Chapter 6
Starting Out at Bamyili: Factors Specific to the Development of the Kriol Program

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The Kriol program had a long gestation period and a difficult birth. My husband and I arrived in Bamyili, which has been known as Barunga since 1984, with our three children at the beginning of 1974. It was an exciting time for Aboriginal education in the Northern Territory. Bilingual education was on the agenda in schools where the children spoke traditional languages. The Bamyili situation was different, however, as the children spoke a new Aboriginal language, now known as Kriol, but then called 'Pidgin English'. This chapter documents the early development of the Kriol-English bilingual program at Bamyili with reference to the literature and research available to us at the time.

The nature and status of creoles have set them apart from traditional indigenous languages in discussions about whether or not they should be used in the classroom. Resistance from some linguists, Education Department decision-makers, many teachers and the public made it an uphill battle to even begin; so, while we shared many of the experiences of schools with traditional vernacular programs, the focus here is on some of the extra difficulties we faced with the Kriol program.

The Consultative Committee

At its first meeting, in 1973 the Bilingual Education Consultative Committee decided that there had not been enough linguistic study of the children's language, or enough evidence of community support, for the language to be used in a bilingual program at Bamyili (Department of Education 1973, p. 5).

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In June 1974 Geoff O'Grady and Ken Hale recognised that the language being used at Bamyili was the children's mother-tongue and a creole, rather than a limited lingua franca used by the different traditional language groups to communicate with each other, as is the case with a pidgin. They recommended that, in communities where children spoke a creole as their first language, the teachers should use it for instructional purposes in the early years of school (O'Grady and Hale 1974, p. 8). They said that it could be helpful to teach reading and writing in Kriol too, but there were also many problems with this.

In November 1974 Maria Brandl reported on a visit to Roper River with John Sandefur, the SIL linguist studying creole. Margaret Sharpe had also recommended the use of Kriol for initial literacy and general instruction in the early curriculum, while pointing out some of the potential problems such as prevailing attitudes, devising an orthography, and differences between dialects (Sharpe 1974, pp. 19–23). By then the Bamyili Council had given written approval for Kriol to be trialled in the pre-school. So the Committee recommended that both Roper River and Bamyili should go ahead and make oral use of Kriol in the pre-school in 1975 (Sharpe 1974, p. 5).

During 1975 the Principal of Bamyili School, Holt Thompson, and an Aboriginal teacher, David Jentian, surveyed Bamyili family groups, who were found to support the use of Kriol in the school, so the Consultative Committee recommended that the school staff should prepare resources and materials in 1976 and consider beginning a full program in 1977 (Department of Education 1975, p. 5).

First Steps

The school's bilingual program team consisted of non-Aboriginal teachers working with Aboriginal assistant teachers, a team of Aboriginal literacy workers (writers and illustrators) and a non-Aboriginal production supervisor, with a non-Aboriginal teacher-linguist as program coordinator. The non-Aboriginal teachers were young and relatively inexperienced. Along with the production supervisor and the program coordinator, they were English speakers and transient residents in the community. The Aboriginal assistant teachers, Kriol speakers who were culturally and linguistically ideal for the task, had no formal teaching qualifications. We were all keen to learn as much as possible from each other.

In 1976 I was appointed to the position of teacher-linguist with responsibility for developing basic literacy materials as the top priority. This involved ongoing consultation with Kriol speakers, linguists, Bilingual Education advisors in Darwin, and school staff, as there were a number of factors to be considered before we could begin the practical work.

Language Status

One factor to consider was the status of pidgins and creoles, which have been spoken in various parts of the world for centuries. People often ignored them or thought they were not 'real' languages. Educators usually acted as though they did not exist or, if they did acknowledge their existence, thought they should be eradicated (Craig 1976, p. 95). Siegel notes that this is still often the case, but points out that English itself was once considered inappropriate for use in education (Siegel 2006, p. 42).

Pidgins are contact languages that develop when people from different language groups are living or working in contact with each other and need to communicate in certain situations (De Camp 1971, p. 15). They are not the main languages of these speakers (Mühlhäusler 1979, p. 41). When people from different language groups live in contact with each other over a period of time using a pidgin to communicate with each other, the children may grow up using the pidgin as their mother tongue, or main language of communication. The pidgin then becomes a creole. In the creolisation process the language is expanded and enriched, since it is no longer restricted to some situations, but is used for all of its speakers' communication needs. Creoles are spoken in many parts of the world, and may survive after the original contact situation no longer exists. It is interesting to reflect that no one knows how many of the world's 'normal' languages might have begun through this pidgin-creole process (De Camp 1971, p. 16).

