

CONTACT LANGUAGES AT THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

BRITISH MILITARY SETTLEMENTS 1824-1849

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INTRODUCTION¹

When English language speakers first came into sustained contact with Aboriginal people of what is now the Northern Territory coast, they did not bring the English language into a pristine situation of societal monolingualism but into a cultural region in which there had already been developed skills of cross-cultural communication. The speech communities of the top end of the Northern Territory have long had to adjust to prolonged contact with foreign visitors and to develop strategies for making verbal communication possible.

There will always be a great deal of speculation as to who the earliest foreign visitors were. Aboriginal legends and historical and linguistic research can be combined in various ways to suggest answers. The only certainty is that for two centuries or more, prior to British settlement, the coastal Aboriginal people were in sustained contact with Southeast Asian fishermen-traders, usually termed the 'Macassans' (see MacKnight, 1976).

The *lingua franca* of Aboriginal and 'Macassan' communication contained elements of both the trade language of the archipelago and the language of Macassar itself. As Urry and Walsh (1981:97) suggest, this *lingua franca* is probably best regarded as a 'Macassan' Pidgin. It was perceived by Aboriginal people as a language useful for communication with foreigners generally and, as well, was modified by them into a local pidgin for use between distant Aboriginal groups, a phenomenon which has been fully discussed in Harris (1984). Its influence on the languages of the Arnhem Land coast was quite profound, as Walker and Zorc (1981) are discovering.

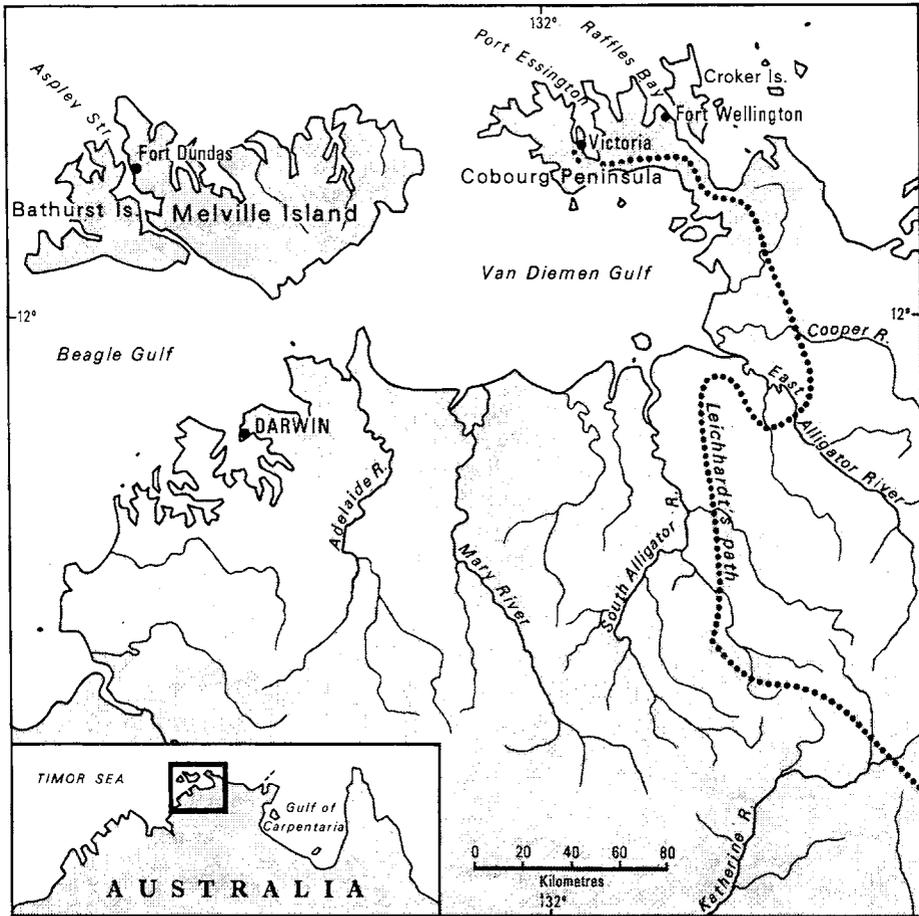
This paper deals with an almost-forgotten era between 1824 and 1849 when the presence of English-speakers on the Cobourg Peninsula created a new situation of culture contact in which new contact languages were created to cope with new demands for verbal communication.

During this era, the British made three abortive attempts to establish military garrisons on the Northern Territory coast. Historians still debate the real reasons for the establishment of these outposts. Fear of an imminent French attempt to colonise North Australia has long been held to be the underlying reason (Wildey, 1876:81). Most modern historians agree that the immediate reason was the desire to establish a trading port on the eastern archipelago

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CONTACT LANGUAGES OF NORTHERN TERRITORY



The Darwin Area of the Top End of the Northern Territory

which could emulate the success that Singapore had proved to be in attracting the trade of the western regions (Campbell, 1912:80; Davies, 1926:28-30; Powell, 1982a:47). It was hoped, initially, that this port would attract the 'Macassan' trepang fleet (Bauer, 1964:29).

THE MELVILLE ISLAND SETTLEMENT.

The first of the military settlements was established by the British in the N.T. on Melville Island in 1824. Called Fort Dundas, it was in reality a struggling little outpost consisting of fifty-one soldiers and three officers, a few of their wives and forty-four convicts. It was a singular failure. Powell (1982a:52) recently summarised the situation as follows:

They had much to endure, these men and women. 'Our little colony became very sickly', wrote Campbell sadly after burying six men in the month of January 1827.

All but one died of fever, probably malaria imported by the crews of the ships which brought supplies from Timor. The fever came intermittently. Diseases of bad diet and poor hygiene were with them always — scurvy, night blindness, dysentery, hepatitis. The dank heat of the Wet oppressed them and its gales destroyed their crops. They recoiled from the endless alien forests, the mud and mangroves with their tormenting swarms of mosquitos and sandflies: and over all lay creeping fear of the black men.

Not only were the environmental conditions debilitating, but the settlement did not even get that boost to morale which it might have done had there ever been some visible evidence of its purpose. The Macassans never came (Bach, 1958:228). Their normal route lay well to the north east. In fact, one commandant, Barlow, even wondered if anyone in the Archipelago knew that Fort Dundas existed (Bach, 1958:229).

From the outset, relations between the Tiwi people of the island and the British were tense, often violent. An Aboriginal man was shot within a few days of the garrison's arrival, although it was two years before a British soldier was killed. In typical fashion the commandant, Bremer, exhibited no tolerance and responded with violence to petty theft or any intrusion by the Tiwi, failing, of course, to recognise his own much greater intrusion. Campbell, one of Bremer's successors, did try to initiate communication, once or twice entering into what he called 'palaver', whatever that implies, but no accord was ever reached (Campbell, 1834:154-155). The British considered the Tiwi an unpredictable threat to their outpost of colonial expansion. To the Tiwi, the British were unwelcome intruders, probably all the more unwelcome because European slave traders had already predisposed them to be antagonistic towards foreigners (Hart and Pilling 1960:97-98). The consequences in terms of human relationships were inevitable.

There was also the same inevitability about the sociolinguistic consequences. The failure to develop even the most rudimentary contact language is hardly surprising. The only linguistic contact known to have occurred resulted from a plan by Campbell which he divulged to Colonial Secretary Macleay.

