

North Australian Kriol and the Kriol 'Holi Baibul'

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Language Change and Colonisation

Both the loss and gain of languages have always been part of the process of aggressive colonisation. Language loss has been one of the many irreversible consequences of white invasion and settlement of Aboriginal Australia. Such a phenomenon is not new. Language loss has almost invariably accompanied long-term invasion and imperialism. Losses, however, have never been so drastic and widespread as they were during the era of European colonialism.

Colonisation has also resulted in language gain. Invaded peoples often acquire the language of the invaders. This is not an absolute gain if it is at the expense of vernacular languages. Although it is true that where contact with the invaders has been gradual and not particularly aggressive the invader's languages may be acquired as a second language without loss of indigenous languages, it is also true that some indigenous languages, including some in Aboriginal Australia, have survived against incredible odds.

If the contact with the invaders is limited and the need to communicate is therefore restricted, a *pidgin* may arise as a contact language. It will have simplified grammar and a small lexicon. It will be no-one's primary language. It may expand if communicative contexts increase, but while these contexts are restricted the language will remain a pidgin, only moving towards the invader's language when full communication is allowed.

There is a special set of circumstances in which a pidgin may be rapidly expanded, not in the direction of the invader's languages but into a new language, a *creole*. These circumstances can only arise where society has been so damaged and disrupted that language continuity becomes impossible. It is typical of such situations that speakers of a variety of languages are thrust together into new communities where immediate interaction is necessary between people whose languages are not mutually comprehensible.

It is often the case in these contexts that the only language which people have in common is the pidgin that was used between them and the invaders. This pidgin

is the obvious candidate for the *lingua franca* of the new community, but its restricted nature renders it unsuitable for the entire range of communicative needs. A process of creolisation then takes place in which the pidgin, together with whatever other linguistic resources are available, is expanded to cope with all communicative requirements. These other linguistic resources normally include the original vernacular languages, the standard language of the invader and what many linguists consider to be innate linguistic universals.

The most obvious features of creoles are that they have the lexicon of one language (the superstrate) and the semantics and grammar of another language or languages (the substrate). They typically arise in times of linguistic and social disruption when a new community has an immediate need for a new language. In multilingual contexts, a later generation of creole speakers may acquire the languages of their neighbours as second languages and their neighbours will also acquire the creole as a second language.

North Australian Kriol demonstrates these characteristics very clearly, both in its linguistic features and in the circumstances of its origin. It also demonstrates another common feature, which is that the Christian church is often a significant institution in creole-speaking communities throughout the world. There is certainly no intrinsic or linguistic reason for this. It is more that the rise of creoles in colonial contexts usually occurred where traditional cultural life is damaged. Christianity has, in many places, replaced traditional religions. The subsequent recognition of creole languages by the church, where this has occurred, has often been the biggest single factor in the growing pride and acceptance by creole-speaking people of their own linguistic and cultural identity.

This is a new identity. It is not the original, indigenous identity although it has historical continuity with it and retains significant elements of it. It is not the Western identity, either, which the church may well have tried to impose, although it may have borrowed elements from that too. It is a new and distinctive identity.

This paper, after sketching the origin of Kriol, will discuss the significance of the church to its development, and in particular, the effect of the Bible translation program.

The History of Kriol

After four unsuccessful attempts by Europeans to invade the Northern Territory between 1824 and 1866, permanent settlement was achieved in Darwin in 1870. Over the next thirty years, there was an influx of English-speaking people. Some came to establish the cattle industry and others came to the gold rushes, where they were outnumbered by the Chinese. There was considerable interaction between Chinese, European and Aboriginal people, particularly in the vicinity of European settlements, such as the emerging townships, the mining camps, and the cattle stations. None of these groups could understand each other's languages, and a direct consequence of their need to communicate was the emergence of pidginised forms of English. By the beginning of the twentieth century, these pidgins had converged into one widely-understood *lingua franca*, Northern Territory Pidgin English. At this point, Northern Territory Pidgin English was still a contact language, used for restricted purposes only, and nobody's primary language; that is, it had not yet creolised (Harris 1986a:113-214).

