

LONG, DANIEL. 2007. *English on the Bonin (Ogasawara) Islands*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press. Publication of the American Dialect Society, no. 91. Pp. xi + 255. ISBN: 978-0-8223-6671-3. US\$20.00, Hardcover.

Reviewed by JOEL BRADSHAW, *University of Hawai‘i*

A friend of mine and fellow fieldworker in Papua New Guinea came under fire during his dissertation defense for devoting his efforts to documenting one language as thoroughly as possible without regard for theoretical consistency. By borrowing a bit from one framework and a bit here and there from others to help elucidate his analysis, he had foregone the possibility of making a rigorous contribution to advancing any one theory.

Although still a graduate student, yet to defend my own dissertation, I leapt to my friend’s defense. “How many centuries had this language gone undocumented?” I asked. “There is a good chance this will be the only comprehensive grammar of this language ever written. Why should we subordinate the goal of documenting it to the goal of advancing a fly-by-night theory?”

“A fly-by-night theory?” harrumphed the professor. “It’s been under development for at least three decades!”

Centuries trump decades, documentational needs clearly trumped theoretical concerns for the rest of the committee, and the descriptivist in this case went on to a very productive career (not in the U.S.), making many contributions to both theory and description. But what sort of documentational imperatives apply to language varieties whose lifespans and mutation cycles are measured on the same time scale as linguistic theories? Daniel Long’s salvage documentation of intriguing artifacts from the lifecycle of English in the Bonin Islands raises several such questions.

The previously uninhabited Bonin (lit. ‘no people’) Islands were settled in 1830 by a motley shipload of settlers out of the Hawaiian Islands who spoke an assortment of European, Polynesian, and Micronesian languages. Men speaking British and American varieties of English were dominant during the early years, but the others on the island would have spoken what Long labels Bonin Pidgin English, Bonin Creoloid English, and Bonin Standard English, the last being used with English-speaking visitors to the Islands (including Commodore Matthew C. Perry’s squadron in 1853).

In 1876, the Japanese government reasserted its claim to what it calls the Ogasawara Islands, brought in many settlers from Hachijōjima and elsewhere, and conferred Japanese citizenship on the earlier inhabitants (even setting up bilingual schools to accommodate them), thereby adding the Hachijō dialect of Japanese, Ogasawara Koiné Japanese, and Ogasawara Standard Japanese to the language mix employed by the local population.

Under the Japanese administration, the descendants of the first settlers were distinguished by their ability to speak some variety of English, although less and less of it during the years leading up to the Pacific War. But when the U.S. Navy took over in 1946 and expelled all Japanese except those descended from the original settlers (and their in-laws), the Bonin Islanders were distinguished by their ability to speak some variety of Japanese. The Navy generation learned English in school but used what Long calls the Ogasawara Mixed Language (OML) at home. The OML had skewed more toward Japanese under the

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Japanese and more toward English under the Americans, and then began slowly to die out after Japan resumed control in 1968. The tiny diaspora of Bonin Islanders who opted for U.S. citizenship have continued their transition toward English, while those who remained behind have been reassimilating to the returning Japanese majority. The latter can often still be distinguished by their family names and heritage, or their Christian religion or non-Asian features, but not much longer by OML or even English.

The case of the Bonin Islanders and their varied linguistic repertoires over the past 180 years highlights a number of larger issues for language documentation and conservation. I will just briefly touch on a few here.

How important is it to document tiny, isolated varieties of huge, well-documented languages like English and Japanese, and who are the beneficiaries of such documentation? The book under review was published by the American Dialect Society, and addresses issues of much more interest to its membership than to the community whose languages are documented therein. Some Japanese academics will also find much of interest. There is a large enough potential readership for such works among the speakers of the major languages that we can probably let market forces finance documentation efforts in such cases.

How important is it to document fly-by-night languages like OML, whose lifecycle may be limited to times of Matrix Language Turnover (Myers-Scotton 1993, Fuller 1996), when a bilingual community moves from one base language to another? Although more stable languages that have gone undocumented for centuries should take priority, such transitional languages can tell us much about not just how languages change, but how communities switch languages. (Fortunately, in the Bonin case, there is a corpus of interviews with “Navy-generation” speakers of OML recorded in the 1990s and early 2000s.) Judging from my fieldwork and follow-up research in Papua New Guinea, I suspect that most of the regions of the world richest in undocumented languages are also richest in multilingual communities who have undergone cycles of MLT in response to radical demographic shifts similar to those in the Bonins, with residual effects that are making the much-derogated term “mixed language” more respectable again (see Bakker and Mous 1994, Bradshaw 1997).

Another question concerns language conservation. What does one do with a community like the original Bonin Islanders, whose descendants have scattered in many directions and whose linguistic markers of unique identity are no longer of much use? There is no chance of conserving the language community in situ. Can one keep a language alive solely by means of periodic reunions and active email exchanges?

However stimulating or challenging Long’s work might be to language documentation specialists, it is not an attempt to document any one language. It is instead an attempt to document the history of a particular community of mixed and fluid linguistic heritage by assembling a dated sequence of linguistic artifacts from as many sources as possible, most of them very sketchy. Perhaps one could call it linguistic archaeology. The only sizable corpus of language data is the set of interviews in OML, a corpus that should be recorded and transcribed in some archive accessible to a wider variety of researchers.

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Joel Bradshaw
bradshaw at hawaii dot edu