Socio-historical and political influences on the use of English in Saipan

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1. Introduction: Saipan is the largest of 14 islands in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), located in the north-western Pacific Ocean. The emergence of English in Saipan is being examined in the complex context of its colonial past: Saipan was first colonized by Spain, then Germany, Japan, and finally, by the USA. The focus lies on the influence of the American era on the linguistic outcomes in Saipan: The ongoing change from English as a second language to English as a first language and whether a distinct English dialect is evolving are both investigated. This development is examined according to Schneider’s (2007) ‘Dynamic Model’ of postcolonial English formation. Saipan is an interesting case study in so far as the model mostly has been applied to Englishes that emerged due to British rather than American colonialism.

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2. Theory: The ‘Dynamic Model’

The Spanish Era
- Christianity, clothing, Spanish social mores
- Ancient Chamorros were exiled from Saipan to Guam, decline in the Chamorro population
- Carolinians (from the Caroline Islands) resettled to Saipan around 1815 due to a devastating typhoon

The German Era
- Maintenance of the Spanish political structure
- Law and order, German money
- Registration of land, homestead program on public land: increase of the population
- Establishment of public education (teaching of German), health care, copra industry

The Japanese Era
- Maintenance of the German/Spanish political structure, Naval administration
- Settlement, rigidity of rules and procedures
- Public education (teaching of Japanese), public health, land policy
- Economy: sugar industry, tuna, rice, pineapple

The American Era
- The Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands (TTPI) (1947-1954)
- The Present Commonwealth Judiciary (1978-present)

1. Foundation
- Military Government
- ‘Exploitation’ colony
- Cash economy
- No settlement
- Set up of refugee camps
- Reestablishment of public education, religious services and health care
- Acquisition of English
- Stable colonial status (TTPI): eventual right to self-government
- Reactivation of trade, industry, and agriculture
- Expanding contact due to Peacor
- English established as a language of administration, law and education

2. Exonormative stabilization
- CNMI becomes a Commonwealth of the United States
- Economic boom: labor work, tourism, garment industry
- Widespread and regular contacts
- Common bilingualism
- Territorial-based
- Increasingly pan-ethnic
- Financial crisis
- Approx. 20% population decrease
- Identity struggle
- No codification of a new variety has begun yet

3. Nativization
- A slable young nation does not exist yet
- Dynamic community
- Dialect birth?
- Ethnic differences (Chamorro and Carolinian culture)
- Social differences (education: private vs. public education)

4. Endonormative stabilization
- Use of try: when telling a story and saying that a friend broke an arm
- Use of plural forms: maybe in uh two week
- ‘I’m done; five weeks
- ‘I haven’t tried that yet’
- ‘Use of adjectival quantifier
- ‘I think my separation just made me’
- ‘Use of nothing (nothing power) – nothing used as adjectival quantifier
- ‘Use of to follow (I follow you) – to follow used as I come along
- Borrowings from Chamorro: Lanya (curse word)

3. Method: recorded informal conversations with 95 indigenous Chamorros and Saipanos of the CNMI ranging in age from 12 to 79.

4. Hypothesis: Saipan presents an interesting transitional phase of English becoming a first language with local ‘island’ features.

5. Preliminary Observations

Phonology
- Monophthongization of GOAT diphthong
- Raising of the KIT and DRESS vowels
- ‘Happy’ is realised with [I]

Vowels:
- Consonants:
  - /t/ or /θ/ deletion
  - /l/ may be vocalised
  - Semi-thetic
  - Consistent use of /h/
  - Variable use of /θ/: often realised as a stop [d]
  - /p/ are usually not aspirated, /t/ can be realised as a flap or a glottal stop

Prosody:
- High-rising terminals

Morphosyntax
- Third person – omission / lack of third person singular concord: to me it don’t feel that long
- Variable use of plural forms: maybe in uh two week
- ‘I’m done; five weeks
- ‘Negative concord: I think my separation just made me not care about anything no more
- Double comparison: which would be more easier

Irregular use of articles: on the island marriage is like death certificate

Lexis
- Use of try: when telling a story and saying that a friend broke an arm
- ‘I haven’t tried that yet’
- ‘Use of adjectival quantifier
- ‘Use of nothing (nothing power) – nothing used as adjectival quantifier
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6. Discussion: The preliminary observations of some characteristics of Saipanese English seem to suggest that an own local dialect is starting to emerge. However, putting Saipanese English into perspective with other Englishes spoken around the world, many phonological and grammatical features are shared with Palauan English (cf. Britain & Matsumoto, 2014) such as the described phonological and morphosyntactic features above. Many of these features are also shared with Philippine English (cf. Thompson, 2003, p. 52-53) and other postcolonial Englishes in general such as vowel shortening, loss of short-long contrasts (Schneider, 2007, p. 72) and the stopping of /b/ [Schneider, 2007, p. 73] among others. My ongoing research investigates both the distinctive characteristics of Saipanese English, as well as those features which it shares with other varieties.


• NOAA Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center Blog. [Photo illustrating the Location of the Marianas and the survey area within the southern islands April, 2014]. Retrieved from https://pifscblog.files.wordpress.com/2014/04/figure-1_survey-area.jpg

