

MULTILINGUALISM IN THE EASTERN TORRES STRAIT ISLANDS

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INTRODUCTION¹

Of the more than 200 islands and cays of Torres Strait, that stretch of water which separates Australia from Papua New Guinea, only 17 are now permanently inhabited. Fourteen of these are designated as 'reserve' islands, administered by locally elected councils and the Queensland Department of Community Services (previously known as the Department of Aboriginal and Islanders Advancement).

Although the major division in Torres Strait continues to be that between the eastern Islanders on the one hand, and the western and central Islanders on the other, it is more usual, on geographical, geomorphological, linguistic and cultural grounds, to group the 'reserve' islands into four, thus:

- (1) far western (Boigu, Dauan, Saibai)
- (2) near western (Mabuiag, Badu, Moa, Hammond)
- (3) central (Yam, Waraber, Purma, Masig)
- (4) eastern (Ugar, Erub, Mer).

The currently inhabited islands of the eastern group, which are the focus of this study, form a relatively cohesive sociocultural unit, although traces of earlier rivalries and tensions remain. Ugar (Stephens Island) is the smallest in both size and population; Erub (Darnley Island), the largest in area; and Mer (Murray Island) has the largest population.

The Islander population of Torres Strait in 1983, the latest figure available, was about 4,000, although at least twice that number have now settled on the Australian mainland. Since the mid 1960s, when Islanders were first permitted to travel to the mainland without a pass, there has been a steady haemorrhaging of population.

In 1949, almost 1,100 people lived in the eastern islands, 50 on Ugar, about 320 on Erub and some 720 on Mer.² By contrast, the respective populations in 1981 (with numbers of children attending school on the islands in brackets) were: 35 (4); 144 (51); and 188 (44). There was little change in 1982 and the 1983 populations were: 33 (Ugar); 171 (Erub); and 204 (Mer).³

LANGUAGES OF EASTERN TORRES STRAIT

The traditional language of the eastern islands is Meriam Mir (Miriam in early texts), which is related to the Papuan languages of the Fly River.

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For about 120 years, however, Meriam Mir has shared linguistic space, initially with one or more stabilised varieties of Pacific Pidgin English, introduced by the South Sea Islanders who came to work in the marine industries, then with its descendant creole and, for the last 40 years, also with English.

Pacific Pidgin English, which creolised on Erub and Ugar around the turn of the century (Shnukal 1983b), has been described at various stages of its history by Ray 1907, Dutton 1970 and Crowley and Rigsby 1979. Called by its speakers Broken, Pizin, Big Thap, Ailan Tok and, most recently, Blaikman, it was influenced in its development by the area's two traditional languages, expresses a Torres Strait Islander world view and has become a pan-Islander marker of ethnicity and solidarity among the present generation. For these reasons, I shall refer to it here by the neutral term of Torres Strait Creole (TSC).⁴

REPLACEMENT OF MERIAM MIR BY TORRES STRAIT CREOLE

On Erub and Ugar, TSC has been the majority community language since around 1890, when the original inhabitants became a minority there.⁵ Weight of numbers, the prestige accorded the South Sea Islanders (and therefore to their *lingua franca*) and the mistaken belief that this was English led the children of the Pacific immigrants to choose their fathers' common language in preference to that of their mothers. It is now the first language of every inhabitant of Erub and Ugar and has been so for four generations, the last native speakers of Meriam Mir on those two islands having died in the 1940s.⁶ Linguistic shift on Erub and Ugar appears to have involved the gradual replacement of Meriam Mir by TSC equivalent vocabulary at the individual or micro level, a process which paralleled the societal or macro level adoption of TSC. While the grammar and lexicon were simplified, the semantics of the two languages were harmonised, with TSC being adapted (with the inevitable upwards and downwards generational restructuring) to the existing semantic structures of Meriam Mir. Communication was thus preserved between generations through grammatical simplification and relexification.

One example I was given will illustrate this gradual process of relexification using the phrase 'a very small one'. (In Meriam Mir, *kebi* means *small* and *kebi kakale* *very small*.) In the 1920s, when Meriam Mir was no longer used as the major community language on Erub and Ugar, people tended to say:

kebi kakale wan a *very small one*.

About 20 years later, most would have said:

prapa smol kakale wan

whereas, by the 1970s this had become:

prapa smol wan a

where prapa and single sentence-final a are intensifiers.

My claim that the semantics and pragmatics of the island traditional language were largely preserved is based on the absence of communicative discontinuity between the older language speakers and their TSC-speaking children, and on evidence that translation from Meriam Mir into TSC is comparatively straightforward when compared with translation into English. In many cases, lexical replacement alone preserves the content of the original text. This is not to deny the affective difference between the traditional language and TSC, nor

that they occupy separate domains, but rather to contrast the relatively easy transference between Meriam Mir and TSC with the difficulties even well-educated Islanders have in expressing themselves in English. For most, even apart from the psychological barrier imposed by the current equation of English with acceptance of European values, English is truly a foreign language representing alien and uncomfortable modes of thought. Many Islanders have commented to me that one cannot express 'the same feelings' in English and TSC. The perceived correspondence between English and TSC (as opposed to that between TSC and both traditional languages) is small.

