

# ON THE ORIGIN AND USAGE OF THE TERM *BEACH-LA-MAR*

Ross Clark  
(University of Auckland)

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The following is a typical definition of *Beach-la-Mar* from a modern English dictionary:

A pidgin based on English and used as a lingua franca in New Guinea, the Bismarck Archipelago, The Solomon Islands, and other islands nearby.  
- *Webster's Third International Dictionary* (1966)

What is apparently being described is the English-based pidgin of Papua New Guinea (self-designated as *Tok Pisin*) and the closely related pidgin of the Solomon Islands. But speakers of these pidgins do not refer to what they are speaking as *Beach-la-Mar*, but as *pidgin* and cognate words.

The only area in the Pacific in which a modern pidgin is called anything like *Beach-la-Mar* is the New Hebrides Condominium. Here the local English-based pidgin (also closely related to those of Papua New Guinea and the Solomons) is self-designated as *Bislama*. In French it is known as *Bichelamar*, while English speakers generally use either one of these terms or *pidgin*. But no dictionary definition of *Beach-la-Mar* that I know of makes any specific reference to the New Hebrides.

The solution to this discrepancy between dictionary definitions and reality might be thought to lie in the unspecified time reference. This idea would be supported by the practice of linguists writing about pidgins and creoles, who generally use *Beach-la-Mar* in a strictly historical sense, as in the following typical passage:

... there grew up, in the eighteenth century in the Pacific, a pidgin language known as Beach-la-Mar (from *bêche-de-mer*, a French name for the trepang), which is still spoken to some extent in the New Hebrides and Fiji. This language ... is the direct ancestor of Solomon

Islands Pidgin and New Guinea Pidgin, though  
it shows many differences from both  
(Laycock 1970:105)

Thus for Laycock and others, *Beach-la-Mar* refers to a pidgin which *formerly* existed in the eighteenth or nineteenth century, and was the ancestor of the pidgins of New Guinea and nearby islands.<sup>1</sup> While not explicitly stated, it is certainly implied by this linguistic usage that the historical pidgin was actually referred to *at the time* as "Beach-la-Mar". One of my purposes in this paper is to show that this was almost certainly not the case.

First, however, I would like to consider the etymology of the term. Most linguists and lexicographers would agree with Laycock in deriving *Beach-la-Mar* from *bêche-de-mer*. The trepang or edible sea-slug was a commercial item of some importance in the early South Seas trading period, and its association with the prevailing contact pidgin presumably led to the transfer of meaning. While the general idea of this etymology is correct, the relation between the two forms is in fact a great deal more complex, as I will show in the following section.<sup>2</sup>

## 2 HOLOTHURIANS

The trepangs (*Holothuria* and related genera) are soft-bodied echinoderms which live on sandy bottoms in shallow water throughout the tropical Indo-Pacific seas. They are a traditional delicacy in China, eaten in soups and other dishes. Chinese traders began importing trepang from Indonesia probably during the late 17th century (Macknight 1976:7-8), and Europeans first encountered and described trepang as one of the many exotic items of trade in the Orient. In view of this historical context, it is plausible to suppose that the Portuguese *bicho do mar* is the ultimate source of both English *Beach-la-mar* and French *bêche-de-mer*. The Portuguese were pioneers in the European discovery of the Far East, and their language contributed or transmitted many words for such exotic products to both English and French (English *areca*, *betel*, *copra*, *mango*, *teak*, etc.). Moreover, the Portuguese form is the only term of the three which is internally self-explanatory, being literally translatable as "sea worm".

In French there are in fact two forms to concern us. *Biche de mer*<sup>3</sup> could be an etymological borrowing from Portuguese, or could conceivably have been an independent creation in a dialect of French where *biche* has the meaning "insect, small animal".<sup>4</sup> *Bêche de mer* is more problematic. It could be a folk-etymological re-shaping of *biche de mer* - though it is hard to see why

"spade" (*bêche*) is any more appropriate a designation for trepang than "doe" (*biche*). Mossé, however, observes that all early attestations of *bêche de mer* known to him are in works translated from English, and concludes that it is an English innovation which has been re-introduced into French.<sup>5</sup> This would leave us with the problem of accounting for a change from *biche* to *bêche* in English, which seems even less motivated than in French. Nevertheless it is possible to imagine a series of steps which might have had that effect:

- (i) borrowing of French *biche de mer* into English, with the first syllable pronounced /biš/;
- (ii) mis-spelling of *biche* as *beche*, according to the English spelling convention that /ī/ may be spelled *e...e*;
- (iii) reading of *beche* as /beš/, according to Anglicized French spelling conventions;
- (iv) addition of the circumflex to produce an actually occurring French word.

