policies, the native language of the students was supposed to be used in elementary school and, above all, in religious instruction. Since in some regions the density of languages was so high that students of different mother tongues shared a classroom, the missions either used a pidgin or started to develop certain indigenous languages into *lingua francas*, e.g., Kâte and Yabem on New Guinea and Tolai in the Bismarck Archipelago.⁷ The use of these languages as *lingua francas* was restricted to the context of schooling and missionary work. Plans to expand them into other domains of colonial life were opposed by the German settlers who were not willing to learn indigenous languages: "You cannot ask of a farmer and his workers, who earn their bread in the sweat of their brows, to go to school after a day's labour."⁸ Moreover, most of the indigenous languages were considered difficult to learn. Consequently, what was reported from the Marshall Islands held true for most German settlers: "There is hardly a white man on the Marshall Islands who—even though a resident for years—has mastered the language."⁹

This reluctance to learn indigenous languages was often combined with a negative attitude toward them. Since the "simple languages of these peoples" were thought to have only a certain value for science, "we, as the higher developed people, are obliged to document them, before we destroy them."¹⁰ In the vein of social Darwinism, indigenous languages were considered doomed to extinction. Those languages that "are too weak in the struggle for life may disappear; there are no immortal literary works that would die with them."¹¹

Thus colonialists remained trapped in the contradiction that indigenous languages were considered too complicated to learn and too simple to transport the cultural values of the colonizing nation. It was not only for linguistic reasons that the use of indigenous languages was not promoted by the German government. It was also feared that the spread of indigenous languages might contribute to the development of national, anti-colonial sentiments among the indigenous population.

Since the German Empire was committed to the unity of state, nation, and language, one might assume that colonialists in Germany may have

unanimously opted for German as a lingua franca. However, the language policies developed and adopted in Germany were not transferred automatically to the colonies. In the colonies, the teaching of German was not always welcomed by settlers, who were afraid that they would not have the language to themselves and that the natives might eavesdrop and spread about what they had heard.¹² Moreover, some politicians were afraid that the knowledge of spoken and written German might help indigenous people to interfere in German politics and to promote national aspirations. The German language was also viewed as a symbol of social distance between the German and indigenous populations. Thus it was recommended that the Germans learn the indigenous languages so "that by keeping the natives away from our language community we draw the line between us and them."¹³ Expressing feelings of western supremacy, the Germans also pondered "whether our beautiful German mother tongue would improve by forcing it onto other people who will never learn to understand it in its entire beauty and will at best distort it."¹⁴

However, politicians in Germany favoured the use of German as a lingua franca. Nationalistic sentiments led to demands such as the following: "In German colonies—the German language!" "English advances into British protectorates, French expands into the French ones—partially without human intervention, partially assisted by the governments. We cannot be left behind."¹⁵ Apart from political arguments, there was also economic reasoning. Making German the leading language in the South Pacific could be advantageous for international trade. Again, ideas of western supremacy slipped into the discussion: "It is only by learning a world language that the native will become a *'Kulturmenschen'*."¹⁶

Political Measures Taken

In the end, the discussions in Berlin were dominated by arguments that placed the language question within the context of imperialistic rivalry. This also meant that activities by influential circles such as the German Colonial Society were directed against English and Pidgin English but not against the indigenous languages. These were granted their own status to serve a local purpose and their scientific study was supported financially. In general, politicians in Berlin were not really aware of the linguistic situation in the South Pacific colonies, and language policies were based less on the wish to comply with the communicative needs of the inhabitants of the colonies than on a fundamental expansionist, imperialistic attitude.