RELATIVE STATUS OF MERIAM MIR, ENGLISH AND TSC

The ability to speak good Meriam Mir and English is highly valued among eastern Islanders and confers status on their speakers. Perhaps that is why the amount of both languages reported to be spoken in each community is consistently exaggerated. TSC, however, is generally regarded by Islanders as 'not a real language' and usually contrasted unfavourably with 'good English', 'pure English', 'real English'. Whereas both traditional languages and English are called *langus language*, this term is never applied to the creole. There are two main reasons for this distinction. First, while TSC is still widely believed to be a form of English, it is a form which has been consistently denigrated by Europeans since the war, when most Islanders came to realise that the creole was not, in fact, the English of Europeans (Shnukal 1983a). Second, the creole is uncodified, an unwritten language with no formal normative apparatus such as dictionaries, grammars and thesauri, whereas 'portions of the gospels, hymns and the catechism with some school books' were printed in Meriam Mir by the London Missionary Society in 1876 (Langbridge 1977:37). One Erub woman, for example, who speaks English fluently, lived for many years on the mainland but has now returned to live on Thursday Island, exclaimed when I told her I intended to write a grammar and dictionary of TSC: 'Oh Anna, please don't give them a language!'

The negative European response to a language which has become the lingua franca of Torres Strait Islanders everywhere has been internalised by a majority of Islanders aged between 20 and 65. Most Europeans living in Torres Strait consider it to be 'a rubbish language' which 'has no grammar' and is 'a waste of time'. One Queensland Education Department Advisory teacher based on Thursday Island told me that if I wanted to learn the language, the European teachers would 'talk funny' to me.

Murray Islanders in particular express a low opinion of TSC. One young man, a native speaker of the creole, told me (in English) that he was against it, didn't like the sound of it. When pressed for an explanation, he admitted that it made the Islanders 'seem backward, unable to speak English properly' and thus a 'laughing stock in the eyes of Europeans'.

Among Erub and Ugar people, however, while that attitude does exist, there is also a certain pride in being the *bos owners* of the language. 'We on Darnley regard it as our language', the chairman told me. This pride is related in complicated ways to their being descended from both Miriamle and Pacific Islanders. Although rarely articulated openly to other Islanders, there is a feeling among people from Erub and Ugar that of all the Torres Strait Islanders they are the most progressive and modern in outlook, the result partly of their dual heritage. Their openness to the new, expressed most recently through the

adoption of innovative social and commercial ventures, is viewed as a natural progression from their early acceptance of Christianity and 'civilisation'. The children of the immigrants once proudly called themselves *apkas half-castes* and considered themselves superior to other Islanders, especially those from the west. Murray Islanders, on the other hand, regard the Erub and Ugar people with some suspicion, precisely because of their dual heritage and readiness to accept non-traditional ways.

A recent development among adolescents throughout the Strait is that TSC has become the language of Islander ethnicity, identity and solidarity. When English-only-speaking youngsters from the mainland visit the outer islands, they are ridiculed for not speaking the creole and disapprovingly said to *meke emselp olsem koleman to have adopted whiteman's ways*, demonstrating yet again the symbolic association of language with cultural stereotypes. On many occasions, young people remarked with astonishment that I tok blaik *spoke like a blackfellow*.

Nevertheless, it is clear that the phonological, syntactic and lexical norms of TSC are heterogeneous with respect to Australian English. Where there are differing pronunciations of a word, appeal is made to English pronunciation. On Mer, for example, the pronunciation of *ganger* is [geŋŋa], in the central and western islands it is said to be [geyna] and on Erub [geyŋa], but 'we Darnley people are right because the European blokes say *ganger* [gæŋə]'. Similarly, one Erub man born in 1912, referring to the pidgin spoken by his father, a Solomon Islander, told me: 'We talk more better than where they talk', because present-day speech sounds more like English.

It is interesting, on that point, to contrast current attitudes towards the older forms of both Meriam Mir and TSC. Those of Meriam Mir are admired as examples of 'deep' language and their users known and respected throughout the eastern islands as linguistic authorities. Users of older TSC forms, on the other hand, are scoffed at because of their 'deviant' pronunciation and 'old-fashioned' usage. Thus, older forms like [plʌndɛ] *many*, [sɛmɔɛ] *seventy*, [dʌnɪ] *dance* and [mɛlk] *milk*, which presumably are closer to the pidginised variety spoken by the original South Sea immigrants, stereotype their users as older and less 'progressive' speakers than those who use the current forms: [plɛnti], [sɛbenti], [dʌns] and [mɪlk], respectively.⁷

English, which currently provides about 85% of the creole's lexicon, remains the most productive source of new vocabulary. Any English word is potentially borrowable into TSC and the creole used on the job by carpenters, mechanics, council office workers, store managers, Medical Aid Post nurses and teachers on the outer islands contains a high proportion of borrowed English vocabulary. I have found no evidence of recent formations, a new item automatically being named by the English word. Once on Erub I was present when a group of people were discussing the floats of a helicopter, for which there was no word in TSC. Everyone looked at me, so I supplied the English word and plot it has now become. Meriam Mir is no longer a fruitful source of borrowing on Erub and Ugar and the proportion of Meriam Mir vocabulary in common use is declining. Interestingly, Meriam Mir has been replaced to some extent by the western island language as a source of new lexicon. This borrowing began in the mid to late 1960s and can be traced to the opening of the Thursday Island High School, where Easterners have always been in the minority. Western island language borrowings, called 'the new language' by Easterners, is brought to the east by the 'young people'. Their elders now use these words themselves, although reluctantly, citing a

need to remain 'up-to-date'. Thus the Meriam Mir kin term *popa grandparent*, has been replaced by *aka grandmother* and *athei grandfather*, *oao yes* by *wa*, *esoao thank you* by *eso*, and *naoa farewell* by *yawo*.