So, we needed to consider the status of Kriol with respect to our bilingual program. Many people in the NT thought it was not a 'proper' language. Some agreed it was a real language, but thought it was not 'really Aboriginal'. I was unsure about it as well when I first arrived at Bamyili, but I soon realised it was an Aboriginal language (see also Sandefur 1980). Kriol speakers have not 'lost their Aboriginality' as some people fear. Many Kriol words may have been derived from English, but they are no longer English words. They may sometimes sound like English, but the meaning will be related to the Aboriginal way of thinking. In that sense Kriol provides a way for Aboriginal people from different traditional language groups to live together in contact with English speakers while they still maintain their Aboriginal ways of thinking.

We encountered a wide range of derogatory attitudes to Kriol at Bamyili on the part of non-Aboriginal people and these had been communicated effectively to Aboriginal people over the years. Aboriginal people often expressed similar sentiments in the past but, by this time, were much more prepared to 'stand up and be counted' as Kriol speakers.

In the past children were punished for speaking Kriol in school, and an Adult Education class was refused funds for Kriol literacy materials on the grounds that Kriol was 'not a language' (Sandefur 1979, p. 19). It is not surprising that Aboriginal people preferred not to use Kriol around non-Aboriginal people, and they often echoed these negative attitudes when questioned about it. However, over time, Sandefur (1979, p. 19) reported a positive change at Roper in the expressed

attitudes of Kriol speakers towards their language. I observed a similar change at Bamyili, where the bilingual program itself helped to generate a more positive attitude towards Kriol. Now there is a range of resources for Kriol, including the Bible, community education and interpreters.

Kriol and Variation

The fact that Kriol is a 'continuum language' was another factor to be considered. The Aboriginal people brought together through contact and resettlement by Europeans were speakers of some twelve distinct languages and these contributed to the pidgin and creole that emerged (Sandefur 1979, p. 8). European contact began with some early exploration in the 1840s and greatly increased after the construction of the Overland Telegraph Line and the establishment of cattle stations in the 1870s. Non-Aboriginal, Chinese and Aboriginal men came to work on the stations, sometimes bringing with them other Pidgin-English varieties used elsewhere.

In 1906 the Church Missionary Society established a mission on the Roper River, a safe haven for Aboriginal people from across the region, including speakers of many different languages. It developed into the Aboriginal community now known as Ngukurr.

Contact in the Bamyili area increased when tin mining began at Maranboy in 1913. Experimental peanut farming also began and the Australian Inland Mission set up a Flying Doctor hospital base, which later became the Maranboy police station.

More Aboriginal people moved from place to place during the First World War, but during the Second World War the government set up camps, or settlements, to control this movement. Several locations were tried without success before the present site of Bamyili, on the Beswick Creek, was chosen (Thompson 1976, p. 11).

As people from different language groups became integrated into a more settled community and Pidgin became a useful language of communicating between them, this language variety expanded as it was used for everyday interactions of the community. Eventually, a generation of children grew up speaking this language as their mother tongue, and so the creole (later known as Kriol) emerged.

Creolisation most likely began at Ngukurr because of its earlier establishment as a multilingual community. At Bamyili creolisation would not have been accelerated by the establishment of the war compounds (Sandefur 1979, p. 14).

When the Pidgin was in its formative stage Aboriginal speakers took English words and pronounced them using the sound systems of their own languages. They also used the words to label their own Aboriginal concepts rather than keeping the meaning they had in English. As the Pidgin remained in contact with English, the English sound system began to influence it.

The English-sounding pronunciations did not replace the Aboriginal-type sound system, but supplemented it and expanded it. As the language expanded, it

developed a complex sound system "that can be described as a 'continuum' of sounds with an Aboriginal-type sound sub-system at one end and an English-type sound sub-system at the other" (Sandefur 1979, p. 29).

Kriol speakers use the words 'heavy' and 'light' to describe the Aboriginal-type sounds at one end of the continuum and the English-type sounds at the other end. The word for 'snake' is a useful example. It can be pronounced:

(heavy end) jineg—jineig—jineik—sineik—sneik (light end)

Kriol speakers do not speak at any one point on the continuum, but rather within a range on the continuum. Most speakers, while using some heavy and some light sounds, generally operate between the two extremes. They refer to this as 'proper Kriol'. 'Heavy' speakers, operating mostly at the heavy end of the continuum, tend to be traditional language speakers who have learned Kriol as a second language. 'Light' speakers, on the other hand. tend to be Aboriginal people whose first language is English and who have learned Kriol as a second language (Sandefur 1979, p. 50).

