
BWAXAT TO BISHOP:

AN EARLY MELANESIAN-PIDGIN ENGLISH TEXT

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1. Introduction

Documents in the languages of Melanesia from the mid-19th century are not abundant, and direct evidence about the development of Pidgin English in the area is fragmentary. The text to be presented here not only enlarges both of these corpora, but is of special interest in being bilingual, with one version of the text in the Fwâi language of New Caledonia, and the other in a form of Pidgin English.¹ The former is the earliest recorded text in any language of New Caledonia; and the latter is the longest single text from the sparsely documented Sandalwood English phase of Pacific Pidgin English history.

2. Origins and composition

The authorship, date and place of composition of the text are, up to a point, easily established. It is a letter, dated 'Fengen, 18 July, 1852', and signed 'Basan, Dama Iehen' (Basan, Chief of Hienghène²). It is addressed to 'Bishop', referring to George Augustus Selwyn, Bishop of New Zealand, who on this date was visiting Hienghène, on the northeast coast of New Caledonia, aboard the mission vessel *Border Maid*.

Selwyn (1809-1878) had arrived in New Zealand in 1842 to become the country's first Anglican Bishop. After several years spent establishing the

Church in New Zealand, he turned his attention to the evangelisation of the islands to the north, and began making annual cruises there, to assess the need for mission work in the region, and where possible to find boys who could be taken to New Zealand and educated in the Church's college, ultimately returning to their own communities as Christian teachers (Hilliard 1970, 1978). The first of these cruises was aboard *HMS Dido* in 1847-8. In 1849 and 1850 Selwyn sailed his own schooner, *Undine*, and in 1851 and 1852 the much larger *Border Maid*, bought with funds given by Anglicans in New South Wales.

Bwaxat³ (c.1815-1873) was one of the best known Melanesian leaders of his time (Douglas 1978; O'Reilly 1980: 42-43). As chief of a large and powerful tribe, he had early established contacts with sandalwood traders in the area (Shineberg 1967: 74), and like other ambitious Pacific Island leaders in the post-contact, pre-colonial period, he encouraged potentially useful foreigners to settle in his domain (O'Reilly 1980: 42).⁴ In 1848 he and his brother had visited Sydney as guests of the trader Robert Towns.

Although annexation of New Caledonia by France was only a year away at the time the letter was written, Bwaxat's foreign contacts and his sympathies still lay mainly with the English. He had asked for an English missionary on Selwyn's first visit in 1849 (Erskine 1853: 356), and continued to do so until the last, in 1857, but Selwyn was never able to comply with his request. In 1858, as a consequence of his anti-French activities, Bwaxat was exiled to Tahiti, and the Hienghène area was closed to foreigners (Douglas 1978: 251, n.47; Hilliard 1978: 46). The Church of England never established a foothold on the mainland of New Caledonia.

If the identity of the nominal writer and recipient of the letter, the date and place of writing, and the general historical background are clear, there are other respects about which we know far less. First, the whereabouts of the original manuscript is unknown; the text as presented here is taken from a typewritten transcript made in the 1930s.⁵ Internal evidence suggests that the transcription is quite accurate, but it has not been possible to check the occasional suspected error against the original.

More seriously, we know little about the actual process of construction of the bilingual text. According to the only detailed account of the 1852 voyage (Anon 1853):

Our old friend Basan the chief of the place came on board, and remained with us during our stay. ... Basan dictated to the Bishop an urgent request to the Church in Sydney and New Zealand for an English Missionary to reside at his place.