I have watched every opportunity of seizing some of that tribe since the Murder, but they are at present extremely shy and guarded. I certainly might have taken some of them by violent means since that time; but, as they are in a state of barbarous ignorance, I preferred endeavouring to seize one particular man, who appears to be their Chief and has been frequently observed directing them in some daring Acts of Violence, even previous to my arrival in this Island. I shall either secure this individual, or if opportunity offers get hold of a couple of young boys which sometime accompany them. By the latter plan, we might be enabled (by teaching them a little English) to acquaint them with our intentions towards them and convince those Islanders that every act of violence would be followed by severe retaliation.²

Campbell's plan did not succeed. Neither the supposed 'chief' nor his associates were ever captured although one Aboriginal man was eventually taken almost a year later. He escaped within a fortnight, carrying with him, it seems, the only English word which was ever acquired by the Tiwi in those years. The word was 'Fort Dundas', now changed phonetically to

² Major Campbell to Colonial Secretary Macleay. *Historical Records of Australia* (hereafter *HRA*), III [6]:677-681.

Punata in modern Tiwi. It is significant that some possibly Portuguese words (*piccanini* – ‘children’; *pakee* – ‘peace’) were among the few items Campbell (1834:158) collected from his prisoner. This is not the only evidence that the Tiwi already knew some words from Portuguese or a Portuguese pidgin (see Harris, 1984:140-143).

The ineffectiveness of the settlement at Fort Dundas as a commercial venture, the perpetual battle with the Tiwi, and the ravages of the environment, finally led the British authorities to order the closure of the garrison.³ It was abandoned on 31 March 1829, the personnel being transferred to Raffles Bay. Almost all physical evidence of the fort has now disappeared. The four and a half years of exposure to the British had hardly affected the Tiwi. The memorial to Fort Dundas consists only of a few Tiwi stories and dances and in the word *Punata* which only a linguist could now recognise.

THE RAFFLES BAY SETTLEMENT.

Only two years after Fort Dundas had been established and before its abandonment was ordered, it was officially deemed to be a failure and so a second attempt was ordered at Croker Island. Stirling, in charge of founding the garrison, located no good water or anchorage on Croker Island and settled, instead, at Raffles Bay on the nearby coast. He named the garrison Fort Wellington and, having set it up, sailed away, leaving Captain Henry Smyth in charge of forty-four soldiers, twenty-two convicts, a Malay interpreter and his son, a surgeon, a storekeeper, two women and five children.

Although Stirling described Smyth as ‘a gentleman of good sense, great zeal and experience’ he exhibited neither good sense nor experience in his relationships with the local Aboriginal inhabitants of Raffles Bay (Powell, 1982a:52). As Smyth’s own diary entries show,⁴ theft by the Aborigines, almost exclusively of a petty nature, enraged him right from the beginning and his response was always to attempt immediate physical retaliation, although initially without success.

It is a pity that Smyth, like so many other intruders both before and after him in Australia, allowed his indignation at pilfering by the Aborigines to dominate his reactions to them. From this point on they were fired at indiscriminately whenever they were seen and a cannon loaded with grapeshot was used against them if they approached the camp itself. It is also a pity that Smyth did not read the obvious signs that from the outset, the Aborigines did not intend violence towards the British. He regularly reported their failure actually to harm anyone but failed himself to read the significance, even when a lone soldier or two ‘escaped’ from a hundred armed Aboriginal men.

. . . June 14th . . . one of the party being a little in the rear of the others, was chased by a number of natives with spears (about seventy or one hundred) who fled on his reaching the party.

. . . July 17th . . . two soldiers followed them near to their general assembly, when a large body came out with spears, and with much difficulty the soldiers escaped.

³ Sir George Murray to Governor Darling. *HRA*. III [14]:214-215.

⁴ References to Smyth’s diary are to extracts recorded in Wilson 1835.

In the early days of his regime, Smyth recorded another incident which must surely have indicated the basic attitude of the Raffles Bay people. Thomson, a soldier from H.M.S. *Success*, went missing. This was just a few days before the departure of *Success*. Search parties were sent out without avail and finally *Success* sailed without him. It was feared that Thomson had been killed but some time after the *Success* had sailed, a group of Aboriginal people escorted him back to Fort Wellington. Fair-minded people later recalled that on the very same day, Smyth had publicly shamed the man the British considered to be the Aboriginal chief.

After these occurrences, it is somewhat astonishing that the seaman missed the same evening from H.M.S. *Success*, was not massacred by the natives in revenge for the insult offered to the Chief, instead of being accompanied by them in safety to the camp (Wilson, 1835:147).

The importance of this gesture seems to have been lost on Smyth who continued to order Aboriginal people to be fired upon indiscriminately. Although it is certain that some were injured, it appears that none were actually killed up to this point. Finally, after some months, the Raffles Bay Aborigines committed what Wilson (1835:148) regarded as their first (and perhaps only) real act of aggression. A soldier was speared near the garrison,⁵ although he eventually recovered from his injury. Smyth, however, ordered an immediate reprisal, the true facts of which can no longer be discovered. Official reports and records of detailed evidence at subsequent enquiries 'describe' the event or at least provide the perspective and details which the European participants were prepared to disclose. Wilson, a few months later, tried to piece together the true account of the reprisal.

A party of the military (and, I believe, also of the prisoners) were dispatched in search of natives. They came unexpectedly on their camp at Bowen's Straits, and instantly fired at them, killing some, and wounding many more. A woman, and two children, were amongst the slain; another of her children, a female, about six or eight years old was taken, and brought to the camp, and placed under the care of a soldier's wife. After this, the natives kept aloof from the settlement . . . (Wilson, 1835:148).

It seems likely that Wilson suspected but could not determine the extent of the massacre but Sweatman, in 1843, believed the deaths to be as high as thirty (Sweatman in Allen and Corris, 1977:135). Thus was created an atmosphere of tension and fear between the British settlers and the Raffles Bay Aborigines. The pattern of mutual mistrust, into which Smyth had guided the situation, persisted after Smyth's departure in April 1828, following which Fort Wellington was briefly in the charge of Smyth's deputy, Lieutenant Sleeman.⁶

All evidence seemed to indicate that there would be at Raffles Bay a repetition of the disastrous experiences on Melville Island.

Linguistic contact was obviously minimal throughout this period. In the first few weeks of the settlement some attempts were made to barter or exchange gifts but the communication seems to have been pantomimed. During the early days of Fort Wellington, a few of the Aboriginal men were permitted to join in some of the tasks such as cleaning, stoking the furnace and felling timber. It is likely that on these occasions, a few words may have been

⁵ Smyth to Macleay. *HRA*. III [6]:774-777.

⁶ Lieutenant Sleeman to Macleay. *HRA*. III [6]:764-800.

spoken both by the British and by the Raffles Bay people. Several of the more prominent Aboriginal men were given English nicknames, including Wellington who was presumed to be their leader and whose real name was Mariac. After the first few days of the garrison's arrival, however, opportunities for any further development of verbal communication ceased.

The pattern of avoidance and suspicion and therefore of negligible linguistic contact, which began early in Smyth's term as commandant, persisted after he left until the arrival, on 13 September 1828, of Captain Collet Barker as commandant. Under Barker's influence, the whole atmosphere was to change dramatically.