Whatever the locus of the change from *biche* to *bêche*, the fact is that both appear in English from quite an early date.

The real interest of English speakers in the trepang begins in the early nineteenth century, with the opening of the Pacific islands to European commercial exploitation. Australian, British and American entrepreneurs were soon collecting *bêche de mer* in Fiji, New Caledonia, Micronesia and elsewhere, and taking them to Chinese ports for sale. (See Ward 1972 for an account of this trade.) The literature of this period contains a rich variety of variant terms for the slug, a representative sample of which is shown here, with the earliest occurrence I know of for each:

- bêche de mer*: 1805 (King to Camden, *Historical Records of Australia*, Series I, Vol.IV, 382)
- biche de mer*: 1783 (Forrest, *Voyage to Mergui*, cited in Yule and Burnell 1903:883)
- beech de mer*: 1851 (Wallis, *passim*)
- beche le mer*: 1808 (*Sydney Gazette*, July 17, p.2)
- beech le mer*: 1814 (Deposition of P. Dillon, *HRA*, Vol.VIII, 105)
- beche de mar*: 1828 (*Calcutta Gov't. Gazette*, May 8, in Dillon 1829 (II):431)
- bich de mar*: 1817 (*Raffles*, I, 203)
- biche de mar*: 1809 (*Calcutta Gazette*, Oct. 26, in Im Thurn and Wharton 1925:205)

- beecheley mar*: 1805 (Aickin to King, *Historical Records of New South Wales*, Vol.V, 620)
- beeche le mar*: c.1810 (Davies, in Im Thurn and Wharton 1925:129)
- beache le mar*: 1817 (Delano, 100)
- beache lamar* : 1824 (*New Bedford Mercury*, May 21, in Ward 1966, Vol.2, Fanning 8)

Obviously much of this profusion of forms is merely a result of the vagaries of English (mixed up with French) spelling. (I have eliminated such additional confusing variables as italics, hyphens and capital letters.) But just as obviously, some real differences in pronunciation must be indicated.

If we compare the two attested modern English pronunciations, *bêche-de-mer* /beš də mer/ and *Beach-la-Mar* /bič lə mar/, we find four points of difference:

- (i) /e/ versus /ī/ in the first syllable;
- (ii) /š/ versus /č/ at the end of this syllable;
- (iii) /d/ versus /l/ in the second syllable;
- (iv) /e/ versus /a/ in the final syllable.

Taking every possible combination of this set of four alternatives, we would have a set of variants which correspond quite closely to the range suggested by the above spellings. To derive *beach-la-mar* directly from *bêche-de-mer*, as the standard etymology would have it, involves a change from the first to the second alternative of each of the four variables just listed. None of these changes, however, is part of the normal naturalization of French loans in English. We would require one less change if we made the source *biche de mer*, considered as independently borrowed from French. But an even more attractive possibility is that the immediate source of *beach-la-mar* is the Portuguese *bicho do mar*, anglicized as /bič də mar/.<sup>6</sup> Given that the neutralization and loss of unstressed vowels is to be expected in English, this leaves only the change of /d/ to /l/ unexplained.