THE USE OF MERIAM MIR ON ERUB AND UGAR

While Meriam Mir is now rarely heard on these two islands and ceased to be a community language there some 40 years ago, there still exists a significant amount of Meriam Mir vocabulary in the creole spoken in the eastern islands. As expected, the speech of the oldest generation contains a greater amount of substrate lexicon than does the following generation's, with the youngest people's speech containing the least. Thus older people use Meriam Mir words like *augemwali Mother Hubbard dress*, *baker money*, *deko to blend*, *derser to prepare*, *nazir trochus*, and so forth. These are part of the passive, but not active, vocabulary of younger age groups, who use their TSC equivalents: *longdres*, *mane*, *smase*, *meke redi* and *sususel*, respectively.

Meriam Mir vocabulary in the eastern islands dialect of TSC appears to represent some 12% of the total on Erub and Ugar and perhaps 17% on Mer.⁸ As one would expect, the substrate lexicon names mainly traditional cultural activities, villages, bays, creeks, wells, springs, garden areas, the *sai fishtraps*, which encircle the eastern islands (only two of which have English names), reefs, insects, shells, fish, birds, plants, animals, seasons, some cooking implements, dancing gear, some greetings, and some body parts. Although the most private and covered body parts have Meriam Mir names, which are considered 'more polite', some of them also have TSC equivalents which are felt to be more 'slangy' and are used in teasing and jokes.

None of the Meriam Mir kin terms is still in common use on Erub and Ugar, although the traditional distinctions and taboos have been preserved. One must, for example, avoid naming in-laws in their presence, or even pronouncing similar words, so as not to give offence and have to recompense the offended person. Mentioning *ariari Murray Island sardine*, for example, in the presence or hearing of an in-law named Harry would insult him and shame the speaker.

Among young people, there is often little awareness of just what vocabulary is borrowed from Meriam Mir and what is not. Sentences with one Meriam Mir word or phrase (here underlined), such as *ai prapa niap I'm really thirsty* or *mango i turum the mango tree is covered in fruit* are extremely common and it is usually only people born before the war who can confidently identify the Meriam Mir elements.

Generally speaking, the pronunciation of Meriam Mir vocabulary on Erub and Ugar is similar to that of Mer. The main phonological differences appear to be long-standing dialect variation. High front lax [ɪ], which has merged with high front tense [i] in the speech of younger Murray Islanders, becomes mid front lax [ɛ] on Erub and Ugar. Thus [pɪm] *grasshopper*, [mɪkɪr] *almond (tree)* and [dɪrsɪr] *to prepare* become respectively [pɛm], [mɛkɛr] and [dɛrsɛr]. Similarly, the final vowel of three-syllable words often disappears in the Erub and Ugar version, with a shift in stress to the final syllable: *mókepù cowrie shell*, for example, becomes *mokép*. There may also be simplification of final open syllables (sometimes with stress alternation) with diphthongs becoming single vowels: *wakei thigh* thus becomes *wake* and *gábomarað doggy mackerel* becomes *gábumàra*.⁹ There has also been some semantic shift, although

it is now impossible to know whether this occurred before or after the adoption of TSC. Thus *dam* on Erub and Ugar means any kind of seaweed, whereas on Mer it refers only to *green sea grass*, *brown seaweed* being *meo*. *Durdur* on Erub and Ugar means *to shake* or *to shiver*, whereas on Mer, *zirur* is used for *to shiver*. *Nako*, a sentence-initial interrogative, has come to mean *if only...*, in the sense of *I wish...* in everyday use on Erub. These differences are derided by the Murray Islanders, who are considered by all Miriamle to be the models and guardians of correct usage. They claim that the Erub and Ugar people speak *parkoparko* *incorrectly* or *corruptly*.

THE USE OF TORRES STRAIT CREOLE ON ERUB AND UGAR

On Erub and Ugar, we find an almost classic Fergusonian example of community diglossia. TSC, which is the first language of almost every inhabitant,¹⁰ is used in all but official and written contexts (that is, in 'high' or predominantly 'European-style' domains), but also for popular songs, children's rhymes and swearing. Thus, most daily activities – communal work, gossip, family life, food preparation, exchange of information, fishing, gardening, shopping, children's play, private prayer, the telling of stories and the giving of instructions – are organised through the medium of TSC.

In the past, the Erub and Ugar people used to compose songs in TSC, but 'not this generation', i.e. the people born since the war. Most of these songs have now been forgotten, as have the songs which continued to be written in a mixture of TSC and Meriam Mir until the 1930s, almost two generations after the shift to TSC.