It only took Barker a day or two to assess the situation. He issued an order on 18 September that guns were not to be used 'without absolute necessity'. This effectively reversed the instruction issued by Smyth fourteen months previously and not long after the garrison was established, that sentries were to 'fire whenever they approached'. On 24 September, Barker noted in his diary that he had:

Addressed the men on the importance of avoiding any cruelty towards the natives in case of falling in with them at any time and any violence towards their women and children.⁷

Barker had obviously ascertained some of the real facts of the massacre in the previous year and alluded to it in his address, stating that he might conduct an enquiry. He stressed that in future, force was not to be used against the Aborigines unless they instigated physical violence first.

Barker was clearly intent on redressing the wrongs of the past and establishing a friendly relationship with the local people. Two months were to pass before he was able even to begin to do so and his diary up to that time records every small piece of evidence of the presence of Aboriginal people, a reflection of his anxiety to meet them and prove his good-will towards them. His first opportunity did not come until 25 November and it was, finally, the Aboriginal people who made the first gesture of peace. One of the garrison stockmen, Costello, encountered a group of them a short distance from Fort Wellington. They signalled their peaceful intentions by sticking their spears in the ground. Motioning Costello towards them, they presented him with a gift of a basket. On Costello's return, Barker responded with alacrity.

I went out with him immediately taking with me two handkerchiefs and a pair of scissors. Davis took some bread with him . . . We endeavoured to make ourselves understood by each other in a friendly way for some time. They seemed to make signs that a man of ours was with their people a long way over the bay and went through the motion of a flintlock, the pointing to the place and going through the motion of rowing. They would not come to the camp but seemed to wish we should accompany them. I did so for a short distance but having eaten nothing this morning and making out from them that we should have a long way to go, I explained to them as well as I could that I would accompany them tomorrow morning and they went from me. (Barker's diary, 25 November)

This little transaction was an event of critical importance, with consequences which continued long after Fort Wellington had disappeared. Linguistically, it was of little immediate significance. Indeed, it was in many ways a perfect example of miscommunication. Only sign language appears to have been attempted and even that was misunderstood by both

⁷ Barker's diary, a handwritten MS, held in Mitchell Library, Sydney.

sides. Barker's reading into the signs that the Aborigines had knowledge of his missing soldier never turned out to be the case. The aborigines did not understand, either, that Barker intended to accompany them the next day. Something infinitely more important, however, was communicated. This was the desire for peace. That night, with feelings of both excitement and apprehension, Barker put his affairs in order in preparation for going out alone to the Raffles Bay Aboriginal people.

Closed and signed all the men's accounts for fear of any accident happening to me tomorrow as it will not be without risk that I accompany the natives but I consider the object justifies some risk. (Barker's diary, 26 November)

They had not, however, understood each other and so Barker did not meet up with any of the Aborigines the next day. There was no contact for another week until Barker was around the bay in a small boat.

As we were running along the shore some natives were discovered. We made friendly signs to each other and I ran the boat in and landed unarmed, desiring every one also to remain in the boat. On our approach to the beach the natives retired some distance from it evidently in a little alarm. I advanced to where I supposed them to be and soon fell in with one who seems to be the chief. We exchanged presents, I giving him a handkerchief and he giving me a spear unheaded and the stock for throwing it. He had perhaps taken off the head. He also gave me a string of beads made of a kind of cane. I shewed him a basket which I had taken with me and explained that it was given me by one of his people. I asked for Wellington, when he pointed to himself and repeated the name. They looked in the basket apparently for bread pronouncing a word somethinke it but I was forced to tell them I had none but that I would give them some if they came to the settlement. (Barker's Diary 2 December)

At last, Barker records that on 7 December, Mariac and Iacama together with some other men, approached Fort Wellington with considerable trepidation. On seeing the sentries, the other men fled and Mariac and Iacama would have done the same had not Barker showed extreme friendliness and given them some gifts. It was finally a child who allayed their fears. Wilson (1835:74) recorded the incident.

Captain Barker . . . used every endeavour to induce them to come into the camp, but without success, until a little child, belonging to one of the soldiers, went and led in the Chief, Wellington, by the hand. He was evidently under great alarm, looking back frequently, and addressing himself to Waterloo, his *fidus Achates* who kept in his rear.

Barker showed them around the garrison and recorded in his diary that they were amused at a small monkey 'and also a pig which they called often as "Big" seeming unable to pronounce the "p".' They were quite overcome when they saw the young girl, taken during the massacre.

On discovering the little native girl, both Wellington and Waterloo evinced great emotion, particularly the latter, who was on that account, believed to be her father. Seeing her so well taken care of increased their confidence; she was then named Mary Waterloo Raffles, but her native name was Rival.

After this occurrence, the intercourse with the natives was renewed, and, as Captain Barker used every precaution to prevent their receiving injury or molestation from any individual in the camp, it continued unbroken . . . (Wilson, 1835:70, 74)

CONTACT LANGUAGES OF NORTHERN TERRITORY

Baker's own diary and Wilson's eye witness accounts of his residence at Raffles Bay, record in considerable detail Barker's indefatigable efforts to establish and maintain an atmosphere of peaceful co-existence between the garrison and the local people. He continually demonstrated his trust in them in a variety of ways. Not long after Mariac and Iacama's first hesitant re-entry into Fort Wellington, Barker had his longed-for opportunity to accompany them alone which he did for a whole day. On another occasion, he decided to remain with them overnight, against the advice of other members of the garrison. Mariac obviously regarded this gesture as a reciprocation of his visits to the garrison and responded appropriately to his guest. Wilson (1835:179-180) described the visit.

A short time before I arrived, Captain Barker had paid a visit to the natives, placing himself under Wellington's care, who seemed not a little flattered by such a mark of distinction. Dr. Davis accompanied him a little way into the woods, and then endeavoured to persuade him to return, representing his expedition to be dangerous and foolhardy. He, however, was not deterred from his undertaking, but gave the Doctor permission to go back, if he felt at all uncomfortable: the Doctor took him at his word, and returned to the settlement, where every one lamented the rashness of the Commandant in trusting himself with such a set of savages; more especially as they knew that the said savages had ample cause for retaliation.

These unfavourable surmises were not realised, as Captain Barker was treated with the greatest attention and kindness. Wellington would neither accept of any present himself, nor would he permit any of his followers to do so, although, when in the camp, he was constantly begging for something. In the evening, they prepared a mess of fish, which they had speared, and were highly delighted to perceive Captain Barker partake of it. In travelling, whenever they came to a stream or marsh, one of the natives, named Marambal, insisted on carrying him over.

Next day, he returned to the settlement in safety, to the great joy of all our people, who thenceforth, began to consider the natives in a more favourable light than they had hitherto done. (Wilson, 1835:179-80)

In the social sphere, Barker demonstrated his willingness to treat the Raffles Bay people as social equals. They were allowed, on occasion, to sleep within the garrison and encouraged to put on dances for the entertainment of all at the Fort. In response, Barker entertained Mariac and the other leaders in his home where they all waltzed and danced the hornpipe to the tune of the ship's fiddler. (Wilson, 1835:87-100)

It is fortunate that Barker's original diary still survives. Together with Wilson's first-hand observations, there is a full and detailed account of a remarkable year of cross-cultural bridge building. As Powell (1982a:53) has recently commented,

In only a year spent at the settlement, he transformed race relations, mainly through the force of his own personality and tremendous courage. He treated the Aborigines with consistent tact and respect . . . The black men responded with trust equal to his own and spread word of him beyond their own lands.

