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TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STUDENTS IN QUEENSLAND MAINLAND SCHOOLS

Part 1 : Language Background

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(This is the first of two articles, based on a paper delivered at the 1982 conference of the Applied Linguistic Association of Australia, entitled: "Language maintenance among Torres Strait Islanders living on the Australian mainland." It deals with the language backgrounds of most Torres Strait Islander children attending mainstream Queensland schools. The second part, which will appear in the next issue, discusses some of the language difficulties experienced in the classroom by many of these children).

THE FIELDWORK

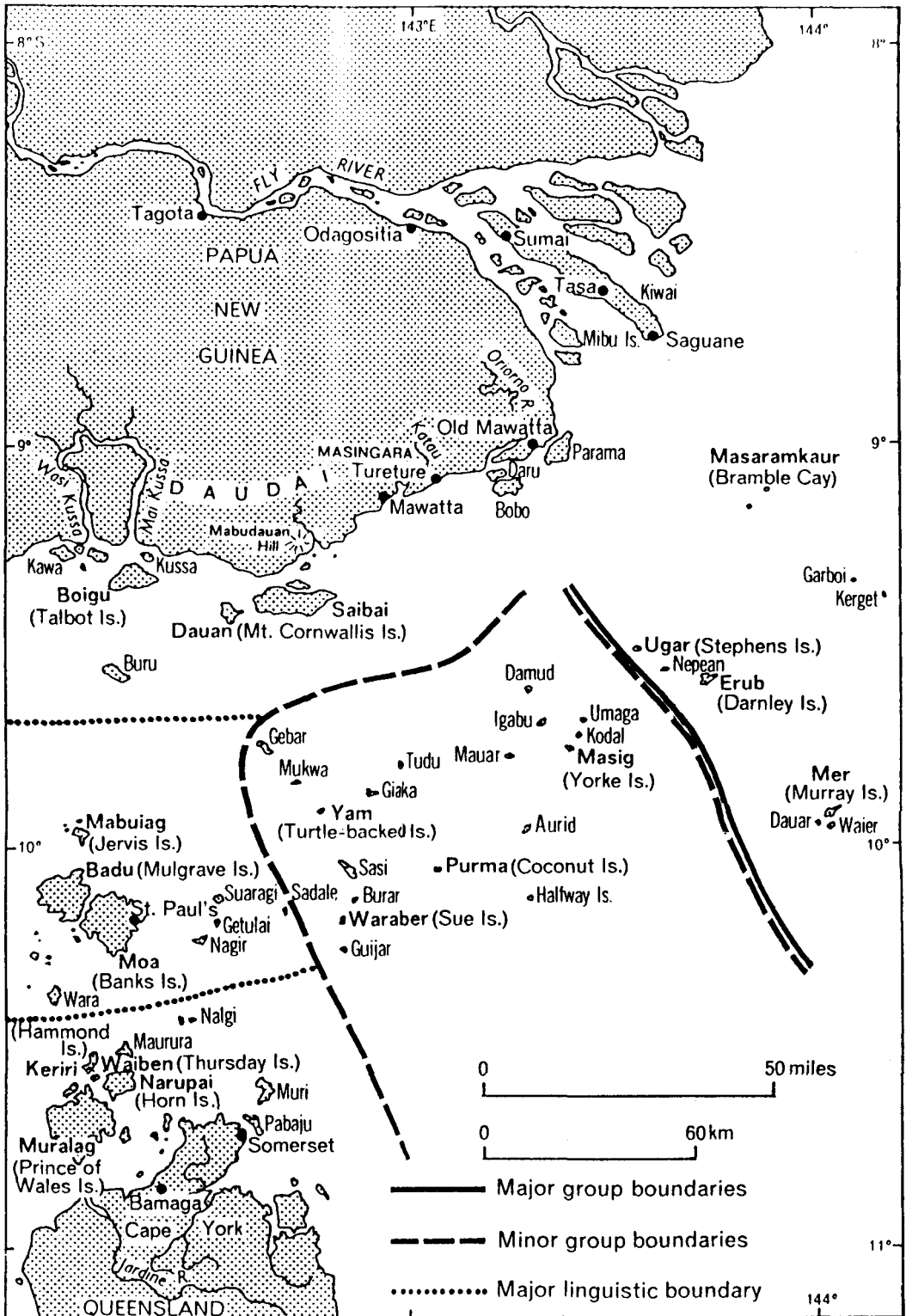
Between October and December 1981, I travelled down the Bruce Highway from Mossman to Brisbane, stopping in twenty-one Queensland coastal towns and cities where numbers of Torres Strait Islanders have now settled. During those nine weeks, I interviewed over eighty Islanders, who described to me their own language backgrounds and current language use, as well as those of their immediate families, relatives and friends. Through Islander networks, I estimate that I gathered first or second-hand information about some six to seven hundred Torres Strait Islanders living on the mainland.¹

I also spoke to school teachers and principals, community counsellors, speech therapists, and education, community welfare, health and housing officials about the language backgrounds and difficulties of Islander school children. Among Islanders and knowledgeable outsiders there was general agreement as to what the language situation was. Moreover, what they told me corroborated my own observations of language use in streets, playgrounds and homes.

