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TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STUDENTS IN QUEENSLAND MAINLAND SCHOOLS

#Part II: Language Difficulties

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This article is the second of a two-part series on Torres Strait Islander children whose families have settled on the Queensland mainland. Here I discuss some of the language difficulties of these children. The first part, dealing with their language backgrounds, appeared in Vol.12 No.3, June/July 1984.

INTRODUCTION

The following discussion is in no way a definitive or complete exposition of the language problems of Torres Strait Islander children attending Queensland schools. Rather, I hope to make educationists aware of some of the specific areas of concern to teachers of this group of students, indicate the probable cause, and suggest a solution.

The article deals only with children whose families have made their homes in the coastal cities and towns of Queensland, i.e., in predominantly European society. Excluded from discussion are the Torres Strait Islander high school students on Aboriginal Study Grants, who leave the Strait for secondary schooling on the mainland, but whose immediate families still reside in the islands or in Bamaga. The problems they face in learning English and in adapting to mainstream Queensland society are usually even more acute.

NUMBERS OF TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CHILDREN IN QUEENSLAND SCHOOLS

I mentioned in the previous article some difficulties in obtaining accurate population data about Torres Strait Islanders. Yet another problem was establishing the number of Islander children currently attending mainstream Queensland schools.

Some years ago, there was a Queensland Cabinet decision not to count Aboriginal and Islander students separately from Europeans, since "they are all Queenslanders." However, now that 80% to 90% of black students receive secondary school grants from the Commonwealth Department of Education, high schools are obliged to keep lists of their students receiving Commonwealth payments and grants.

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Using official figures from several Commonwealth departments, I estimate the number of Islander children in Queensland mainstream schools to be between 3,500 and 4,500.¹

LANGUAGE DIFFICULTIES

Children of Torres Strait Islander descent tend to do poorly at school, even though they appear to be highly motivated, at least initially. Islander parents are generally keen for their children to do well in school. In many cases, the quest for a good education for their children was given as one of their motives for emigrating to the mainland.

There are, of course, many possible reasons for this failure to achieve academic success. Some of the blame must be accepted by the state education system itself, which seems for the most part unable to adapt its structures and functions to the educational needs and aspirations of minority groups. Part of the failure is undoubtedly due to the difficulties minority students face in coping with the kind of English that is used as the language of instruction in mainstream schools.

Few teachers and educationists, from pre-school to secondary school level, appear to realize that the majority of Torres Strait Islander students, for example, even those whose families have lived for many years on the mainland, speak an island language as their "mother tongue" and come from homes in which all interaction is carried out in an island language. As was discussed earlier, this is usually Torres Strait Creole (TSC), the Strait *lingua franca*, but may occasionally be Kala Lagaw Ya, the Western language. Only rarely do the children of Murray Island families continue to speak Meriam Mir, the Eastern language, although it is still spoken by some parents. It is true that English is increasing as the home language among some Islanders but, even when parents use English with their children, it is influenced to some extent by their own island first language.

Thus, Islander children attending school for the first time often lack confidence in their ability not only to behave appropriately in the new institution, but also to express themselves in the new language. Both of these factors contribute to the children's shyness and unwillingness to talk in class.

Islander children whose mother tongue is not English cope with the language problem in several different ways. One is to refuse to talk at all in the classroom, another is to speak in a whisper, hoping their imperfect English will not be noticed by the teacher and classmates and that the teacher will not call on them again, and yet

another is to attempt to communicate normally with teacher and classmates using the best English they can produce.

All second language learners transfer phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic and even pragmatic features of their first language to the second. In time, if the second language learning is successful, the number of features transferred becomes fewer.

