THE CREOLE LANGUAGE OF THE KATHERINE AND ROPER
RIVER AREAS, NORTHERN TERRITORY

Margaret C. Sharpe and John Sandefur

Most of the Aborigines resident at settlements at Ngukurr (Roper River) and Bamyili (near Katherine) speak a contact vernacular which they refer to as 'Pidgin English'. The language has become creolised, being the first language for the younger people, and the usual language of communication for the older people. Similar creoles appear to be spoken in a wide area in cattle station areas of the Northern Territory; although the forms may not be identical, these creoles appear to be highly mutually intelligible.[1]

Aborigines at Ngukurr and Bamyili who are fluent in English clearly differentiate the creole and English, and rarely mix them. Those who are less fluent in English speak a mixture of English and creole to non-Aborigines, the proportion varying with their familiarity with English. This situation accounts for the non-recognition of the creole as a language entity by many government and school staff for many years. It was noted only that some Aborigines spoke good English, while others, with less white contact, spoke a 'broken English'. Sharpe reported on the creole to the then Northern Territory Welfare Branch in about 1967, and found that, although their staff had not been conscious of the creole before then, they appeared immediately to recognise that its existence accounted for much language they had heard from and among Aborigines. Greater awareness of the creoles by whites, stemming from greater use of creole in the presence of whites, has followed changes in attitude to these languages in recent years, by both Aborigines and whites.

The Roper Aborigines distinguish between different forms of creole in their area, referring to 'proper' or 'heavy' Pidgin as opposed to

'light' Pidgin. Jernudd, in studying sociolects at Bagot Reserve in
Darwin in the late 1960s, found three types of 'English' spoken there:
Aboriginal English (a restricted form of English, often only used for
very stylised topics - for example, saying the right things to those
in authority about baby care, hygiene, etc.), Creole, and Roper Pidgin.
At this time many of the more influential Aborigines at Bagot Reserve
were from Roper River. Jernudd states (1969:20):

> "The youth Creole is linguistically different from Pidgin.
> Creole is typologically closer to English than Pidgin since
> it has a similar phonology (although particularly the inton-
> ational characteristics are closer to Pidgin) and a more
> English vocabulary. Its syntax is basically a Pidgin syntax.
> Pidgin has preserved an Aboriginal-type phonology in addition
> to sharp syntactical differences from English. It is often
> referred to as Roper Pidgin (from Roper River). Many school-
> children switch between and are able to comment on the two
> Aboriginal English varieties, Pidgin and Creole. For them
> these varieties functionally stand in a diglossia relation
> (in addition to the diglossic relation between them and
> English). They use Pidgin to adults, Creole among themselves.
> Their Pidgin is in effect a modified Creole."

The evidence in the Ngukurr-Bamyili area does not warrant a clear
distinction of two dialects of creole. Rather, Ngukurr and Bamyili
may best be described (after DeCamp 1971) as being post-creole speech
communities. In such a situation the creole is being continually
modified in the direction of the standard (donor) language, and is in
the process of merging with it. The influence of the standard language
(in this case English) does not reach all speakers uniformly, so that
there is a continuum of varieties of creole (mesolectal creole)[2] from
an 'old creole' form or basilect, to a form much closer to English,
which we will call the acrolect. The acrolect is defined to be the
donor language towards which the creole is moving or levelling. This
situation applied in the Bamaga Community in Cape York (Rigsby 1974),
but at Ngukurr and Bamyili there appears to be a structural gap between
the acrolectal creole and English. Sandefur plans to confirm whether
this gap exists with the aid of a computer concordance in the near
future.

The Aborigines' use of 'heavy' Pidgin is roughly equivalent to the
basilect, and 'light' Pidgin to the acrolect. The speakers make no
clear or absolute delineation between the two, but classify a given
speech variety relative to another variety. Thus, for example,
acrolectal creole may be said to be 'proper English' in one situation
and 'light Pidgin' in another by the same speaker. Jernudd's Roper
Pidgin is roughly equivalent to 'heavy' Pidgin or basilectal creole,
and his youth creole to 'light' Pidgin or acrolectal creole. We have

used Roper Pidgin for communication with Aborigines from Elliott,
Borroloola, Bagot (mainly with Roper related people), and even (for a
few old people) at Palm Island near Townsville, and observed its use
among Aborigines on twelve cattle stations throughout the Roper River-
Bamyili area, and at Katherine.[3] We have reports of a similar creole
or creoles from Elliott down to and along the Barkly Highway to the
Queensland border,[4] Hooker Creek, etc. Evidence from television
documentaries seen by Sharpe also suggests that Roper Creole would be
mutually intelligible with creoles in an even wider area.