English, which is learned imperfectly as a second language in the primary schools, often from Islander teachers who themselves lack a good command of English, is largely restricted to the domains of education, religion and official ceremonies. There is also some knowledge of songs and children's rhymes, like *Baa baa blacksheep*, *Twinkle twinkle little star*, *Heydi heydiho*, *the elephant is so slow*, and *Insey winsey spider*, involving repetition of short bounded rhythmical formulae rather than creativity in English.

Moreover, until the ABC began relaying programmes from Cairns to Torres Strait in 1979; until the 'boosting' of television reception to the region at the end of 1981 (still, with the exception of Erub, restricted to Thursday Island); until the recent acquisition of videos, showing American movies and Australian commercials recorded by relatives on the mainland, and with only the occasional film showing to raise money for the school, models of spoken English were few and the outer islands even more isolated from mainstream Australian language and culture than they are today.¹¹

These days, young Islanders know the words of current popular songs and often sing along with cassettes of disco and reggae hits or of semi-rock groups like Abba. Parents teach English nursery rhymes to their children and in kindergarten more rhymes are taught and often chanted during games like skipping, hopscotch and tag.

Nevertheless, most Erub and Ugar Islanders, especially those born before World War II, do not speak or understand other than simple English. People do not read instructions or warning labels and have difficulty understanding written official documents, such as the taxation, census and social security forms.

Although many people listen to the radio every day, the content of radio news broadcasts is not generally understood. If Torres Strait is mentioned, or the name of a mainland town where kinfolk are living, many will seek further clarification about the news item from someone who has lived on the mainland and worked with Europeans, and who therefore understands English.

Young Islanders, however, most of whom were educated by Europeans at high school level, can speak English quite well. Prestige is gained by speaking English and the children on Erub and Ugar are eager to learn. They practise English pronunciation, correcting the mistakes of their friends and classmates, and like to practise their English with European visitors.

On Erub and Ugar, English is used for all written purposes: for public notices, letters, cards, invitations to parties, weddings, funerals and tombstone openings and for tombstone inscriptions; in the school (though not in the early grades) and for school messages; at church services; for public prayer; for the blessing of food; and for formal speeches at all official functions, such as Anzac Day and July One, the Torres Strait national day, and welcoming ceremonies for visitors from other islands. At public meetings, I am told, people speak as close an approximation of English as they can, adapting English phonological and grammatical features into TSC if they cannot speak English. With rare exceptions, English (or the speaker's closest approximation) is used with Europeans. In part, this is to avoid the negative stereotyping which unthinkingly accompanies the use of the creole and to which Islanders are extremely sensitive; in part, it is to avoid giving offence. Few Europeans speak TSC and Islanders consider it impolite to use a language which not everyone present understands. One Islander explained it this way: 'If I want to show respect, I try to make so all can understand. If I'm going to speak real Broken, you sit down like an idol - you don't understand. I can make it more broken or like half, so that both parties can understand. So nobody put out then'.

Few Erub and Ugar people, however, feel comfortable speaking English and they use TSC both before and after official functions. Indeed, such events are linguistically bounded, the switch from TSC to English and then back by the officials signalling the beginning and the end of the official part of the ceremony.

As for written material in English, no newspapers or magazines are sold on the islands, with the exception of a few copies on Erub of the fortnightly *Torres News*. But the revised version of the Bible is read every evening by many heads of families and people often buy magazines on visits to Thursday Island.

Let us briefly consider the two main English domains: school and church.

(1) School

In both kindergarten and primary school, the official language of instruction is English only. Islander teachers have long been instructed to 'stop that Pidgin English' and use only 'pure language or English' in the classroom and at Parents and Citizens meetings. This is despite the fact that Erub and Ugar children have no knowledge of English before entering school.¹² Moreover, as mentioned above, few Islander teachers speak English well. A 45-year-old Erub man told me how, when he was at school, the children 'read books in English, but from the teacher's lips it was Broken'.¹⁵ Because TSC was, until recently, generally believed to be English, there are no ESL programmes for primary school teachers or pupils, nor any specific training of teachers to deal with language difficulties. Although the first European primary school principal on Erub was

appointed in 1899, the school at Ugar, with its tiny population, has had no more than one (often untrained) Islander teacher. Moreover, contacts between the white principal and the Islanders have been generally limited to formal occasions or to a few families headed by English speakers.

At Ugar, where there is one teacher for the four children attending primary school, all instruction is in TSC. On Erub, teachers unofficially and sensibly also use TSC to 'get the message across' and 'make things clear' to the children in kindergarten and the early grades, using more English in the higher grades. TSC is used also in the higher grades to introduce new topics, which are then elaborated in English. Thus a de facto, though unofficial, bilingual programme has long been established in the island's school. The European principal, who teaches the highest grade, uses only English, but the children switch to TSC as soon as they leave the classroom.

Out of respect for the principal and the official nature of the proceedings, Parents and Citizens meetings are conducted mainly in English, and school notices concerning holidays, new equipment, fund raising, sports carnivals, excursions, film evenings, and so on, are always written in English.

(2) Church

Since the 'Coming of the Light' in 1871, when the London Missionary Society landed teachers on Erub, Christianity has had a profound influence on the Torres Strait Islanders. Equated with 'civilization', it also provided the earliest education system and began the breakdown of traditional loyalties and rivalries, which were further weakened by the introduction of the cash economy and east-west intermarriage. It also provided one of the few avenues for personal (and family) advancement within the new order that began to be established from around 1900.

