

## **Beyond wordplay: Lexical creativity in Tok Pisin and its colonial interpretations**

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The English based creole Tok Pisin (TP) began to develop as a pidgin in the Pacific area during the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Travel reports and other contemporaneous records of linguistic interactions from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onward are the earliest reflections of the developing pidgin. Systematic lexical documentation in word lists and dictionaries, mainly produced by linguists and missionaries, started early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century; their purposes were twofold: to describe the new variety (linguists) and to provide newcomers with a communication help (missionaries).

My investigation is based on TP dictionaries, wordlists and travel reports from the early (colonial) period of TP development (roughly 1885 – 1915).

The sources reflect colonial interpretations of TP; in several of these interpretations, the semantics of TP lexical items are merely seen as the result of incomplete target language (i.e. English) acquisition. Superstrate speakers' comments based on this view were often derisive and did not account for semantic creativity resulting in new meanings. One such example is the TP lexeme *gras*, originally taken from English and/or German. Its meaning today is roughly "something growing out of a plain", so, if accompanied by a specifying modifier, it can refer to hair (*gras belong het*), feathers (*gras belong pisin*), or the grass of a meadow (*gras*).

A neglected aspect in such colonial records is the playful linguistic creativity with which the colonized reflected the colonial power relationship including the weaknesses of the colonizers. This perspective shines through in Tok Pisin nick-naming practices. As all colonial documentation was done from the colonizers' perspective, only traces of such deliberate playfulness can be found, but they hint at a level of metalinguistic awareness that the documenters apparently were not conscious of.

Both perspectives on TP, the colonizing and the colonized, will be considered in my presentation.