The creole of a given speaker will cover a large range of the
continuum, a number of socio-linguistic factors affecting the area of
focus at any given time. The two main factors, as mentioned earlier,
are the speaker's degree of fluency in English and who he is talking
with. Inter-Aboriginal communication is usually focused towards the
basilectal creole, which is not normally intelligible to Europeans.
Speakers fluent in English clearly code switch when speaking with
Europeans, rarely mixing the creole with English. Those less fluent
in English focus on acrolectal creole, some mixing the creole with
English (i.e., continuously switching codes in the conversation). One
notable exception is the Aboriginal minister at Ngukurr who is very
fluent in English (he learnt English before Creole) but characteristi-
cally mixes Creole and English during church services in an attempt to
be intelligible to both the Aborigines and the Europeans in his con-
gregation.

The process of levelling and speaker focus on the continuum are most
readily seen in the phonology. It is also observable in the grammar,
as well as (although to a lesser degree) in the vocabulary.

The basilect phonemes are patterned after the Aboriginal tribal
vernaculars of the area with little significant deviation, being the
following: consonants[5] /b, ḍ, d, ḍ, g, m, ñ, n, ṇ, ŋ, ḷ, l, ḷ, ɼ, r,
y, w/ and vowels /i, e, a, o, u/. There is evidence for the existence,
diachronically, of several coexistent vowel systems. For those tribal
vernaculars that have a three vowel system, 'old' Pidgin appears to
have only had three vowels /i, a, u/; /e/ was probably introduced into
the basilect before /o/, as /e/ has also developed in the Alawa lan-
guage from south of the Roper River; /e/ also occurs in Creole as a
contraction of /ay/. The phoneme /o/ developed later. Phoneme
fluctuation can be seen in laygim/legim *like*, bugi/bogi *swim*, namu/
numo/nomo *no*, and guwe/gowe *go away*. Consonant clusters word initially
are avoided in the basilect, either by deletion of the initial conson-
ant or by insertion of a vowel between the consonants of the English
donor word, resulting in words (still retained) such as jilib *sleep*,

jineg *snake,* bilaŋgid *blanket,* buludaŋ *blue tongue lizard,* bulijiman *policeman,* garajim *scratch,* don *stone,* and biya *spear.*

The acrolect phonemes are patterned after the English phonemes with no significant deviation. Consonant di- and tri-clusters occur as do vocoid diphthongs, and the distribution of phonemes is the same as for English. The mesolect does not have a set of phonemes *per se* but may be thought of in terms of levelling rules showing the basic interference patterns between the basilect and acrolect as one moves 'up' the continuum. Ten general consonantal levelling rules have been delineated. These are not ordered rules but operate simultaneously. They are listed, however, according to frequency of operation.[6]

1. Sibilants that were deleted to avoid consonant clusters word initially are replaced. biya → sbiya *spear.*

2. The alveolar sibilant replaces the alveopalatal stop in donor positions.[7] Further delineation of the sibilants in donor positions occurs in acrolectal creole. jabi → sabi *understand,* sap → šap *shop.*

3. Voicing further delineates devoiced consonants in donor positions, occurring stylistically in basilectal creole and contrastively in acrolectal creole. bag → bak *bark.*

4. Labiodental fricatives replace bilabial stops in donor positions. bobala/bowabala → fobala/fowabala *four.*

5. Word initial /h/ that underwent deletion during creolisation re-occurs. amini → hamini *how many?*

6. Affricates replace the alveopalatal stop in donor positions. jej → čeč *church.*

7. Interdental fricatives replace alveolar and alveopalatal stops in donor positions. jarre → ðarre *there* (from '*that way'*), de → ðe *they.*