In 1915, the Anglican Church took over the administration of Christianity in Torres Strait and, until the 1970s, was the sole Christian sect with churches on the 'reserve' islands.¹³ Today, on each of the eastern islands, there is competition from Pentecostal sects. The largest of these, with congregations on all three eastern islands, is the Assembly of God but on Mer there are two other Pentecostal churches, the Body Felt Salvation Church and the Resurrection Church of Jesus Christ.

The language of Christian worship, or at least its public manifestations, is English. While it is true that private prayers are sometimes offered in TSC, this appears to be largely by default, as, for example, when the English ritual prayers are imperfectly remembered. It is thought sacrilegious to address the Almighty in TSC, although recently younger people have been seeking reassurance that He will not be angry if they do and that it will not invalidate their prayers.

On every island, the Anglican Church services follow the order and language of the Australian Prayer Book. While on the eastern islands about half of the hymns in each service are sung in Meriam Mir, only a few of the older people on Erub and Ugar understand the words. Communion, prayers and the Bible reading on Erub and Ugar are always in English, but TSC is used for announcements of church business and in giving instructions to the congregation, as, for example, in explaining how to venerate the cross. The sermons on Erub and Ugar are given in a mixture of English and TSC, no matter who the speaker is (provided, of course, that he is an Islander). They follow a standard form, which resembles

that of a set of themes and variations: the text of the sermon is given in English and it is immediately followed by a paraphrase in TSC; an initial explanation or clarification of the text is then given in TSC, but then a switch to English is made; from then until the end of the sermon there is continual codeswitching, with the arguments being advanced first in English and reiterated and elaborated in TSC, with TSC predominating. Any personal anecdotal material is related in TSC, sometimes with a word, phrase or sentence in English interpolated, but the closing sentence is always in English. The only variation I heard in over 20 services was in the two sermons given by one of the political leaders mentioned above, a partial speaker of Meriam Mir. He began his sermon with two or three sentences of Meriam Mir, switched briefly to English and then to TSC. The sermon continued in the usual way with codeswitching between English and TSC throughout: 'Money is the root of all evil. Yumi ebribodi sabe'. *We all know this*. The penultimate sentence was in English and the final sentence in Meriam Mir. Two additional Meriam Mir sentences were used within the body of the sermon to mark linguistically its tripartite thematic structure and the use of the traditional language was generally felt to have lent a tone of authority and deep solemnity to his words.¹⁴

As for the Assembly of God services, the format is almost equally rigid. The welcome, hymns and choruses, prayers and responses ('Praise the Lord! Praise God!') are in English, as are the faith healing formulae spoken by the pastor ('Cast away the sickness, oh Lord! Cast away the pain, Lord Jesus!'). However, on my most recent visit to Erub in 1982, I found that some Meriam Mir hymns had been introduced into the Pentecostal services and a Meriam Mir chorus, recently composed by Murray Island church members, was also sung.

The sermons demonstrate the codeswitching sequence outlined above and again, as in the Anglican services, the public announcements concerning times of meetings and the following week's activities are made in TSC.

The Pentecostal services, however, contain one component not found in Anglican services: individual testimony as to the influence and workings of Christ in the lives of church members and their families. The person who is to give testimony comes to the front and faces the congregation. Immediately after the initial formula in English: 'First I'd like to praise and thank the Lord', the church member generally switches to TSC to deliver his or her testimony, which is, of course, highly personal, anecdotal and at times emotional.

General church business, both Anglican and Pentecostal, on Erub and Ugar and meetings of the Mothers' Union are conducted in TSC, although with a fair amount of English vocabulary.

As for family prayers, I can report only on the family I lived with, some other Assembly of God families and the accounts of Islander friends. It seems that grace and evening prayers (normally consisting of choruses, Bible reading and prayer) are always in English and in the English of the King James version of 1611. One Erub man expressed it in this way: 'I got no other way. It's the only thing we got in English — everything else we do in Broken. But man, woman and child, we pray in English'. Just as English is felt to be the prapa *proper* language of the church, as it is more in keeping with the solemnity of the occasion, so words and phrases such as 'thou, thee, thine and brethren', as in 'Lord, we thank Thee... We commend ourselves to Thy care...' are also considered to be 'more respectful' than the modern alternatives. Assembly of God Sunday School, Ambassadors for Christ preparation and other religious instruction for children are, however, almost always conducted in TSC.

Thus, what is ritualistic and formulaic in religious observance is delivered in English; what is personal and spontaneous is expressed in TSC.

LANGUAGE USE ON MER

The sociolinguistic situation on Mer, where Meriam Mir is still spoken as a first language, is triglossic or, more accurately, one of overlapping diglossia.

There is today a very pronounced linguistic split on Mer between people born before the end of World War II, whose primary language is Meriam Mir, and those born after about 1947, whose primary language is TSC. This split is most noticeable in families with several children born during the 1940s.