In a visit, for example, to Croker Island, people whom Barker had never met mobbed him, calling out 'Commandant! Commandant!' (Wilson, 1835:103). It is, however, thought-provoking to note that Mariac was careful to explain to Barker that he, too, was a '*commandan*' among his own people. Without in any way minimising Barker's remarkable contri-

bution to the creation of peace, it should be borne in mind that Barker left all sorts of written records, including a detailed diary whereas Mariac obviously did not. It is nevertheless clear that Mariac's contribution and efforts at peace-making were also very significant, even if largely unrecognised. They were two great statesmen, in their own ways.

All things seemed to augur well for the future of Raffles Bay as a commercial enterprise. Not only was peace established between the British and the local people, but the gardens flourished, health and morale at the garrison improved markedly, and the Macassans came — thirty four praus in 1829, manned by more than a thousand seamen (MacKnight, 1976:130-1). Thus it was an unbelievable shock to Barker when he was ordered to abandon Fort Wellington in August 1829. Ironically, during all of Barker's year of immense effort to create success out of disaster, the gloomy forebodings of previous commandants and the British Government's subsequent orders to abandon the project had been crossing the seas between Australia and Britain and back again. Barker even contemplated disregarding his orders but finally did what he considered to be his duty. One of his last acts was to show his Aboriginal friends around the settlement gardens and to explain to them about the different fruits and vegetables which were shortly to be theirs. On 28 August, Barker recorded in his diary that he and the last sentries embarked and 'abandoned the settlement to Wellington'.

LANGUAGE CONTACT AT RAFFLES BAY.

Very little has been said, so far, about language but a great deal has been said about communication. The forming of a peaceful relationship between Raffles Bay Aborigines and the garrison at Fort Wellington through the efforts of Mariac and Barker was a very significant event. In a language contact situation, the nature of the contact and the attitude of the groups to communication with each other are factors of critical importance in determining any subsequent linguistic development.

Both Barker and Wilson made definite efforts to record what was communicated or, on some occasions, what they thought was communicated. They did not, however, say much about how the communication was achieved. The situation was unusual. Whereas it had, in common with many colonial contexts of the era, the potential for all the problems which normally seem to have been associated with the clash between 'settlers' and 'natives' — and, indeed, Fort Dundas and the early months of Fort Wellington were typical of such a situation — the person and attitudes of Barker injected a real difference into what finally happened at Raffles Bay.

The development from pantomime to conversation took some months. As has been noted already, the earliest communications between Barker and Mariac and the other Aborigines were in gestures only. The following quotation from Barker's diary of 7 December 1828 is typical.

I also enquired respecting the white men in a boat as I fancied they might have seen our Crown Prisoners who might possibly be still on the coast and I partly suspected they had seen them but I could make out nothing positive. It is a great drawback having no interpreter . . . I think if we could have conversed together we should be able to . . . make whatever intercourse we might have with them friendly and pleasant to both parties . . . The natives told us very clearly that they would return in one or two days, Miago pointed to the sun place about 4 p.m. . . . I half fancied as they were going off that they made signs they would bring back a white man with them.

It transpired that the pantomimed communication was quite unsuccessful. Within a few weeks, Barker describes attempts at verbal communication, the success of which he is unsure.

Wellington and Marambal first appeared and then went back and brought seven others . . . Wellington was spoken to about his behaviour to Leary (whom he had threatened) which he seemed to understand and earnestly disclaimed any bad intentions . . . (Barker's diary 20 January 1829)

In a formal report, a month later, Barker⁸ expressed his concern with the lack of verbal communication.

One of our greatest difficulties is the want of knowing each others language, for I feel convinced they are a well disposed people and that, if we could clearly explain to them the line of conduct we expected, we should find them very tractable.

After some months passed, both Barker and Wilson record events in which it is obvious that conversations, sometimes of some complexity, were engaged in and were understood. This event from Wilson, is a typical example.

We visited Mr Radford's grave, and Wellington appeared to be a good deal affected, when he understood who was buried there . . . He was very particular in his inquiries as to the names and rank of others buried near the same spot; and on returning, we overheard him explaining these particulars to other natives. (Wilson, 1835:93-4)

Thus, all that can be unequivocally claimed is that by the end of Barker's year at Raffles Bay, verbal communication was being achieved. The precise nature of that communication cannot be so categorically determined although a little can be inferred from the evidence Barker and Wilson provide.

There was some English in use. Even if only initially, Barker and the British would obviously have had to use some English but it is evident that Mariac and the other Aboriginal people also learnt and used it.

Some of the more specific evidence is enumerated below:

- (i) Even before Barker's arrival, Mariac knew the English name he had been given. 'I asked for Wellington, when he pointed to himself and repeated the name.' (Barker's diary, 2 December). Other Aborigines were also given English nicknames, e.g. 'One-Eye', 'Waterloo'.
- (ii) Barker was addressed as 'Commandant' by the Aborigines as he no doubt was by everybody else. This word had, in fact, spread further afield than Raffles Bay and was known by people who had never met him. Barker actually records Mariac's pronunciation. 'Wellington was very earnest with me in explaining that . . . as he was chief of all, he was *commandan*.' (22 January)
- (iii) Barker records non-English pronunciations of other words such as 'bread' and 'pig'.
- (iv) Some conversations, the topics of which are recorded, demand the interpretation that some English was being used. In, for example, the discussion noted above about the graves, Mariac's queries regarding the names and ranks of the deceased people surely demanded an answer in English and even the question would seem to have demanded the use of English.

A particularly important consequence of Barker's attitude to the Raffles Bay people was his attempt to learn what he thought was their language, an attempt which other members of

⁸ Barker to Macleay. *HRA*. III [6]:826-827.

the garrison emulated. It is not surprising to find that the Raffles Bay Aboriginal people attempted to speak English, or a modified version of English if that is what was presented to them. It was certainly an universal feature of European colonialism that the colonised people learnt the language of the colonisers or at the very least acquired a pidginised version of it. It is, on the other hand, exceptional to find the colonisers having the example of their leader attempting to speak the local language.

With respect to Raffles Bay in 1828, however, it is not easy to determine just what language it was that Barker thought he was learning. It will be shown in this paper that the language used twelve years later by Aborigines trying to communicate with the settlers at Port Essington was the 'Macassan' Pidgin. This being so, and given that some of the Raffles Bay Aborigines were also later at the Port Essington settlement, it would seem logical that the same trade language may have been employed when the Aborigines tried to communicate verbally with members of the Raffles Bay garrison. Before considering this further, the small amount of actual linguistic data is given below.

- (i) Both Barker and Wilson mention the frequent requests by Aborigines for various items which they named such as *mambrial* (cloth) and *ley-book* (hatchet).
- (ii) Many of the Aboriginal people's names are recorded and obviously used by everybody, e.g. *Monanoo*, *Luga*, *Miago*, *Olobo*, *Marambal*.
- (iii) Barker collected Aboriginal words with specific intention of communicating more effectively. Wilson (1835:315-21) has recorded portions of these lists. Barker even sent his word list to the Colonial Secretary.⁹
- (iv) The tribal divisions and affinities of the various Aboriginal people were widely known.

In this part of the coast, the natives are divided into three distinct classes, who do not intermarry. The first and highest is named *Mandro-gillie*, the second *Man-bur-ge*, and the third, *Mandro-willie*. (Wilson, 1835:165)

Barker and Wilson frequently record the use of these terms in conversation but they appear also to have been in general use. One of the soldiers, for example, teased Mariac by calling him a *Manburge*. (Wilson, 1835:120)

- (v) Wilson records some of his own attempts to communicate with Mariac, quoting some Aboriginal words.