8. /θ/ replaces /s/ in donor positions word finally. mawos → mawoθ *mouth.*

9. Alveolar consonants (sometimes with modification of the preceeding vowel) replace retroflexed consonants in donor positions. ardim → adim *hurt.*

10. Flapped /ř/ is reduced to continuant /r/ in initial consonant clusters. trrubala → trubala *true.*

Speakers will occasionally apply levelling rules in non-donor positions. One speaker at Bamyili, for example, characteristically 'over-levelled' with reference to rule 4, so that he had /f/ occurring where /p/ or /b/ should have been.[8] Levelling rules for vowels are more complex and harder to define. Use of some vowel phones is stylistic

over much of the mesolect, but only becomes contrastive near the acrolect.

Dutton found for Palm Island Aboriginal English that there was a greater speed of utterance (in syllables per unit time) for Aboriginal English than for Australian English.[9] Although no study has been done on the creole on this point, this appears to be so for it, accounting in large measure for the very low intelligibility of the creole to Australian English speakers. Otherwise rhythm (stress-timed as in English) and the basic intonation patterns and the information conveyed by each intonation pattern, are readily understood by speakers of our dialects of English (Australian and southern American resp.). The creole has, as does Australian English, two statement intonations, one with final fall of pitch, and one with final rise of pitch. The latter pattern appears, as in Australian English, to convey non-final utterance in narrative, or a statement inviting some token of response in conversation. This non-final statement pattern may end in a glottal stop, particularly in narrative. However, the creole also has an intonation pattern never heard in English, for describing some continuing action. Pitch rises mid-sentence, usually on a verb, and is maintained at a high level on a lengthened vowel or on repetitions of a word; the sentence is concluded with a phrase or clause having either statement intonation pattern. Laryngealisation can often be heard in the high-pitched segment.

a bin wed wed wed wed wed wed najiŋ.
I waited for ages, but nothing (came).

The more prominent features only of the grammar are presented in this short article. The descriptions given can be amplified and explicated by reference to the appended short texts.

Transitive verbs are marked by the suffix -im.
    im gilim geŋgarru. *He is hitting a kangaroo.*
    im graygray. *He/she is crying.*
    mi lug. *I see.*

Past tense is marked by bin (also used as a past tense copula), and future by andi.
    Past: im bin gilim mi. *He hit me.*
    Present: mi jabi. *I understand.*
    Future: im andi jilib jaya. *He will sleep there.*

Continuous aspect is shown by the suffix -bad on verbs; for intransitive verbs reduplication can be used instead of -bad.
    im bin megim ginu. *He made a canoe.*

im bin megimbad ginu. *He was making a canoe* (not finished)
im bin gray. *He cried.*
im bin graygray. *He was crying.*

Moods are indicated by words as follows:
wandi *want* (intentive): im wandi go la riba.
                                    He wants to go to the river.
labda *must* (obligative): im labda lug la dagda.
                                    He must see the doctor.
gin *can* (abilitative): a gin bajimab.
                                    I can bring it.
gan *cannot* (inabilitative): yu gan go la mi.
                                    You can't go with me.
urldi *used to* (habitual past, occurs with bin):
     im bin urldi albim mi. *He used to help me.*
yusda *used to* (habitual past, occurs without bin):
     mi yusda legim im. *I used to like it.*
alde *always* (repetitive): alabad alde bleble.
                                    They are always playing.
nomo *not* (negative): yu nomo bin albim mi.
                         You didn't help me.

Verb clitics indicate direction of movement, sometimes of an abstract
nature. Although of English origin, there is indication that at least
one language nearby, Nunggubuyu, had clitics used for the same purpose.
The clitics are listed below.
   -ab *up:* bajimab bla mi. *Pass it up for me.*
   -dan *down:* im bin buldan. *He fell down.*
   -ad *out:* im bin gowad la hawoj gwigbala.
               He went out of the house quickly.
   -in *in:* mi wandi gowin la riba. *I want to go in the river.*
   -an *on:* yundubala gaman la mi. *You two come to me.*
   -we *away:* im bin basawe. *He passed away (died).*
   -beg *back:* gambeg weya yu binij. *Come back when you finish.*