Around 1947-48, the home language of most Murray Island children changed from Meriam Mir to TSC. While the parents continued to speak Meriam Mir to each other, they switched to TSC to address their children and the children used TSC with each other and with their peers. Though this language shift happened quite rapidly in the majority of homes in response to the profound sociocultural changes of the period, it did not affect all families equally quickly. The most nationalistic of Murray Islanders were slower to follow the community trend but, given the smallness and cohesiveness of the community and the sanctions imposed on non-conformist social behaviour, they eventually followed suit. I could find no Murray Islander born after about 1950 who speaks Meriam Mir as his or her first language.

Nevertheless, although few young Murray Islanders speak Meriam Mir, they understand it, replying in TSC whenever they are addressed in Meriam Mir. This is not often, since first language Meriam Mir-speakers, all of whom control TSC to some extent, generally switch to TSC when speaking to children or young adults. They admit to feeling uncomfortable using Meriam Mir to young people, except when they are particularly angry or wish their words to be taken particularly seriously. I have often observed grandparents whose instructions in TSC are not immediately obeyed repeat their instructions in Meriam Mir. This linguistic shift signals both anger and the serious consequences of continuing to disobey and has an immediate and galvanising effect on the children. Meriam Mir thus continues to be the language of authority and strong emotion for all the people of Mer.

For Murray Islanders over 35, Meriam Mir serves the same main function as does TSC for the Erub and Ugar people: organising daily activities. Depending on the context and subject matter, there may be considerable borrowing both from English (as I heard, for example, among a group of men repairing a truck, mixed groups of darts and card players and two women at the Medical Aid Post, who spoke of 'doctor, tablet, sister') and from TSC (as, for example, among women preparing for a feast where the names of various dishes and cooking utensils came from TSC.) Codeswitching between Meriam Mir and TSC (or even English) may also occur, depending on the topic of conversation and the speaker's knowledge of the other languages. On one occasion, during a three-way conversation in Meriam Mir, the subject of the plane service between Mer and Thursday Island came up, whereupon all speakers switched to TSC, only to switch back into Meriam Mir when the conversation topic changed.

On Mer, the creole, while a viable and growing community language, is heavily stigmatised and, generally speaking, is identified with people under 35: people too young to hold power or recognised leadership positions.

As indicated earlier, the variety of TSC spoken on Mer appears to include a higher proportion of Meriam Mir vocabulary than that of Erub and Ugar. Thus, Meriam Mir greetings like *debe ki good night*, *debe idim good morning* and *maiem welcome* are the norm, and Murray Islanders are also more likely to say, for example: *ai go zogometa nau I'm going to church* or *koskir blo mi my wife* rather than: *ai go preya nau* and *oman blo mi*. There are few differences in pronunciation of the creole, however, the most common being the insertion of [g] after [ŋ] in such words as [sing] *song*, [tang] *tongue*, [talinga] *ear* and [singaut] *to call out*. The Mer pronunciation of a few individual words also differs from that of the other two islands, and these words are diagnostic of Murray Islander speech: [klɔstun] rather than [klustun] *near*, [wɔman] rather than [ɔman] *married woman*, [manjɔt] rather than [manjɔta] *cassava*.

English is the third language heard on Mer and, as on Erub and Ugar, its domains are limited to the official sphere, which it shares with Meriam Mir.

(1) School

The acting principal of the primary school in 1981, a Murray Islander, was adamant that TSC was not spoken at the school. 'I hate the Pidgin. I want standard English and good Miriam'. In this, he is echoing prevailing Queensland Education Department policy as well as general Murray Island sentiment. One half hour lesson per week of Meriam Mir is now given to Grades 4-7, a recent innovation. Although the principal claims that the school children are punished for using TSC and that since 1975 the Grade 6 and 7 classes have been conducted only in English, the true situation resembles that on Erub. Of the five other teachers, also Murray Islanders, only one speaks Meriam Mir. They are obliged to use TSC with the early grades, and a mixture of English and TSC with the higher grades 'so the kids understand' and TSC is the language of the children in the playground, at games, and during home and leisure activities.

In the 1920s and 1930s, by contrast, the children spoke only Meriam Mir at school. By the 1940s the children were being encouraged to speak English or TSC at school and discouraged in their use of Meriam Mir even in the playground, although it remained the language of the home.

There is a nice story, possibly apocryphal, about a spelling lesson on Mer in the 1940s, with the children, following the teacher's lead, chanting: d..o..g omai; d..o..g omai (where omai is the Meriam Mir word for *dog*).

(2) Church

As for church services on Mer, again the ritual and official components are in English. General announcements and some prayers in the Anglican Church are given in Meriam Mir, while the calling upon members of the congregation to say prayers of intercession and the prayers themselves alternate between English and Meriam Mir. Usually, if the call is in English, the prayer itself is in Meriam Mir and vice versa.¹⁵ There is codeswitching in the sermons between English and TSC (though the TSC component is smaller than on Erub and Ugar) with some Meriam Mir, though a smaller proportion than I had expected. Meriam Mir in this context tends to be interlarded with English words and phrases, such as 'church council', 'timetable', numbers, days of the week, and so on. The priest explained: 'I use Broken because of the children. Even [for religious instruction] in school, I might begin in English and change to Broken'. Both Meriam Mir and TSC have been used in services on Mer for 'a long time'.

