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A NEW ABORIGINAL LANGUAGE?

J. R. Sandefur

Can there be such a thing as a *new* Aboriginal language? Yes! Not only do all living languages undergo change, but new languages sometimes arise out of contact between existing languages. These new languages borrow features from the existing languages, but they also develop features unique to themselves. Kriol is just such a language.

Kriol has caused much controversy. Because most Kriol words have been borrowed from English, many people insist that it is a European language, not an Aboriginal one. But Kriol is spoken fluently by more than 15,000 Aborigines in the north of Australia from western Queensland to the coast of Western Australia. Very few Europeans speak Kriol fluently - so how could it be a European language?

Brennan (1979:43) in talking about Aboriginal interpreters/translators, says such a person

is one who is of Aboriginal descent, who regards himself to be a fluent speaker of Aboriginal languages (understood to include Aboriginal English and Kriol) and is recognized by the Aboriginal community as being a competent speaker...

Kriol is commonly referred to as 'pidgin'. Technically though, it is a creole rather than a pidgin. A pidgin is a language that is spoken by no one as their mother tongue. A creole, on the other hand, is spoken by a group of people as their mother tongue. In some Aboriginal communities (e.g. Ngukurr, N.T.) there are families with four generations who speak Kriol as their mother tongue.

The historical roots of Kriol go much further back than four generations. They can be traced back to a pidgin that developed in the Sydney area in the late 18th century. So Kriol is a language with a history, though like most of Aboriginal history it has largely been ignored by Australian historians.

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THE UNIQUENESS OF KRIOL

Kriol, like all Aboriginal languages, has many words and is capable of meeting all the communicative needs of its speakers within their social domain. The *beginnings* of a Kriol dictionary, which at present is not much more than a wordlist, has over 2,500 entries (Sandefur and Sandefur, 1979).

Though most Kriol words are borrowed from English, they are no longer English words. They have become Kriol words.

Kriol words often do not sound like English words because they are pronounced with an Aboriginal system of sounds. 'From' becomes *burrum*, 'sleep' becomes *jilip*, 'ear hole' becomes *irriwul*, 'scratch' becomes *grajim*.

Kriol pronunciation is not just lazy pronunciation of English words. The Kriol sound system is derived from a logical but complex combination of the sound systems of Aboriginal languages and English (Sandefur, 1979:29).

Probably the most important aspect about Kriol words to realize is that they express Aboriginal concepts and world view, not European ones. Miscommunication often occurs because Europeans interpret Kriol in terms of English meanings and Aborigines interpret English in terms of Kriol meanings. *Garra* in English means 'must' but in Kriol it means 'will'; *kilim* in English means 'kill' but in Kriol it primarily means 'hit'; *haf* in English primarily means 'one of two equal or corresponding parts of an entity' but in Kriol it primarily means 'part of one entity'; *lisin* in English means 'listen' but in Kriol it primarily means 'obey'.

Though Kriol words may be similar to English words, there is usually not a direct correspondence between them. The following examples may appear to demonstrate such a direct correspondence:

English	Kriol
I am a <i>cook</i> .	<i>Mi Kuki</i> .
I will <i>cook</i> the food.	<i>Mi ani kukum daga</i> .
The food is <i>cooked</i> .	<i>Daga im kukwan</i> .
I <i>cooked</i> the food.	<i>Ai bin kukum daga</i> .

However, the Kriol word *kukwan* refers not only to food that has been prepared by cooking, but also to fruit that is 'ripe'. In other

words, *kukwan* does not mean 'prepared by heat' as does the English 'cooked'; rather, it means 'ready to eat'.

Kriol differs from English not only in the meanings of individual words, but also in the systems that the words fit into. In talking about people the English word 'man' refers generically to 'human beings' and specifically to 'adult male'. In some contexts a woman is a man! The Kriol word *blekbala* is the generic equivalent to the English 'man' but in its specific use it refers to 'in-group people', not 'adult male'. Usually the 'in-group people' are Aboriginal, but in some contexts a European is a *blekbala*!

