Some Reflections on the Emergence of the English Language in Kiribati

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Introduction

This paper will attempt to trace how English was first introduced to the islanders of the tiny Republic of Kiribati in the Central Pacific. Reference is made to the historic accounts of Spanish and British Sea explorers during the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as well as to the oral traditional accounts anecdoted by I-Kiribati elders (Unimane). Kiribati, pronounced "kiribas", is a phonological representation of the Gilbertese pronunciation of 'Gilberts' and people who come from there are called I-Kiribati.

The present Republic of Kiribati (est. 1979) consists of three groups of coral atolls: the Gilbert group with 17 islands; the Phoenix group with 8 islands; and the Line group which is further sub-divided into 3 Northern Line islands and 5 Central and Southern Line islands. The Republic covers a land area of 270 square miles, separated across a vast expanse of ocean—approximately 3 million square miles in area. The country occupies a unique position in the middle of the Pacific Ocean isolated from any significant island or mainland nation by immense and deep sea distances.

Until 1979, Kiribati was known as the Gilbert Islands, and together with the Ellice Islands formed the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony (GEIC) which was administered by the British Government from 1892. Today, however, Kiribati is an independent nation within the Commonwealth and like most other independent states, has become a member of many regional and international organisations. At the time of independence in 1979, a parliamentary system of government based on the British system was adopted but with the President as the Head of State as well as Government.

The Development of English in Kiribati

As in most other Pacific island countries, Christianity, education and literacy all had their beginning with the arrival of European missionaries during the early
and mid-nineteenth century (Mangubhai, 1985). The development of the Pacific vernaculars and the spread of English among the island communities is also rightly ascribed to the efforts of pioneer missionaries such as Dr Hiram Bingham of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) who arrived on Abaiang in the Gilbert Islands in 1857. It is possible that the process had actually begun much earlier with the visiting of whalers, beachcombers, ships' captains and crews, and traders.

The contribution of the early missionaries to the spread of English is reflected in their two major objectives: firstly, genuine concern to deliver the islanders from 'the forces of darkness' to the doctrines of Christianity; and secondly, their desire to educate. In order to achieve these objectives, they made considerable use of the English language, in addition to the local vernacular. Thus, whatever little contact there had been up until then, the missionaries certainly helped to consolidate and further advance the English language influence in the islands. In Bingham's list of priorities, it seemed that teaching English to the natives in any formal way did not exist at all when he wrote in one of his letters to the ABCFM in 1858:

\[
\text{We have no time for teaching English, we feel the great work is the preaching of Christ.}
\]

\[(Rennie, 1985, 208)\]

The most common criticism of the Protestant education (during its infancy in the Gilberts) by the British Resident Commissioners had been that the Gilbertese had been taught in their own language rather than in English. Bingham offered a reason for this in 1904 in an address at the ABCFM:

\[
\text{I do not think it at all probable that English will ever be generally read or spoken by the Gilbertese. These islands are such wretched abodes for human beings that white men will never go to dwell in numbers among them.}
\]

\[(Rennie, 1985, 289)\]

However, not all colonial administrators agreed with Bingham's assessment. Officials praised the Mission for laying the firm foundation of primary education in the Gilberts and it would appear that Bingham has been proved wrong. The I-Kiribati now learn, read and speak English for their own specific needs. They do not learn English just for the sake of a handful of expatriates resident there; they
need English for higher education, technical and vocational training, research, international trade and international political relations.

The three Missions - the London Missionary Society (LMS) in the southern Gilberts, the ABCFM and the Catholic Mission (SHM) both in the northern and central Gilberts - used the Gilbertese language extensively as a vehicle to establish themselves. The written word made an impact on the lifestyle, culture and language of the islanders. Increased contact with English-speaking traders, however, particularly in the northern and central Gilberts where the High Chiefs conducted trade themselves, led Gilbertese to feel the necessity for the I-matang (European) language.

The King would send his son to school if we would agree to teach him English. Others are also very anxious to learn our language.

(Macdonald, 1982, 35)

Bingham had observed that the desire for learning English was obviously there, not only in the royal household but among the people in general. Returning seamen also became influential agents in generating this desire with their glorified stories of far-off islands of the 'white people' often told in the oral tradition of the maneaba (meeting place). The seeds sown through the early contact between the whalers and traders on one side and the Gilbertese on the other during the first half of the nineteenth century had begun to germinate. It is no coincidence that the rise and fall of the first known 'school' started by Bingham took place so rapidly as the islanders opposed the idea of learning in their own language: in this context they were showing a degree of maturity in their judgement foreseeing more contact with Europeans in the future.