All languages change, and one linguist believed that Kriol, at Bamyili, was "moving rapidly in the direction of Standard Australian English" (SAE), and thought it could possibly merge with SAE in about "one and a half to two generations" (Steffensen 1975, p. 4). Another believed that, although Kriol was becoming "more English", it would probably not merge with English for three or four generations (Sharpe 1974, p. 20). My own view was that Kriol was not likely to 'merge' with Standard Australian English until Aboriginal Kriol speakers' world view, culture, and way of thinking 'merged' with those of the dominant culture.

Pit Corder explains that there are differences in languages where there are differences in cultures (1977, p. 70). To give an example from Kriol: the word *ab—hap—haf* means 'a portion of a whole'. There need not be only two portions; the portions need not be equal; and it is not used to describe the dividing of the abstract quality of number, but rather the dividing of a real entity into portions. The fact that a Kriol speaker pronounces the word *haf* (so that it sounds like the English 'half') instead of *ab* will not indicate a 'move in the direction of Standard Australian English', as long as the word is used to label the concept above, which is certainly not the concept underlying the SAE label 'half'. Kriol speakers have a different way of talking about sharing a number of items into equal portions.

Variation and Orthography

The continuum, with its many correct ways to pronounce Kriol words, made it difficult to devise an orthography. A breakthrough came when we discussed the problem with two SIL linguists, David and Margaret Bendor Samuel, who were visiting Australia. They suggested that we devise an orthography to cover the full range of the sound continuum, and have a flexible spelling system where words would be spelt whichever way they were pronounced. This was not a problem to Kriol speakers, as the letters always represented the same sounds.

Flexible spelling, though, was a novel idea to English speakers, who are used to words always being spelt the same way with some letters of the alphabet representing different sounds in different words. For instance, the letter 'a' is pronounced differently in each of the following words: *man, many, baby, father, all, watch, organ, vary*. The English spelling system tends to be rigid but inconsistent, whereas the Kriol system was flexible but consistent.

In 1975 Aboriginal writers from Bamyili and Ngukurr attended a writers' workshop with John Sandefur of the Summer School of Linguistics and Dr. David Zorc of the School of Australian Linguistics. There they reached agreement on a suitable orthography for Kriol.

Some people asked why a child should be taught to spell a word 'h-a-f' in Kriol when they will have to spell it 'h-a-l-f' later on in English. But, as noted above, the Kriol word *haf* does not mean the same as the English word 'half'. They are actually two different words, so spelling them differently can help to avoid confusion, rather than cause it.

There were also the dialect differences to consider. Kriol has many words derived from traditional languages as well as those from English. Different areas were settled by different language groups, so we find that 'dog' is *wartdu* at Ngukurr but *rolu* at Bamyili. Both groups, however, also use *dog*. Some pronunciations are also different in different areas. The word for the verb 'to go' is usually pronounced *go* at Bamyili, but *gu* at Ngukurr. The Sandefurs report similar borrowing from local vernaculars in the Kimberleys area, and note (1979a, b, p. 10) that in virtually all cases there are synonyms for the vernacular words that are used throughout most of the Kimberleys and Territory. They give the example *yabawandi* ('children'), which is common in the Fitzroy area, but not used elsewhere. However, the people of the Fitzroy area also use *biginini*, as do those at Bamyili.

It would be possible to produce materials which would be understood generally, by keeping mainly to words derived from English, but it was thought that reading materials would be much livelier, and much more interesting, if they included the locally derived words. So to start with, writers in each area wrote in their own dialect; small printings were done, and samples were shared.

Designing a Program

Some people were concerned that the concepts and vocabulary of Kriol might not be sufficient for use in all parts of the curriculum. Sharpe (1974, p. 21) reported that Kriol would be able to describe things in many curriculum areas, but there could be problems in some of them.

Different language groups have precise terms for concepts which are culturally important to them. In Kriol *gaggag* means 'father's father or mother's mother'. There is a different word, *mammam*, for 'father's mother or mother's father'. English speakers use phrases, not single words, to refer instead to maternal grandparents or paternal grandparents. Whether they use a single word or a phrase

to describe them, both English speakers and Kriol speakers know who their grandparents are and how they are related to them. In the same way, English has very precise terms for all kinds of measurements, while Aboriginal languages, including Kriol do not, so in these languages such concepts need to be described in phrases or sentences. At Bamyili it was decided to leave some things, such as ordinal number and numeration and notation of numbers over 20, to be taught in English in later grades rather than in Kriol in the early years.

