

# SOME ERRORS IN WRITTEN ENGLISH AS A RESULT OF INTERFERENCE FROM SOLOMON ISLANDS PIJIN

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While one appreciates that in many circles it is not fashionable to concentrate on the errors that the pupils make, for fear of reducing the pupils' motivation, it is interesting to read S.P. Corder's words in which he states that errors

"are significant in three different ways. First to the teacher, in that they tell him, if he undertakes a systematic analysis, how far towards the goal the learner has progressed, and, consequently, what remains for him to learn. Second, they provide to the researcher evidence of how language is learned or acquired, what strategies or procedures the learner is employing in his discovery of the language. Thirdly (and in a sense this is their most important aspect), they are indispensable to the learner himself, because we can regard the making of errors as a device the learner uses in order to learn. It is a way the learner has of testing his hypotheses about the language he is learning. The making of errors then, is a strategy employed both by children acquiring their mother tongue and by those learning a second language."<sup>1</sup>

In the learning of English as a second language, or as a third or fourth language as it often is in Solomon Islands, the main task of the learner is to ask the questions "Are the systems of the new language the same or different from those of the language(s) I know?" "And if different, what is their nature?" Evidence for this is that a large number, but by no means all, of his errors are related to the systems of his mother tongue.<sup>2</sup> This is sometimes described as interference from the habits of the mother tongue.

It has been said that the systems of Solomon Island Pijin are closely related to whichever Melanesian language is the spoken first language of the learner in this situation.<sup>3</sup> This is particularly true of the sound system. The learners "try to approximate the sounds of Pijin (or English) as best they can, but many speakers never master some of the sounds which they don't have in their own native language."<sup>4</sup> This is also true of the grammatical categories, syntactic patterns and use of vocabulary, which Dr Lee's article goes on to mention.

In the learners' attempts to acquire skill in English, in which much of the vocabulary and some of the structures are the same as in S I Pijin, the

questions in paragraph 2 become "Are the systems of the English language the same or different from S I Pijin? And if different, what are the differences?" However, not all learners of English will be able to formulate these questions, for in many cases (often at the primary school and even in the lower forms of the secondary schools), the learners do not have a clear idea that S I Pijin is a language that is different from English, and even after this difference has become apparent to them, the boundaries between the one and the other are not clear in the minds of many learners.

The list of common written errors that follows was originally an attempt to provide some useful information, firstly, for newly arrived, and mostly experienced, expatriate teachers of English, who could spend a couple of years in the Solomons before realising that the errors seen in students' writing are in fact common errors related to the systems of another language, and not simply just occasional mistakes; and, secondly, for Solomon Island teachers of English, who, because of their closer relationship to Pijin, may not always be aware of the regularity with which certain types of errors do occur in written English.

The intention behind this list, then, was to speed up an awareness of the errors with a view to identifying what the learner needs to learn, that is, allowing these needs to determine the syllabus to some extent, in that, as teachers of English "we may learn to adapt ourselves to their needs, rather than to impose on them our preconceptions of how they ought to learn, what they ought to learn and when they ought to learn it."<sup>5</sup>

**Spelling** The wrong pronunciation of certain English sounds in Pijin produces spelling errors of the following types in written English:

bitten for beaten	angry for agree
live for leave	along for alone
fill for fell	truck for trunk
this for these	then for than
figure for finger/figure	sport for spot
advice for advise	match for march
chance for change	walk for work
lack for luck	hat for hut/head
met for made	
a lack of the final 's' in plural nouns	
and a lack of the final 'ed' in past tenses	

**Tenses** Pijin does not on the whole express the idea of time by changing the tense of the verb. Other words in the sentence are a sufficient in-

dication of time, for example, before, behind means after; yesterday, last yesterday, last year etc. Therefore many students forget to use the past tense in English and have great difficulty in using other past tenses correctly. Constant practice is necessary at all levels.

**Relative pronouns** The only relative pronoun used in Pijin is 'wea' (where), so this word tends to be overused in written English, and some students have permanent difficulty in using relative pronouns like who, whom, whose, which and by which. Associated with this difficulty is the practice of including an unnecessary pronoun in a sentence which contains a relative pronoun as in the following examples:

That was the first house which I lived in *it*.