Tuesday, August the 4th, Wellington, accompanied by a native, paid another visit to the camp: today his first word was "*Mambrial*", and the second "*Miago mandrowille*". He was gratified by my saying "*ee, ee*", and was then presented with a shirt, when he begged that Miago should not receive anything. (Wilson, 1835:93)

Despite the limited amount of data, it is obvious that words of local origin were in use in the communications between Aborigines and settlers. It is also reasonable to assume that more words were in use than those which happen to have been recorded. Unlike the later experience at Port Essington, however, very few words appear to be derived from Southeast Asian languages.

The only three words definitely in this category are all in Wilson's word list (1835:315-321). Two of these Wilson acknowledges as 'Malay' — *Marege(e)*, the Macassan term for the Aboriginal people (and for their country), and *lipe lipe* — 'canoe' derived from the Macassan

⁹ Barker to Macleay. *HRA*. III [6]:827, refers to the list but the list itself has not yet been located.

term for canoe, *lepalepa*, widely found in coastal Aboriginal languages today (Walker & Zorc, 1981:122). The third word is *mungedera*, clearly derived from the Macassan term for themselves 'Mangkasara', but which Wilson claims was used at Raffles Bay to designate an item of clothing, no doubt in the Macassan style.

Although further research remains to be done, no other words have yet been shown to be of Southeast Asian origin. In particular, this applies to the words most likely to have been related to a 'Macassan' trade language, such as the terms for known trade items. Wilson (1835:315-321) provides the terms *mambrual* – 'cloth'; *ley-book* – 'hatchet' and *mure mure* – 'knife'. No semantically related similar words have so far been found in the literature and, furthermore, there are distinctly different Southeast Asian (Austronesian) loanwords in modern Aboriginal languages which denote the same items. In their study of loan-words in the *Yolngu-Matha* languages of Northeast Arnhem Land, Walker and Zorc (1981) list *ja:ricari* – 'cloth', *dakul* – 'axe' and *la:ti* – 'knife'.¹⁰

The presence, therefore, of only a very few Southeast Asian loanwords in the recorded examples of words used in communication at Raffles Bay suggests that the 'Macassan' Pidgin was not the language with which the Raffles Bay Aboriginal people endeavoured to speak to the British. It is, in support of this claim, significant that Barker communicated in what he termed 'Malay' with the visiting prau captains and specifically recorded their observation that there were Aboriginal people further east who 'spoke a little Malay'. (Barker's diary, 2 April; 11 May). Barker's efforts to communicate with the local Aboriginal people were so concerted that it seems highly likely that had they wanted to use the 'Macassan' Pidgin, he would eventually have recognised its relationship with Malay.

It is possible that the Raffles Bay people did try to use the 'Macassan' Pidgin prior to Barker's arrival, and that during the first few weeks of the garrison, when some communication occurred, they discovered that it was not understood by the British. A more plausible possibility is that considerable changes had occurred during the decade between the end of the garrison at Raffles Bay and the establishment of the garrison at Port Essington. There are hints here and there in Barker's Raffles Bay diary that the number of praus which visited the Cobourg Peninsula area in 1829 was considered by the trepangers themselves to be exceptionally high, seeking perhaps more fully to exploit the region. Certainly they were delighted to find the possibility of British protection on the peninsula and returned the following year in force, only to find that the British had gone. It is possible that they may not have been daunted by this and may have begun to establish a more peaceful communication than that which seemed to obtain before the British garrison at Raffles Bay imposed a temporary truce. Certainly there is evidence that whereas the presence of Aborigines from the Gulf of Carpentaria on praus returning to Macassar via the Cobourg Peninsula was a matter of surprise to the local people in 1829 (Barker's diary, May 7), by the 1840s, travelling to Macassar from the Cobourg Peninsula appears to have been commonplace (Sweetman in Allen and Corris, 1977:144).

Another possibility is that the particular Aboriginal people with whom Barker had most contact at Raffles Bay were not those who dealt with the trepangers. Relations between the

¹⁰ *Dakul* – 'axe'. Austronesian but probably not Makassarese. e.g. South Philippine *pa-dakul* – 'axe'.
Jaricari – cloth. Makassarese *carecare*.
La:ti – 'knife'. Makassarese *lading*.

Aborigines and the trepangers at Raffles Bay appear, according to Barker's diary, to have been strained, even violent. There were undoubtedly differing degrees of contact between Aboriginal people and the trepangers. Aborigines of some regularly-visited localities developed amicable relationships whereas other groups or even other families with much less personal contact did not develop such relationships at all and may have therefore had less competence in the trade language.

Whatever the reason, the information available at present indicates that despite the unarguable use of the 'Macassan' Pidgin in attempts to converse with the British at Port Essington, it was not used in such attempts at Raffles Bay. Rather, the local people appear to have used their own vernacular and this is what Barker and the others tried to learn and to use.¹¹ The best conclusion which can therefore be drawn from the available evidence is that a mixture of English and the local Aboriginal vernacular was the means of communication between the British and the Aborigines at Raffles Bay. Predictably, no sustained conversations are recorded. Wilson (1835) records two short sentences: *Miago mandrowillie* which obviously meant 'Miago (is a) mandrowillie' (see p.158) and *Mute commissaree ande* which occurred as a part of a longer conversation beside Radford's grave:

We visited Mr Radford's grave, and Wellington appeared to be a good deal affected, when he understood who was buried there, repeatedly uttering in a plaintive tone, "*Mute commissaree ande*".

As Radford was the 'commissariat officer' or storeman, it is obvious that the word *commissaree* is derived from English. In his word list, Wilson (1835:320) gives *mute* – 'good' and *ande* – 'dead'. Thus, Wellington's lament was a mixture of local vernacular and English, and can be roughly translated as '(the) good storeman (is) dead'.

It appears, therefore that the era of communication at Raffles Bay under Barker was too short to enable a stable pidgin to arise. Indeed, given the degree of communicative equality that seems to have characterised the situation, the eagerness on both sides to learn each other's language and the small numbers of people involved, the contact language which was beginning to develop may eventually have been based on both languages had the settlement not been so hastily abandoned. Wilson (1835:89) probably came closest to describing the nature of the developing language when he referred to Mariac's speech as 'great vehemence of jargon and gesture'.

The most important factors are that there was verbal communication, and that this communication spanned a larger range of subjects and was more personal and amicable than is

¹¹ Elsewhere (Harris, 1984:161) I have used the term *Iwaidja* to designate this language. Although I acknowledged it then to be a label of convenience, I now prefer to avoid its use altogether in reference to the early 19th century. The historical distribution of language and land-holding groups on the Cobourg Peninsula is highly complex and poses many problems (Powell, 1982b:91). Changes had been taking place before the era of British settlement (Earl, 1846:242) and it should not automatically be presumed that there is direct historical continuity between the language spoken at Raffles Bay in the 1820s and the language known today as *Iwaidja*. I am indebted to Peter Spillett for suggesting to me the possibility, which he encountered in Sulawesi, that the term *Iwaidja* may mean 'place of payment' and may have originally been a label applied by the 'Macassans' to those Aboriginal people who attached themselves to the customs station which was established at Port Essington later in the 19th century. There is some linguistic support for this possibility in that words closely related to Buginese *waja* – 'to pay' are known in other coastal languages (Walker and Zorc, 1981:118) and the prefix *i-* (or *ri-*) can be used in Makassarese to mean 'in' or 'at' at the beginning of place names.

normally said of communication between settlers (or invaders) and natives. In the long-term, the linguistic significance of this type of communication between Europeans and Aborigines lay not in the nature of the contact language itself but in the positive attitude to communication of which it was the product. This attitude survived and determined the atmosphere in which communication was to recommence ten years later at Port Essington.