Support for a direct borrowing from Portuguese into English is provided by the occasional use of something like the Portuguese form in English contexts by writers such as Andrew Cheyne [1842]:

I also learnt that the reefs produced Becho de Mar, and that Tortoise shell was to be procured at certain seasons. (Shineberg 1971:157)

and even more strikingly by the following instance where a clearly anglicized form is given as if it were Portuguese:



Sea swallow (called beach de mar by the Portuguese and trepong by the Malays)... (*Naval Chronicle* VIII:380 (1802), cited in *OED*, s.v. *sea-swallow*)

One could go further and suggest that *biche de mer*, and possibly *bêche de mer*, were borrowed from French at a rather educated, literate level, whereas *beach-la-mar* was borrowed from Portuguese mainly by uneducated speakers through the spoken language. The two forms were perceived to be related, with the result that in time the latter came to be seen as a "corrupted" pronunciation of the former, and writers made sporadic attempts to "correct" their spellings (and possibly their pronunciations)<sup>7</sup> in the direction of the prestige variant, giving rise to the great variety of forms in the literature. With the decline in importance of the trepang trade, the "correct" variant alone survived, and few forms other than *bêche-de-mer* are to be found in the literature after about 1860.

### 3 PIDGINS

The holothurians are easy enough to collect, being almost devoid of defence or mobility. But once caught they must be cleaned, boiled and dried according to fairly precise standards in order to reach the market in a saleable condition. For European merchant ships in the Pacific in the nineteenth century, this meant considerable time on shore, the erection of temporary buildings, gathering of firewood, and so on, and the recruitment and supervision of native labour to help with these tasks. Thus, like the cutting of sandalwood, the trepang trade created temporary mixed communities where a contact language could be expected to arise and flourish.<sup>8</sup>

The transference of meaning from the item of trade to the trade language is natural enough, and was probably by way of a phrase such as *beach-la-mar English*. This development is paralleled by the phrase *sandalwood English* - referring to the same pidgin - which is sometimes shortened to *sandalwood*. Thus Margaret Whitecross Paton, a missionary's wife, writing in 1865 from Maré in the Loyalty Islands, refers to "*Sandalwood English* - a sort of peculiar broken English, which traders use with Natives all over the Islands" (Paton 1895:6); while a later missionary in the same area relates the following anecdote:

Mr Gill of Rarotonga and myself once paid a visit to a French priest of Uvea. We addressed him in English, he could not understand us and said "Speak sandalwood". We did so, he could then understand us. (Jones ms.)

However, I have found *no* examples of the use of *Beach-la-Mar* or cognate forms to denote pidgin English in the literature of the early and mid-nineteenth century. Writers describing what was apparently pidgin use phrases such as "broken English", "pidgin English", and so on. The original *OED* (whose A-B section was compiled in the 1880's), has no entry for *Beach-la-Mar*, and gives only the meaning "trepan" for *bêche-de-mer*. When *Beach-la-Mar* first makes its appearance, in the 1933 Supplement, the earliest citation offered is the title of a 1911 book by William Churchill: *Beach-la-Mar: The Jargon or Trade Speech of the Western Pacific*. Despite a fairly extensive search of the nineteenth century South Pacific literature, I have been unable to find any published use of the word in this sense earlier than Churchill's.<sup>9</sup>

In striking contrast to the absence of attestations in English before 1911, the word *biche-la-mar* is used by French writers from as early as 1872 to refer to a type of pidgin in use in the New Caledonian region:

...or, le seul moyen de communication intellectuelle à ma disposition pour converser avec eux, était le langage dit "*biche-la-mar*", espèce de sabir océanien (ou lingua franca), composé de beaucoup de mauvais anglais, mélangé d'un peu de tout pris dans les autres langues, portugaise, française et polynésienne.

(Parquet 1872:57; see Hollyman 1976 for additional citations)

It is significant that French forms referring to pidgin always have *l* in the second syllable and final *-ar*, whereas those denoting the trepan have *d* and final *-er*. As we have seen, the *l-ar* form is known in English well before this time, in the sense of "trepan", and later appears in the sense of "pidgin"; and since it appears with only the latter sense in French, I conclude that *biche-la-mar* represents a borrowing by French of English *Beach-la-Mar* in the sense of "pidgin". Thus the crucial semantic shift must have taken place in English before 1872.

The fact that no documentary evidence of this early shift has so far come to light can be explained if we recall that all the French citations from the nineteenth century relate to New Caledonia and the nearby islands (the Loyalties and the southern New Hebrides). New Caledonia had been a French possession since 1853, and hence most travellers, administrators and others who left published accounts were French speakers. But English speakers had made up a substantial part of the European population ever since European contact became continuous in the

1840's (Hollyman 1976:27-31). So it is not unreasonable to postulate a regional variety of English in which an innovation like the term *Beach-la-Mar* (*English*) might develop and be preserved, while remaining largely unknown to the greater English-speaking world.