Captain Rooke of the HMS 'MIRANDA' talked of 15 Europeans and Chinese traders resident on various islands of the Gilbert group during his visit to the islands in 1886. In 1889, Robert Louis Stevenson estimated the number of European/Oriental traders in the Gilberts as 50 (Sabatie'r, 1977). And Captain Davis of the HMS 'ROYALIST' had a count of 77 European residents (see Table 1) throughout the Gilberts during his epoch-making visit of 1892 declaring the Islands a British Protectorate. Although the missionaries and the captains of the visiting or trade ships made use of some of the resident traders as their interpreters - notably Ben Corrie of Maiana whose services were utilised by Captain Rooke, and Richard Randell of Butaritari who helped Bingham and visiting ABCFM missionaries - by 1892 there were a few Gilbertese who, having acquired minimum skills of spoken English, were able to trade their
Table 1

Residence and Nationality of non I-Kiribati people in the Gilbert Group - June 1892

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Residence</th>
<th>British</th>
<th>American</th>
<th>German</th>
<th>Chinese from:</th>
<th>British</th>
<th>America</th>
<th>Denmark</th>
<th>Swedish</th>
<th>Norwegian</th>
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(Source: Proceedings of HMS. 'ROYALIST'. Davis, 1892) Spelling of most of the islands listed here do not correspond to the modern form of I-Kiribati orthography.)
artifacts directly with the captains of the ships without using a European resident as interpreter. As Macdonald (1982, 21) pointed out:

... However their (Europeans) presence in this role (of interpreters) was seldom required because a number of islanders, especially those who had worked on whalers themselves, were soon sufficiently proficient in English to conduct their own trade.

This is further strengthened by the fact that Captain Davis had used the services of a Gilbertese named Tekiatoa (Chief of Police at Maiana) as his interpreter. Tekiatoa was provided by the courtesy of the King of Maiana, whom Captain Davis described as:

a most able man and a very good interpreter; far more intelligent than the generality of the Gilbert Islanders and possesses the merit—a rare one—of being able to interpret exactly what one wishes to say.

Captain Davis strongly recommended that any Resident (Commissioner) appointed to the Group:

should obtain, permanently if possible, this man's services, for although only a Policeman in Maiana, he is the King's adviser and right hand man.

(Davis, 1892).

Despite the decline of the ABCFM in the northern and central Gilberts, the people had begun to see the value of the I-matang and its part in their socio-economic structures. Soon after their arrival in the Gilberts in 1888, the SHM employed European missionaries, who were more welcome than the Samoan pastors employed by the LMS in the southern Gilberts. The European priests brought modern technology, material wealth, skills of literacy and education. From the log book of the HMS 'ROYALIST', we find that the Gilbertese regarded the Catholic missionaries very highly, but not entirely in spiritual terms as is evident from this response:

'Oh, that Roman Catholic missionary man, he no trade, he no fine—he give um book—no makee pay, Oh, he belong good man.'

(Davis, 1892, 54)

Although I-Kiribati today do not use a pidgin form of English as a secondary means of communication, they occasionally use sentence structures which are
tantamount to accepted pidgin structures elsewhere in the world. In fact, in the Pacific, pidgin English is recognised only in Melanesia as a supplementary second language, and has never been so in Fiji, Polynesia or Micronesia. (Colonial Office, 1951). Another example of pidgin is cited by Captain Moore of the HMS 'DART' during his visit to Abemama in 1884:

Having recently annexed and added the island of Nonouti (though temporarily) to his island possessions, te Uea (King) Tem Binoka of Abemama declared: 'Nonouch belong a me'.

(Moore, 1884, 4)

Grimble also quoted his cook named Sila speaking in English, probably in honour of his guest, Eliot, the then Resident Commissioner:

'Missus, come quick.
Gravy, no bloody good';

and again talking about the dinner, Sila responded:

'Yes, he good, Sah',
I makem myself.
I boilem with plenty sugar.
No, Sah.
He not wine. He juice.
He beetroot juice outem tim'.