While Islander children are learning English, their speech will contain elements of their first language. Unfortunately, few teachers in Queensland schools are aware that the imperfect English produced by their students during this stage is the result of normal second language learning processes. After all, as several remarked to me, the children in question "were born here", the implication being that children born and raised in Queensland towns and cities must necessarily belong to the mainstream English-speaking society and speak English as their first language. Unfortunately, there is also a tendency among some teachers to expect less from their Islander than from their European students and, rather than question the appropriateness of the material presented or the language of its delivery, to ascribe lack of attention and non-standard English forms to lack of intelligence. Some teachers, therefore, are quick to label the features which are transferred from the child's first language and which differ from those of the variety of English aimed for in the classroom as 'speech defects' and see them as an indication of 'cognitive deficit', even though recent research has thoroughly discredited deficit theory as an explanation of non-standard language use among minority children. In some cases, the children are sent to remedial teachers and speech therapists, usually with little success since the cause of the problem is not properly understood.²

SOME NON-STANDARD ENGLISH FORMS USED BY ISLANDER STUDENTS

This is not the place for a detailed description of the non-standard English forms (or so-called 'speech errors') used by Islander children, but I propose to examine here the ones most commonly cited.

Phonological

- 1) Plosive sounds are substituted for some fricatives, most often p for f, b for v, t for θ, and d for ð.
- 2) The fricatives, s and z are substituted for the affricates, tʃ and dʒ, respectively.
- 3) There is metathesis of s and k, where the English sequence sk becomes ks.³

It is instructive to note that none of the three island languages contains the sounds: f, v, θ, ð, tʃ, dʒ in its phonemic inventory. Although Kala Lagaw Ya has two interdental sounds, which are written as th and dh in the new orthography, these are stops, not fricatives as θ and ð are in English. Words from English and other languages which were borrowed into those languages and 'naturalised' to conform to the existing sound structures, show precisely the same substitutions cited above. Thus 'flour' [Flawə] became [plaua], 'lavalava' became [labalaba], 'three' [θriy] became [tiri], 'other' [ʌðə] became [nada], 'church' [tʃətʃ] became [sos] and 'jam' [dʒæm] became [zam].

Metathesis of k and s is a morphological device of Meriam Mir, as shown by the change from ikos, meaning 'Spear' (an order) to iski, meaning 'speared' (recent past tense). In TSC, the word derived from English 'ask' is akse [aksɛ], and 'basketball' is baksetbol (baksetbol).

Morphological

- (4) Plural nouns are not marked as they are in English. We add an -s to most nouns to signal plurality, as in 'one girl', but 'two girls', 'three girls', etc. Islanders are more likely to say 'two girl', 'three girl', and so on.

To monolingual English-speakers, it may seem that plural marking on nouns is "logical" or "necessary" and that children whose language variety does not make plurals in this way may be "unable to tell the difference between singular and plural." If this were so, it would indeed be a cognitive deficiency. However, a great many of the world's languages have no plural marking on nouns, especially when they follow a numeral.

This pattern of numeral plus uninflected noun occurs in all three island languages. The equivalent phrases in these languages are:

Meriam Mir:

netat neur;	neis neur;	neis netat neur
one girl;	two girl;	three girl

Torres Strait Creole

wan gel;	tu gel	tiri gel
one girl;	two girl;	three girl

Kala Lagaw Ya:

urapun poekay;	uksar poekay;	mura poekayal
one girl;	two girl;	three girls (or more)

Note that while the noun remains the same in Meriam Mir and Torres Strait Creole, Kala Lagaw Ya does add a plural ending to nouns when they follow a numeral meaning 'more than two'.

- 5) Many Islander children use "he" as their sole third person singular pronoun, whereas English has the choice of "he", "she" or "it", depending on the gender of the referent (the person or thing referred to).

This may also reflect the pronominal system of the island languages, only one of which distinguishes gender here. Thus, the single form meaning 'he, she, it' in Meriam Mir is e, and in TSC it is em. Kala Lagaw Ya has two third person singular pronouns, nuy meaning 'he' and na meaning 'she'. This is not to say that these languages have fewer pronouns than English: each of the languages has several words where English has only "we" or "you", for example.