Teaching First Language Literacy

To begin preparing our resources and teaching materials we needed to decide what method we would use for teaching the children to read and write. Some schools in traditional language areas were using a method developed by the late Sarah Gudschinsky during her years of work in South America. This involves a series of reading books containing a number of 'key words', which are learnt by sight. They are then broken down into syllables and the syllables are then put together in different ways to make other words. This method works well with languages where all or most of the syllables are CV syllables, consisting of a consonant (C) followed by a vowel (V), and where there are many words suitable for use as key words (Gudschinsky 1967, p. 29). The key words should be 'content' words, like nouns, verbs, adjectives or adverbs, rather than 'function' words, such as pronouns, prepositions or conjunctions. They should be words that will be useful for making interesting stories and also have the syllables needed for putting together in different ways to make many new words.

Kriol, though, has syllables with complicated combinations of vowels (V) and consonants (C), including V, CV, CCV, VC, VCC, CVC, CVCC, CCVC, CCVCC, CCCVC; simpler syllable patterns are found in the function words.

We also considered applying the literacy teaching methods of Paulo Freire, another educator, who worked in South America. He used key words too, which he called 'generative words'—not in a set of ready-made books, but in a program of socio-political 'awareness-raising' discussions about the real life social justice problems of the people learning to read. He saw the literacy-learning program as an integral part of their struggle for social justice. He chose 'generative words' that were emotionally and socially relevant and therefore likely to promote lively discussion. They also had to be words with the syllables needed for recombining to form many other words. The Spanish and Portuguese languages in his programs did not have complex syllable patterns, and he said he only needed to use 17 key words to teach adults to read and write (Freire 1975, p. 38).

However, the methods described above were unsuitable, because they were designed for teaching adults. Young children have different needs and different skills. They have a shorter concentration span, and have not reached the same level of language development or cognitive development as adults have. They also spend

more time in school than adults can spare for learning to read. We therefore needed a different method for our children's literacy program.

David Zorc used what he termed a 'Programmed Method of Reading' in the Philippines. He discussed this method with John Sandefur and me as a possibility for the Kriol program, and with members of the Bilingual Consultative Committee in the wider context of the NT bilingual education program. As he described it to us at Bamyili, the children would begin with the letters that were easiest to read and write and the letters that were most significant in the language or dialect. They would learn to read and write words and sentences composed of the letters they had been taught, and since all the letters were taught by the third month, they could then move on to a creative writing program. He acknowledged though that the method "left much to the ingenuity of the teacher", since it involved teacher-made visual aids rather than ready-made books (Zorc n.d., p. 1).

The members of the Consultative Committee were concerned that this method depended too heavily on teacher expertise. They said we should instead develop a set of literacy materials which could be used by teachers who may not have had formal training and extensive experience.

At the regular Bilingual Program conferences in Darwin Stephen Harris discussed his views about important differences between traditional learning styles and formal Western education. In traditional Aboriginal society children are used to learning in real life situations without a great deal of verbal instruction. Western schools set up a sequence of skills to be learnt in a formal setting with much more verbal teaching. Harris felt that traditional learning styles were not necessarily suited to the classroom, and so some current classroom methods are more compatible than others with the learning styles he believed were familiar to Aboriginal children. These methods could therefore be very useful, especially in the early years of schooling.

We had trialed the Van Leer language development program (Queensland Department of Education 1971) from 1974 to 1976 before the formal bilingual program started at Bamyili. It was designed for using with Standard Australian English, but its use of themes, and activities based on the children's 'language experience' looked promising for the Kriol program.

After a great deal of consideration, we decided to adopt a multi-strand, thematic approach, similar to that of the Van Leer program. We chose a series of themes that the members of the teaching team would use to plan activities where the children would spend a lot of time listening and speaking to adults and to each other. Aboriginal assistant teachers would tell stories and read books to the children. They would go for walks with them, in the bush, or around the community, with a Polaroid camera to record the experience. Back in the classroom the photos would be placed on wall charts or made into class books to be 'read' over and over again. Extra story-books and scrap-books would be made by the teachers and the children to add to the collection.

We chose a number of interesting 'sight' words that the children used often in their speech. These were printed on cards to be used in sentence-making activities. Because the sight words and the theme activities were both based on the children's

interest areas, the sentences made with the sight words were ones that the children would most likely to want to use for captioning photos and drawings. Gradually the classroom would be filled with books, captions and useful labels, to surround the children with print.