We have it, then, that Bwaxat ‘dictated’⁶ the letter to Selwyn. Presumably this refers at least to the Fwâi version; Selwyn’s knowledge of the language must have been minimal, and composition of a complete text would have been well beyond his capabilities.⁷ This version, then, was literally dictated, word by word, by Bwaxat for Selwyn to write down. What about the English version? The typescript is labelled a ‘translation... by Bishop Selwyn’, but this seems like a hasty supposition by Prebble (or some earlier annotator of the manuscript). The second text is neither a translation into standard English, nor a series of strict morpheme by morpheme glosses. A more plausible scenario would be that Bwaxat first dictated the Fwâi version, then offered his own translation in his own English, which Selwyn faithfully transcribed. The two versions correspond quite closely, as will be seen; to what extent this results from good memory on Bwaxat’s part, or to what extent he may have followed the already written Fwâi version in dictating the English, is hard to say. Bwaxat himself was not literate in any language (Douglas 1978: 35), but Selwyn could have read back the Fwâi version, phrase by phrase, and taken down the translation.

While the 1852 letter might seem a paradoxical document—Selwyn writing a letter ‘to’ himself, ‘from’ Bwaxat, who was with him at the time—it makes sense when we bear in mind that the real intended readership was not Selwyn himself, but (as the chronicler notes above) ‘the Church in Sydney and New Zealand’. Bwaxat offered his goodwill and material support for a missionary, and noted the nearby presence of rival French (Catholic) missionaries—all points that Selwyn himself would undoubtedly have emphasised in urging the need for Anglican missionaries in Melanesia to his church associates at home.

3. The texts and notes

Prebble lists the two texts as separate items in his Bibliography, suggesting that they are on separate manuscript pages. The typewritten versions in his Appendix are presented successively as ‘Letter’ (Fwâi) and ‘Translation’ (English), each run on as a single paragraph (Prebble 1931: Appendix: 18-19). Since the two texts are closely parallel, and each helps at some points to clarify the other, I present them below in tandem, with division into numbered lines for purposes of discussion. The top (bold) line is the Melanesian text from Prebble; below this are Fwâi morpheme identifications (using the orthography

of Haudricourt and Ozanne-Rivierre (1982)) and glosses,⁸ the bottom (bold) line is the English text from Prebble. Insofar as possible I have aligned corresponding words and phrases vertically. English words in square brackets have no direct counterpart in the Fwâi text. The parallel version is followed by a free English translation, with references to the numbered lines.

Fengen.9 18. July. 1852.

1. **Bishop, do ti pei nen Missionary Englin,**
do ti- peei na-n
 2sg go.down say prl-to
Bishop, you go tell Missionary English,
2. **niamen we tame mo Iehen,**
nyame-n we ta-me moo Yheengen
 heart-3sg that go.up-here stay Hienghène
he like come stop Iengen,
3. **wo kehea wo, wowen Papali**
wo kohea wo wo hwen pupwaale
 1sg good 1sg 1sg like European
me very good me all the same white man
4. **niamung nen Papali wele mo onbalong**
nyamo-ng na-n pupwaale we-le moo hobalo-ng
 heart-1sg prl-to European that-3pl stay near-1sg
me like white man stop along with me
5. **Koi pegatch, koin guna, niape woi nahun sip -**
koi pexaac koi guna hya peei wo hina hun-sip
 no fight no steal not 1sg know way-lie
No fight, no steal, me no tell lies
6. **Wo kohea wo, we tame pai weranga,**
wo kohea wo we ta-me phwâi vera nga
 1sg good 1sg that go.up-here make indef house
Me very good, [me] make build house