Careful examination of manuscript sources will undoubtedly yield much better evidence on this hypothesis. At the moment I can offer only two pieces bearing directly on it. Neither is as early as the earliest French occurrences, but both considerably antedate Churchill. The first is a note by Hugo Schuchardt (1883:154) on the pidgin material supplied to him by E.L. Layard, British consul in Noumea:

Ihm zufolge wird es allgemein als *Beche-le-mar*-englisch bezeichnet, das ist, 'Trepangfänger-englisch'.

[According to him it is generally designated *Beche-le-mar* English, that is, 'Trepang-catcher English'.]

Unfortunately, since this remark of Layard's is rendered indirectly in German, it is not clear whether he is reporting a French or an English usage. However, the absence from French sources of any such phrase as *\*anglais(de)bichlamar* could be taken as some indication that it was the latter.

The second item is from an unpublished letter of the Rev. John Jones, a missionary on Maré, in the Loyalty Islands, written in 1882:<sup>10</sup>

...the natives throughout the whole of the Pacific, where any degree of civilization has commenced, manifest a great desire to learn and speak English, but it is almost universally a "broken English" generally called "Bece [sic] de Mer English" or "Sandalwood English" from the fact that it is spoken by white men and natives in trading for those articles. (Jones ms.)

Although the new sense of *Beach-la-Mar* may have developed as early as the 1840's, it does not appear to have been known outside of the New Caledonian regional varieties of French and English until the early 20th century. (Mossé seems to be unaware of its use in French before 1926!) The first two writers to give it wider currency in English were apparently William Churchill and Jack London. Churchill has already been mentioned as the author of the well-known 1911 book entitled *Beach-la-Mar*. While this work is probably the single most frequently cited reference on the subject, it is at best a semi-

scholarly work, and the author is extremely vague about the currency of the term *Beach-la-Mar*, as he is about his own sources of first-hand knowledge of it, if any. London's sources are easier to trace; he spent several months cruising the New Hebrides and Solomon Islands in 1908 in his yacht the *Snark*, touching as far south as Tanna. His 1909 article in the *Contemporary Review* was entitled "Beche de Mer English", and the shorter term "bêche de mer" is used in the text. Presumably this indicates that these terms were in use in at least some parts of this area at the time.

Writers like Churchill and London introduced *Beach-la-Mar* (or *bêche de mer*) to the literate English-speaking world at large, where it has persisted to this day in some popular writing, supported by dictionaries. But this currency, largely among people who had never been to the Southwest Pacific, must be distinguished from the question of where and when the term was used by people *in the islands* to refer to a pidgin they were using. The present evidence available to me suggests that it never spread much beyond New Caledonia and the New Hebrides. Although the pidgin which developed there between 1840 and 1863 was apparently the major basis of the pidgin used on the plantations of Queensland and Samoa, from which the modern Melanesian pidgins are descended, the term *Beach-la-Mar* does not seem to have followed it except in reference to the sea-slug (New Guinea *pislama*, New Hebrides *bislama*). I have no evidence that this term was ever used for pidgin in Queensland, the Torres Straits, Papua, New Guinea, or Samoa.<sup>11</sup> In New Caledonia, the English-based pidgin became extinct by the end of the nineteenth century. In the New Hebrides the pidgin survives, as does the term, but nowadays only in a form re-borrowed from the French. Just how late the terms *Beach-la-Mar* or *bêche-de-mer* survived in local English is not clear.

Linguists appear to have acquired their use of the term from the popular metropolitan, rather than the local colonial source - particularly from the quasi-scholarly Churchill. Reinecke (1937) used "Beach-la-Mar" as the title of his chapter on South Pacific pidgins, but this was mainly for lack of a better term. His major sources for defining the extent of pidgin usage were a series of British Foreign Office Handbooks published in 1920, some of which used the phrase "*bêche-de-mer* English". But Reinecke himself questioned their accuracy (728), and there is no good reason to suppose that this phrase reflected actual local usage in the various territories mentioned.