THE PORT ESSINGTON SETTLEMENT.

After the two unsuccessful attempts at settlement, interest in the idea of a military or trading post on Australia's far Northern coast waned for some years. In 1836, however, George Windsor Earl, traveller, linguist and authority on Southeast Asia, re-opened the discussion in response to approaches by Chinese merchants (Spillett, 1972:16-18). Despite initially negative reactions, Earl persisted. When the decision was finally made to resettle the north coast, it was not a matter of trade but of demonstrating occupancy to the Dutch, the French, and even the Americans (Powell, 1982a:54). As Barrow put it 'it would be a most humiliating mortification, to witness the tricoloured flag, or that of the Stripes and Stars waving over Dampier's land'¹²

An expedition, fitted out in England, sailed via Sydney to the chosen site at Port Essington, close by the old site at Raffles Bay, under the command of Captain (later Sir Gordon) Bremer, first commandant of Fort Dundas, Melville Island. Named Victoria, the garrison consisted of Bremer, Captain John McArthur and his son, thirty six marines, a botanist, a surgeon, Earl (linguist and draftsman), three women and two children (Powell, 1982a:54). Knowing the sorry state of race relations at Fort Dundas and Bremer's obvious lack of skill in establishing a friendly relationship with the Melville Islanders during his brief commandancy there, the choice of Bremer as commandant would not appear to have augured well for relationships between the garrison and the Aboriginal people of Port Essington. Such a prediction, however, would have failed to take into account the legacy of Barker and Mariac's successful efforts at establishing happy communication at Raffles Bay ten years earlier. The Cobourg Peninsula Aboriginal people's enduring belief in the essential goodwill of the Europeans made a vast difference between the beginnings of the earlier settlements and the beginnings of Victoria.

When the small fleet arrived the scene could hardly have differed more from the suspicious and tense beginnings at both Fort Dundas and Fort Wellington. Barker had taught the local people that Europeans could be trusted and, in fact, Bremer was thought to be Barker returning.

As the canoe neared the ship, both the men stood up, and the elder made a short speech, the purpose of which, as may be imagined, was perfectly unintelligible to us . . . The elder, whose name was Langari, singled out Sir Gordon Bremer the moment he came on board, and delivered a long address, shedding tears, and frequently touching his shoulders with both hands in a sort of half embrace. From this repeatedly pointing towards Raffles Bay, and making use of the term "Commandant" in a tone of endearment, it appeared that Langari, who had been a frequent visitor at our settlement at Raffles Bay, had mistaken Sir Gordon Bremer for Captain Barker, the last commandant there, to whom the natives had been very much attached. (Earl, 1846:34-35)

¹² Barrow quoted in Allen 1969:319.

Stokes (1846[1]:393) in reporting the arrival of the expedition in Port Essington, stated that 'one of the Raffles Bay tribe instantly made himself known on the arrival of the expedition in the Bay.' Stokes gave this man's name as *Marambari* which is almost certainly the man *Marambal* so frequently mentioned both by Barker and Wilson. As Mariac ('Wellington') and Iacama ('Waterloo') are not mentioned by Stokes, nor in any other writings relating to Port Essington, it must be presumed that they had died.

Even allowing for the confidence born of the memories of Barker, the rapidity with which the Aborigines established a friendly relationship with the members of the new garrison was remarkable. Within a few days, the ship's surgeon, Wallace, writing in the journal of *H.M.S. Alligator* on 30 October 1838, was able to report that guards hardly seemed necessary. The Aborigines were generally friendly, following the soldiers everywhere and sleeping beside their tents. Some had already started to take up permanent residence on the beach in order to barter fish, crabs and oysters for biscuits and clothing. The only problems seem to have been in relation to pilfering of minor articles and Bremer, fortunately, appears to have adopted a relatively lenient view of such minor offences. Bremer left in 1839 and was replaced by Captain John McArthur. He was said to be a 'pragmatic old fogey' who ruled by the book (Huxley, 1935:149) and Stanley described him as a 'litigious old fool' (Lubbock, 1967:229). Nevertheless, Earl was able to report that by 1844 McArthur:

had succeeded in establishing a system which has brought civilised man into close communication with the savage without any of those violences which usually attend the mingling of such opposite ingredients, and which rendered the course of events in the settlement an uninterrupted flow of harmony and goodwill between the native tribes and their visitors. (Earl, 1846:70-71)

The only truly serious confrontation occurred in 1847 when some Aborigines were arrested for theft and one of them was accidentally shot by a guard while attempting to escape. Perhaps in order to preserve their peaceful co-existence with the garrison, this death was avenged not by killing a white but by spearing Neimnal, an Aboriginal man who had chosen to live at and be identified with the garrison (MacGillivray, 1852:155-156). The consequence of this was feuding between the Aboriginal groups involved and not, ironically, between the Aborigines and the garrison. As Spillett (1972:148) notes McArthur was greatly distressed by the whole issue particularly in view of the long period without violence. The guard was committed for trial at the Supreme Court in Sydney where he was finally acquitted.

This seems, however, to have been the only truly potentially damaging event. Writers and observers at the time generally emphasise the remarkably happy relationships. Sweatman, for example, who visited Victoria in *H.M.S. Bramble* described in his Journal how he swam and played with the women and children and generally had what he termed 'pleasant life' and 'great fun' with them (Sweatman in Allen and Corris, 1977:130). 'The people appear to be really amiable' wrote Bremer to his wife not long after he arrived (Lubbock, 1976:91).

In 1849, Victoria went the way of Fort Dundas and Fort Wellington. It was not so much a failure as an anachronism. Only a few shipwreck survivors ever found their way there and trade languished. The British government never seriously pursued the concept of free enterprise and land occupation, but then none of these things were the real reasons for the existence of the garrison at Port Essington. It was more accurately what Allen (1972:342) terms a 'strategic manoeuvre'. As Powell (1982a:57) points out, the Dutch and the Americans showed no interest in North Australia. The French turned up in the region from time to time and the garrison may have deterred them. By 1849, however, no nation could seriously

doubt the British claim to the whole of Australia and their presence on the coast was no longer needed. When it was learned that the new steamships were going to ply a route far away from Port Essington, the orders were given for its abandonment.

McArthur and the last of the garrison were picked up by *H.M.S. Meander* on 30 November 1849. As *Meander's* log of that day shows, everything serviceable was uplifted and much of what remained was burnt (Spillett, 1972:168). The ruins were left for the Aborigines to salvage and the white ants to devour. Some stone foundations and chimneys and a few graves are still visible today. Earl looked back in 1863 and summed it up thus:

The garrison (at Raffles Bay) enjoyed good health and, after a time, established friendly intercourse with the natives of which we experienced the benefit when the establishment was formed at Port Essington, where friendly relations were never once interrupted. (Earl, 1863:34)

LANGUAGE CONTACT AT PORT ESSINGTON.