7. **wole nga na wo hai la kōk**
wo le ga na wo hai la kuuk
 1sg fut indet give 1sg much indef yam
Me give plenty yam,
8. **y nani nuko, nai konj, hai tep.**
hai nani hnook hai khûny hai thep
 much goat female much sugar.cane much coconut
plenty nani goat, plenty sugar cane, plenty cocoa nut.
9. **We tame mo ra, hai mben Missionary.**
we ta-me moo rha hai bee-n
 that go.up-here stay here much friend-of
He come stop here, plenty man belong Missionary.
10. **Hai haok wele tibuk.**
hai haok we-le tii buuk
 much child that-3pl write book
Plenty boys make a write, make a book.
11. **Missionary Wiwi ile mo Puiehiepo, i le mon Balad.**
yele moo yele moo
 3pl stay 3pl stay
Missionary French stop Puarepe, stop Balad.
12. **Missionary Englin wele ma mo Fehen.**
we-le maa moo
 that-3pl invit stay
Missionary English come stop Iengen.
13. **Wele mo ne wan ngong.**
we-le moo ne hwa-n ngo-ng
 that-3pl stay at door-of house-1sg
Stop my house.
14. **Fendami raichien nga; We paiweranga hūn.**
vhe-da-me ra cee-n nga we phwâi vera nga hun
 carry-go.up-here indef wood-of house that make indef house big
He bring wood, make a house.

15. **Ve niamen dahōt, ye talin dahōt.**
ne nyame-n daahoot ye ta le daahoot
 if heart-3sg river he go.up to river
He like river, [stop] river.
16. **Ve niamen tha, ia mo ra.**
ne nyame-n tha ye moo rha
 if heart-3sg here 3sg stay here
He like here (i.e. at sea), stop here
17. **Vatut ta Paik, tale Pinji, ta Koerne, ta Mebia,**
ta ta le ta ta
 go.up go.up to go.up go.up
Bye bye go Paik, go Pinji, go Kornii, go Uebia,
18. **hen Truho, hen a Ngona, hen a to Wande, hen Penda#s,**
hen hen hen hen
 go.along go.along go.along go.along
go Truho, go Ngoma, go Wande, go Pendas,
19. **hel e Wanach, hen Ote,**
hen le hen
 go.along to go.along
go Wanach, go Ote,
20. **kohea kahuk be Missionary,**
kohya kahok bee-n
 good man friend-of
[tell a man] very good man belong Missionary,
21. **when kahun Dilvu, when kahun Mare.**
hwen hwen
 like like
all the same man Lifu, all the same man Nengone.
22. **We Pitami Missionary Englin, tame tha.**
we pe-ta-me
 that refl-go.up-here go.up-here here
[Make haste] Missionary English, come here.

23. Ye	petaro	tame.
<i>ye</i>	<i>pe-taru</i>	<i>ta-me</i>
3s	refl-quick	go.up-here
	Come quickly.	

24. (Sgd.) BASAN

Dama	Iehen
<i>daahma</i>	<i>Yheengen</i>
chief	Hienghène
Dama	Fehen

Free Translation

1. Bishop, go and tell an English missionary 2. who wants to come and live at Hienghène. 3. I am good, I am like Europeans. 4. I want Europeans to live with me. 5. There is no fighting, no stealing, I am not a liar. 6. I am good. Let him come and build a house.¹⁰ 7. I will give many yams, 8. many goats, lots of sugar cane, many coconuts. 9. If he comes to live here, there will be many friends of the missionary. 10. Many boys writing books. 11. The French missionaries are at Pouébo, they are at Balade. 12. Let English missionaries come and live at Hienghène. 13. Let them live at my place. 14. Bring some wood, to build a big house.¹¹ 15. If he likes the river, he can live on the river. 16. If he likes it here, he can live here.¹² 17. Then¹³ he can go to Paik, to Pije, to Kornî, to Wevia, to Touho, 18. to Kongouma, to Tiouandé, to Pindache, 19. to Ouanache, to Ote,¹⁴ 20. to say that¹⁵ it is good to be friends of the missionaries, 21. like the Lifu people,¹⁶ like the Nengone people. 22. Let English missionaries come, come here.¹⁷ 23. Come quickly. 24. Signed: Basan, Chief of Hienghène.