The political measures had the goal of establishing German as a lingua franca. However, these were compartmentalized activities without an overarching concept. The Colonial Department of the German Foreign

Office issued a decree that intervened in the school curricula in the colonies. It demanded that if a language other than the indigenous languages was taught, German had to be included into the curriculum.¹⁷ As a consequence, even the non-German missions were not allowed to teach English as the first foreign language. In Samoa, the governor amended the decree by prohibiting English as the language of instruction in favour of Samoan.¹⁸ One method to promote the German language was the establishment of government schools in which German gained a prominent role as a subject and as a language of instruction. However, only four government schools were founded in the two provinces, while 756 schools were run by the missions. In the two German provinces, 98 percent of the students were educated in mission schools,¹⁹ which were subsidized only to a small extent for teaching German. Furthermore, the budgets of the provinces of German Samoa and German New Guinea contained a fund of 5,000 and 12,000 German marks, respectively, for promoting the German language—the *Fonds zur Verbreitung der deutschen Sprache*. Financial rewards went to indigenous students for excellent knowledge of German, to indigenous civil servants for improvement of their German, and to German clubs in the colonies for efforts in language cultivation.

The Language Use of Traders and Settlers

Despite all these efforts, the reality was that the language of the multinational society of traders and settlers in the South Pacific was English. Pidgin English was widely spoken as well, in particular between European and indigenous inhabitants. The attempt to establish German in these domains failed because there was no communicative deficit that pro-German language policies could have addressed. Contemporary reports document how deeply English and Pidgin English were rooted in the South Pacific communities. A missionary reports from the Marshall Islands: "Though the Germans used their own language in conversing among themselves, the natives were all addressed in English. One of the members of the firm [the *Deutsche Handels- und Plantagengesellschaft*], in discussing the desirability of the natives learning German, said to me, 'There is no need of teaching them German, they all know English.'"²⁰ A letter referring to the Caroline Islands attests that the "missionaries are doing their best to satisfy the government according to our instructions. German is already taught in some of the schools; the missionaries are studying German so that they can do this better. (The Germans on Ponape use English as a means of intercourse and do not seem to care for German.)"²¹

German and the Administration

Within the administrative domain, there was an attempt to strengthen the role of German by using it for special purposes.²² Decrees were usually published in German and partly in local languages; the courts used German in their proceedings, using interpreters if necessary; indigenous civil servants were expected to learn German, and special language classes were established for the police force. Nevertheless, the police force—usually composed of men from different linguistic backgrounds—preferred pidgin when talking among themselves. German became only the language of commands. It is frequently reported that German civil servants even used pidgin when talking to the locals. A missionary from Nauru remarked on the efforts of the German government to eradicate Pidgin English by pointing out that this “is of course not an easy matter as not only English-speaking whites use it in their daily dealings with the natives, but the writer has more than once heard German Government Officials converse with their protégées in this peculiar dialect.”²³ As a consequence, the use of German in the centres of German administration (Apia on Samoa, Ponape in the Carolines, Rabaul in the Bismarck Archipelago) was mostly restricted to the immediate surroundings of the German officials, that is, to their employees and domestic servants.

German In School and Missions

Due to the language decree of 1898, most mission schools taught German. However, only about 35 percent of the schools in the two provinces were run by German missions. Even in those, 60 percent of the classes were taught by indigenous teachers. Thus only about 15 percent of school lessons were given by native speakers of German. For the non-German missionaries, the obligation to teach German posed serious problems. A missionary from the Boston mission points out in a letter to the mission secretary that the appointment of a German is necessary, because “I cannot teach it at all well, however, as I pronounce very badly and cannot read even the easiest little story without my German English dictionary. I am giving the girls easy stories to translate. Mr. Gray and I are trying to do a little studying together at least twice a week but it is hard to find time for it.”²⁴ Thus it is no wonder that the results of these German lessons did not go beyond learning a few German songs, as a missionary from Kosrae claims not without irony:

We have made use of our English readers and Bible stories. After reading the English, the scholars have been required to translate what they have read into their own language. An effort has been made to use the German Readers in the same way but, as you realize, to become a teacher of German means that one must be familiar with the German language.