Linguistically, the situation at Port Essington was interesting but distinctly different from that which obtained at Raffles Bay. The sociolinguistic situation at Raffles Bay had been one of minimal language contact until the arrival of Barker. Then the situation had changed to one in which an understandably reticent group of Aboriginal people and an aggressive group of European intruders were brought together amicably by the painstaking and diplomatic efforts of their leaders, Mariac and Barker.

On the other hand, at Port Essington, the British were instantly welcomed by a large number of confident Aborigines who immediately associated with them and their activities. As has been reported many times before in Australia's history, the Aborigines were not only the more eager to acquire the other party's language but appeared to be much more adept at doing so.¹³

As already described, at least the word 'commandant' was remembered by some people from the Fort Wellington period at Raffles Bay ten years previously and almost certainly a number of other words. One of the more thought-provoking survivals from the Raffles Bay era was social rather than linguistic, a quite remarkable sense of ease and common politeness — remarkable, not because culturally different people should not be courteous to each other but because such courteousness was rarely reported, presumably because social distance was maintained. It was certainly a matter of surprise to Bremer when he first arrived and he commented upon it in a letter to his wife:

. . . in this intercourse with each other (they) display a kindness and attention which would honor a more polished society; nor are they by any means deficient in natural politeness. They never fail to introduce a stranger of their tribe to us, and endeavour to give him our names. They never leave us, when they go into the woods to sleep, without *individually* saying "Goodnight" which they utter as plainly as we can.¹⁴

Owen Stanley, captain of the *Britomart* which remained at Port Essington for a brief period after delivering personnel and equipment for the founding of the settlement, recorded

¹³ See for example Collins 1798 [I]:544; Curr 1887:2; Dixon 1980:69; Brandl and Walsh 1982:76-77.

¹⁴ Bremer, quoted in Lubbock 1967:91-92.

how immediately the local people attempted to incorporate him and his ship into their own relationship system. This had been done at Raffles Bay and the Aboriginal people may well have therefore expected the captain to understand the significance already.

Apart from a few English words remembered by those Aboriginal people who had been at Raffles Bay and the expectation that the British, too, would remember their relationship system, the first attempts at verbal communication by the Port Essington people were in the 'Macassan' Pidgin. This point was emphatically made a number of times by Earl, a competent linguist.

You ask for vocabularies. I am in the most ridiculous perplexity about them.

After having collected many words, I found that I was making a vocabulary of a horrid *patois* of the Macassan dialect: in fact, nearly all the words the natives use when speaking with us are Macassarese . . . (Earl 1842:140)

Comparing the local variety with what he termed the 'Macassan language', Earl (1846: 244) emphasised that 'they never . . . speak it correctly'. Examples Earl provides include '*berasa* becomes *bereja*, *trusaan* becomes *turutan* and *salat* becomes *jala*'.

Earl later admitted that he had at first thought that the 'horrid patios' was the primary language of the local people, only later realising that it was their attempt to converse with foreigners in the trade language of the archipelago.

A very considerable portion of the coast natives have, from frequent intercourse with the Macassan trepang fishers, acquired considerable proficiency in their language . . . On our first arrival, the natives, from having been long accustomed to address strangers in this language, used it when conversing with us, and the consequence was that some vocabularies were collected which consisted almost entirely of this patois, under the supposition that it was the language of the Aborigines. (Earl 1846:244)

A shipwrecked Roman Catholic priest, Father Angelo Confalonieri¹⁵ may have been the only person to have seriously studied the Aboriginal language and unlike Raffles Bay, there is little evidence that it was ever used generally in communication between the two groups. It appears that an English-based pidgin arose much more rapidly than any Europeans could acquire a local language and in any case, the local people chose to attempt communication in the 'Macassan' Pidgin, the *lingua franca* of their international dealings.¹⁶

It is evident from Earl's writings that the 'Macassan' Pidgin continued in use for some time, perhaps several years although it is now impossible to determine whether or not this

¹⁵ Father Angelo Confalonieri survived the wreck of the *Heroine* in 1846 and reached Port Essington where he worked as a missionary among the local people until his death from malaria in 1848. Perhaps some others had a passing knowledge of a few local words. Some knew enough to inform John Sweatman that the Aborigines taught Confalonieri obscenities, which he then unknowingly used in his sermons. (See, for example, Allen and Corris, 1977:116-117).

¹⁶ I am indebted to Peter Spillett for drawing my attention to the existence of material relating to Father Confalonieri's work in Vatican archives. I have also learnt from Harold Koch that Karl Rensch found samples in the archives of Aboriginal languages, and made some notes. Koch's initial analysis of the samples revealed that the language was probably Iwaidja but that it contained evidence of both 'Macassan' and English influence. I have not yet had the opportunity to examine any of this material.

only applied eventually to Earl and others who understood what they called 'Malay'. It is also evident that an English-based pidgin finally arose and that it began to develop very soon indeed after the arrival of the garrison. Whether by memory from some of the English words used at Raffles Bay or by rapid language acquisition, it is evident that within three days of the arrival of the first ship, an embryonic English-based pidgin was already developing. Earl, for example recorded the following incident on or about 30 October 1838.

Mallamaya . . . was caught one evening after dark in the very act of stealing a shirt . . . he was dragged by his captors to the tent . . . and presented before Sir Gordon Bremer for judgement . . . The prisoner spoke very energetically in his own defence, making a most elaborate use of the few English words that he had picked up, and Sir Gordon Bremer, thinking the fright he had endured would be sufficient punishment . . . allowed him to depart. (Earl, 1846:42-43)

By February 1840, McArthur reported that the Aboriginal people could speak some English but that no whites spoke their language. By 1841 Stokes (1846 [II]:357) described the contact language of Port Essington as 'such few words of broken English as were then used at the colony.' After a few more years it was becoming frequently recorded that some Aboriginal people spoke what was recognisably English (e.g. Keppel, 1853:158; Sweatman in Allen and Corris, 1977:44). In other words, the Aborigines' contact language had changed in two years from the attempt to speak the 'Macassan' Pidgin which was not generally understood by the British with the possible exception of Earl, to the use of an English-based pidgin understood by both groups.

It is tempting to suggest that what may have occurred was a relexification of 'Macassan' pidgin. The briefly popular idea that relexification is part of the origin of all pidgins (Thompson, 1961) is far too simplistically wide but the idea that some languages have changed their lexical affiliation almost completely, is essentially correct (Koefoed, 1979:52). Evidence of the relexification of the 'Macassan' Pidgin on contact with English is not entirely lacking.

There is, firstly, the circumstantial but compellingly logical evidence of language usage. Whereas it is indisputable that at first the Aboriginal people of Port Essington spoke to the Europeans in the 'Macassan' Pidgin — in what Earl (1842:140) termed 'a horrid *patois* of the Macassar dialect' — it is also indisputable that within a few years, the same Aboriginal people were using an English-based pidgin.

How did this linguistic transformation occur? Did they suspend the use of the 'Macassan' Pidgin and set about acquiring another pidgin based on a new target language, English, or did they continue their initial endeavours to use the 'Macassan' pidgin and relexify it, gradually using an increasing number of English words as they acquired them? It seems quite possible that a relexification of the 'Macassan' Pidgin is what, in fact, occurred. In this context it is significant that Earl's statement (1842:140) that 'nearly all the words the natives use when speaking with us are Macassarese' was made in July 1840, some eighteen months after the garrison had been established and communication between Aborigines and Europeans was well advanced. The 'Macassan' Pidgin was not dropped immediately.

