ON THE ORIGINS OF PITCAIRN-NORFOLK

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Among the enigmas of Pitcairn history, the languages 'mystery' is not the least.'
(Silverman 1967:203).

1. Introduction

The attraction of looking at Pidgin and Creole languages to gain understanding about the origin of human language and weighty matters such as the nature - nurture debate is derived from the view that many Creolists subscribe to: That ontogenesis recapitulates phylogenesis. This view combined with the Cartesian view that there must be a general or universal grammar underlying the grammatical features of all languages is articulated, for instance, in Bickerton's *Roots of Language* (1981) where it is suggested that the examination of the grammar developed among first generation Creole speakers with no exposure to a coherent model leads to the discovery of a set of so-called bio-program features of human language.

The fruitfulness of Bickerton's approach is contingent on a number of factors, including the correctness of the ontogenesis - phylogenesis hypothesis and the universal deep structure assumption as well as the availability of empirical data from an uncontaminated 'desert island' situation of glossogenesis. Bickerton's choice of Hawaiian Creole with hindsight, turns out to be a problematic one as the genesis of the language appears to have occurred in the schoolgrounds of English - medium schools in Hawaii. Reinecke (1969) who had pointed out this fact suggested a different language as the optimum case, Pitcairn-Norfolk (Reinecke et al 1975:590):

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> Pitcairn Island English with its offshoot on Norfolk Island is of extraordinary interest because it offers as near a laboratory case of Creole dialect formation as we are ever likely to have. The place, the time and sequence of events, and the provenience of each of the handful of original speakers are known as are most of the subsequent influences upon the Pitcairnese community and, to a lesser extent, upon the one on Norfolk. Only two languages, English and Tahitian, were in contact. The chief unknown factors are the sort of makeshift speech in use on Tahiti before Fletcher Christian and his companions left in 1790 to search for a desert isle and the extent to which the British seamen may have been influenced by a pattern of maritime English Pidgin.

As recently as 1997 Sebba, in his textbook of contact languages reiterated the view that Pitcairn-Norfolk is an uncontroversial example of a prototypical Creole.

In this paper I shall address the question what Pitcairn-Norfolk can tell us about how human languages come into being.

2. Pitcairn-Norfolk As A Creole - Discourse And Reality

More has been written about Pitcairn Island than almost any other island in the Pacific and the story of the Mutiny on the Bounty has a unique place among the myths of present popular culture. This of course is not due to the linguistic importance of the island but to its romantic appeal. A handful of English sailors and Tahitian maidens setting up a new society on one of the worlds most isolated islands in 1795[1]. The relocation of the islanders to Norfolk in 1854 is similarly romanticised: A small group of converted ex-mutineers, God-fearing and unspoilt Pitcairners transformed the hell of a former penal colony into a paradise[2]

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It is astonishing that the first 150 years or so of Pitcairn-Norfolk history attracted very little interest from linguists, who appear to accept the view that the Pitcairn-Norfolk language is a contaminated English, substandard dialect or a mixed Tahitian - English jargon. Codrington, who was the resident linguist of the Melanesian Mission on Norfolk Island in the 1870s and who produced groundbreaking descriptions, classifications and comparative studies of the Melanesian languages does not pay any attention to Pitcairn-Norfolk, a language which he could not escape on a forty square kilometre island and when replying to Schuchardt's request on Pidgin and Creole English in the Pacific he does not mention Pitcairn-Norfolk.

The mixed character of the language was seen by both outsiders and at least some Pitcairners as a blemish and the practice of marrying outsiders to increase the European appearance of the population is matched by their pride to be speakers of pure English. The idea of diachronic purism as will be known to students of Afrikaans where history has been portrayed by several leading historical linguists e.g. Raidt (1983) as one of accelerated development of a European language. This view was helped by the discourse of social Darwinism with its emphasis on the survival of the fittest (i.e. European languages) and racial purity. The headmaster of the Norfolk school in 1916 (Passmore 1916:26-7) articulated this as follows:

> I loved these people but I hated their language, because of its limitations, and for another reason in which my opinion has been lately correbated [sic] by Professor Adams. He says that a people's language determines their moral attributes - or words to that effect. ...If the Norfolk dialect could be wiped out I am convinced that there would be a moral uplift.