I know an animal which I like *it*.

**Repetition of the subject or object of a verb.** This seems to occur as a result of direct translation from Pijin to English.

*The man who lives in that house he* has two sons.

*The woman I saw her* yesterday *she* was going to the market.

*The short ones* we threw *them* out.

**Gender and singulars and plurals** The word 'hem' in Pijin does not signify gender in the third person singular, nor does it signify plurality when used in conjunction with other words in the third person plural. It is not surprising then that there are errors like "his husband" and "her wife", and constant difficulty in remembering to use the 's' in the third person singular in the present tense, for example, he have, he sing. This latter point also occurs as a result of direct translation from Pijin. There is also a general tendency to mix singulars and plurals in the subject and the verb, especially when the subject is separated from the verb by a phrase or a clause. This would seem to stem from the lack of distinction in the use of nouns and verbs in Pijin.

**Singulars and plurals in relation to collective nouns** Although there is the tendency not to distinguish between singular and plural in Pijin with the use of an 's' as in English, there is perversely a tendency to add an 's' to collective nouns in Pijin. As a result of direct translation, students' writing is full of furnitures, equipments, staffs, machineriess, crews, traffics etc. The further question of which collective nouns take a singular verb and which take a plural verb is a complicating factor.

**Other problems of singular and plural** After the word 'every', there is a tendency to use a plural noun, following the Pijin pattern, instead of a

singular one, for example, every people, every students. This is followed by a plural verb instead of a singular one, for example, every answers of mine are correct; everybody are present.

On the other hand, with the phrase "one of . . .", the students very often use a singular noun instead of a plural one, for example, one of the rule of the school . . . ; one of my friend . . . etc.

**Making verbs from English nouns and prepositions** This is another result of the students' making a direct translation from Pijin usage and results in such expressions as: *off* the light; *on* the water, what is he *aftering*? I am going to *oven* the pudding, *againsting* custom.

**Further direct translation from Pijin** results in a number of often repeated expressions such as: she borned a baby, I climbed a coconut, I'll come to pick you at 7 o'clock, we went by outboard motor. These and similar expressions may also result from the factor mentioned earlier, namely, a lack of knowledge of the boundaries between the two languages.

**Misuse of negative** This is the common use of 'no' instead of 'not' for example, I have no any money; I have no enough money and the use of 'too' instead of 'either' in a negative sentence, for example, I don't like it too.

**Confusion between 'too' and 'very'** This seems to occur because there is only one word in Pijin ('barava') for both of these English words. The students will write 'I am very busy to see you', instead of, either, 'I am very busy,' or, 'I am too busy to see you.'

**Failure to use the active and passive correctly** In Pijin there is no difference between the subject and object pronoun, which may contribute to the great difficulty many of the weaker students seem to experience in attempting to use the passive, as in the following examples.

They always confuse about the answers.

I had to punish every Saturday.

I educate at Selwyn College.

**Lexical errors** Some English words are used in Pijin where they have a different meaning from their meaning in English. Until the students are made aware of these differences in meaning, there will be continuing errors with such words as 'to die', 'to kill', 'to swim', 'behind', 'to like', 'to stop', 'to stay', 'to pay', 'to dress up', 'ashamed', 'story' (as a verb).

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**Omission of the main verb** It is common in Pijin for the speaker to make a complete statement without using a verb, and alternatively, to use a clause as a complete statement, with or without a verb. This pattern reoccurs in written English.

These points are an effort to identify some of the major types of errors that occur in students' writing in Solomon Islands — errors that are related to the form of expression in Pijin — in the hope that identification of the errors will lead to an awareness in the teacher of what the learner needs to learn, so that appropriate teaching can ensue.

### **References**

1. S.P. Corder. 'The Significance of Learners' Errors' in **Error Analysis**, J.C. Richards (ed.), p. 25. Longman, 1978.
2. Ibid. p. 27.
3. Ernest W. Lee. 'Solomon Islands Pijin' in 'O'O, **A Journal of Solomon Islands Studies**, Vol. 1, p. 33. Honiara. 1980.
4. Ernest W. Lee, op. cit. p. 28.
5. S.P. Corder, op. cit. p. 27.