Before carrying out this fieldtrip, I had lived for four months on Erub (Darnley Is.), an eastern island community in Torres Strait, where I had learned to speak the *lingua franca* of the area. I had also met visitors from other islands and carried out fieldwork on Ugar (Stephen Is.), Mer (Murray Is.), Masig (Yorke Is.), Bamaga and Thursday Island. Nevertheless, I was continually surprised at the

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¹ Bamaga, a Torres Strait Islander reserve community located on the tip of Cape York Peninsula, is considered by Islanders to be part of Torres Strait.



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openness and hospitality of Islanders I met on this trip once I spoke to them in a Torres Strait language and explained who had sent me to them.

THE TORRES STRAIT ISLANDS

Estimates of the number of Torres Strait Islanders (who are Australian citizens) vary from a low of about 10,000 (Commonwealth 1971 Census) to a high of about 22,000 (Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs 1981 figures). The latter estimate, which includes people of Islander descent who identify and are accepted as Torres Strait Islanders and are thus eligible for certain grant monies from the Commonwealth, is probably more accurate.

Since the beginning of large-scale emigration to the mainland from the late 1960s, there has been a continual decline in the population of the islands. Only about 4,500 Islanders remain in Torres Strait and more than half of these have settled on Thursday Island, the administrative, commercial and shipping centre. Thus, possibly as many as 17,000 to 18,000 Islanders now live in other parts of Australia, mostly in the coastal cities and towns of Queensland.

The largest centres of Islander population are Townsville, Cairns, Rockhampton, Mackay and Brisbane, but Islander families have also settled in the coastal towns of Ayr, Babinda, Bowen, Bundaberg, Cardwell, Gladstone, Gordonvale, Innisfail, Mossman, Pine Creek, Port Douglas, Sarina and Tully. (There are also significant numbers of Islanders living in Sydney, Perth, Weipa and Darwin).

Although there has long been intermarriage between Islanders and Aborigines, most Islanders do not identify as Aboriginal people. It is unusual for the two groups to live together on the mainland and interaction is rare, although this is changing at the community leader level and, perhaps more significantly among high school students and recent school leavers. Torres Strait Islanders are usually described as a Melanesian people with social and cultural values that are as much European as Aboriginal.

THE LANGUAGES OF TORRES STRAIT

Although this paper deals with Torres Strait Islanders who are now resident on the Australian mainland, some information about the languages spoken in the Strait may be helpful in understanding the mainland context.

Of the two hundred or so islands in Torres Strait, which lies between Cape York Peninsula and Papua New Guinea, only seventeen are currently inhabited. However, all of them are owned and many are still visited and cultivated by people from neighbouring islands. Before about 1850, only two languages appear to have been spoken: Kala Lagaw Ya, an Australian language spoken in the western and central islands; and Meriam Mir, a Papuan language, spoken in the eastern islands. With the arrival of Europeans and large numbers of Pacific Islanders in the last half of the nineteenth century, a third language, a descendant of Pacific Pidgin English, came to be used not only among Islanders, Aborigines, Papuans, Pacific Islanders and Europeans involved in the beche-de-mer and pearling industries but, increasingly, as a common language for Torres Strait Islanders from either side of the traditional language barrier (see map).

In time, the children on several islands began to speak this new language as their mother tongue and, in response to the increasing need for a *lingua franca*, it spread throughout the area, even displacing the traditional languages on some islands. Although it is now the first or second language of almost all Islanders, it is generally not considered a 'real' language but rather it is stigmatized as a 'corrupt' or 'ungrammatical' form of English. The language has several names: Pizin, Broken, Big Thap or Blaikman. Because it creolized (i.e., acquired mother tongue speakers) in Torres Strait and has been greatly influenced by the traditional languages of the area, I shall refer to it as Torres Strait Creole (TSC).

Since the turn of the century, English has been the language of instruction and has been formally taught by European (and Islander) teachers in the classroom. For most children, it is a second or third language. Today, all except two of the teachers in Thursday Island and Bamaga schools are Europeans and there are European principals on some island schools, but many children are taught by Islander teachers whose command of English is often poor.¹ English is seen as the key to advancement within European-dominated areas of society and as a valuable political tool in dealing with the bureaucracy. Although Islanders with a good grasp of English are generally admired, they incur severe censure if they attempt to use it in situations where Islanders alone are present.

¹ The 14 primary schools on the reserve island communities are not administered by the Queensland Education Department, but by its Department of Aboriginal and Islander Advancement through the Torres Strait Island School located on Thursday Island. These schools are staffed by Torres Strait Islander teachers and, at the time of writing, six have European principals who are seconded to DAIA from the Education Department for the two years of their service on the islands.

ISLAND LANGUAGE USE ON THE MAINLAND

Although there is some individual and family variation, certain current patterns and long term trends emerged from my study of language use among Torres Strait Islanders resident on the mainland.