That Pitcairn-Norfolk was a Creole is a notion that only gradually emerged. Ross & Moverley in their first serious account of the language (1964) point out certain parallelisms with English Creoles elsewhere and the only description by an islander (Harrison 1972 and 1985) first dismisses that one is dealing with a Creole but later concedes that the language contains a number of Creole features. Meanwhile, as I documented in Mühlhäusler (1998 and 1999) the view that Pitcairn-Norfolk is a prima facie Creole has been the accepted view of most Creolists. It is portrayed as a case of children being born on an isolated island where parents

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did not have a language in common and consequently were forced to construct a Creole out of the scraps of English, Tahitian and the unstable Pidgin that most of the parents appear to have communicated in at the time.

A revaluation of the Tahitian content of Pitcairn-Norfolk culture by the islander community today, as is evident in the increased use of reference to Tahitian foremothers; revival of Tahitian music and dancing and widespread interest in Tahitian cultures. The distinction between the two meanings of creolization mixing and recreation is left in this process.

It is worrying to observe that such a creolist discourse is rarely based on first hand knowledge of the language or an examination of the historical sources and after three fieldtrips to Norfolk and a study of a vast number of historical/archival documents I have not found support for the view that Pitcairn-Norfolk is anything like a Creole, let alone a prototypical one. As a test case for the bioprogram hypothesis it is a very infelicitous choice.

If anything, Pitcairn-Norfolk illustrates the effects of intensive contact at virtually all stages of the history of this language not the effects of isolation.

3. Why Pitcairn-Norfolk Is Not A Creole

Creoles are defined in two ways, either, structurally by a number of typological properties or sociologically as a Pidgin that was adapted as a first language by a new generation of children in a situation of linguistic continuity.

It is true as Harrison (1985) and more recently Romaine (1988:65) pointed out, that a number of typological features commonly associated with Creoles and listed by Bickerton in his bioprogram list of features are found in Pitcairn-Norfolk but so are many quite uncreole features such as complex vowel clusters, interdental fricatives, comparison of adjectives, a large number of prepositions, definite and indefinite articles, reflexive pronouns and several others alongside features that look distinctly like those in Carribean and other English -based Creoles. There is as yet no comprehensive grammar of Pitcairn-Norfolk and documents of

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varieties spoken around the turn of the century when Pitcairn-Norfolk was the exclusive language for some families are not available - Harrison (1985:35) comments that "the exceptional class relationship between Norfolk and English in the repertoire of most Norfolk Islanders' and the constant code merging" makes it very difficult to determine what is Pitcairn-Norfolk and what is not.

Sociohistorical evidence again does not favour the characterization of Pitcairn-Norfolk as a Creole: It is suggested (e.g. Laycock 1989), having examined a range of early documents from visitors to Pitcairn in the first half of the nineteenth century, that English at all times was part of the repertoire of those born on Pitcairn Island and that side by side with English, a second form of speech emerged out of a number of other varieties spoken there:

i) the makeshift English-Tahitian jargon used by the Tahitian women
ii) regional dialects of English (including Scottish and American English),
iii) the mixed English - Tahitian used by the white men,
iv) St. Kitts Creole.

Laycock argues that these non-standard forms crystallise into a distinct form of speech as an act of identity when in 1830 the Pitcairners temporarily relocated to Tahiti which by then had become a hostile environment. According to him, Pitcairn-Norfolk is an adult creation and a kind of antilanguage.

The key question is to what extent the English model was available to the children and what other models they were exposed to. Such evidence as we have suggests that English remained the high language throughout the history of Pitcairn, that standard Biblical English fulfilled a major role in the education and daily lives, that Tahitian language and customs enjoyed very low prestige and that English literacy was a very important factor in the education of all inhabitants of Pitcairn. Tahitian was not passed on by the women to the next generation and both the number of Tahitian words and the nature of constructions of possible Tahitian origin are quite low - Tahitian is at best an ad mixture but to speak of mixed Tahitian English language would fail to characterise the nature of Pitcairn-Norfolk.