During the past few years, the girls have been taught to sing equally as many German hymns and songs as they have English.²⁵

This impression is corroborated by a visitor on Kosrae who was impressed by some beautifully performed German songs, "the contents of which probably remain unintelligible to the singers."²⁶

The situation was different in the government schools and some of the German mission schools. In particular, in cases where German was not only subject but also language of instruction, the German language gained a certain functional value in the vicinity of the schools. The German Capuchins report from the Palau Islands that the students "have advanced so far in German that they can serve as interpreters for government officials, travellers, etc."²⁷ The success of German in educational contexts depended also on the language attitudes displayed by the students. From Kosraean schools, run by the Boston mission, it is reported that "English is very much desired by the scholars ... German is tolerated by the scholars, for the sake of the English, but there is no enthusiasm over it."²⁸ In Palau, the German Capuchins claimed that students showed a positive attitude toward German: "The students show the most interest in German and geography. Every German word gets written into an exercise book right away."²⁹

In summary, domains in which German functioned as a second language were limited to the households of the German settlers, traders, and planters, to the lower levels of administration, and to the vicinity of the missions. Beyond that, German never became a *lingua franca* in the South Seas. This was due to the qualitatively inadequate language instruction, the low number of native speakers of German, and, therefore, the rare opportunity to practise German, the widespread use of pidgins, and the language choice of many Germans who preferred English or pidgins.

German Loanwords

Considering the low functionality of German in Oceania, the influence of German on the indigenous languages could only be minimal. Yet the influence is still noticeable today. Many languages contain at least a handful of German loanwords. An investigation of sixteen of the twenty-five languages spoken in Micronesia³⁰ resulted in the detection of German loanwords in all but two of them (Kosraean and Chamorro). Table 1 contains some examples.

There are remarkable differences concerning the number of loanwords. While Kosraean in eastern Micronesia does not have any German loanwords, at least thirty-five were found in Palauan on the western fringe of Micronesia. The differences are due to the following conditions, which were prevalent, for example, in Palau but not in Kosrae: a comparatively

TABLE 1 Examples of German loanwords in indigenous languages in Oceania

Language	Lexical Item	Source	Translation
Carolinian	<i>fayerabwaw</i>	<i>Feuerbaum</i>	flame tree, poinciana
Chuukese	<i>kkumi</i>	<i>Gummi</i>	rubber
Kapingamarangi	<i>situnte</i>	<i>Stunde</i>	hour
Marshallese	<i>kapel</i>	<i>Gabel</i>	fork
Mokilese	<i>Dois</i>	<i>deutsch</i>	Germany
Nauruan	<i>esel</i>	<i>Esel</i>	donkey
Nukuoro	<i>situnte</i>	<i>Stunde</i>	hour
Palauan	<i>chausbengdik</i>	<i>auswendig</i>	know thoroughly, memorize
Ponapean	<i>sirangk</i>	<i>Schrank</i>	cabinet, particularly one in which food is stored
Puluwatese	<i>siike</i>	<i>Ziege</i>	goat
Sonsorol	<i>dioka</i>	<i>Tapioka</i>	tapioca
Tobi	<i>dioka</i>	<i>Tapioka</i>	tapioca
Ulithian	<i>rat</i>	<i>Rad</i>	bicycle
Woleaian	<i>kaantiin</i>	<i>Kantine</i>	store, shop, booth
Yapese	<i>sitiraf</i>	<i>Strafe</i>	punishment

high functionality of German as a second language, little competition with English, and a positive attitude toward German. Thus while German language policies did not establish German as a lingua franca in the South Seas, they had consequences for the lexicon of the indigenous languages, which survived the times of German colonialism.³¹

Settler Varieties of German

Reports from different parts of the German South Seas indicate that English and Pidgin English must have had a considerable influence on the German spoken by the settlers. Contemporary accounts, in particular from Samoa, complain that "our German here is strongly mixed with pieces from English."³² In Samoa, a particular variety of German seemed to have developed that I will call Samoan Settler German. Because it was mainly a spoken variety, evidence is hard to come by and the traits of Settler German must be reconstructed from written sources: a strong lexical influence from English, a grammatical influence from English, and a certain lexical influence from Samoan. The lexical influence from