Syntactic

- 6) There is no copula link ("am", "is", "are") between subject and predicate noun or between subject and predicate adjective. Islanders are likely to say: "He my friend" and "He very angry" rather than the standard English: "He is my friend" and "He is very angry".⁴

Many languages (e.g. Russian, Tagalog, Hebrew, Indonesian) lack a copula in these constructions, simply juxtaposing subject and predicate noun or adjective.

In Kala Lagaw Ya, the two sentences would be translated as:

Nuy ngaw thoebudh.	Nuy mina ngurum.
He my friend.	He very angry.

In Torres Strait Creole, they would be:

Em met blo mi.	Em prapa wail.
He friend of me.	He very angry.

In Meriam Mir, while the second sentence would be translated as:

E au wekuweku.
He very angry,

the first may be translated either as:

E kara kaimeg	or as	E kara kaimeg dali.
He my friend		He my friend is.

However, I am told that dali 'is' is used only when the subject of the sentence is a person (as it is here) and that otherwise it is omitted.

- 7) My final example involves the use of double negative sentences. One example of this kind of sentence was given to me by a remedial teacher: "I don't want no money". The standard English version of this sentence would be: "I don't want any money", with only one negative word.

This construction, which occurs in several non-standard varieties of English as well as languages such as French, Italian and Spanish, is also found in the three island languages, as the following examples illustrate:

Kala Lagaw Ya:

Lawnga ina ayginga.
No here food+none.

Meriam Mir:

Ka nole leuerkak.
I not food+not having

which both mean: "I don't have any food." In Torres Strait Creole, we see the same constructions in such sentences as:

I no gad nating (lit. There isn't nothing.) Nothing is happening.

This has been a brief discussion of the non-standard English forms most commonly encountered by teachers and remedial specialists working with Islander school children in Queensland. Since all of them can be shown to correspond to patterns of sound and grammar in the three island languages, they could well be analyzed as transference phenomena--features transferred during second language learning from the child's first language to English.⁵

EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

It seems clear that we are dealing here, at least in part, with problems of second language learning. Sending Torres Strait Islander children to speech therapy and remedial teaching classes to correct first to second language transference phenomena is a misuse of resources and a largely unsuccessful experience for the children and specialists alike. Being sent to such classes and still failing to improve their spoken and written English can shatter the children's self-confidence and it leaves them (and their parents) feeling discouraged, anxious and resentful--and later often disillusioned and

angry, not only with the school system, but also with the society it represents. (Most parents I talked to are convinced that European teachers discriminate against their children.)

Even though community education consellers and concerned teachers in certain schools have attempted to persuade the Queensland Education Department to experiment with ESL programs, the attempts have been unsuccessful.⁶ Thus, while the provision of ESL classes is an obvious solution to the language difficulties of many children, there are at present no ESL teachers employed in mainstream schools in Queensland and, it is fair to say, most educationists do not recognise that English is a second language for many of the children they teach.

All children who were born or raised in Queensland towns and cities are assumed to speak English at home as their 'mother tongue'. Even in primary and secondary schools in Cairns and Townsville, where TSC is regularly spoken out of the classroom by Islander children, several teachers refused to believe that this was so. "I've never heard it," said the principal of one Cairns primary school with a large Islander enrolment. "Here they speak English--that's when you can get them to speak." As I tried to show in the previous article, Islanders quickly shift to English when Europeans approach.⁷

CONCLUSION

Although I spoke to dozens of English principals, teachers and remedial specialists working in Queensland schools, few were aware of the ethnic or language backgrounds of the children they were teaching. In part this was due not to lack of sympathy or interest but rather to a reluctance to seem to be prying into their student's private lives. In part, also, it was due to the ideological framework within which Queensland teachers structure their teaching practices and attitudes towards minority children, an ideological framework imposed to some extent through bureaucratic practices. Recognition of different ethnic backgrounds among Queensland school-children is a sensitive political and social issue - hence the Cabinet decision referred to earlier.