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The continued dominance of English is a matter that requires explanation: By 1793 only four English speaking men remained and " for a time there was a prospect that Pitcairn would become predominantly Polynesian rather than European." (Maude 1964:55). Within ten years there were twenty mixed race children but no pure Polynesian ones. When Pitcairn Island was first contacted by Captain Folger of the American Whaling ship Topaz in 1808, he was astonished to be greeted by Tahitian looking youths with perfect command of the King's English".

As Silverman (1967:204-5) observes:

> The evidence indicates that the early Pitcairners were bilingual. Pipon noted that in 1814, "The old women who are from Otaheite, retain the mother tongue . . they have pick'd up many English words and understand the English language tolerable," but that English was "the general language among them {the descendants}." Pipon's conclusion was probably correct, but the Pitcairners would naturally use a common language in conversing with the visitors, who expressed amazement that they spoke English "uncommonly well," regardless of the speech current among themselves. Moerenhout, who visited Pitcairn in 1829, noted the bilingual abilities of the Islanders and drew therefrom the suggestion that they would make good missionaries. And Hon. Captain Waldegrave, reporting observations made in 1830, said: "One of the remarkable circumstances is the correctness of their language and pronunciation. The general language in English; their divine service, also, is in English; but they frequently converse in Otaheitan, the language of the mothers."
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> The survival and, indeed, triumph of English could hardly be predicted in the circumstances. It is difficult to explain after the fact. Dr. Shapiro, one of the few to devote much attention to this interesting question, suggest that the British are "proverbially bad linguists and have, according to the French, forced the world to speak their language by their inability to use another." This suggestion draws

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> some support form the statement of Jenny (1) that, "The first settlers discouraged the Tahitean language , and promoted the speaking English." Her interviewer says of Jenny that she "can speak neither English nor Tahitean, but a jumble of both." On the basis of an interview five years later, von Kotzebue said that Jenny "spoke English well enough to carry on a conversation."

The linguistic role model was the language of the leader of the community, Christian Adams, the Bible and the language spoken by Edward Young from St. Kitts who was a storyteller and because of his poor health was closer to the children than other men. Some West Indian Creole features could have been transmitted by Young.

That the children were not the makers but the creolizers of Pitcairn-Norfolk, Norfolk is confirmed by other evidence. The existence of a mixed English - Tahitian special antilanguage is documented from as early as 1790 before the mutiny. Speaking differently, Dening (1997:57-8) argues, was one of the acts of defiance of the Bounty Crew.

> There, in such an ambivalent space, even the language of the crew began to change. What stuck in the memory of those who tried to describe Christian on the morning of the mutiny was the sort of Tahitian -English Pidgin he was using. '*mammoo*' (mama), 'silence,' they remember him shouting. While it is difficult to point to anything stronger that hints in James Morrison's and Peter Heywood's accounts of the mutiny,, there is a suggestion that the crew of the Bounty has been marked by something more than tattoos at Tahiti. They had begun to intersperse Tahitian words in their speech with one another. By the time Edwards had collected them in the *Pandora* , this pidgin had made them bilingual. It was a highly threatening strangeness to Edwards, and he promised extreme punishment, even gagging, if a word of Tahitian was spoken. On the Bounty, their pidgin would not have been to exclude others' understanding what they were saying, but to underscore a relationship changed by their Tahitian experience. It bred familiarity. It lessened distinction between them and increased distance between their present and their former selves. It blurred the genres of their sailors' talk. Bligh might rage at their

> seamanship, but it was more than their incompetence that angered him. They were touched and changed by something outside their wooden walls. They showed it on their skin and in their speech.