In the Assembly of God, English was again the language of the scripture texts, Bible readings and choruses, but several Meriam Mir hymns were sung. The sermon, however, was spoken in a mixture of English and Meriam Mir, beginning and ending in English, with constant codeswitching throughout, and prayers were said in Meriam Mir with ritual responses in English: 'Praise God! Hallelujah!'. All testimony was in TSC, but this may have been because most of the congregation were young.¹⁶

(3) Official functions

In 1981, the public notices outside the Council Hall on Mer were written in Meriam Mir. This practice had begun in May of that year as part of a campaign to revive the use of Meriam Mir, all previous public notices having been in English. One advertisement for a *tama bring and buy sale*, used several English borrowings: 'show', 'Monday', 'admission fees', while a second notice referred to the collection of 'garbage'. Notices in the community store, on the other hand, were in English.

At a concert held to raise money for the Anglican Church, the proceedings were conducted in Meriam Mir throughout, with English borrowings like 'item', 'programme', 'show', 'Hope you like it!', and 'encore'. The names of most of the dances, however, which were of South Sea origin, were given in TSC: *suka dans sugar dance*, *ula dans hula dance*, *sidaun dans sitting dance* and *meiltrein mail train*. Traditional Murray Island dances, such as the *kapkar*, were announced in Meriam Mir.

Similarly, the public prayers and official speeches made by the island chairman and other island dignitaries on important days and at the opening ceremonies for feasts, festivals and public gatherings are now delivered in Meriam Mir. Nevertheless, it is not uncommon after such speeches for younger men to approach the authorities to ask the meaning of the 'deep' words.

There is widely articulated regret on Mer that the children do not speak Meriam Mir and anger among some young people that they were not taught their traditional language. While some Murray Islanders are apathetic about the issue, or feel that it is not too late to reverse the process — 'When we die, I think the Miriam will be lost' — most say they would prefer only Meriam Mir and English to be community languages on Mer. This has led to recent efforts by community leaders (the most respected opinion makers whose first language is Meriam Mir) and by several young nationalists in their late 20s and early 30s, partial speakers of the traditional language, to maintain it as a viable code. Some of the younger men, recently returned to Mer after several years on the mainland, are teaching themselves Meriam Mir, learning new words from their parents and instructing friends. The Anglican priest encourages both public and private prayer in Meriam Mir and the issue of Meriam Mir maintenance is now a powerfully emotive sociopolitical issue.

Mer, then, is a trilingual community, with language choice predictable, not solely according to domain, as on Erub and Ugar, but also according to age of speaker and/or addressee and, less importantly, to expressed degree of emotion and topic of conversation.

In spite of strenuous efforts by influential members of the community, Meriam Mir is obviously under threat, since it is in competition both with English (in the official domain) and with TSC (in the private domain). Thus there is no societal domain which is recognised as the exclusive preserve of Meriam Mir. Moreover, as the people born since the war raise their children in TSC; as the

number of first language Meriam Mir speakers declines; as the young people continue to emigrate to the mainland; as intermarriage with other Islanders continues; and as extra-community pressure from kinfolk sustains the use of the pan-Islander lingua franca, TSC, the only language which all Murray Islanders speak, the prospects for the survival of Meriam Mir appear remote.

CONCLUSION AND PREDICTIONS

From the 1850s, when Pacific Pidgin English became established as the lingua franca of the fledgling marine industries of Torres Strait; the 1890s, when the pidgin creolised on Erub and Ugar, displacing within a generation the eastern island traditional language, Meriam Mir; and the late 1940s and early 1950s, when it was adopted by the children of Mer, TSC has continued to expand its domains and influence. Because of the isolation of the region and restricted communication between Islanders and Europeans, TSC was for many decades believed to be English, a prestige acquisition and necessary for integration into mainstream Australian society.

With the collapse of that belief in the 1960s and the realisation that TSC was partly to blame for the perpetuation among many Europeans of racist stereotypes, there was a push by Islander parents, particularly those on the eastern islands, for a mainland education for their children. They continued to believe that English was the single most important guarantee of a place within Australian society and access to its material benefits.

These beliefs explain in part both the adoption of TSC in the eastern islands (as elsewhere) and the disillusionment which has fed the Mer nationalist movement, one of the most powerful symbols of which is the eastern islands' traditional language. Now that TSC has become not only the lingua franca of Torres Strait Islanders everywhere, but also a potent symbol of Islander ethnicity and separateness, it remains to be seen whether the efforts of a committed minority of Murray Islanders can prevail over their less committed countrymen (and over the linguistic shift underway in Torres Strait since the turn of the century) and manage, despite the odds, to preserve Meriam Mir as the language of Miriam identity. In spite of increased linguistic awareness and various language planning activities, including pressure for an adult literacy programme and a translation of the Bible, the future of Meriam Mir as a viable community language appears bleak.