As the study of Pacific pidgins increased, focussing particularly on New Guinea, where the term *Beach-la-Mar* was not locally used, this term became associated more and more with the earlier writers, and hence with earlier stages of pidgin. In

1955, R.A. Hall noted that the term was "at present somewhat obsolescent in linguistic discussion", but suggested that it "might well be revived as a general term for nineteenth-century South Seas Pidgin." (Hall 1955:68n.). Subsequent writers have adopted this suggestion, but they have assumed that the term must in fact have been applied to the pidgin they were writing about, at the time when it was spoken. Churchill's vagueness has thus led to *Beach-la-Mar* being applied retrospectively far beyond its geographically and temporally limited span of actual local usage.

#### 4 CONCLUSIONS

Both *beach-la-mar* and *bêche-de-mer* (as well as a large number of intermediate forms) were in common use in the Pacific in the early 19th century to denote the trepang. The former, rather than being derived from the latter, is probably an independent borrowing of Portuguese *bicho do mar*, the ultimate source of both. The use of *Beach-la-Mar* to refer to pidgin English arose in the local English of the New Caledonian region between 1840 and 1870, and was there borrowed into French as *biche-la-mar*. The word achieved wider currency in English only for a few decades in the early 20th century, and now seems to be obsolete in local usage, except in the New Hebrides, where it has been re-borrowed from French. The linguistic use of *Beach-la-Mar* to refer to early 19th century pidgin English is now firmly established, but is strictly speaking an anachronism.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Churchill, William 1911. *Beach-la-Mar, the Jargon or Trade Speech of the Western Pacific*. Washington, Carnegie Institution.
- Clark, Ross 1977. "In search of Beach-la-Mar". *Working Papers* No. 48. Dept. of Anthropology, University of Auckland.
- Delano, Amasa 1817. *A Narrative of Voyages and Travels in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres*. Boston, E.G. House.
- Dillon, Peter 1829. *Narrative and Successful Result of a Voyage in the South Seas*. London, Hurst Chance & Co.
- [Fletcher, R.J.] 1923. *Isles of Illusion*. London, Constable.
- Hall, R.A. 1955. "Pidgin English in the British Solomon Islands". *Australian Quarterly* 27(4):68-74.



- Hollyman, K.J. 1976. "Les pidgins européens de la région calédonienne". *Te Reo* 19:25-66.
- Im Thurn, Sir E. and L.C. Wharton (eds.). 1925. *The Journal of William Lockerby*. London, Hakluyt Society.
- Jones, J. ms. Letter to Thompson (LMS Secretary), 6 September 1882. Box 37, South Sea Letters, London Missionary Society Archives, London.
- Laycock, Don 1970. "Pidgin English in New Guinea". In W.S. Ramson (ed.), *English Transported*. Canberra, ANU Press.
- London, Jack 1909. "Beche de Mer English". *The Contemporary Review*, 96:359-64 (September). Reprinted in *The Cruise of the Snark*. New York, Macmillan, 1911.
- Macknight, C.C. 1976. *The Voyage to Marege': Macassan Trepangers in Northern Australia*. Melbourne University Press.
- Mossé, F. 1929. "Histoire d'un mot et de ses pérégrinations: biche-de-mer". *Revue anglo-américaine*, 7:37-49, 143-5.
- Parquet, Jules 1872. *La Nouvelle-Calédonie avec un croquis topographique*. Alger, Imprimerie de l'Association V. Aillaud.
- Paton, M.W. 1895. *Letters and Sketches from the New Hebrides*. London, Hodder and Stoughton.
- Raffles, T.S. 1817. *The History of Java*. London, Black, Parbury and Allen.
- Reinecke, John E. 1937. *Marginal Languages*. PhD Dissertation, Yale University.
- St.-Johnston, T.R. 1922. *South Sea Reminiscences*. London, Allen & Unwin.
- [Scherzer, K. von] 1861. *Reise der Oesterreichischen Fregatte NOVARA um die Erde*. Wien, Kaiserlich-königlichen Hof- und Staatsdruckerei.
- Schuchardt, Hugo 1883. "Kreolische Studien V: Über das Melaneso-englische". *Sitzungsberichte der k.k. Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Wien (Philosophische-historische Klasse)*, 105: 131-61.
- Shineberg, Dorothy (ed.). 1971. *The Trading Voyages of Andrew Cheyne, 1841-1844*. Canberra, ANU Press.
- Todd, Loreto 1974. *Pidgins and Creoles*. London, Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- [Wallis, Mary Davis] 1851. *Life in Feejee, or Five Years Among the Cannibals*, by a Lady. Boston, Wm. Heath.
- Ward, R.G. (ed.). 1966. *American Activities in the Central Pacific, 1798-1870*. Ridgewood, N.J., Gregg Press.
- 1972. "The Pacific bêche-de-mer trade with special reference to Fiji". In R.G. Ward (ed.), *Man in the Pacific Islands*. Oxford University Press.
- Warner, W.L. 1937. *Black Civilization*. New York, Harper & Brothers.
- Wurm, S.A. 1971. "Pidgins, creoles and lingue franche". In *Current Trends in Linguistics*, Vol.8, 999-1021. The Hague, Mouton.