Laycock (1991)suggests that a late temporary encounter with the outside world in Tahiti in 1830 was the key element in the crystallization of the Pitcairn-Norfolk language; a kind of communal act of identity (cf. Le Page & Tabouret-Keller, 1985) in which " from remnants of an already moribund Tahitian English jargon and an insider language or cant was created to assist in the preservation of the identity of the Pitcairn-Norfolk group" (pg. 622) he hypothesizes (ibidem):

> Examples of communities creating new forms of speech (new dialects, new varieties) - mainly by modifying existing forms - are not easily unearthed, but further examples may be found in Laycock and Mühlhäusler (199?), and in Laycock 1982. It is not suggested that this is done with the deliberateness of a modern linguistic planning committee, but there is no doubt that small communities can carry out what I call NAIVE LINGUISTIC ENGINEERING. The process in Pitcairn-Norfolk was carried on, I suggest, by means of remarks such as:
>
> - Do you remember what old x used to say?
> - Wouldn't it be a pity if we forgot the old words?
> - When we say things the old way the others can't understand us.
> - We've got a special way of saying that in our family.

Such statements reinforce the use of the variety, and set the standards for group acceptance. Similar statements are still made by Norfolk Islanders, as: '*yu main watawieh oel Chaali bin yuus a' tal et?*' 'Do you remember how old used to say it?'

It would appear that this initial antilanguage continued to be used and altered, particularly in the period following the relocation to Tahiti and back to Pitcairn in 1831 when contemporary observers (Carlton 1850 in Ross & Moverley 1964:120) who remarked that:

> "..the language of conversation among themselves is fastly degenerating into a dialect."

This trend continued once the Islanders were resettled on Norfolk where they had to assert their identity against the Melanesian Mission on Norfolk. As another observer (Knowling 1901:7) states:

> "..the tendency is growing among the islanders to make use of a sort of language of their own."

Passmore (1910:23) who similarly suggests:

"The dialect is of comparative recent growth . Very little of it came from Tahiti. Most of the words are corruptions of English."

What appears to have occurred is that an ingroup language developed gradually among the islanders and over the past 100 years - a process very different from creolization within a single generation and that at least some of its defining properties were deliberately introduced by adults.

The practice of linguists to favour timeless descriptions and to treat Pitcairn-Norfolk as a single language has contributed to muddy this issue. What is needed is two separate longitudinal accounts of the varieties of Pitcairn and Norfolk to tease out communalities and later changes.

The full story of Pitcairn-Norfolk remains to be written and a further detailed inquiry into primary data is necessary before conclusions can be reached.

What seems important is that language genesis can take many forms and that the ones that have received most attention - independent development after splits and creolization are only

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two of many possibilities. What these two types have in common is a) the emphasis or discontinuity and b) the element of naturalness - both creolization and changes following splits have been portrayed as natural developments. Languages such as Pitcairn-Norfolk and in many regards also Afrikaans, involve a much larger range of factors, as they emerge much more gradually and involve deliberate acts of 'naive' language engineering. Their development does not take place in isolation in any interesting sense.

One should consider above all the question in what sense the change that occurs is a response to specific environmental factors, including physical conditions.

The social factors that propelled the development of Pitcairn-Norfolk indicate the wish to have an esoteric language which enabled a new community to protect themselves against outsiders - for the first 25 years or so the inhabitants of Pitcairn were regarded as mutineers and criminals who lived in fear of being punished by the British Government.
To be a member of the community was an act of defiance which grew as violence, drunkenness and social disintegration increased before the conversion of the island to fundamentalist Christianity. At this point the antilanguage was reinterpreted as the language of identity and community.

As regards the physical conditions in Pitcairn these were characterized by constant scarcity of resources. Knowledge of these resources and their management was primarily with the Tahitian women as the lexicon shows: Names of plants and animals, used for food and implements used for food preparation are of Tahitian origin.

a'u	unspawned eggs of crabs rubbed into bait to lure fish
tihi	small shellfish
ano	coconut grater / husker
uau	part of the yam which is next to the surface of the plant

And the lexicon also bares evidence to the continued exploration and experimentation by the islanders as can be seen from coinages in these domains:

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poison trout	poisonous fish of trout-like appearance
dream fish	fish whose meat causes nightmares
poison wind	easterly wind that adversely affects fishing.

An area of grammar that would be of potential interest is that of spatial orientation: Christian (1999: 384) who has recently examined the contribution of the Tahitian women to Pitcairn-Norfolk culture comments that:

> "places are frequently preceded by Up or Down, indicating where they are in relationship to the speaker. So you might refer to some places as Up Halianda or Down Tedside without the first word being part of the real name."