The first place in the Northern Territory where pressure was placed on the pidgin to expand to become the primary language of a new community was the Roper River Mission (now Ngukurr) where creolisation began to occur shortly after 1908. The invasion of the Roper River region by Europeans had commenced with the construction of the Overland Telegraph in the early 1870s. Huge cattle drives were then undertaken as the pastoral frontier moved from Queensland into the Northern Territory. Cattle stations were established in the 1870s and 1880s and a small township emerged at Roper Bar, the shallow crossing used by European drovers, miners, settlers, cattle thieves and anyone else who had to cross the Roper River travelling north or south.

These were violent years and a great deal of aggression was directed at Aboriginal people in the region. As one of the early missionaries, R.D. Joynt (1918:7) wrote, hundreds had been "shot down like game". The massacre of Aboriginal people in a 'war of extermination' was widespread and continuous throughout the whole of the pastoral frontier. Initially, the battle was not entirely one-sided. The Aboriginal people of the Roper River region gained themselves a reputation for fierce and concerted resistance to the European invasion of their lands. The abandonment of most of the cattle stations in the region in the 1890s was attributed to their efforts.

Any chance that Aboriginal people may have been able to preserve their traditional cultural and linguistic integrity ended drastically at the turn of the century when the London-based *Eastern and African Cold Storage Company* acquired massive tracts of unleased or abandoned land to carve out a pastoral empire from the Roper River north into Arnhem Land. The Company had no intention of allowing Aboriginal resistance to hinder this huge project. Determined to exterminate them, they employed gangs of up to fourteen men to hunt out all inhabitants of the region and shoot them on sight (Merlan 1978:87). With the police and other authorities turning a blind eye, the hunting gangs of the Eastern and African Company staged an unprecedented, systematic campaign to exterminate the Roper River people. They almost succeeded:

...white people hunted us out from there, shooting people like kangaroos — like birds. Oh, terrible times we used to have...
(Barnabas Roberts in Hercus and Sutton 1986:66)

This near annihilation of the Aboriginal people of the region produced the first factor necessary for the genesis of a creole; sudden and drastic social change and the accompanying severe disruption of normal language transmission. The second requirement for the genesis of a creole is a new community. Challenged by the plight of Aboriginal people, the Anglican Church determined to establish a mission, choosing a site on the Roper River itself. Commenced in 1908, the mission was perceived as a refuge by the scattered people of the region. By 1909 some 200 Aboriginal people gathered there. They were the remnants of the Mara, Wandarang, Alawa, Ngalakan and Ngandi people together with the easternmost Mangarayi people and the southernmost members of the Rembarrnga and Nunggubuyu (Harris 1986a:232). As Barnabas Roberts, an Alawa man who came to the Mission as a young boy, once said: "If the missionaries hadn't come, my tribe would have been all shot down" (Sandefur 1979:13).

The eight groups spoke separate and distinct languages. As is typical of Aboriginal people, the adults were multilingual. Although they had not lived permanently in such close proximity before, in their traditional lives they had met regularly for ceremonial and other purposes. Over the course of a lifetime, these people had normally become fluent speakers of each other's languages. The children, however, were not yet multilingual. Approximately seventy children attended school at the mission. They lived in dormitories and so were forced into contact with other children whose languages they had not yet had time to learn. They were the new community and they needed a primary language. Whereas their parents could communicate with other adults by speaking Alawa, Mara, etc., the children could not. What they had in common was Northern Territory Pidgin English, the English they were hearing in school, and which had features common to their separate Aboriginal languages. With this limited input, it was this younger generation who, in the course of their lifetime, created the creole, manipulating the lexical resources available to them to create a language which catered for all their communicative needs (Harris 1986a:301-316).

