



Linking language and the environment: the case of Norfolk and Norfolk Island



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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates a range of structural and lexical aspects of the Pitkern–Norf’k language, which characterize it typologically as an ‘ecologically embedded’ contact language. Lexical items spanning various lexical fields are employed to illustrate key criteria in the relationship between place-knowledge and linguistic knowledge. It is claimed that ecolinguistics needs to supplement philosophical reflection and language critique with a staunchly empirical approach.

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The group of people, who inhabited Pitcairn Island until 1856, were governed by a single set of values. Their collective soul was developed to such an extent that it pervaded and guided the entire life of both the community and its members. The community had an intimate relationship with its physical environment. The settlers were solidly interconnected with their environment and regarded it as an important part of their being.

(Rogner, 1940: 53 translated from German original)

1. Introduction

This paper is concerned with the language spoken by the mutineers of *The Bounty* and their descendants on Pitcairn and Norfolk Islands (see [Fig. 1](#) location map). This language variably known as Pitcairnese, Pitkern/Norf’k, Pitcairn English and by other names is featured prominently in the discourse of language mixing and particularly creolistics and has been called a laboratory case by some:

Pitcairn English with its offshoot on Norfolk Island is of extraordinary interest because it offers as near a laboratory case of Creole formation as we are ever likely to have.

(Reinecke et al., 1975: 590)

We shall refer to the two varieties spoken on Pitcairn and Norfolk Island by their official names Pitkern and Norf’k, respectively.

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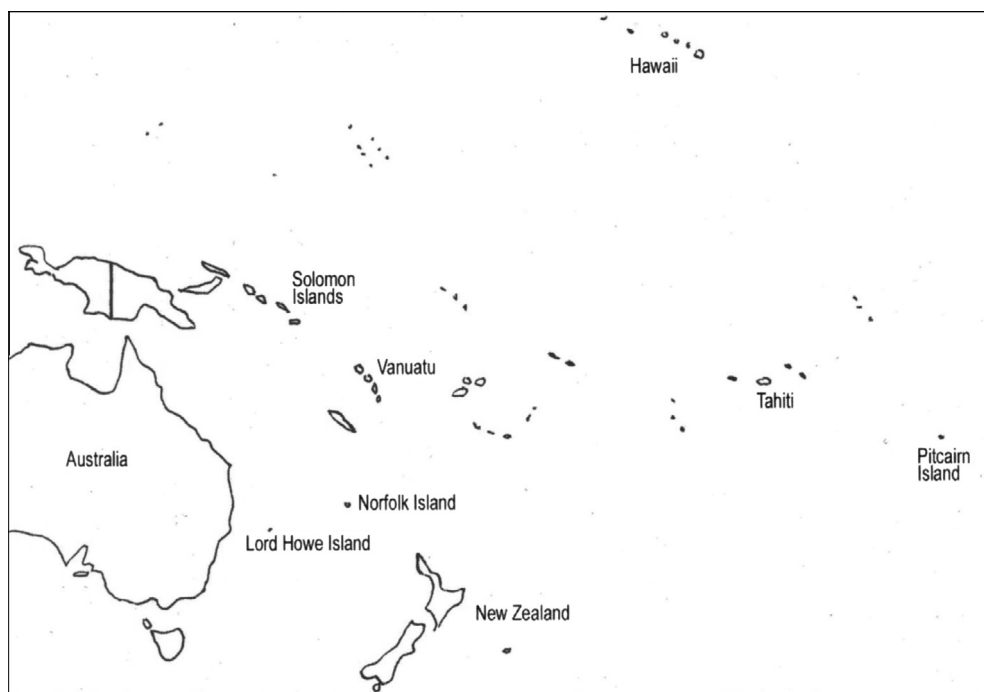


Fig. 1. Map of the south-western and central Pacific showing the positions of Pitcairn and Norfolk Islands. (From Hayward, 2006: viii.)

Mainstream structure-fixated linguistics unsurprisingly focuses on a narrow range of structural properties of this language and the comparison of these formal aspects with the structure of other contact languages. The outcome of these studies is inconclusive. Kortmann and Szmeccanyi (2004) conclude that on structural grounds it is most closely related to Melanesian Pidgin and Creole English, whereas Baker and Huber (2001) argue that it should be grouped with the Atlantic Creoles. There is an ongoing debate as to whether one is dealing with a Creole at all.