The only nouns overtly pluralised in the creole are olmen *old man*
(plural olmenolmen), and olgamen *woman* (plural olgolgamen). Adjectives
are usually marked by suffixed -bala or -wan.
Pronouns are shown in Table 1. Except for the first person (excl.)
singular pronoun, there is no variation in form between nominative and
oblique, object or possessive. a/ay may be used for subject, and may/
mayn for possessive; mi may be used in all positions. Away from Roper
River the dual distinction is sometimes missing, and the forms mibala,
yu(m)bala and sometimes imbala are heard. yumob is more common than
yuwalabad at Ngukurr, and yuwalabad at the cattle stations.

TABLE 1 PRONOUNS			
	singular	dual	plural
12 person (1st incl.)	yunmi	-	yunmalabad/minalabad/wi
1st person (excl.)	mi (etc.)	mindubala	melabad/mibala/wi
2nd person	yu	yundubala	yuwalabad/yubala/yumbala/yumob/yu
3rd person	im	imdubala	alabad/al/de/je

A reflexive pronoun mijalb (invariant for all persons) and recipro-
cal pronouns gija *each other* and mijamed *together* exist.

olmen bin lujim mijalb. *The old man died.* (lit. *lost himself*)

yu wandi bogi mijalb la riba? *Do you want to swim by yourself
in the river?*

yunmi gadimab mijalb. *We go our own ways.*

alabad bin gilimbad gija. *The were continually killing each other.*

dubala med gija. *They (two) are mates.*

dubala bin go la riba mijamed. *They (two) went to the river
together.*

As in English, the subject of the clause precedes the verb if any,
and the object if any follows the verb. Other 'case' relations are
signalled by:

bla/blaŋa genitive *belonging to, pertaining to, for the purpose of*
la/laŋa locative *to, in, at, with (accompanitive and instrumental)*
garrim instrumental *with (accompanitive and instrumental)*
burrum ablative *from*

To indicate location more specifically, phrases such as la dab la
on top of, laŋa lid la *in front of*, biyan la *behind*, gulujab *near*,
binji la *facing*, bagbon la *facing away from* are used.

Clauses may be related by juxtaposition, but seven conjunctions
occur. They are an *and*, bad *but*, buji/buñi *if*, anles *unless*, dumaji
because, win *when*, and waya *where, while, that, who, when*.[10] Their
functions parallel that of their English equivalents.

Sentence words and interjections include yuway *yes*, nomo *no*, najiŋ
nothing, no, gurdi *oh dear!*, yagay *ouch*, bobala *poor thing, what a
shame* (bobala also has adjectival-type use as in bobala mi *Poor old
me!*).

In basilectal creole many items of vocabulary are from local
languages. Examples are: ŋugu *water*, gabarra *head* (origin not
known), gula *anger*, barrawu *boat* (from Malay via local languages),
warl *good all over*, ñugurr *sacred*. Other words, although of

English origin, may not be recognised as such by many Australian
English speakers. Examples are: binji *stomach*, daga *food*, dagadagad
eat, jaba *dinner, evening meal*, bagi *tobacco*, bajam *past/first time*.
Other words of English origin have changed their reference sufficiently
to be confusing. Examples are: biŋga *arm, hand* (from *'finger'*),
aŋinab *be up above* (from *'hanging up'*), gilim *hit* (from *'kill'*),
jigibala *poisonous* (from *'cheeky'*), yalabala *halfcaste* (from *'yellow'*),
gugwan *ripe* (from *'cooked'*), brabli *proper* (from *'properly'*), dumaj
lots (from *'too much'*), gajin *mother-in-law* (from *'cousin'*).

Many creole expressions were incorporated into the English of white
residents at Ngukurr and surrounding cattle stations; such residents
found them colourful and apt. Expressions often heard from whites
included: gud binji *happy*, bulab gula *angry*, bobala, bobala mi, etc.
poor fellow, poor old me, etc., yu savi? *do you understand*, wanem *a
what's-it*, ŋi? (pronounced ñi by whites) *isn't it?*, mowa beda *better*,
jaldu *finished, OK*, im rayd *it'll do*, bogi *swim, wash*, biginini *child*,
yuway *yes*, gejim *catch, get*, munaŋa *white person*, blegbala *Aborigine*,
yalabala *halfcaste*.