Further creolisation processes occurred elsewhere in later years in places such as the Kimberley cattle stations and around the World War II army camps in the top end of the Northern Territory — although in many of these places the developments occurred where there were already some Kriol speakers. These creoles have spread and merged into one widely spoken language now called Kriol. It is spoken in approximately 150 communities from Western Queensland across the Top End of the Northern Territory and into the Kimberleys. There are approximately 20,000 speakers, half of whom speak it as their primary language.

The Christian Mission

In the early 1900s, the Roper River region was far from the major centres of white population where an uneasy conscience flickered about the mistreatment of Aboriginal people. As Rowley (1972:288) has pointed out, government agencies were generally 'unofficially' aware of the large-scale killing of Aboriginal people in the northern parts of Australia and they either condoned it or gave it tacit approval by ignoring it. In the Northern Territory itself, there was a conspiracy of silence. The police turned a blind eye to atrocities committed by settlers and were themselves responsible for what they described as 'dispersing the blacks'. The northern press was part of this conspiracy of silence, adopting the view that the less the public knew the better. This view was clearly expressed in an editorial in the *Northern Territory Times* in 1886:

It is absurd to expect anything like a fair, manly, or dispassionate view of the question from any South Australian newspapers... If a hundred of the offending tribe had bitten the dust for each of the poor fellows who were so brutally attacked, we at least would consider that no more than simple justice had been done... Our settlers in the Territory will doubtless take good care to deal with the natives, when they again offend, without the intervention of the police or the Government. We trust that when occasion again arises there will be no necessity to argue about the tally of killed or

wounded; private parties will be sent out and the natives will probably disperse, beyond that statement the Southern Press will have little to fill its sensational columns with. (*Northern Territory Times*, 20 Feb. 1886)

Despite a well-deserved reputation for opposing the invasion of their lands, the Roper River people's resistance was mercilessly put down. They became a hunted and dispossessed people with nowhere to go and with no-one to whom to turn. It was finally only the church which had the courage, sense of justice and compassion to do anything at all. Bishops George Frodsham and Gilbert White made clear the reasons why they believed the church should establish its presence in the region. Frodsham, White and many others had been vigorously outspoken about the treatment of Aboriginal people in North Australia. They had not achieved much by mere words and were now of the opinion that the church should go there itself:

A previous speaker at this Congress has said that the "British were put by God into Australia to preach the Gospel to the heathen". I have never heard a more complete condemnation of the stewardship of the Australian people. We have developed this country, and we have civilised it, but we have certainly done very little to preach the Gospel to the people we have dispossessed. The blacks have been shot and poisoned while they were wild and dangerous. They are now left to kill themselves with white vices where they have been 'tamed' ...but very few have received at our hands either justice or consideration. (C.M.A. 1907:5)

The Roper River mission provided an immediate haven for the remnant of the Aboriginal people of the region. It was an unpopular institution with the police and the settlers, who recognised that it would hamper their activities and even assist Aboriginal resistance. As Mounted Constable Willshire said of missions, they provided a place where Aborigines could regroup and 'concoct schemes'. His callous attitude to both Aborigines and missionaries was clear:

I don't mind them experimenting on a hypocritical missionary, but they must leave the practical bushman alone, for they are the brave pioneers who push out to the frontier, and are exposed to the full force of the naked barbarians. (Willshire 1896:26)

Aborigines, however, accepted the missionaries. They had chosen the mission site for them and they recognised that the missionaries came as friends, not enemies. They gathered at the mission and there formed the new community for which a new primary language became necessary.

The relationship of the missionaries to the emergence of Kriol is a complex one. Certainly, the mission provided a location for a new community where the demand for a creole would arise. The movement of pidgin English towards a creole at other locations, however — in the Kimberleys, around the cattle stations and at Barunga during World War II, for example — indicates that the process of creolisation would no doubt have eventually taken place had any Aboriginal people survived in the

region. Thus, although the effect of the mission was to expedite the rise of Kriol, it was not the primary cause. Indeed, the truth is that Kriol arose despite the efforts of the missionaries to prevent it.