English is evident in loanwords such as *Schweinefenz* (hog fence), *Wharf* (wharf), *Bicycle*, *Halfcast*. The grammatical influence is evident, first, in adopting the structure of certain English prepositional constructions (e.g., *in meiner Meinung* for “in my opinion,” instead of standard German *meiner Meinung nach*); second, in using English word order (e.g., by allowing more than one phrase in front of the finite verb); third, in simplifying the German gender system; and fourth, in loan translations of English idioms (e.g., *sage* derived from “let’s say”). The lexical influence from Samoan is mainly restricted to words expressing culture-specific concepts such as *matai* (head of the family), *tofiga* (official duty or function), *pulenuu* (mayor), *faamasino* (village judge or judge), and *pule* (authority or power). Samoan Settler German is a result of certain language attitudes and language policies. In trying to elevate a minority language (the language of the colonial power) to a lingua franca, colonial language policies concentrated their efforts almost exclusively on the indigenous population and overlooked the fact that many of the few native speakers of this minority language had already made other language choices (English, Pidgin English, Settler German).

The Development of Pidgin and Creole Languages

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, German-based pidgin and creole languages began to develop in some areas of the German South Seas.³³ Among them were Ali Pidgin German, spoken on Ali, an island off the shore of New Guinea,³⁴ and Unserdeutsch (literally “our German”) in northern New Britain. Unserdeutsch is a creole language that was spoken in the vicinity of the mission school of Vunapope, which also served as an orphan home.³⁵ In Vunapope, as in Palau, German was taught intensively and was used as the language of instruction. Yet, while the linguistic background in Palau was uniform—Palauan was the only language spoken—the students in Vunapope came from families with many different native languages. In this regard, German could assume a function that went beyond classroom instruction. However, while standard German was taught in school, a German-based creole developed as a vernacular in the vicinity of the school. This creole was passed on through several generations. Obviously, communicative needs and decisions made by the speakers thwarted the official attempts to promote standard German as a lingua franca.

Even more remarkable is the connection between German colonial politics and the history of Tok Pisin, the English-based pidgin spoken in New Guinea.³⁶ From the 1860s on, there was a great demand for workers on the German plantations in Samoa, so that workers were recruited from the Bismarck Archipelago (after 1879 and again after 1900), the Gilbert and

Ellice Islands (1867–1880), the North Solomon Islands (after 1880), and the New Hebrides (1878–1885). Under these conditions, a stable English-based pidgin originated—Samoan Plantation Pidgin. It was used among the Melanesian and Polynesian workers, and between the workers and the German and German Samoan employees of the Deutsche Handels- und Plantagen-Gesellschaft. Between 1879 and 1913, about 6,000 workers returned to the islands of the province of German New Guinea after their contracts had expired. Due to labour migration between the Bismarck Archipelago and New Guinea, the pidgin spread and became what was later known as Tok Pisin. During the times of German administration, this pidgin underwent lexical extension and relexification of English words on the basis of German. About one hundred and fifty lexemes of German origin can be traced, among them *ananas* (pineapple), *balaistip* (pencil), *beten* (pray), *bigelaisen* (iron [for ironing]), *donabeta* (cry of admiration or anger), *esik* (vinegar), *gever* (rifle), *gumi* (rubber), *lupsip* (airship), *malen* (paint), *palmen* (palm trees), *saiskanake* (derogative, literally “shit kanaka”), *saitung* (newspaper), *sange* (pliers), *sikmel* (sawdust), *soken* (socks), *svesta* (sister), and *turm* (tower). While German colonial politics aimed at suppressing the use of pidgin, their economic policies, which were tied to a high degree of work migration, had quite the opposite effect and helped to spread and develop pidgin languages.