In the last few years a number of lexical and semantic accounts of Pitcairn-Norfolk have become available (Buffett 1999, Källgård 1998). As already mentioned it has been assumed that Pitcairn-Norfolk is a single language (a view sometimes rejected by its speakers) and whilst the comparison of two synchronic accounts cannot make up for careful longitudinal studies, such a comparison nevertheless offers some interesting possibilities.

The two communities became separated after about 1860 and whilst there had been contact, they developed very differently.

A particularly interesting group of words are those derived form proper names - since 1856 Norfolk has added:

snel	not having enough to eat - from the family named Snell,
saia	to scrounge a meal - from Siah a character known to impress himself at various homes around mealtime,
William Taylor	a weed with small white flowers introduced by a Melanesian mission worker of the same name,
Logan bin kik yu	ugly, as if kicked into the face by a horse named Logan,

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brimen	skinny, after a casual visitor named Mr. Breman,
potagii	unreliable, from the whaling days on Norfolk where the Portuguese proved unreliable.

Other words that can be traced back to a single speaker are *hepe* 'help me,' an expression used by a child with a speech impediment and *haja* an expression of surprise used by a German music master.

A comparison between Buffett's most recent Norfolk dictionary (1999) and Kallgard's 1998 Pitcairn word list reveals a number of differences:

Källågard (Pitcairn 1998)	Buffett (Norfolk, 1999)
Benny fruit - tree with good tasting fruits that look like beans	*baket* - type of red cod fish
bulb-tale - wild taro	*behgie pan* - apron made from large sugar bags
dad dad - grandfather	*'in' raip* - ripening pit to force ripen fruit
dirt-oven - traditional earth oven	

None of these have equivalents in the other language.

Most of the differences are due to different contacts (American Seventh Day Adventists on Pitcairn, Australians on Norfolk), the very considerable differences of the natural environment, differences in life-style and religious differences. (Pitcairn is predominantly Seventh Day Adventist, Norfolk Anglican). No study of deeper grammatical differences is available at present.

A detailed study should throw light on the question to what extent the language had developed when Pitcairn and Norfolk communities separated in the 1860s. If it is true, as it has been suggested by Laycock, that the conditions for creolization occurred only on Norfolk and only late around the turn of the century, when some island families lived in relative isolation from

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the rest of the community, one would expect more Creole features in Norfolk than in Pitcairn , but this hypothesis requires a great deal of further work.

4. Conclusions

Over the last four years I have visited Norfolk three times, completed a large collection of primary sources on the social history of the language of Pitcairn and Norfolk and have interviewed speakers from a multitude of backgrounds. Most recently the materials collected by the Queensland dialectologist Flint have become available, including text collated by him among old speakers of Norfolk in the 1850s. There remain many gaps. My documentation and the quality of the materials is quite uneven. I am in no doubt that further study of Pitcairn-Norfolk can significantly contribute to an understanding of how languages come into being and develop. I also have no doubt s that single parameter explanations such as creolization are far too crude to explain what has happened.

Finally, language genesis on Pitcairn is not a unique case - the story of Palmerston English (Erhart-Kneher 1996) and Bonin English (Long 1999), both similar desert island utopias, reveal many similarities and comparison of these three languages could help distinguish between general principles and singularities of language development.

NOTES

[1] That there were also six Tahitian men is often conveniently ignored - and after four years they had all been killed.

[1]This has also been expressed by Silverman (1967:XIV)as follows:

The Pitcairn story, if only in dim outline, is known to many. Its various aspects recall many of the classic cliches, legends, stories, and parables of the Western world. Pitcairn is the very prototype of the man-and-woman-cast -up-on-an-island which has become a cartoon genre. It is the Bali Hai of the song, "that special island." It is complete with Fayaways. It is the Swiss Family Robinson. It is Robinson Crusoe with sex. It is Adam and Eve and the apple, It is the Fall - the Redemption. It is the story of the Exodus, the Revelation, and the Promised

Land. It is Utopia. Unplanned and imperfect Eden, Pitcairn has survived many precalculated versions of the perfect community.

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