As for TSC, whose phonological and syntactic norms have always been those of English, it is ironic that, just as it is beginning to be valued in its function as the Torres Strait Islander ethnicity and identity marker, rapid decreolisation is underway at all levels of the grammar. As the Islanders' contact with spoken Australian English increases, so does the pressure to restructure the creole in the direction of English. While it may well continue as an island community language for several generations, the continuing emigration of large numbers of Islanders to the mainland and their eventual integration into mainstream society, if this occurs, will undoubtedly lead to its disappearance, just as Queensland Canefields English, another descendant of Pacific Pidgin English, disappeared within a generation (Dutton 1980:110-111; Mühlhäusler, this volume). Some features of the creole and traces of its distinctive idiom will no doubt survive in the English of people of Islander descent — indeed, this is already observable among many of those who were raised in Queensland country towns in the 1960s and

1970s, and who do not speak TSC — but the long-term future of TSC, dependent as it is on the maintenance of a separate Islander identity and viable Islander communities, whether in Torres Strait or on the mainland, is unclear.

NOTES

1. This is an expanded and updated version of a paper presented at the 1981 annual meeting of the Australian Linguistic Society. The fieldwork on which it is based was conducted on Erub (Darnley Island), Ugar (Stephens Island) and Mer (Murray Island) between April and July of that year and in August of the following year and funded by a Visiting Research Fellowship in Sociolinguistics from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies.

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2. Figures are from the former Queensland Department of Native Affairs. The Mer total includes a hundred Miriamle who at that time lived on Dauar, a neighbouring island, all of whom eventually shifted to Mer.
3. These are the 1983 community profile figures from the Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs, which established a regional office on Thursday Island in 1973. Not included are the high school age children who are obliged to leave their islands to attend secondary school elsewhere, nor the 36 Papua New Guineans living on Erub (30) and Mer (6), most of whom are related through blood or marriage to the Islanders. Fairly recent arrivals from Parem (Bampton Island), they have all had to learn Torres Strait Creole (TSC). None speaks Tok Pisin, a language historically related to TSC, but those aged between 20 and 30, who were educated in Papua New Guinea, speak better English than the majority of Islanders. Although the adults speak TSC with their children and others in the community, they continue to speak their own language with one another.
4. A variety of TSC, spoken as a second language by elderly Aboriginal speakers living in Bamaga, was described by Crowley and Rigsby 1979, who called the variety Cape York Creole. Syntactically, except for minor details, the varieties are the same, but phonologically they differ quite markedly. Tok Pisin, a sister language, is claimed by TSC-speakers to be unintelligible, because of phonological and lexical differences. However, TSC and Tok Pisin share much of their syntax and sociological factors may well account for some of the 'mutual unintelligibility'.
5. Of the 43 families living on Erub and Ugar immediately after World War II, only two were 'full Darnley natives' and their members were all married to the descendants of South Sea people.
6. There are now no native speakers of Meriam Mir on Erub and Ugar. The oldest inhabitants, born around 1910, can understand simple Meriam Mir if it is spoken slowly and they are aided by extralinguistic cues, but they do not speak it well and cannot understand the 'deep' language of their contemporaries on Mer. Only two Erub men now claim to speak Meriam Mir reasonably

well, though neither can make a long speech, pray, nor tell a story in the language and their brothers and sisters cannot speak it. Both speakers are male, in their mid-60s and heads of rival political factions. Both learned Meriam Mir during their early 30s for nationalistic and political reasons and one is married to a Murray Islander. Both speak very good English and one claims some knowledge of the western island language. They are the most politically active men on Erub and I am sure that their linguistic virtuosity plays a considerable role in their political success.

7. For an account of ongoing phonological and grammatical developments in the creole, see Shnukal 1984.
8. This is in contrast to the proportion of Aboriginal language vocabulary in Cape York Creole, which is said to contain few words from the Cape York languages (Crowley and Rigsby 1979:205).
9. Also mentioned was the change from [r] to [n] in the Erub and Ugar dialects but I found no evidence of this in the vocabulary in current use on these islands.
10. In 1982, only seven adult Islanders living on Erub, four of whom were married to Erub people, had not been born on either Erub or Ugar. Two, however, one from Masig and one from St Paul's, spoke TSC as their first language. Three were Murray Islanders, one came from Saibai and one was Fijian.
11. During the 1970s, the Islanders listened to English language radio broadcasts from Papua New Guinea and sometimes managed to pick up Radio Australia transmissions on short wave.
12. The kindergartens and primary schools on the 'reserve' islands are administered by the Queensland Department of Community Services, although it was announced in 1984 that the state Department of Education would take over all schools in the future. All teachers there are Islanders, with little formal education, except for six European primary school principals, seconded from the Queensland Department of Education to the DCS during their two-year appointments to island schools. In 1981, there was a white primary school principal on Erub, but no Europeans on Ugar or Mer. There is now (1984) a European principal on Mer.
13. There were other Christian denominations on Thursday Island and a Catholic Mission on Hammond Island, established in 1929.
14. While I was on Ugar, however, the relieving priest, an elderly Murray Islander, delivered his sermon entirely in Meriam Mir. The congregation later complained because they had understood nothing.
15. As part of the recent campaign to preserve Meriam Mir, the priest, a descendant of the legendary Murray Island warrior, Id, has been encouraging young people to pray in Meriam Mir.
16. The most influential community elders, often descendants of traditional clan and cult leaders who were given early positions of authority within the Anglican Church, have generally remained faithful to that denomination. It is often, though not always, individuals or families outside the prevailing political and religious power structures in the eastern islands (and who therefore perhaps have less interest in preserving the status quo) who have become adherents of the Pentecostal churches.

