

THE NORF'K LANGUAGE AS A MEMORY OF NORFOLK'S CULTURAL AND NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

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Introduction

In this paper I shall attempt to make a few general points about the languages of small islands. I will demonstrate these points by using a small sample of Norf'k words, and by illustrating how the history of the Pitcairn descendants is reflected in their language. I will also make suggestions as to how a linguistic study of the Norf'k language can help to strengthen and revive the language.

My interest in the languages of small islands, particularly relatively young mixed languages or Creoles that have developed on such islands, is the consequence of general methodological considerations. Like many other linguists, I am keenly interested in the general principles that govern the birth, development and decay of human languages, just as many biologists are interested in the origin and development of life forms. Biologists would have a difficult task if they bred pandas or giraffes in order to observe such development. Instead, they work with fruit flies, guinea pigs and rats. Analogously, linguists cannot easily develop general principles from big old languages such as Chinese or English. Quicker and more reliable insights can be gained from the study of languages that developed on small islands over a short period of time. Arguments to this effect can be found in the contributions to Calvet and Karyolemou (1998). Small island languages follow the principles known from population genetics (ie there is greater speciation and a faster rate of change). Pitkern and Norf'k are particularly interesting because 150 years ago most Pitcairners permanently relocated to Norfolk Island, where the Pitkern language had to adapt to a new environment.

The Lexicon of Norf'k as a Memory of the History of its Speakers

One of the particularly interesting characteristics of small island languages is the influence of single individuals in their genesis:

In a normal speech-community, such as our own, or that of the Anglo-Saxons, the linguistic influence of a single individual must always be extremely insignificant. In English, we can hardly point to a single example of such a thing; Lewis Carroll's

chortle (made up from snort + chuckle) affords one of the very few examples of a word created by an individual becoming part of the normal language. But, at the birth of Pitcairnese, matters will not have been at all like this; in such a tiny community the speech of every individual must have been of vital significance. (Ross and Moverley, 1964:137-138)

Similarly interesting is the subsequent development of the language. The grammar and lexicon of any language are shaped by its speakers and over time become a fossilised memory of experience.^[1] Norfolk grammar provides many examples. Consider the grammar of location: both Pitcairn and Norfolk Island are characterised by difficult steep terrain and this experience has become fossilised in spatial orientation grammar. Norfolk, unlike English, has an absolute orientation system, with the main reference point *taun* (Kingston) and two coordinates: one vertical, *daun-ap* as in *daun ar taun* ('in, to Kingston'), or *ap Ban Pain* ('to Burnt Pine'), *ap in a stik* ('into the woods in the mountainous north west') and a horizontal one, where greater distances from Kingston are signalled by *aut*: *aut ar mission* ('to/in the former Melanesian Mission grounds'), *aut Duncombe* ('in, to Duncombe Bay'), etc. A second example is the contrasting first person plural pronouns *wii* and *aklan*. The latter probably derives from *our clan* and is used as the insider pronoun referring to Pitcairners only. Finally, there is the semantic distribution of words of Tahitian and English origin. Close inspection of Nobbs Palmer (1992) and Buffett (1999) shows that numerous Tahitian words refer to the undesirable, unclean and abnormal. This may reflect the racism that prevailed on Pitcairn Island in the first years of settlement (see Table 1).

Table 1

Tahitian word	Meaning
<i>eeyulla</i>	adolescent, immature, not dry behind the ears
<i>hoowi-hoowi</i>	filthy, extremely dirty
<i>howa-howa</i>	to soil one's pants from a bowel movement
<i>iwi</i>	stunted undersized
<i>laha</i> (also <i>lu-hu</i>)	dandruff
<i>mutty-mutty</i>	dead, died
<i>ootatow</i>	youth who has reached maturity but is still very small in stature
<i>po-o</i>	barren or infertile soil
<i>poo-oo</i>	unripe or green fruit
<i>tarpou</i>	stains on the hands caused from peeling some fruit or vegetables
<i>toohi</i>	to curse, blaspheme or swear
<i>tye-tye</i>	tasteless food
<i>unna-unna</i>	to lack self-confidence
<i>wa-haloo</i>	dilapidated, ramshackle