The reasons for the disagreements and confusions include the fact that most writers have worked with secondary data or with a limited set of primary data collected over a short period of time. These data have been too patchy to capture the full range of lexical and structural properties of Pitkern and Norf'k and represent the social and ecological relationships in the day-to-day use of the language in a very sketchy fashion. Another reason for disagreement is that past observations were based on the assumption that language could be detached and explored independently from the cultural and natural ecologies in which they developed and continue to be embedded. The final reason is the atemporal synchronic approach of most writers, which ignores that new languages such as Pitkern and Norf'k adapt (cf. Mühlhäusler, 1996) to the needs of their users over a long period of time.

The approach advocated by the writers of this paper differs from mainstream linguistics in a number of ways. All of them are derived from the ecolinguistic perspective adopted by them:

1. The interrelationship between language and people and the natural and cultural environment is seen to be both an explanandum and a source of explanations.
2. Our fieldwork¹ is seen as long term engagement with the language community. Mühlhäusler began visiting Norfolk Island in 1997 and continues to visit twice annually. Nash began his work in 2007. Our fieldwork has not been restricted to making recordings and linguistic documentation but includes participant observation with the community in a number of important official projects (language legislation, the preparation of documents to obtain recognition of Norf'k as an endangered language by UNESCO (2007), development of a school language program, museum exhibitions and direct involvement in signage and placenames). Linguistic fieldwork cannot be separated from taking part in the mundane everyday activities of the community either and thus also includes sharing practical activities with islanders such as chopping wood, cutting corn, repairing gutters, weeding and watering vegetables among other activities.
3. Importantly our work has paid attention to reference and denotation, i.e. linguistic substance/content rather than form.

¹ For practical reasons, our fieldwork was restricted to Norfolk Island where the majority of the descendants of the *Bounty's* mutineers have lived since 1856.

2. Language type and type of linguistic study

The relationship between language and its biocultural environment is a recurrent theme in ecolinguistics. While not approaching the matter as an ecolinguist, [Heryanto \(1990: 41\)](#) has nevertheless captured an eminently important point when he argues that:

Language is not a universal category or cultural activity though it may sound odd, not all people have a language in a sense of which this term is currently used in English.

To this one might add, 'by the users of the official languages of nation states'. In the view of those that have become habituated to the idea of nation states and national languages, languages are defined by their grammar and lexicon. They can therefore be studied without any reference to the biocultural context in which they are used. They can also be transplanted and replace other languages, as, in the general view, they are all arbitrary codes to express universal cognitive categories. These concepts have been at the heart of the ecolinguistic critique of traditional linguistics. The metalinguistic concepts, including typological criteria, of modern Western societies and Western linguistics contrast with a very different view found in a number of societies around the world, for instance in Classical Javanese. Javanese *basa*, as pointed out by [Anderson \(1990: 28\)](#), included in its broad semantic field the notions of civility, rationality and truth:

Basa, just like *bahasa* in Classical Malay, meant 'language', but it always included in its broad semantic field the notions of civility, rationality, and truth. This conception of 'true' language meant that in the profoundest sense Javanese (or in their local habitats, Sundanese, Balinese and Buginese) was isomorphic with the world, as it were glued to it. It was this isomorphism, this inherence, that made for the efficacy of mantra. Because words or particular combinations of them contained Power, like kings, krisses, banyan-trees and sacred images, their utterance could unleash that Power directly on, and in the world.

Similar accounts of speakers' metalinguistic views about Aboriginal languages of Australia are given by [Mühlhäusler \(1996: 121 ff\)](#). This leads us to the suggestion that existing structural and social typologies of language are deficient because:

1. They assume that social and structural parameters are separable for all languages;
2. They are based on an impoverished view of the context in which languages develop and are used.

Whereas they can be applied to the languages associated with modern nation states and languages shaped by missionaries, administrators and educators, there are other ways of speaking, which can only be understood as part of a whole ecology.