4. The language

I will not comment in detail on the vernacular version of the text. Considering Selwyn's extremely limited knowledge of the language, he seems to have been a good scribe. For the most part it is grammatical Fwâi. Apart from a few apparent mistranscriptions between manuscript and typescript, there are a small number of features which agree better with the closely related Pije language (Françoise Ozanne-Rivierre, p.c.). Whether these are the result of recent changes in Fwâi, or of some sort of language mixing by Bwaxat, is beyond the scope of the present paper.

Bwaxat is described by contemporary observers as fairly proficient in English. J. E. Erskine, who met him the year after his visit to Sydney, noted that he spoke English 'sufficiently well to maintain a conversation tolerably without the aid of an interpreter' (Erskine 1853: 354). The French geologist Jules Garnier, in the 1860s, said that he knew both French and English well, but preferred to express himself in the latter (Garnier 1867-8: 194).¹⁸

Nevertheless, the English of this text shows a number of features which distinguish it from native-speaker English and place it within an identifiable Pacific Pidgin English (PE) tradition. The pidgin of this particular place and time (southern Melanesia from about 1840 to the 1860s) has been referred to as 'Sandalwood English'¹⁹ (Clark 1979-80, 1983; Keesing 1988, Ch.3). The existence of such a language is clearly articulated by Garnier, though he has no name for it:

Il est un langage en Nouvelle-Calédonie qui se parle sur toute la côte et sert de moyen de communication entre les kanaks et les blancs et quelquefois entre les blancs eux-mêmes, quand ils sont de nation différente; ce langage a pour base l'anglais, mais on y rencontre des mots français, chinois, indigènes, tous plus ou moins altérés. (Garnier 1867-8: 171)

[There is a language in New Caledonia which is spoken all around the coast and serves as a means of communication between Kanaks and Whites and sometimes between the Whites themselves when they are of different nationality; this language is based on English, but in it one finds French, Chinese and native words, all more or less corrupted.]

The Sandalwood English period began with the first sustained Melanesian-European contact, with sandalwood and *bêche-de-mer* traders based in Australia operating in southern Melanesia from about 1840. These traders brought with them a form of Pacific PE which had developed, in eastern Australia during the preceding two decades, a number of salient features which were to become characteristic of Melanesian PE (Baker 1993). At the end of the period, in the 1860s, the English-Melanesian contact situation in New Caledonia dissolved as a consequence of resource exhaustion (sandalwood) and the imposition of French rule. Sandalwood English ceased to exist. In the New Hebrides, however (and for a time in the Loyalty Islands), the recruitment of indentured labour for distant plantations in Queensland, Samoa

and Fiji created new situations for a contact language, and Sandalwood English formed a major source for early Melanesian PE—the ancestor of today’s Bislama, Solomons Pijin and Tok Pisin (Clark 1983; Crowley 1990b).

Continuity between these successive types of pidgin can be recognised by a number of diagnostic features of grammar and lexicon. A short list of these was used in Clark (1979-80), while Baker (1993) gives a much larger list with greatly expanded documentation. Crowley (1990b: 187-200) systematically compares grammatical features of Sandalwood English with those of modern Bislama, while Baker and Huber (2001) place the Pacific varieties in a global context.

Overall, Bwaxat’s pidgin is neither precocious nor retrograde—most of the features discussed appear in other sources from New Caledonia and the Loyalty Islands during the period 1840-1860, and in the New Hebrides a little later.

Features such as *all the same* ‘(be) like’ (3), *bye bye* ‘after a time’²⁰ (17), preverbal *no* for sentential negation (5), *me* in subject position (passim), *plenty* ‘much, many’ (7-10), and the location verb *stop* (passim) are found in pidgin and creole languages in both the Atlantic and Pacific hemispheres, generally from the late 18th century onward. They persist into modern Melanesian Pidgin (MP). Features with a Pacific origin which also come down to the present include possessive *belong* (9, 19)²¹ and *nani (goat) ‘goat’*.²²

Some other aspects of Bwaxat’s pidgin are typical of early Pacific PE but were not destined to survive. The comitative preposition *along with* (4) has world-wide distribution, but disappears from MP. Phrasal *very good* for ‘good’ is common in early Pacific records but is replaced by *good* in MP. The Fwâi text also has *wiwi* ‘French’, an early Pacific pidgin item, rendered as *French* in the PE version.