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<i>whawhaha</i>	conceited, full of self-importance
<i>ama'ula</i>	awkward, ungainly or clumsy
<i>hawa</i>	excrement, faeces
<i>hawahawa</i>	to have diarrhoea
<i>nanu</i>	jealous

The Norf'k language came into being as a consequence of the mutiny on the *Bounty* in April 1789 and the subsequent settlement of the mutineers and their Tahitian entourage on Pitcairn Island in January 1790. Within a short period of time, the pressure for the Tahitians to communicate with the speakers of English led to the crystallisation of a contact language which continues to be spoken with English by the descendants of the Pitcairn settlers. I shall examine what the present-day Norf'k dictionary tells us about the provenance of the Pitcairn settlers and the knowledge of Pitcairn's natural environment and life. I shall then briefly look at the linguistic evidence on the Pitcairners: what they knew; what they did on Pitcairn; and how they made Norfolk Island their new home.

Provenance of Pitcairn Settlers

There were nine mutineers on the *Bounty*, four of whom died within four years of their arrival on Norfolk Island. Another four mutineers, Fletcher Christian, John Adams, William McCoy and Matthew Quintal spoke dialects of English, whilst the last mutineer, Edward Young, was a native of St Kitts (West Indies). Young's first language appears to have been Creole English.

Several linguists have worked on tracing English-origin dialect words in Pitkern-Norf'k. For instance:

English dialect words are very abundant. The question of tracing them to actual mutineers is difficult, chiefly owing to the wide spread of many of the words under discussion in the dialects . . . only two groups of words are definitely traceable to particular mutineers.

First, there is a very considerable amount of Scotch, due to John Mills (Aberdeen) and William Mickoy (Ross-shire), e.g. blood 'to bleed', bole 'to make a small hole in anything', dark 'to become dark', devil's-needle 'dragon-fly', gaggle 'to cackle', heave away 'to throw away', No, Sir! 'it is not so', what-way, 'how; and, with Tahitian admixture, hilly-hilly 'choppy (of the sea)' (Tahitian reduplication) and [i:wi:] 'little' (wee + T[ahitian] iti 'small').

There does also seem to be a definite influence from the South-West, due to Matthew Quintal (Padstow), e.g., beeth and prosthetic verbal, granny-bonnet 'k. flower', possibly also [du:] 'don't. (Ross and Moverley, 1964:168)

The full story of all English dialect words would be the topic of a doctoral dissertation, and the same could be said about words of Tahitian origin. The difficulties here stem from major changes in pronunciation and the unavailability of a dictionary of old Tahitian. The percentage of Tahitian words in Pitkern-Norfolk is difficult to establish as there is no agreement which words of English origin actually qualify for Norfolk words. Having produced a draft dictionary (Eira, Magdalena and Mühlhäusler, nd) and having made decisions on what words should be included as Norfolk, my estimate is that about 10 percent of word types are of Tahitian origin. Many of these have a very low token frequency (eg *am'te* 'trough' or *ha'waii* 'guttering').

The contribution of Edward Young from St Kitts has generally been underestimated, in spite of the fact that he was the community leader after 1793, that he introduced church sermons and education, and that he was a prolific storyteller. His status as a linguistic role model is illustrated by West Indian Creole words such as:

morla ('tomorrow');
morga ('thin');
santaped ('starfish');
cherimoya ('guava');
bastard ('inferior or inedible variety of a plant' as in *bastard ironwood*, the wood found on both the West Indies and on Norfolk Island);
airish tieti ('potatoe').

Settlers' Knowledge

A commonly expressed view is that the Tahitian women had extensive knowledge of plants and other biological lifeforms on Pitcairn Island. On closer inspection (Mühlhäusler, 2002), it turns out that their knowledge of plants and the women's knowledge was more limited than generally assumed. The women who went to Pitcairn Island were not from the social background where such specialist knowledge was found. The limitations of their knowledge are evident from a study of plant names and usages (Göthesson, 1997). Only 56 names of Pitcairn plants have a Tahitian name, while 190 of English or local origin, and 53 species of lichen and mosses on Pitcairn Island have no local name at all. Many plants that were of cultural significance in Tahiti were never named or used on Pitcairn. Of the 26 fern species of the island, only nine were named: three had a Tahitian name, while six had a Pitkern name, such as *rockfern*, *blackfern*, *old man fern* or *creepy fern*. One of the unnamed ferns is used in 36 Tahitian remedies, but none on Pitcairn; three other unnamed ferns were also used for medicinal purposes in Polynesia, two were used as a food source elsewhere but not on Pitcairn.