APPENDIX

The following text examples were tape recorded at Ngukurr by
Sandefur during April and May, 1974. With few exceptions, the basilect
vowel system has been followed.

Text No. 1. This is part of a story told by Sambo for tape recording
after telling the same story in his tribal vernacular, Ridarngu. Sambo,
about 40 years old, speaks Roper Creole as his second language, and
speaks virtually no English. The story is about making a stone axe,
and he makes reference to a specific tree on location in the story.

dijan   - de bin alde go.   de bin alde luk   dat bigwan.
This (tree) - they always went to one. They always looked for a big

    big tri bin jandab. belam - blam tri. diswan.   de bin libam dat
one, a big tree standing, a plum   tree, this one. They left the big

big tri. ledi   jandab.   de bin alde   luk dat yaŋ tri,   e?
trees, let (them) stand. They always looked for a young tree, see?

pilam.   de bin luk   an bletnim,   bin kadim. de   bin
A plum. They found one and flattened it, (and) cut (it). They (would)

kadim   an grebam.   grebam,   megi   lilwan. megi
cut (it) and scrape (it), scrape (it) (and) make (it) small, make

flatwan prabli.   gidim   redwan,
(it) really flat. (They would) get a hot coal (lit. 'red one'), (and)

megim baya. megim baya an barnim.   megim jilagwan,
make a fire, make a fire and heat (it). (They'd) make it flexible

    bindimbak   an pudim dat ton ek.
(slack), bend it back and put the stone axe (head) (on it). (They

      gidim jat triŋ, dat buj triŋ.   dat buj   triŋ, na win
would) get that string, that bush string. That bush string, now which

mi gulim - win a bin dok tide, kolim bagwurrani, im iya blandi.   dat
I called, when I talked today, bagwurrani, there's plenty here. That

buj   triŋ, abarijani weya   de bin alde yujim, im iya.
bush string which the Aborigines they always used, there's some here.

bigmab iya, dumani ala go jandab,   abowe.   gidim
Lots here, plenty always standing (growing) everywhere. (They'd) get

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    an dayimap  -                      lodan                    radap
it and tie it up (wrap the handle) - low down (near the head) right

   la hen,                    weya  ðe bin alde olim    gadi
up to the handle (end of handle) where they always held it with the

biŋga.  endal - im gadim ....
hand.  It's got a handle ....
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Text No. 2.   This example is part of an inconspicuously recorded conver-
sation between Isaac (Mara tribesman deceased, age about 70, spoke fair
English, and Charlie (Rembarrnga tribesman, age about 50, speaks fair
English) outside the Ngukurr store.

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I:  wat dat  bod bin du?  C:  wijan? - o   im gada    hol  in im,   ðe
    What did that boat do?  Which one? - oh, it got a hole in it they

   rekan. I:  baj?  C:  im stakin   ða  send. I:  weya dijan iya?
reckon.  The barge?  It's stuck in the sand.   Whereabouts (lit. 'where

        C:  roj       riba im jidanlabat -  la sengran.   maidbi im
this here') Rose River it's sitting at, on the sand.  It's possibly

  gada hol -  I:  jeya, win a bin jaya im bin stak jeya laŋa ðat
got a hole.  There, when I was there it got stuck there at that

     mawoθ, weya im bin lo tayd.  C:  ðe rekan im gada hol dumaji.¹¹
(river) mouth, at low tide.    They reckon it's got a hole.

I:  an       mobeda    im kaman dis sayd burrum
    And (it'd be) better (if) he comes this side from (where he was)

  stak  agin  .... mobeda im bin   kaman   dis sayd -
stuck next time ... better (if) he comes this side (from where he was)

stak   weya  ðat tubala čanal im splidap. C:  dawon fram ðat čanal
stuck where the two channels divide.   Down from (where) the channels

splidap  im  bin go na  hidim beŋk .....
    divide he went, (but he) hit the bank .....
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Text No. 3.   This is part of an inconspicuously recorded conversation
with Wallace, and is an excerpt of his response to the question of the
difference between Pidgin and English.   Wallace is a Ngandi tribesman,
about 50, and speaks very poor English.