If all children in Queensland shared the same cultural, social and linguistic backgrounds, values and aspirations, it would be justified for institutions which transmit those norms (such as schools) to treat them in a similar fashion.

Ignoring the major differences among students does not diminish these differences. On the contrary, it may deepen them, especially if disadvantaged groups within the community come to view the institutions concerned as alien and even hostile to their own needs and aspirations.

NOTES

- ¹ This may actually be a low figure. It includes children of mixed descent, who have the option of identifying as Torres Strait Islanders if they so wish.
- ² This should in no way be interpreted as an attack on such professionals, for whom I have a high regard. I interviewed several remedial teachers and speech therapists working in Queensland schools and all were extremely sympathetic to the language problems of Islander children and distressed at their own lack of success in changing established speech patterns. They realized that a disproportionate number of black children were being sent to them for remedial work, but that only a small number of them could truly be classed as 'speech defective'. After I spoke to one therapist, she began working with a group of Islander children using ESL techniques and reported to me that these had proved successful.

Readers may also be interested to learn that some European parents who have spent time in Torres Strait and whose children have been exposed to island languages also send their children to specialists to be "checked out for language" - "phonetically de-liced" was how one remedial teacher put it.

- ³ It is interesting to speculate on why these particular phonological 'errors' were always singled out rather than other non-standard English features of Islander children's speech. Not mentioned, for example, were salient differences in intonation and timbre, in vowel quality and in place of consonant articulation.

It may be that the features mentioned here are found only in the speech of non-European children and so are diagnostic of those varieties of English spoken by Islander (and Aboriginal) students.

Although feature (3) also occurs variably in certain non-standard English varieties as well as in the speech of young standard English-speaking children, it seems to occur categorically in the speech of Islander children even from English-speaking backgrounds during their first months at school and perhaps for that reason is readily identified as a marker of Islander speech.

It may be that teachers have found these particular features the most difficult to change.

Or, given the *de facto* primacy of literacy in most English-language programs and that assessment of progress in English studies is based on visible signs, non-standard features of pronunciation such as dental rather than alveolar t and d low central [a] rather than low front [æ] etc., which do not affect the way words are actually

written, may be considered as potentially less likely to cause miscommunication than the substitution of plosives for fricatives and certain fricatives for affricates and therefore of secondary importance.

- ⁴ Teachers who have adopted a prescriptive framework for the teaching of English appear to find "verbless" sentences like these particularly difficult to work from. Since the major structural unit of English language analysis in schools is the sentence, failure to recognize and produce "full" or "well-formed" sentences, i.e., sentences containing "full" verbs, threatens the progression from sentence to sentence-conjunction to paragraph to essay by which progress in English studies is assessed. Again, failure to recognize the basic structure of the English sentence may be taken as a problem of cognition or "lack of logic" by teachers who have limited themselves to this approach to the teaching of English. (I am grateful to Jean Harkins and Glenda Livette for discussions on this point.)
- ⁵ It should be noted that by the end of their first school year, few Islander children are still being sent to remedial classes. There are at least two possible reasons for this. The first is that, after a year's exposure to English in the playground and instruction in it in the classroom, the children have learned to communicate in standard English or at least to avoid those features which are unacceptable to teachers. The second, less charitable, reason, which was mentioned to me by several people, is that the teachers, having low academic expectations of their Islander students, have decided that remedial classes are a waste of time and have given up attempting to teach the children the kind of English they must have to succeed in their education.
- ⁶ Queensland Education Department officials may privately be sympathetic to such programs and admit the need for them, but they too are working under financial, personnel and political constraints.
- ⁷ Islander children attending the schools in question told me (in TSC) that they did speak the language in the playground and this was confirmed by European children, who complained of being excluded and not knowing what was being talked about, by the community education counsellors, and by other teachers.

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