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"Too Much English"

Our Difficult Speech as it is Twisted by the South Sea Islanders

GIVEN a number of white traders, a wide area of land and scores of savage languages and dialects, the result will be that the traders will manufacture a totally new, unscientific, but perfectly adequate, language. This the traders did when they invented the Siwash lingo for use over British Columbia, Alaska and the Northwest Territory. So with the lingo of the Kroo boys of Africa, the pigeon English of the Far East, and the *beche de ber* of the westerly portion of the South Seas. This latter is often called pigeon English, but pigeon English it certainly is not. To show how totally different it is, mention need be made only of the fact that the classic *piece* of China has no place in it.

There was once a sea captain who needed a dusky potentate down in his cabin. The potentate was on deck. The captain's command to the Chinese steward was, "Hey, boy, you go top-side catchee one piecee king."

Had the steward been a New Hebridean or a Solomon Islander, the command would have been, "Hey, you fella boy, go look 'm eye belong you along deck, bring 'm me fella one big fella marster belong black man."

It was the first white men who ventured through Melanesia after the early explorers who developed *beche de mer* English—men such as the *beche de mer* fishermen, the sandalwood traders, the pearl hunters and the labor recruiters. In the Solomons, for instance, scores of languages and dialects are spoken. Unhappy the trader who tried to learn them all; for in the next group to which he might wander he would find scores of additional tongues. A common language was necessary—a language so simple that a child could learn it, with a vocabulary as limited as the intelligence of the savages upon whom it was to be used. The traders did not reason this out. *Beche de mer* English was the product of conditions and circumstances. Function precedes organ; and the need for a universal Melanesian lingo preceded *beche de mer* English. *Beche de mer* was purely fortuitous, but it was fortuitous in the deterministic way. Also, from the fact that out of the need the lingo arose, *beche de mer* English is a splendid argument for the Esperanto enthusiasts.

A limited vocabulary means that each word shall be overworked. Thus, *fella*, in *beche de mer*, means all the *piece* does and quite a bit more, and is used continually in every possible connection. Another overworked word is *belong*. Nothing stands alone. Everything is related. The thing desired is indicated by its relationship with other things. A primitive vocabulary means primitive expression; thus, the continuance of rain is expressed as *rain he stop*. *Sun he come up* cannot possibly be misunderstood, while the phrase structure itself can be used without mental exertion in ten thousand different ways; as, for instance, a native who desires to tell you that there are fish in the water and who says *fish he stop*. It was while trading on Ysabel island that I

learned the excellence of this usage. I wanted two or three pairs of the large clam shells (measuring three feet across), but I did not want the meat inside. Also, I wanted the meat of some of the smaller clams to make a chowder. My instruction to the natives finally ripened into the following: “You fella bring me fella big fella clam—*kai-kai* he no stop, he walk about. You fella bring me fella small fella clam—*kai-kai* he stop.”

Kai-kai is the Polynesian for *food, meat, eating, and to eat*; but it would be hard to say whether it was introduced into Melanesia by the sandalwood traders or by the Polynesian westward drift. *Walk about* is a quaint phrase. Thus, if one orders a Solomon sailor to put a tackle on a boom, he will suggest, “That fella boom he walk about too much.” And if said sailor asks for shore liberty he will state that it is his desire to walk about.

Too much, by the way, does not indicate anything excessive. It is merely the simple superlative. This, if a native is asked the distance to a certain village, his answer will be one of these four: “Close up; long way little bit; long way big bit; or long way too much.” *Long way too much* does not mean that one cannot walk to the village; it means that he will have to walk farther than if the village were a long way big bit.

Gammon is to lie, to exaggerate, to joke. *Mary* is a woman. Any woman is a Mary. All women are Marys. Doubtlessly the first dim white adventurer whimsically called a native woman Mary, and of similar birth must have been many other words in *beche de mer*. The white men were all seamen, and so, *capsize* and *sing out* were introduced into the lingo. One would not tell a Melanesian cook to empty the dish water, but he would tell him to capsize it. To *sing out* is to cry loudly, to call out, or merely to speak. *Sing-sing* is a song. The native Christian does not think of God calling for Adam in the Garden of Eden; in the native’s mind, God sings out for Adam.

Savvee and *catchee* are practically the only words which have been introduced straight from pigeon English. Of course, *pickaninny* has happened along, but some of its uses are delicious. Having bought a fowl from a native in a canoe, the native asked me if I wanted “Pickaninny stop along him fella.” It was not until he showed me a handful of hen’s eggs that I understood his meaning. *My word*, as an exclamation with a thousand significances, could have arrived from nowhere else than old England. A paddle, a sweep, or an oar, is called a *washee*, and *washee* is also the verb.

Here is a letter, dictated by one Peter, a native trader at Santa Anna, and addressed to his employer. Harry, the schooner captain, started to write the letter, but was stopped by Peter at the end of the second sentence. Thereafter the letter runs in Peter’s own words, for Peter was afraid that Harry gammoned too much, and he wanted the straight story of his need to go to headquarters.

Santa Anna.

Trader Peter has worked twelve months for your firm and has not received any pay yet. He hereby wants twelve pounds. [At this point Peter began dictation.] Harry he gammon along him all the time too much. I like him six tin biscuit, four bag rice, twenty-four tin bullamacow. Me like him two rifle, me savvee look out along boat, some place me go man he no good, he *kai-kai* along me.

PETER.

Bullamacow means tinned beef. This word was corrupted from the English language by the Samoans, and from the learned by the traders, who carried it along with them into Melanesia.