We adapted phonic puppets from the Van Leer program to use in games and informal play activities to gradually focus the children's attention on specific sounds. Book and chart collections of words with the same initial sound would add to the body of print in the classroom and provide the beginnings of later dictionary work. As the children developed greater awareness of these sounds and letters, the puppet games would be used more to provide variety and fun for reinforcement and motivation. We designed a simple paper-bag type of puppet for each character in case the more elaborate Van Leer puppets were unavailable, and invented extra characters where there were no suitable ones in the Queensland program.

A program of formal 'word attack' skills was an important strand in our multi-strand approach, since in Kriol, unlike English, each letter always represents the same sound. We needed to begin writing the formal teaching materials, but we had to decide what to do about the spelling. A flexible spelling system solved the problem of coping with the phonological continuum and dialect differences, but actually posed problems for the production of beginning literacy materials. Confident literate adults could cope with a flexible system; we had to be sure it would not confuse young beginners.

Margaret Bendor-Samuel helped us decide what to do. She suggested we standardise the spelling used in the early teaching materials. She advised us to choose vocabulary that was suitable for the children, but to standardise the spelling according to the preference of adult, mother-tongue, Kriol speakers. This was to make sure that adults did not reject the materials as childish. The children would not be likely to reject material about subjects that were interesting to them. Later in the program we could teach the children about flexible spelling.

The basic 'work-books' contained teaching and revision units designed so that the children would focus their attention on each of the letters and digraphs in turn. The theme activities, class-made books, sentence-making cards, puppet games and printed books were to help the children become familiar with words containing any given letter for some time before the letter was presented in a formal lesson.

Teaching English in the Bilingual Program

As well as preparing the Kriol literacy materials we had to plan a suitable oral English program. The usual methods of teaching English as a 'foreign' language or a 'second' language were not necessarily the most suitable. De Camp explains (1971, p. 15) that linguists traditionally describe a pidgin or creole as 'based' on another standard language. He points out that a French-based creole is not "genetically related to French in the same sense that French is related to Italian". The word 'based' is used to describe the fact that there are similarities in the vocabulary.

Kriol is called an 'English-based' creole because most of its vocabulary has been derived from English. As pointed out earlier though, Kriol words which sound the same as particular English words may have quite different meanings.

The 'Immersion' method of teaching English, for example, may be useful in many situations. In this method the teaching is done entirely in the target language and explicit explanations of grammar rules are avoided. However, explaining aspects of the target language can often be more helpful than simply continuing to speak in the target language. I have found that children as well as adults often want specific explanations of 'how the language works'. I particularly remember an occasion, in the highlands of Papua New Guinea, when my grade six students were having difficulty with direct and indirect speech in their writing. When I finally stopped trying to teach them by the prescribed method and explained how their Enga way of expressing it was different from the English way, one student asked in an exasperated voice, "Why didn't you say that in the first place?"

I believe this is particularly relevant to Kriol speakers. Teachers, even if they are not fluent Kriol speakers, need to know the differences between Kriol and English, and to be prepared to explain them when needed. Otherwise, as in the case of *haf* and 'half', teachers and children may be saying the 'same' words to each other without realising that they are, literally, speaking different languages.

The Kriol and English bilingual program incorporated incidental English learning at pre-school and planned informal learning at Transition, followed by systematic daily oral English sessions based on the Van Leer program's English, but modified to avoid confusion; i.e., we planned separate topics in Kriol and English, particularly where English and Kriol terms have similar forms but different underlying meanings. Teachers would read English story books to the children at each level and the children would learn to sing English songs. We expected that by the time they mastered literacy skills in Kriol they would have learned enough English to be able to extend their literacy skills to include English reading and writing.

And Finally, the Program Began

1976 was a year of intensive consultation, in-service training, team building, problem solving and program planning. And eventually in 1977, Bamyili School on the Beswick Reserve, 78 km south-east of Katherine, began its formal Kriol bilingual education program. We also produced a paper I wrote titled "Kriol Literacy: Why and How…", which was an account of the factors involved in establishing the Kriol Bilingual Program in the NT. It had been prepared for the use of teachers in Bamyili at the time, and I have drawn on it in writing this chapter.

We moved to Darwin at the end of 1980 and others took over the program, but we have maintained contact with Kriol speakers. Recent years have seen an increasing interest in Australian creoles in different areas of the country, and Aboriginal speakers are conducting research into their own languages, including Kriol. There are still problems for classroom practitioners but there is also great potential; I believe the use of Kriol in education is a story to be continued.

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