It is not easy to judge accurately the impact of the missionaries' attitudes to language. Initially, they intended to learn a local language but discovered to their dismay that there were at least eight. They could have chosen one of these — perhaps the language of the mission site — but it is unlikely that this would have prevented the emergence of Kriol.

What the missionaries did was conclude that Standard English was the only choice for the official language of the mission. They therefore tried to discourage what was starting to be called 'Roper Pidgin', and were surprised at their inability to do so. People became multilingual, speaking Kriol among themselves and English to the missionaries. Informally, many missionaries also spoke some form of Kriol as a communicative necessity.

The missionaries could not, of course, have known what was happening. Even the scholarly linguistic world did not recognise Kriol until the 1970s. Prior to that, Kriol and its antecedent pidgins were considered 'ridiculous gibberish' (Strehlow 1947:xix), 'broken jargon' (Wurm 1963:4) and 'lingual bastardisation' (Baker 1966:316). In this context, the missionaries could not have deduced that a new and viable language was coming into existence. No more insightful than contemporary linguists, the missionaries persisted in discouraging the use of Kriol, banning it in school and especially avoiding it in religious contexts.

The Kriol Bible Translation

Against this background, it was quite remarkable that the idea of translating the Bible into Kriol should even have been investigated. By the early 1970s, some members of the Summer Institute of Linguistics were beginning to recognise the significance of what was still called Roper Pidgin. A linguist, John Sandefur, was appointed to work on the language early in 1973. Over the next ten years, he worked on the grammar and lexicon of Kriol, developed its orthography and surveyed the geographical extent of its usage. He encountered negative attitudes to the language both among Europeans and among mother-tongue Kriol speakers who, after years of denigration of what had become their own language, had themselves become convinced of its inferiority, particularly by comparison with English.

This problem added to the purely linguistic research the task of raising the status of Kriol. In this, Sandefur was assisted greatly by Holt Thompson, Dorothy Meehan and the staff of Bamyili School (now Barunga) where a Kriol/English bilingual education program was instituted. This, however, was only one school in one community, albeit a major one, while there were 150 communities spread over thousands of kilometres in which Kriol was spoken.

It is highly significant that a large proportion of Aboriginal people who speak Kriol as their primary language are Christians. This is particularly true of communities in the Roper River region. There are Aboriginal priests at Ngukurr and Hodgson Downs and in these communities it is not uncommon for almost everyone in the community to attend church meetings. Although not as numerically dominant, the church is still a very significant institution in other large Kriol-speaking communities such as Barunga and Fitzroy Crossing. It is not an exaggeration to say that for these

Kriol-speakers, their common Christian commitment is, together with their Aboriginality, a strong, unifying feature.

It is therefore hardly surprising that the Bible translation program has proved finally to be a very significant factor in raising the status of Kriol. A particularly important feature of this program has been the keen Aboriginal involvement. A second positive aspect has been the co-operation and enthusiasm of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, the Bible Society, the Anglican Church and the Church Missionary Society. Over twenty mother-tongue Kriol speakers have undertaken translator training workshops and four of them now work full-time on translation: Irene and Ishmael Andrews, and William and Marjorie Hall. Early in the translation program, a Kriol Translation Conference was held, attended by people from all parts of *Kriol Kantri*, the Kriol-speaking region. The Aboriginal people decided to attempt one translation for all rather than several translations for the various dialects. Indeed, one of the outcomes of the conference was an awareness among Kriol speakers of the extent of their speech community.

The technique that developed from the conference was that the initial translation is done at Ngukurr (Roper River) where the Sandefurs are based and where Kriol and the Christian church have the greatest time-depth of five generations. The translation is then checked in other Kriol-speaking communities in order to gain a consensus in those places where dialect differences were obvious.

