Little America in the Pacific?: the formation of postcolonial Palauan English

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Palau is a small island nation state in the Western Pacific that has witnessed over a century of intense language contact. Having been ruled by both Spain and Germany, Palau spent periods of time under Japanese (1914-1945) and American (1945-1994) colonial rule, before nominally gaining independence. The two most recent colonial powers have left a considerable linguistic legacy, including the importation of two non-indigenous languages to form successive diglossic speech communities.

Our examinations of Palauan Japanese have shown a strong influence of migrant varieties of Japanese. Colonial migration cannot, however, have played a significant role in the development of Palauan English, because there were few American migrants after 1945. So what is Palauan English like, given the lack of intimate contact between Palauans and Americans?

This paper has three aims: firstly to set the emergence of English in Palau into the context of the country’s complex colonial past. Palau’s four colonial rulers have exercised control in different ways, with different degrees of settler migration, different attitudes towards the function of Palau as a 'colony', and widely differing local policies, leading to very different linguistic outcomes in each case. Secondly, in examining the development of English in Palau, we attempt to apply Schneider’s (2007) ‘Dynamic Model’ of postcolonial English formation to this Anglophone community. Palau provides an interesting and important case study, because few communities in which English has emerged as a result of American as opposed to British colonialism have been examined within the model to date. Finally, we present a brief portrait of the main linguistic characteristics of Palauan English. We attempt, therefore, to provide a holistic sociohistorical, political as well as linguistic account of the process by which a new English emerges in a colonial environment.

References:


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