In the specific usage the English 'man' contrasts with 'woman' because of sex distinctions and with 'boy' because of age distinctions. In specific usage the Kriol *blekbala* contrasts with *waitbala* European, *yelabala* 'part Aboriginal' and *jainaman* 'Oriental' because of racial or cultural distinctions. The English and Kriol systems look something like this:

English			Kriol	
MAN			BLEKBALA	
'human beings'				
o l d e r + y o u n g e r	male (<i>boiwan</i>)	female (<i>gelwan</i>)		<i>waitbala</i> ('European, white person')
	MAN (<i>olmen</i>)	woman (<i>olgaman</i>)	<i>BLEKBALA</i> ('Aboriginal, black person')	----- <i>yelabala</i> ('Part Aboriginal')
	boy (<i>yangboi</i>) (<i>lilboi</i>)	girl (<i>yanggel</i>) (<i>lilgel</i>)		----- <i>jainaman</i> ('Oriental, yellow person')
	male ← → female		in-group ← → out-group	

Not all Kriol words have been borrowed from English. Many have been borrowed from traditional Aboriginal languages:

<i>nirrinirri</i>	fly
<i>yarlbun</i>	water lily seed
<i>ngamuri</i>	grandfather
<i>gabuji</i>	blind
<i>bobo</i>	good-bye

Many of these words are not common throughout the entire Kriol area but are used in regional or local dialects.

Some Kriol can be traced back almost 200 years to the early days of New South Wales. These include:

<i>gabarra</i>	head
<i>gola</i>	angry
<i>yarraman</i>	horse
<i>wadi</i>	stick

(Meston, 1896)

Kriol is rich in its idiomatic usage of words. Though words may have been borrowed from English, they are often used in combinations that are not English: *dagadagat langgus* (literally: 'eating language') means 'speaks fluently'; *nomo garrim irriwul* (lit: 'not with ear-hole') means 'pays no attention'; *gibit mijelb* (lit: 'give myself') means 'run as fast as one can'; *meigim mijelb biginini* (lit: 'make myself child') means 'act like a child'.

The way Kriol words are used in terms of grammar is often different from the way the English words are used:

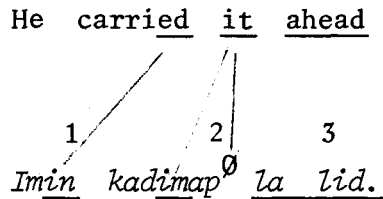
He was swimming in the deep part of the river.

1 2 3

Im na bin bogibogi atsaid la riba.

In this example:

1. Emphasis is indicated in English by stress but in Kriol by the word *na*.
2. Continuing action is indicated in English by the suffix '-ing' but in Kriol by reduplicating the verb.
3. A concept expressed in English by a prepositional phrase is expressed in Kriol by an adverb.



In this example:

1. Past tense is indicated in English by the suffix 'ed' on the verb but in Kriol by the suffix *-im* on the subject pronoun. (Actually, it is a contraction of the auxiliary verb *bin* and the pronoun.)
2. The object expressed in English by a pronoun is deleted in Kriol, partly because the verb is marked for transitivity by the suffix *-im* and thus carries the weight of the object.
3. A concept expressed in English by an adverb is expressed in Kriol by a prepositional phrase.

Some people think that Kriol has no grammar, but Kriol definitely does have a grammar. The grammar of Kriol is different, however, from that of English.

Many Europeans think Kriol grammar is simple, but they are often confusing simplified, 'broken' English with Kriol. Many Kriol speakers themselves think Kriol is simple. "After all," they reason, "I learnt it as a child and it's easy to understand - so it must be simple!"

Kriol grammar has its share of complexities. Europeans often think Kriol is simple because it uses the one pronoun *im* for 'he', 'she', and 'it'. But they do not realize that English uses the one pronoun 'we' where Kriol uses four:

- | | | |
|------------------|---|--|
| <i>yurmi</i> | - | the speaker and the one he is speaking to |
| <i>mindubala</i> | - | the speaker and one other person but not the one he is speaking to |
| <i>mibala</i> | - | the speaker and two or more other people but not including the one or ones he is speaking to |
| <i>wi</i> | - | the speaker and two or more other people including the one or ones he is speaking to |

Kriol is very flexible in terms of the number of alternate ways of expressing an idea. But at the same time Kriol has very definite restrictions on what are acceptable constructions.

Im dalim mi laiya. 'He is telling me a lie' can also be expressed as *Im dalim la mi laiya* and *Im dalim laiya la mi.* But *Im dalim laiya mi* is not acceptable.