The most common observation was that the greater time-depth at Roper River had resulted in a more distinctive, less English idiom so that certain more colourful expressions had to be dropped for the sake of uniformity. Another problem was that some terms considered appropriate at Roper River could be considered slang or even obscene elsewhere. Thus, one important effect of Bible translation is a standardising of Kriol. This is a very common occurrence as the Bible is very frequently the first piece of major literature in a language.

The decision was made to publish early a book of selections from the Bible. The first two major components were Genesis and a 'pastiche' Gospel because no single gospel is complete in itself. A third major book was to be included. The Aboriginal people's choice was clear. It was to be the book of Revelation, a book of dreams, a communicative medium of special importance to Aboriginal people. Even more significantly, it is a book which, above all other books of the Bible speaks of the righting of injustice and the removal of oppression. It speaks in dream imagery of a time when God will set history right.

The book of selections, called *Holi Baibul* was published and released early in 1985. There were concurrent celebrations at Ngukurr, Barunga, Darwin and in the Kimberleys. T-shirts designed for the occasion showed a Bible and a map of *Kriol Kantri*. The slogan read *dubala brom God* — 'both from God'.

In 1987, a larger *Holi Baibul* was published containing a third of the Bible. This is a more significant portion than may at first appear, partly because some other sections of the Bible repeat fairly closely material now translated and partly because, once the challenge of translating a complex theological concept has been met, the task of translating it again in other contexts is much easier.

The following translations of Ephesians 1:5-10 from the Revised Standard Version and the *Holi Baibul* respectively, provide an example of the way in which biblical theological concepts have been rendered into Kriol.

A. Revised Standard Version

⁵He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶to the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. ⁷In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace ⁸which he lavished upon us. ⁹For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ ¹⁰as a plan for the fulness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

B. Holi Baibul

⁵Longtaim God bin jinggabat blanga meigim wi san blanga im, dumaji imbin laigim wi, en bambai afta imbin meigim wi im san wen imbin joinimap wi langa Jisas Kraiss, dumaji imbin gudbinji blanga dum lagijat, en imbin meigim im ron plen. ⁶Wal wi garra preisim God en gibit im teings, dumaji imbin abum detkain filing blanga wi, en imbin shoum wi det filing blanga im wen imbin gibit wi ola enijing friwan thru Jisas det brabliwan san blanga im, ⁷dumaji wen Jisas bin weistim im blad, imbin meigim wi fri, en God bin larramgo wi fri brom ol detlot nogudbala ting weya wibin oldei dumbat. Trubala God im brabli kainbala, ⁸en brabliwei imbin shoum wi im kainbala. Wal God im brabli sabibala du, ⁹en imbin dum wanim imbin wandim, en imbin shoum wi det plen blanga im weya imbin jinggabat blanga dum garram Jisas Kraiss. Nobodi bin sabi det plen basdam, bat wi sabi na. ¹⁰Wi sabi wen im rait taim, God garra joinimap ebrijing weya imbin meigim langa dis wel en langa hebin, en Jisas na garra sidan boswan blanga olabat.

The Kriol Controversy

The dispute over the legitimacy of Kriol as a language is part of a larger and long-standing dispute over creole languages in general. The translation of the Bible into creoles has often been the first recognition of their validity and so for 150 years creole Bible translations have been controversial. The very first translation of the Bible into an English-based creole was the 1829 translation of the New Testament into Sranan, spoken in Surinam, which was then alternatively British and Dutch Guiana. The translation was strongly attacked in the religious and secular press. It was said to be childish, grammarless, lacking in any literature, the language of inferior people and not fit for the Gospel. The Bible Society's translation editor, William Greenfield, published a remarkably sophisticated *Defence* in 1830, showing that Sranan was a full language in its own right 'capable of expressing the great truths of Christianity with accuracy and precision' (Greenfield 1830:56).