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  yu gin irrim,   yu  no.   layk pois. iŋklis prapawan, im  lilbit -
You can hear it, you know.  Like ??  Proper English,   it's a little -

jij jeyagin.                                   kulujap gija.
 just there again (showing with hands).   (They're) close together.

dubala gulujap    gija.        an iya                      iŋliš.
 The two are close together.  And here (showing with hands) is English.

        lilbit hay.              pijin iŋlij  im bodamwan.
(It's) a little high (higher?).  Pidgin English is the bottom one.

im bodam.            yu  no,  yu  sabi     orat. yu si? ... pijin
It's (on) the bottom. You know, you understand OK.  You see?  Pidgin

iŋlis (?) ebiwan ... prapa iŋliš,  im   prapawe,      im layt,
English is heavy .... proper English, it's the proper way, it's light,

yu  no ...
you know ...
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Text No. 4. This is part of a recording made of Lloyd (three-year old
halfcaste) looking at a picture book.

an din im gada galimap galimap, din im gada   puldan dina.
And then he's got to climb up, then he's got to fall down dinner

(pulimdan dina)   yukuy, binana, im gadimap gadimap - ola
(pull down the dinner) Wow, bananas, he's carrying all the bananas.

binana. yukuy, ... lil boy.   dubala gada   go la   mami,
       Wow, ... a little boy.   They two have to go to (their) mother,

dubala ...   yuku, dubala gadi iya ... biŋga. tu biŋga.   tu
those two .... Wow, two of them here ...fingers. Two fingers. Two

olagija ....   darran jeya,   dak.   fij, dadan   gat
altogether (total) ... That there, is a duck. Fish, that one's got a

fij bla melabat. bla yumab. wanlm dijan iya? watfo   fadawan,
fish   for us.   For you.   What's this here? Why is the fat one

                   iya luk?   fatwan,   im werri   big traja,
(doing that)? Here look. The fat one, he's wearing big trousers,

na?? ....
right? ...

N O T E S

1. Data on which this paper is based were gained during fieldwork by
Sharpe in 1966-68 while a member of the Summer Institute of Linguistics
and as a Research Fellow at the University of Queensland funded by the
Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, and by Sandefur under the
auspices of the Summer Institute of Linguistics in 1973-74. A brief
analysis by Sharpe (1974) has been updated by us in the light of
Sandefur's more comprehensive data and analysis.

2. Terminology is taken from Day (1973), 'Patterns of Variation in
Copula and Tense in the Hawaiian Post-Creole Continuum'. *Working
Papers in Linguistics*, University of Hawaii. Vol. 5, No. 2, Feb. 1973.

3. Sharpe at Elliott, Borroloola and Palm Island; Sandefur at Bamyili
and cattle stations north of Roper River; both at all other places.

4. Personal communication with Neil Chadwick.

5. Stops are devoiced, /ř/ is flapped or trilled, and /r/ is a
retroflexed continuant. In examples following, phonemic symbols /ḍ, d,
ṇ, ḷ, ř/ will be replaced by j, rd, rn, rl, rr respectively. Symbols
ñ and ŋ will be retained.

6. This has only been established impressionistically. A statistical
count of their occurrences in a large sample of texts with the aid of
computer is planned for the near future.

7. By 'donor position' is meant that position in the English donor
word from which the basilect word was derived during creolisation (or
pidginisation) and to which it is returning during levelling.

8. This occurs frequently in Filipino English with respect to /f/ and
/p/.

9. Intelligibility of Aboriginal English was increased by repetition
of clauses or phrases, this presumably to compensate for the increased
utterance rate. Roper Creole appears to use repetition in a similar
way, but so to some extent do the substratum languages.

10. waya/weya parallels the subordinating conjunction gada in Alawa
in its generality of use and vagueness of meaning, and the gada-
subordinate clause in Alawa appears typical of many Aboriginal lan-
guages.

11. dumaji here is not easy to translate, but parallels the use of
but in some North Queensland (and elsewhere) English. It implies
reasons understood by speaker and hearers, and is sometimes translated
'because'.

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