The simplest complete sentence in Kriol is one that has no verb - a non-verbal sentence. In its simplest form it has a pronoun as the subject:

Im bedwan. 'He is fat.'

A slightly expanded form could have a noun phrase as the subject:

Tharran munanga bedwan. 'That European is fat.'

Such a sentence may be inverted to shift the focus or emphasis:

Bedwan tharran munanga. 'That European is fat.'

But the sentence cannot be inverted if the subject is simply a pronoun: *Bedwan im* is not acceptable Kriol.

Contrary to what some people think, concepts of ideas can be expressed in Kriol in more than one way. During their second week of writing, an infant class in the Kriol bilingual program at Bamyili School, Northern Territory, discussed the sun and then wrote about it. Four of the children wrote about the sun drying up rivers. Each one of them expressed the concept a different way:

San im meigim riba drai.

Jat san im meigim drai riba.

San im meigim drai langa riba.

Jat san im drainab riba.

(Examples taken from *San Im Odwan*, Bamyili Press, 1979.)

KRIOL IN EDUCATION

It is a well known basic principle of teaching that one begins with the known and proceeds to the unknown. Saville and Troike (1970) have pointed out that -

Any educational program should be based on the principle that the school takes the cultural and language experiences that the child brings with him and builds upon them. Beginning instruction through the medium of the child's native language is sound from the standpoint of educational efficiency. In such a program the child and his culture are recognized as worthy of consideration. Giving him pride in his cultural heritage will at once help him to improve his self-image and increase his success potential, so that he will be better able to benefit from what the educational system has to offer him.

The school at Bamyili has been doing precisely this. With the exception of a small number of children whose families have recently moved to Bamyili, Kriol is the mother tongue of all the Aboriginal school children. The school has been using Kriol in a bilingual program for the past few years. The program has been a controversial one with much opposition. Spring (1980:21) has noted, however, that reservations about the program "are not in any way shared by professional advisory staff or linguists working in the program..."

The literacy component of the Bamyili program has a multi-strand, thematic approach similar to the Van Leer program¹. It is based on language development but has a strong phonic word attack component to capitalize on Kriol's phonetic spelling. A 'literacy kit' consisting of a set of workbooks and graded story readers are used for supporting and reinforcing the children's developing word attack skills. A separate oral English program, which includes English story-telling and shared-book experience, is taught throughout the Kriol literacy program. English literacy is begun in the fourth year (Meehan, 1980).

Before the Bamyili Kriol program commenced, there were no published books in Kriol. Bamyili Press has since published over 130 Kriol books. In addition, over 50 Kriol books have been published by the Summer Institute of Linguistics, Wycliffe Bible Translators, the School of Australian Linguistics, the Bible Society and others.

¹The Van Leer Language Development Program was developed in Queensland for use with Aboriginal children.

CONCLUSION

Todd (1974:88) has noted that -

it is clear that widely used pidgins and creoles are capable of serving all the needs of the community, including, should it prove necessary or useful, their educational and literary needs.

Kriol is a widely used creole (Sandefur and Sandefur, 1980). In the north of Australia there are many Aboriginal communities for which Kriol is *the* main language. In many communities virtually every school child speaks it as his mother tongue. In such Aboriginal communities serious consideration needs to be given to the use of Kriol in school.

There are five basic approaches available to Kriol community schools:

1. Continue with the status quo and let the next generation deal with the matter.
2. Recognise Kriol and take it into consideration when planning educational programs without overtly utilising it in classroom instructional materials.
3. Utilise Kriol in the classroom orally but not in written form.
4. Utilise Kriol in initial instructional materials, both oral and written forms, in a transitional type bilingual program.
5. Utilise Kriol and encourage Kriol speaker creativity and development of literature and other materials in a maintenance type bilingual program.

It is this last approach that Bamyili School is pursuing. It may be that some of the other approaches are sufficient for the educational needs of the communities. But only the last approach supports and encourages the development of the children's creativity and linguistic abilities to the fullest. As this paper has shown, Kriol is a mother tongue language adequate for the expression of such creativity and ability.

To ignore the educational importance of Kriol today is only to postpone the application of a viable educational program and cause the continuing educational problems to fall upon another generation.

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