The same necessity to defend the translation of the Bible into creole languages has not diminished in the 159 years since Greenfield's *Defence*. The use of creole

languages has been attacked many times and the criticisms continue today. Swahili, a creole based on Bantu and Arabic was described as 'lingual obscenity' by those who failed to recognise that Swahili is a full language in its own right and that its origins in a coastal trade language of East Africa give it an interesting history and increase its importance rather than diminish it. The 1969 publication of the New Testament in Tok Pisin brought ridicule in the Australian press (Harris 1986b:15).

Such controversy is much more ancient than the past 150 years. The translation of the Bible into English itself was aggressively attacked by those who believed English to be inadequate. The emerging English language, after the Norman era, had many creole-like features. It arose out of what was left of Saxon and the conqueror's French. Critics said the English spoke 'neither good Saxon nor good French'. Compared to Latin, English was said to be grammarless, incapable of expressing deep thoughts, uncultivated, the language of barbarians and not fit for the Gospel.

When, in 1979, the Barunga School sought permission from the Northern Territory Education Department to introduce formal instruction in Kriol, one senior official, quoting Shakespeare, wrote in the margin 'does madness lie this way?' When a Bible Society press release in 1983 announced the decision to translate the Bible into Kriol, there was an immediate response of critical letters to both secular and religious newspapers. Kriol, it was claimed, was no-one's real language; it lacked literature; it was simply bad English; to speak it was demeaning; it was not fit for the Gospel. Among the responses in support of Kriol were several from Aboriginal people. It was their language, they said, and they were proud of it.

The Future of Kriol

While it is a much more difficult task to foretell the future than to analyse the past, we can make some predictions by a careful assessment of what is happening today. One prediction is certain. The future of Kriol depends very greatly upon the extent to which it continues to be associated with Aboriginal identity in those communities where it is spoken as a primary language.

As we have noted, many mother-tongue Kriol speakers were themselves convinced of its inferiority. This is a common attitude of creole-speakers throughout the world. De Rieux makes this point about creole in the Seychelles:

The dominant group, speaking the dominant language had managed to persuade the creole-speakers that their 'speech' was so inferior in status as to be a 'non-language'... In pre-independence situations linguistic imperialism was so strong that generations have been brainwashed into thinking that creoles were not only useless, but a handicap to economic development and social mobility. (de Rieux 1980:268-9)

This has been true of Kriol but the situation is changing rapidly. A growing sense of community identity and political aspiration are becoming linked with Kriol speech in the minds of many young people. This is not surprising. There are many recent examples of creole-speaking regions where threats to community identity or growing nationalism have automatically resulted in a rise in the status of the creole in the eyes of its speakers.

An increasingly indigenous Christian church is a significant institution in the larger Kriol-speaking communities. In these communities, the future of Kriol, linked as it is to a rapidly developing sense of community identity and group aspiration, cannot be separated from the role of the Church.

The Kriol-speaking people have come through great tragedy and social turbulence. Kriol is, in a sense, both a product and a mirror of that history. One important component in Christian Kriol-speaking people's growing pride in their distinctiveness and unique identity is the possession of the *Holi Baibul* in their own language.

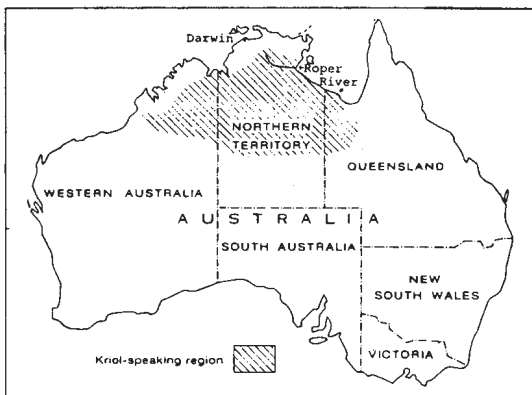
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Australia, showing the region in which Kriol is spoken