Captain Cook and the other early navigators made a practice of introducing seeds, plants and domestic animals among the natives. It was at Samoa that one such navigator landed a bull and a cow. “This is a bull and a cow,” he said to the Samoans. They thought he was giving the name of the breed, and from that day to this beef on the hoof and beef in the tin is called *bullamacow*.

A Solomon Islander cannot say *fence*, so, in *beche de mer*, it becomes *fennis*; store is *sittore*, and box is *bokkis*. Just now the fashion in chests, which are known as boxes, is to have a bell arrangement on the lock so that the box cannot be opened without sounding an alarm. A box so equipped is not spoken of as a mere box, but as the *bokkis belong bell*.

Fright is the *beche de mer* for fear. If a native appears timid and one asks him the cause, he is liable to hear in reply, “Me fright along you too much.” Or the native may be *fright* along storm, or the wild bush, or haunted places. *Cross* covers every form of anger. A man may be cross at one when he is feeling only petulant; or he may be cross when he is seeking to chop off your head and make a stew out of you. A recruit, after having toiled three years on a plantation, was returned to his own village on Malaita. He was clad in all kinds of gay and sportive garments. On his head was a top hat. He possessed a trade box full of calico, beads, porpoise teeth and tobacco. Hardly was the anchor down, when the villagers were on board. The recruit looked anxiously for his own relatives, but none was to be seen. One of the natives took the pipe out of his mouth, another confiscated the strings of beads from around his neck, a third relieved him of his gaudy loin cloth, and a fourth tried on the top hat and omitted to return it. Finally one of them took his trade box, which represented three years’ toil, and dropped it into a canoe alongside. “That fella belong you?” the captain asked the recruit, referring to the thief. “No belong me,” was the answer. “Then why in Jericho do you let him take the box?” the captain demanded indignantly. Quoth the recruit, “Me speak along him, say bokkis he stop, that fella he cross along me”—the recruit meant that the other man would murder him.

What name is the great interrogation of *beche de mer*. It all depends on how it is uttered. It may mean: What is your business? What do you mean by this outrageous conduct? What do you want? What is the thing you are after? You had best watch out; I demand an explanation; and a few hundred other things.

Some years ago large numbers of Solomon Islanders were recruited to labor on the sugar plantations of Queensland. One of the laborers got up and made a speech to a shipload of islanders who had just arrived, using the talk he had heard the missionary make on the Fall of Man:

“Altogether you boy belong Solomons you no savvee white man. Me fella me save him. Me fella me savvee talk along white man.

“Before long time altogether no place he stop. God big fella marster belong white man, him fella He make ‘m altogether. God big fella marster white man, He make ‘m big fella garden. He good fella too much. Along garden plenty yam he stop, plenty cocoanut, plenty taro, plenty *kumara* [sweet potatoes], altogether good fella *kai-kai* too much.

“Bimeby God big fella marster belong white man He make ‘m one fella man and put ‘m along garden belong Him. He call ‘m this fella man Adam. He name belong him. He put him this fella man Adam along garden, and He speak, ‘This fella garden he belong you.’ And He look ‘m this fella Adam he walk about too much. Him fella Adam all the same sick; he no save *kai-kai*; he walk about all the time. And God He no savvee. God big fella marster belong white man, He stop and say, ‘What name? Me no savvee what name this falla Adam he want.’

“Bimeby God He savvee, and speak, ‘Me fella me savvee, him fella Adam him want ‘m Mary.’ So He make Adam he go sleep, He take on fella bone belong him, and He make ‘m one

fella Mary along bone. He call him this fella Mary, Eve. He give 'm this fella Eve along Adam, and He speak along him fella Adam, 'Close up altogether along this fella garden belong you two fella. One fella tree he tambo [taboo] along you altogether. This fella tree belong apple.'

"So Adam Eve two fella stop along garden, and they two fella have 'm good time too much. Bimeby, one day, Eve she come along Adam, and she speak, 'More good you me two fella we eat 'm this fella apple.' Adam he speak, 'No,' and Eve she speak, 'What name you no like 'm me?' And Adam he speak, 'Me like 'm you too much, but me fright along God.' And Eve she speak, 'Gammon! What name? God He no savvee look along us two fella all 'm time. God big fella marster, He gammon along you.' But Adam he speak, 'No.' But Eve she talk, talk, allee time—alle same Mary she talk along boy along Queensland and make 'm trouble along boy. And Bimeby Adam he tired too much, and he speak, 'All right.' So these two fella they go eat 'm. When they finish eat 'm, my word, they fright too much, and they go hide along scrub.

"And God he come walk about along garden, and He sing out, 'Adam!' Adam he no speak. He too much fright. My word! And God He sing out, 'Adam!' And Adam he speak, 'You call 'm me?' God he speak, 'Me call 'm you too much.' Adam he speak, 'Me sleep strong fella too much.' And God He speak, 'You been eat 'm this fella apple.' Adam he speak, 'No, me no been eat 'm.' God He speak, 'What name you gammon along me? You been eat 'm.' And Adam he speak, 'Yes, me been eat 'm.'

"And God big fella marster he cross along Adam Eve two fella too much, and he speak, 'You two fella finish along me altogether. You go catch 'm bokkis [box] belong you, and go along scrub.'

"So Adam Eve these two fella go along scrub. And God He make 'm one big fennis [fence] all around garden and He put 'm one fella marster belong God along fennis. And He gave this fella marster belong God one beg fella musket, and He speak, 'S'pose you look 'm these two fella Adam Eve, you shoot 'm plenty too much.'"