Where Pitkern has a Tahitian word for a useful plant, the range of uses tends to be much narrower. Thus, the *tiplant* or *rauti* was used on Pitcairn to distil a spirit, but it was not used as fodder, eaten or for medicinal purposes as it was in Tahiti. Again, *api* or *giant taro* was used as food, but not as a remedy. Single use on Pitcairn contrasts with multiple uses in Tahiti.

When looking at English-derived names from Pitcairn life forms, the metaphorical transfer of English names is noticeable:

The wood-pigeon is a pigeon but you could not mistake it for the true wood-pigeon; the snipe is a shore bird but could never be mistaken for the British snipe. The sparrow does not look like a house sparrow—or hedge-sparrow—but it was probably the only bird of the general kind of sparrow on the Island. The sparrow-hawk is not even a hawk, but it has a hooked bill and is belligerent and a swift flyer. To sum up: I would say that the naming was on the basis of obvious relationship in the case of the wood-pigeon, but because of some superficial similarity in ecology or behaviour in the case of the others I have mentioned. (Ross and Moverley, 1964:166)

Life on Pitcairn

Many Pitkern words are concerned with food and shelter: *rama* ('to collect seafood or to go fishing by torch light at night'); *a'u* ('the insides of a crab used as burley'); and *fence* ('a fenced enclosure or garden'). In their search for food, the Pitcairners unsurprisingly encountered many species with unpleasant characteristics: *dreamfish* ('a fish, which, when eaten leads to unpleasant dreams'); and *poison trout* ('an inedible trout like fish'). And on Norfolk Island: *sailor's piss* ('a poor tasting fish from the Labridae family'); and *sharkwood* ('smells like rotten shark flesh when cut').

Gardening words such as *taapieh* ('to force ripen bananas), *hutihuti* ('pull weeds') and *hulu* ('garner root vegetables') recall early horticultural practices. Food preparation involved the *yolo* ('grating stone'), *papahaia* ('wooden block on which food is pounded') and the *ana* ('seat grater'). Dishes originating from Pitcairn include *pilhai* ('baked grated sweet potatoes and bananas'). Nursery words reflect the role of women. Thus, Pitkern-Norfolk *salan* ('people') is a nursery pronunciation of 'children'. Words such as *mimi* ('to urinate') *babi* ('breast'), *puupuu* ('to huddle close together') and *taio* ('to ruffle a child's hair, to make them laugh') originate in the nursery context.

Also, the role of women in healthcare can be seen in the comments by Kallgård on the Polynesian roots of some medical words on Pitcairn:

Not much seems to have been written about the colony's medical history. Since many medical words with Polynesian roots are still used on the island (hupe is 'nasal discharge', ili-tona is 'stye', and hapa means 'ill, not well') it is fair to assume that initially much of the health matters were taken care of by the Polynesian women. We also know that to some extent traditional Polynesian medicine has been practised. (The Pitcairn Miscellany, 1996:146)

Buffett (2004:13) mentions *kraenki* ('datura'), a plant "used by our Polynesian foremothers for various health reasons, one of them being birth control".

Resettlement on Norfolk Island

Norfolk Island was a very different place from Pitcairn—it was distinctly unhomey in the first few years after 1856 and *hoem* continued to be the word for Pitcairn. This is reflected in *hoem nanwe* ('the Pitcairn dreamfish') or *hoem oefi* ('the Pitcairn *oefi* fish'). The mournful wail of the wedge tailed shearwater frightened the Pitcairners, and they named it *goesbad* ('ghost bird'). Numerous other unfamiliar life forms received names, which remember those who first identified or introduced them:

Isaac wood ('a tree named after Isaac Quintal');
Siah's backbone ('a tree recording the strength of Josiah Adams');
William Taylor ('a pest plant introduced by the mission mason').