Conclusion

In spite of a controversial discussion in the colonies about the role that the German language should assume in the South Pacific, politicians in Berlin opted for the spread of German in the colonies. Ultimately, the official German language policies were not successful. German did not become the lingua franca of the South Pacific. However, the efforts to spread German throughout the South Pacific were not without consequences, even though they were not the ones initially intended: indigenous languages were enriched by German loanwords; settler varieties emerged under the influence of English and local languages, and pidgin languages developed and spread through the German provinces. The failure of German language politics was due to several factors. There was no promising concept for the promotion of German. The necessary financial efforts were not made with the consequence that language education was insufficient. Too few native speakers of German populated the colonies in order to provide opportunities to speak German. Finally, the European and indigenous inhabitants of the colonies had already made other language choices that fulfilled their communicative needs.

Notes

- 1 Schnee, *Deutsches Kolonial-Lexikon*.
- 2 Baessler, *Südseebilder*, 23. All translations from German sources into English are by the author.
- 3 Spiegel von und zu Peckelsheim, *Kriegsbilder aus Ponape*, 47.
- 4 Jacques, *Südsee*, 96.
- 5 "Der Kampf um die deutsche Sprache," 456.
- 6 Deutscher Reichstag, 10. Legislaturperiode 1900-1903, 2. Sitzung, 8. Anlagenbuch, Aktenstück 814.
- 7 Wurm, *New Guinea Area Languages*, 833ff.
- 8 Friederici, "Pidgin-Englisch," 95.
- 9 Erdland, "Der gegenwärtige Stand der katholischen Mission," 488.
- 10 Weck, *Die Sprache im Deutschen Recht*, 119.
- 11 Sembritzki, "Deutsche Sprache," 128.
- 12 Friederici, "Pidgin-Englisch," 97.
- 13 Kindt, "Sollen die Eingeborenen," 283.
- 14 Schlunk, *Das Schulwesen*, 93.
- 15 Sembritzki, "Deutsche Sprache," 128.
- 16 Sembritzki, "Deutsche Sprache," 128.
- 17 Deutsche Kolonialgesetzgebung IV 1898/99, Nr. 75.
- 18 Samoanisches Gouvernementsblatt, Bd. 111, Nr. 9, 15 June 1901.
- 19 Schlunk, *Die Schulen*.
- 20 Jenny Olin, "Letter to Dr. Judson Smith, Kusaie, Caroline Islands, August 9, 1902." Papers of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABC), 19.4, vol. 16, Letters J-P.
- 21 "Proposed Transfer of Micronesia, December 1902." ABC 19.4, vol. 11 (Micronesia Mission 1890-1899), Letters A-K.
- 22 For information provided in this section see Engelberg, "Influence of German."
- 23 Rev. Ph. A. Delaporte, Mrs. Salome Delaporte, Miss Maria Linke, *Tenth Annual Report of the Nauru Mission*. Nauru, Marshall Islands: Nauru Mission-Press (1911). ABC 19.4, vol. 18, part 1, Documents Reports Letters.
- 24 "Letter to R. Jackson Smith, Oua, Ponape, June 12, 1903." ABC 19.4, vol. 11, Letters A-K.
- 25 Louise E. Wilson, "Letter to Judson Smith, D.D., Kusaie, Caroline Islands, August 2nd, 1902." ABC 19.4, vol. 17, Letters R-W.
- 26 Sarfert, *Kusae*, 421.
- 27 Placidus, "Die Schule in Korrör," 56.
- 28 Jenny Olin, "Letter to Dr. Judson Smith."
- 29 Placidus, "Die Schule in Korrör," 56.
- 30 See Gordon, *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*.
- 31 For more information, see Engelberg, "Influence of German," "Kaisa, Kumi, Karmoböl."
- 32 Zieschank, *Ein Jahrzehnt in Samoa*, 57.
- 33 The term "creole languages," in contrast to pidgins, is usually reserved for first languages used by native speakers, i.e., they are often distinguished from pidgins by their status as the native language of their speakers.
- 34 See Mühlhäusler, "Bemerkungen."
- 35 See Volker, "Birth and Decline."
- 36 See Mühlhäusler, "Bemerkungen."

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