A dying language?

Rabaul Creole German is a unique Creole language from PNG

By ELLEN TIAM

For the handful of Papua New Guineans and Tok Pisin speakers, have you ever wondered where words such as rauw, pater, and papa came from?

They are borrowed from Deutsch, Germany’s official language. Rabaul Creole German (Unserdeutsch) is the only German-based creole language we know of.

It was widely used by children at the Divine Word Mission in the Bismarck archipelago in what is now East New Britain shortly before and after World War II.

Nowadays, only a few elderly speakers living in PNG and the eastern states of Australia are still proficient in Unserdeutsch (Our German).

For university academics Craig Volker and Peter Maitz, the research into this language is an interesting venture as it involves going to find out how many people still speak the language in East New Britain and Australia.

The aim is to document the linguistic technicalities of the now rarely-spoken language.

For the researchers, the interest in this study also stems from the fact that both have German roots having lived and grew up outside Germany. Maitz is originally from Hungary while Volker is from the US. Both come from German-speaking families who left Germany more than a century ago.

Volker currently serves as professor in linguistics at the Divine Word University in Madang while his co-researcher Maitz is based at the University of Augsburg in southern Bavaria, near Munich, Germany.

Volker previously did research on the same topic in the 1970s and 1980s and has written several books on Rabaul German.

“Both of us come from German-speaking families who left Germany over a century ago and who mingled with the local people. This is perhaps one reason why we find the Unserdeutsch story so fascinating,” he said.

The research journey began last September in PNG and Queensland, Australia, and will take three years for language documentation including fieldwork and building a digital archive.

Once this is done, it will take another three years for work on language description.

The research is being carried out through funding from Maitz’s chair at Augsburg University and the pair is hoping to receive further assistance from the German Research Fund where an application has been lodged.

Maitz said once funding was finalised, the study would go ahead, hopefully by the end of this year.

He said the output of the project should be the first step in a digital archive with transcribed recorded interviews and conversations which could be used in future for scientific and educational purposes.

“Later on, we want to write and publish the grammar of the language as accurately as possible; and b) Reconstrucing and presenting the development and history of the language as accurately as possible; and c) Systematically describing the structure of the language. Unserdeutsch or Rabaul Creole German, is a German-based creole language that began its roots in Papua New Guinea.

At the turn of the 19th to the 20th century, during and after the German colonial era in the northern part of what is today PNG, Unserdeutsch, the only creole language based on German arose among children of mixed background (German and other non-indigenous fathers and indigenous mothers) at the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart Catholic mission school in Vunapope, East New Britain, which was then known as Neupommern.

The study estimates that Unserdeutsch will soon be extinct. In 2015, there are only about 100 speakers left.

The vast majority are more than 70 years old. Most of them now live in eastern Australia – and around Brisbane and Sydney. Only a small remnant of the once closed language community is still living in PNG (around 15), scattered over various islands of the Bismarck Archipelago.

With increased mobility and internarrtage, the language has been disappearing in the past few decades.

According to HV de la cath, creole language, or simply creole is a stable natural language that has developed from a pidgin, ie a simplified version of a language. Creoles differ from pidgins, which are not anyone’s first language.