The name of their new home was often prefixed as in *Norfolk Island bean* (*conavalia rosea*) and *Norfolk Island chaff tree* (*achyrantes arborescens*'). The memory of individuals is present in words describing their actions and characteristics, such as *toebi* ('to help oneself to other people's produce, like Toby'), *big Jack* ('to weep, like Mr. Jack Evans') and *Bremen* ('to be skinny' taken from the visitor Mr. Breman').

The economy of Norfolk in the first 50 years has been labelled 'subsistence affluence'. Norfolk Islanders were amply provided for by nature and only had to use their ingenuity to create useful objects such as:

behg iepan ('apron made from a sugar bag');
behg tawel ('towel made from a sugar bag');
niau brum ('broom made from ribs of palm leaves');
chip hiita ('heater using wood chips or small branches').

Living on Norfolk Island did not mean total isolation, as there were contacts with the Melanesian Mission (1860s-1920s), the NSW-controlled education system (after 1890s), whaling (1850s-1960s), experiences of two world wars and tourism (after 1960). The NSW education system discouraged and persecuted the Norfolk language and its only contribution is *breking da king's crown* ('to speak non-standard English').

Whaling expressions are far more numerous. For example, *baeliap* 'to be flat on one's back', *fin aut* 'to be finished', or *faesboet*, which was shouted when a harpooned whale would tow the boat, now used as an exclamation to draw attention to something extraordinary or funny. Contact with foreign sailors gave the Norfolk language *Thanksgiving* and *potagii* 'unreliable', as Portuguese crew.

From World War I and II, when American and New Zealand soldiers lived on Norfolk Island, we have the expression *cushoo* and *faens iron*. '*Cushoo*' derives from the army slang 'cushy', while '*faens*' refers to the misappropriated iron landing strips from the American-built airfield.

Modern life on Norfolk is reflected in words such as *honda rash* ('the condition contracted from excessive motorcycle riding'), *the foenkaad* (needed for making

overseas phone calls), *tep* ('temporary entry person') and *wettls bus* ('mobile fast food stall'; renamed *se mussa buss*, literally 'about to burst'). Of particular interest are the numerous Norfolk placenames that recall events or personalities: *sofa* is 'a place where an angry husband having caught his wife with the neighbour on the sofa, tipped this piece of furniture over a cliff, and *Simon Water* is a stream running through Simon Young's allocation of land (Mühlhäusler, 2002). Other placenames, such as *Goese korna* ('Ghost Corner') refer to folk beliefs or recall former pastimes and social practices.

Conclusions

I would like to conclude by illustrating the complexities found when reconstructing the past from the lexicon of a language with the word *tintoela* 'sweetheart'. Pitkern has *toela*, which Ross and Moverley (1964:263) trace back to *tauvara* 'faithful friend'. Norfolk has *taoela*, which Harrison (1972:150) derived from the pet name Tola of a girl who was living on Norfolk Island. The Norfolk word *tintoela* is explained by Buffet as:

tintoela: *sweetheart, lover, spouse, i.e. the person with whom you toll the tin. (from T: toara (toala) native drum which gives message) hence tin toela, tin drum.*

Back in Pitcairn and early Norfolk days, parents and older relatives would keep track of the moral behaviour of young people who they suspected of having premarital relationships by tying a tin billy with spoons in it under the beds. (Buffet, 1999:101)

The Tahitian etymology Buffet produces is *toala* ('a native drum which sends messages'). But one wonders if the tin under the bed is the same as in *bilitin* ('a bothersome spirit under people's beds'). What this example shows is that memory is not a fixed given, but often contested and negotiated. With regard to the word *aata*, one might ask whether there was an 'Arthur' who showed excessive admiration for his children, as Harrison (1972:88) contends, or whether it derives from Tahitian *aataina* ('longing of the heart') as Buffett (1999:2) suggests, and whether the expression *apkuks* ('non committal, lacking knowledge') refers to the Cook family which once lived near Duncombe Bay or whether it refers to the Captain Cook memorial.

There are still many islanders who remember the origins of such expressions. The preservation of their recollections is integral to the revival of Norfolk because it is the function of language as a repository of individual and collective memory that sustains a positive islander identity.

Endnotes

[1] Memories are not factual records of events but socially negotiated. Etymologising for any language is a mixture of factual information and socially acceptable accounts. I have refrained from commenting on the history of words that would give offence to members of the Norfolk speech community.

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