(Grimble, 1984, 88-89)

Stevenson, during his two months visit on Abemama in 1889 as a guest of the King of Abemama, Tem Binoka, quoted a number of conversations with the King who used pidgin English. Some of these are:

- 'I look your eye. You good man. You no lie.'
- 'A' cobra berong me' (all the copra belongs to me).
- 'He cheat a litty' (he cheats a little).

(Stevenson, 1887, 293, 296, 301)
However, such utterances in pidgin did not form a uniform pattern among the Gilbertese speakers, nor were they widespread. Evidence of this pidgin is so scant that generalisations are difficult to make. Nevertheless, they show some linguistic similarities in the Gilbertese representations of the pidgin, particularly in the areas of phonology and syntax.

In the production of various English sounds, Gilbertese speakers of pidgin usually tended to replace them by the Gilbertese sound approximating to the English e.g.

\[
\begin{align*}
/p/ & \quad \text{ unaspirated/substituted for English } \quad /f/ \\
/t/ & \quad /s/ \\
/l/ & \quad /s/ \\
/o/ & \quad /i/ \\
/r/ & \quad /l/ \\
/b/ & \quad /p/ \\
\end{align*}
\]

Sometimes the final /l/ phoneme is dropped altogether as in 'A' cobra belong me' meaning all the copra belong to me; or it is replaced by the vowel /i/ as in 'litty' for little.

On the syntactical side, the Gilbertese frequently made the following structural errors:

- Omission of the main contextual verb.
- Omission of articles and prepositions.
- Insertion of the personal pronoun 'he' for inanimate subjects.
- Making no distinction between the third person gender or the number of subject, and thus using the pronoun 'he' indicating both male and female as well as plurality.
- Complete omission of inflections showing 'tense and time'.
- Doubling the subject aspect by using both the noun as well as the corresponding pronoun, as in 'woman he smart', 'boy he good man', clearly indicating their dependence on the mother tongue structural pattern: 'e roko te Uea' (he returned to the King).

Most of these syntactical and phonological errors are the result of interference from the Gilbertese language which has only 13 alphabetical letters to manipulate. The Gilbertese language does not show the concept of 'time and tense' by changing the form of the verb, nor does it make use of articles except 'te' which is always followed by a singular noun.
These pidgin utterances making effective communication between some Gilbertese and the Imatang testify to the idea that the Gilbertese had begun to express a desire to learn English as seen later by the establishment of formal mission schools (or at least organised classes).

Returning Gilbertese were more important agents of change. They encouraged young people to venture out (see Table 2). At one time a third of the total estimated population of 31,000 (1855) worked away from their home islands. They brought back with them cloth, utensils, tools, tobacco and firearms and the notion that Europeans were intelligent and that learning English was a worthy thing to do.

Table 2

Nineteenth Century Gilbertese Labour Migration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Destination</th>
<th>Number of Recruits</th>
<th>Years of Recruitment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New South Wales</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1847</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re'Union</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>1857</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peru</td>
<td>312</td>
<td>1863</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiji</td>
<td>2,398</td>
<td>1866-95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samoa</td>
<td>2,500</td>
<td>1867-95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tahiti</td>
<td>899</td>
<td>1867-85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawai'i</td>
<td>2,000</td>
<td>1872-87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central America</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>1890-92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Line Islands</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>1890</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queensland</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>1895</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

9,417

(Source: Munro and Firth, 1987, 25)
By and large the values of the church, the new economic order and colonial rule were adopted but only when interests were served and old values not upset. The old men (Unimane) still retained control over the land and resisted unnecessary change. Anyone who went beyond the accepted limits of change was ridiculed for trying to ape European ways (Lundsgaarde, 1966, 105).

Speaking English among I-Kiribati, even today, is one such instance of ridicule even when all the interactors can speak the language with ease and English is considered to be very important in their lives. I-Kiribati never fail to ridicule the fellow islander who makes an accidental attempt to speak English in the company of his peers. It is simply impolite to be ambitious and show a sign of superiority, in anyway whatsoever, over the others in Kiribati society where respect for men and the elderly take priority over talents and intelligence. This cultural barrier has obvious teaching implications where hardly any discussion takes place in English between the teachers and the taught; and for better or worse it has not been overcome despite the continuous and vigorous efforts of foreign teachers of English in the country.

Must such cultural barriers come down?

References


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