As in the Strait, people who speak one of the traditional languages as their first language or 'mother tongue' will almost always prefer to use it when speaking to other Islanders who share that language. When there is no shared traditional language, Islanders choose TSC, the Strait *lingua franca*. That is why TSC is the language most often heard when Islanders speaking different languages come together at traditional gatherings or at church on the mainland as well as in Torres Strait. When speaking to Europeans, Islanders will almost invariably use English.

This, however, is by no means a complete picture. The major complication concerns children's language choice and, here again, island linguistic practices are repeated on the mainland.

When both parents are Islanders, but come from different language backgrounds, for example, the home language tends to be TSC. Thus, even when the decision has been made to use a Torres Strait language in the home, there can still be a shift away from the traditional languages.¹

On Mer and Kubin, most parents and older people use Meriam Mir and Kala Lagaw Ya respectively, as well as TSC, when speaking to children. The children understand the traditional languages but reply in the creole.

As in the multilingual communities of Thursday Island and Bamaga, some Kala Lagaw Ya-speaking parents, particularly from Mabuiag and Badu, who are concerned about their children "losing their [traditional] language" continue to speak it with their children, reflecting a strong anxiety in those islands about language loss.

It seems, however, that the tendency is for children raised on the mainland to adopt TSC as their preferred language under pressure from their peers, even when their parents do use a traditional language in the home.

¹ After the end of World War II, intermarriage between Islanders from different sides of the traditional east-west barrier became much more common than in earlier times and this trend is even more noticeable among the present younger generation of mainland-dwelling Islanders.

On the one hand, then, some Islanders, especially children, who live on the mainland, are abandoning their traditional languages in favour of TSC, the inter-island medium of communication. This is so particularly in the large centres of Islander population, where cohesive, self-sustaining and self-isolating Islander communities are emerging in the poorer inner city suburbs.

On the other hand, the use of English is also increasing among Islander children resident on the mainland and educated solely in English. This is usually the case when one parent is not an Islander: whatever the ethnic background of the non-Islander spouse (Aboriginal, South Sea Island, European) it is rare to find a language other than English spoken in the home. Similarly, the children of Islander families who have settled in small towns or are otherwise isolated from the large Islander communities are tending to abandon their language in favour of English, even when an island language is used in the home. The presence of grandparents and other relatives in the home can retard this development but apparently not reverse it.

One factor in the children's adoption of English as their preferred language is the mainstream society's negative response to hearing island languages, especially TSC. As a well-educated Islander, now working in Cairns, said to me: "It's an embarrassment here to speak Broken." As Islanders perceive it, most Europeans' response to hearing an island language is to think that the speaker is unable to learn English and comes from "a backward culture". "It's as though you've given up after trying to speak English," said one man. I heard of a child's preferring to take a week's detention rather than hand over his mother's note which was written in ungrammatical English. Some parents, aware of their children's embarrassment and discouraged by teachers from using their language at home, begin to speak only English to their children, although others become more determined to preserve this aspect of their Islander identity. However, even when parents use an island language at home, some children, sensitive to mainstream pressure, will answer only in English.

In spite of this, island languages, particularly TSC, are much more widely spoken on the mainland than is generally supposed. In Cairns and Townsville, I heard them spoken in shops, supermarkets, pubs and games parlours and in the street, but there was usually a shift to English when I approached. In many city schools, TSC can be heard in the playground and on the oval, but only when European teachers are not present. It is never used in the classroom. Generally speaking, I found a high correlation between the maintenance of Islander cultural and social values and maintenance of an island language.

Over the past few years, the majority of adolescents who are fluent bilinguals in English and TSC have adopted the latter as a marker of Islander (or simply black) identity, and it can also signal their alienation from European social values. It is the preferred language in many informal situations, especially when 'mucking around' with friends, and for certain topics: joking, drinking, showing off, recounting gossip or sexual exploits, leisure activities, and so on. If this trend continues, we can expect to see even younger children adopt the creole as a marker of separateness and identity in those Queensland cities in which the population of black and white adolescents is already so evident.

(NOTE - The fieldwork on which these findings are based was funded by a Visiting Research Fellowship in Sociolinguistics from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies as part of a larger project on the English-based creole *lingua franca* of Torres Strait.

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HOME/SCHOOL CO-ORDINATORS - APPEAL FOR RESEARCH ASSISTANCE

I am doing research in Armidale with a view to assisting in the policies that affect relationships between Aboriginal community members and the school system. I am interested in learning about your role in the education of Aborigines - how you go about your jobs, and how you think the future of home-school liaison could develop.

You can write it down and send it to me, or contact me and I'll get in touch with you. Please don't be reluctant. Views of parents, teachers and administrators are also welcome.

Please reply to - John Synott
Centre for Social and Cultural Studies
University of New England
Armidale NSW 2350 Phone (067) 37 3011

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One of the major concerns in Aboriginal health is the occurrence of petrol sniffing among young Aborigines, with deleterious influences on learning. The effects of such activity are described by Dr H.D.Eastwell, in *The Aboriginal Health Worker**.



*From *The Aboriginal Health Worker* Vol.8:2 June 1984.

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