The most notable innovative feature here is the first recorded appearance of Head + Attribute order in noun phrases, as in *Missionary English* (1) and *man Lifu* (21). This order is distinctive of MP, and clearly based on the substrate Oceanic languages. (A separate source²³ suggests that Bwaxat may have used *pigeon* as generic for ‘bird’, which would be one of the earliest recorded uses of this characteristic MP lexical item.)

Some features well attested from early Pacific PE through to modern MP are conspicuous by their absence in this text. The numerous phrases in the text referring to locations and goals are unmarked, with no appearance of the locative/directional preposition *along* which was to become a common feature of MP (*long*). Conditionals seem to be purely paratactic (15, 16), even though

one might have expected Fwâi *ne* ‘if’ to be rendered by *suppose* (MP *sapos*). None of the transitive verbs show the suffix *-Vm*, but as Crowley (1990b: 287) notes, this remains sporadic until relatively late in the development of MP.

Finally, it must be noted that we have here a very early, spontaneous example of the type of parallel bilingual text elicited from Solomons Pijin speakers by Keesing (1988). Keesing was concerned to demonstrate a fairly detailed calquing of Oceanic structures into PE—a process which, he argued, was repeated over generations and played a major role in the formation of MP structure. In the Bwaxat text, while overall rhetorical or discourse structure of the PE text does follow the Fwâi quite closely, there seems to be little fine calquing of grammatical patterns. We have already noted one clear example in Head + Attribute order. The absence of overt marking of location and goal phrases might reflect the fact that most of these are in fact unmarked in Fwâi. However, the absence of a PE word corresponding to Fwâi *ne* in conditionals has been noted as surprising. In addition, the emphatic duplication of subject pronoun *wo* (3, 6, 7), the suffixed possessive construction translated with *he/me like* (2, 4) (literally ‘his/my heart is to’), and the distinctive Fwâi idioms corresponding to *me no tell lies* in (5) (literally ‘I do not know the way of lies’) and *my house* in (13) (literally ‘at the door of my house’), find no reflection in the PE text.

Notes

- 1 My attention was first drawn to the text by the citation of the English version (slightly abridged) in Hilliard (1970: 132). This led me to Prebble’s thesis and the accompanying Melanesian version. On the problem of locating the original manuscripts, see below. I am grateful to Terry Crowley and especially to Françoise Ozanne-Rivierre for comments on an early circulated version of the text.
- 2 Except in direct quotes from the 1852 documents, this and other place names will be given their conventional French spellings.
- 3 The spelling used here, and for the rest of this paper, reflects the phonemic shape of the name in Fwâi. The name is commonly represented in French orthography as ‘Bouarate’, but also Boarat, Boirat, etc (Douglas 1978: 45, 50, 52). ‘Basset’ was apparently the name commonly used by English speakers during the sandalwood period. ‘Basan’ appears to be unique to the documents studied here, and I have no explanation of the deviant final consonant.
- 4 The Pidgin English of another such leader is analysed in Crowley (1990a).
- 5 The two versions of the letter in typescript are appended to A. E. Prebble’s MA thesis on Selwyn (Prebble 1931: Appendix A: 18-19). Prebble labels the two

texts as follows: ‘5. MS Letter. Basan, Chief of Yengen (New Caledonia) to the Bishop of New Zealand, containing an appeal to the Churches in Australia and New Zealand to send an English Missionary to his district. Dated, Yengen. 18 July, 1852.’ and ‘6. MS translation of the above letter by Bishop Selwyn.’ (Prebble 1931, Appendix B: 81) He does not indicate the provenance of the manuscripts, but they seem likely to have been among those he found “sadly neglected” and “stored away in careless fashion” in the Provincial Office of the Anglican Church in Auckland (Prebble 1931: ii). Unfortunately these have now been dispersed to a number of locations, and it has not so far been possible to locate the Bwaxat-Selwyn letter. I am grateful to archivists Eddie Sun of St. John’s College, and Janet Foster of the Auckland Diocesan Archives for information and assistance.