Yule, Henry and A.C. Burnell. 1903. *Hobson-Jobson*. London, John Murray.

#### NOTES

- 1 Laycock and some other writers (e.g. Wurm 1971:1007-8, Todd 1974:93) state or imply that Beach-la-Mar is "still spoken" in certain areas. While this might be argued to be true, in a terminological sense, of the New Hebrides, it is most unlikely that the original eighteenth- or nineteenth-century Beach-la-Mar is "still spoken" anywhere, any more than are Elizabethan English or Proto-Polynesian. Our limited knowledge of the structure of nineteenth-century South Pacific pidgin (see Clark 1977) provides no basis for the belief that New Hebridean *Bislama* is significantly closer to it than any of the others.
- 2 The essential arguments and conclusions of the following section were worked out and presented in preliminary form (Clark 1977, Section 6) before I was aware of the paper by Mossé (1929), which anticipates them in a number of points. However, since Mossé's paper is in a rather obscure publication not likely to be seen by many of my readers, I feel justified in repeating them here.
- 3 The earliest occurrence of this word found by Mossé dates from 1861 (*Revue maritime et coloniale*, Tome I, p.368), but it undoubtedly occurred much earlier, as it had already been quoted by English sources in the late eighteenth century.
- 4 Mossé 1929:41-42. The most common Standard French meaning of *biche* is "doe", but it may also refer to the vine grub, *Eumolpus vitis*.
- 5 Some dictionaries accept Mossé's conclusion - e.g. the *OED* 1933 Supplement ("Quasi-Fr. of Eng. origin"), and the *American Heritage Dictionary* ("Pseudo-French from earlier English").
- 6 Mossé 1929:48. This derivation is accepted by the *OED* (1933 Supplement).

- 7 That the final consonant of the first syllable was almost always pronounced as /č/ is suggested by the fact that it is never spelled *ɛn*, which would have been expected if less than fully literate speakers were using /š/. Spellings can be deceptive here: Scherzer (1861:447n.) notes that in the phrase he spells *biche de mar*, given as the English word for trepang, the *ch* is pronounced as German *tsch*, i.e. /č/.
- 8 At an earlier date, visits by Indonesian trepang fishermen to the northern Australian coasts had led to a pidginized form of their language being used by the local Aboriginal population. (See Macknight 1976, Warner 1937).
- 9 The 1933 Supplement erroneously gives a citation from "Bohun Lynch", dated 1910. As the correction in the 1972 Supplement indicates, the letter in question was written by R.J. Fletcher in 1912; it was not published, however, until more than a decade later. Fletcher (1923:61), who was living in the New Hebrides, uses the form *Biche-la-mar*, which is probably borrowed from French.
- 10 I am grateful to K.R. Howe for bringing this letter to my attention, and to the Rev. B.G. Thorogood of the Council for World Mission (Congregational and Reformed) for permission to quote from it.
- 11 The fact that London spent most of his time in the Solomons might suggest that the term had reached that far north. There is also a remark by T.R. St.-Johnston (1922:71), about Solomon Islands labourers in Fiji picking up "a little English, of a weird sort known as *bêche-de-mer* (or more commonly called 'Beach-de-meer')".