Secondly, the evidence of increasing knowledge of English which the explorer, Ludwig Leichhardt encountered as he approached Port Essington is particularly relevant. At the headwaters of the South Alligator River, three weeks' journey from Port Essington, he encountered Aboriginal people possessing some European goods. Utilising a word list he had earlier obtained from Port Essington, Leichhardt was able to ascertain the direction in which Port

Essington lay and to check the local people's knowledge of Macassan place-names on the coast. Words from the 'Macassan' Pidgin seem to have been used in the exchange. A few days later, Leichhardt met Aboriginal people who spoke to him in a mixture of 'Macassan' Pidgin and English Pidgin. Leichhardt (1847:495) recorded the words in his diary although he did not at the time understand any of them. He ascertained their meanings some weeks later in Port Essington.

'Perikot, Nokot, Mankiterre, Lumbo Lumbo, Nana Nana Nana'

Very good, No good, Macassans . . . very . . . far

Perikot and *Nokot* were from the English 'very good' and 'no good', *Mankiterre* from the Macassan *Mangkasara* (see page 159) and *lumbo* from the Macassan *lompo* – 'big', 'large'. *Nana* has not been identified.

At the mouth of the East Alligator River, Leichhardt heard distinct English words including 'commandant', 'come here' and 'very good' although he was still obliged to communicate by means of his word list, asking for water and directions (pp.502-503). By 10 December, Leichhardt was able to record connected Pidgin English speech.

'You no bread, no flour, no rice, no backi – you no good! Balanda plenty bread, plenty four, plenty rice, plenty backi! Balanda very good.' (pp.552-523)

The only word from the 'Macassan' Pidgin in the words Leichhardt actually recorded on this occasion was *balanda*.¹⁷ By 15 December, two days from Port Essington, Leichhardt found no barriers to communication at all.

Leichhardt's observations demonstrate that there was competence in the 'Macassan' Pidgin quite a long way inland and that from a point about three hundred kilometres to the south east of Port Essington, English or Pidgin English competence gradually increased as the British garrison became closer. This competence was expressed in a progressive reduction in the use of the 'Macassan' Pidgin and a corresponding increase in the use of the Pidgin English. This evidence points very strongly to the likelihood that what was taking place at Port Essington, as a consequence of contact with the English language, was a gradual relexification of the 'Macassan' Pidgin towards an English-based Pidgin. There was clearly, therefore, differential command of an English-based pidgin by Aboriginal people of the Port Essington region, depending on their degree of contact with the settlement. Those with minimal contact with the Europeans spoke a mixture of the 'Macassan' Pidgin and English while, as Sweatman observed, some of the Port Essington Aboriginal people became quite close associates of the British, a few who travelled as far afield as Sydney gaining considerable proficiency in English.

They are fond of travelling about and frequently go in the Bughese prahus to Macassar. Several have also visited Sydney in merchant vessels, the "Heroine" had no less than five on board, who, McKenzie said, were among the best sailors he had and one, Jack White, was so active & well behaved that he actually intended giving him the rating of "tindah" (Boatswain's mate) next voyage. When the "Fly" left Pt. Essington in 1845, a youth named Neinmil accompanied McGillivray as a sort of servant, half protege, and remained on board till she sailed for England, when he joined us for a passage back to his native place. He was a good looking boy, and from his good temper and obliging disposition

¹⁷ Still a common word today, *balanda* – 'European', derives originally from *Hollander*, via the 'Macassan' Pidgin.

became a great favourite on board both ships. He soon learnt to speak English as well as we did, was a capital shot, a good singer, clever fisherman and a most amusing companion in a cruise . . . (Sweatman in Allen and Corris, 1977:144)

Keppel, captain of the *Meander* actually recorded some examples of this differential use of English and/or an English-based pidgin. At his first encounter, he describes the language as 'tolerable English' his second example is perfect English and his third, if not demonstrably a pidgin is not Standard English either.

While working up the Australian coast, we were boarded by a canoe with a crew of six of the veriest looking savages I had yet beheld: one of them, wearing a pair of trousers, the only article of apparel among them, announced himself, in tolerable English, as one of the tribe attached to the settlement at Port Essington. (Keppel, 1853:150)

When riding through the jungle on a shooting excursion, I gave my gun to a naked savage to carry: I was rather astonished at his addressing me in very good English with "should an opportunity offer, sir, I shall fire!". This man was frequently with me afterwards. One day he said to me "If you English could thrash Bonaparte whenever you liked, why did you put him on an island, and starve him to death?" (p.158)

They will not bear to be hurried. If, feeling hungry and tired and knowing the direction, you take the lead yourself, your guide will sulkily follow and allow you to go wrong, or to pass the place he knows you are anxious to arrive at: and when at last you inquire 'where settlement?' with a disdainful look he points towards the place from which you have been travelling the last two hours . . . you say to 'Darkey', "what for you do this?" he replies "what for you take guide in bush?" (p. 183)

By 1849 when Victoria was abandoned, it is clear, therefore, that there was an English-based pidgin in use and that some Aboriginal people had command of the English language as well.

For nearly twenty years, there was no permanent European settlement in the Northern Territory. One of the more fascinating aspects of the language-contact history of the region is that during these years, English or an English-based pidgin, survived in the Port Essington area. Indeed, Port Essington was not totally cut off from the English-speaking world after the abandonment of the British garrison. As the friendly attitude of the local Aboriginal people was generally known, it was a frequent stopping-place for some of the increasing number of private ships plying the north Australian coast, as well as for more official vessels. After the establishment of Darwin in 1869, officialdom recognised Port Essington once more and it became the site of a customs outpost, where duty was collected from the 'Macassan' traders. Port Essington people's English competence was frequently noted.

What English they spoke, they spoke properly. (Lewis, 1922:151)

These boys spoke good English, Macassan and, of course, their own language. (Searcy, 1909:36)

The linguistic consequences of this new era of European contact with the Port Essington Aboriginal people has yet to be fully researched although a start has been made (Harris, 1984:203-207).¹⁸

18 Some research on the later history of the Cobourg Peninsula has been carried out by Powell (1982b), (Footnote 18 continued on next page)

CONCLUSION

At Fort Dundas, on Melville Island and during the early period at Fort Wellington on Raffles Bay, there was minimal language contact because of aggressive and violent behaviour, particularly on the part of the European invaders. During Barker's time in the final year of Fort Wellington, there was considerable language contact and a contact-language using lexical items from both English and the local Raffles Bay vernacular began to emerge. The time was too short for it to stabilise.

The heritage of Raffles Bay was, finally, not a language but an attitude to cross-cultural communication which made the Aboriginal people so positively welcoming towards the Europeans at Port Essington that the tension and aggression, which might have been predicted, did not eventuate. The early verbal communications by Aboriginal people, apart from a few English words remembered from Raffles Bay, were in the 'Macassan' Pidgin. Within a short space of time, however, an English-based pidgin was in use which, at least in part, may have developed by the relexification of the 'Macassan' Pidgin.

(Footnote 18 continued)

and on the relationship between Port Essington and Darwin in the late 19th century by MacKnight (1969:393-402). Also important is Peterson and Tonkinson's work (1979) for the Cobourg Peninsula land claim. It remains debatable, however, whether sufficient data remains to draw firm conclusions about linguistic and sociolinguistic changes.

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