- 6 The same word is used by Prebble (1931: 67), whose account is evidently based on Anon. (1853).
- 7 The early voyages had brought home to Selwyn Melanesia’s ‘amazing multiplicity of languages’:

as if the curse upon the builders of Babel had fallen with tenfold weight upon the race of Ham, and had involved them in a ‘confusion worse confounded’ than that which fell upon the rest of the human race. (Selwyn Letters 216, also in Tucker 1879, I: 301)

Having learned some Māori, he was able to make himself understood in places like Tonga and Samoa, as well as Polynesian-speaking enclaves in Melanesia such as Emae in Vanuatu and Ouvéa in the Loyalty Islands (Selwyn Letters 264: 312). Elsewhere, the most he could do, when time and circumstances permitted, was to learn some rudiments, either from locals on the spot or from the boys who accompanied him to Auckland. It was not until the arrival of the linguistically gifted John Coleridge Patteson, first Bishop of Melanesia, in 1855, that some progress began to be made on this front. The ultimate policy adopted was the use of the Banks Islands language Mota as a church lingua franca.

- 8 The following abbreviations are used in the morpheme glosses: 2, 3 - second person, third person; sg, pl - singular, plural; fut - future; indef - indefinite; indet - indeterminate; invit - invitative; prl - pre-locative; refl - reflexive.
- 9 The ‘F’ here and in line 12 is presumably a mistranscription for ‘T’ or ‘Y’.
- 10 The second part of this line does not seem to correspond. The Fwâi seems to mean something like ‘Let him come and build a house’, whereas the English says ‘I will build a house (or have a house built)’.
- 11 ‘Big’ in the Fwâi version does not appear in the English.
- 12 ‘River’ refers to the valley of the Hienghène River, ‘here’ to the coastal area at its mouth. The letter was written on board the ship at anchor in the bay. The words ‘(i.e. at sea)’ are apparently an interpolation by the original manuscript writer.
- 13 *Vatut* apparently corresponds to *Bye bye*, but the Fwâi word cannot be identified.

- 14 The places named in (17) with the verb *ta* ‘go up’ are localities up the Hienghène River valley. Those in (18-19), with the verb *hen* ‘go along’ are southwards along the coast between Hienghène and Touho.
- 15 English *tell a man* has no counterpart in the Fwâi text.
- 16 Fwâi *kahun* cannot be identified with certainty, but cf. *kahuk* ‘man’, *-n* ‘of’.
- 17 English *make haste* has no counterpart in the Fwâi text.
- 18 Bwaxat did not learn French until his exile in Tahiti from 1857 to 1863 (O’Reilly 1980: 42-43).
- 19 Crowley (1990b: 187ff.) refers to the same language as ‘Early Beach-la-Mar’.
- 20 While *bye bye* here is merely a time adverbial, in Melanesian PE it undergoes a process of grammaticalisation into a future tense marker.
- 21 Possessive *belong* is recorded in Australia as early as 1826, and in Fiji in the 1840s. Bwaxat’s use is its earliest occurrence in southern Melanesia.
- 22 The Fwâi text shows *nani* as generic ‘goat’, but the English *nani goat* appears to translate ‘female goat’ (*nani hnook*).
- 23 ‘.. Richards presented Bwaxat with a double-barrelled gun which the chief had requested in order to shoot birds. ... soon becoming a capable marksman, he succeeded in adding ‘pigeon’ to his diet.’ (Shineberg 1967: 74-75)

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