The degree to which linguistic practices are detachable from the world suggests that one can distinguish between two prototypical language types:

1. Ecologically embedded languages;
2. Disconnected languages.

These are idealized types and in reality languages are a complex mix between being constructed by their environment and constructing their environment ([Mühlhäusler, 2003: 2](#)). This type of ecologically embedded language exhibits properties such as:

1. Words reflect social interaction between humans and their environment;
2. Lexical and grammatical forms are not regarded as arbitrary;
3. There is strong emphasis on the perlocutory force of language;
4. The same word can be used to describe human and other life forms;
5. The lexicon and grammar of space reflects topography;
6. The interaction between humans and the environment is expressed by comitative rather than causative grammar;
7. Densely populated lexical fields are encountered with aspects of the natural environment;
8. A distinct deficiency of densely populated lexical fields related to a proportionate and respective lack in the incident social, physical and conceptual environment;
9. Language is a historical memory of past interactions between humans and nature and others.

We claim that Pitkern–Norf'k is such a language. It presents its speakers as being much more densely intertwined with the environment where it is spoken, i.e. it is an 'attached' language rather than a 'detachable' one – an ecologically linked contact language rather than any number of non-ecologically linked pidgins and creoles of Oceania and elsewhere. It is not the case that English is not linked to English's social and natural environment but it is detachable. Norf'k, however, is not actually detachable from the society and place where it is spoken, i.e. Norfolk Island. Based on our interaction with Norfolk Islanders, it appears that speaking Norf'k in a cultural, and to a lesser degree natural, environment that is not Norfolk Island makes very little cultural or ecological sense.

Previous studies of Pitkern–Norf’k have not considered in detail the socio-historical development of the language such as the fact that acrolectal English was always part of the linguistic ecology of Pitcairn and Norfolk and in constant contact with the basilectal variety that developed after 1790. Unlike most languages classified as Creoles, Pitkern–Norf’k did not develop in the plantation, trade, slave or boarding school environment nor did it develop in a place with a pre-established or authoritative social ecology. It also never had any significant overt linguistic role models during its developmental stage or subsequent stages in its history. Furthermore, it did not develop in a spatially confined location like most documented Pidgins and Creoles. In the typical plantation and slave environment, people did not have to search for sources of food in their new home nor for a suitable place to live. Such a situation promoted only very weak ecological ties between Pidgin and Creole communities and their natural environment.

What we are suggesting is a theoretical characterization of the Norf’k language as an ecologically embedded case of language contact and change in contrast to the ecologically disconnected majority of creoles. What makes this study of typology particularly interesting is that such links had to be established twice, due to the relocating of the entire population of Pitcairn Island to Norfolk Island in 1856, and that these processes of adaptation have been deposited twice in the grammar and lexicon of the languages of Pitcairn Island and Norfolk Island. In this paper we look specifically at the lexicon of Pitkern and Norfolk as well as the grammar of Norf’k placenames as a tool to understand ecological relationships between language and place.

3. Lexical examples of ecological embeddedness: fishing and fish names

For both Pitcairn Islanders and Norfolk Islanders, fish and seafood is an important part of their diet, though overfishing and other factors have reduced fish stocks on both islands. Göthesson (2000) presents an impressive account of the 295 species of fish in Pitcairn waters – a similar account for Norfolk Island is still forthcoming. What emerges from this account is:

1. That a large number of fish are not named. Källgård (1981) lists 90 Pitkern fish names, about 10% of which are synonyms.
2. Many of these names are applied to a number of different species.
3. Only about one quarter of the fish names are of Tahitian origin. There are Tahitian words for many unnamed species in Tahiti but they were not used on Pitcairn Island.
4. Naming fish developed over a long period of time. It is possible to date the origin of many fish names.

These facts combined with historical information about fishing practices suggest the influence of Tahitian language and culture was less than what has been claimed by some observers; it reflects the well accepted view that the Tahitian aspect of the Pitcairners cultural makeup was strongly suppressed in their new home. Rather, the development of fish names was a slow process of a new society accommodating to a new environment and learning to manage it. What is of particular interest is that newly discovered fish were not assigned arbitrary or descriptively transparent labels but reflect the interaction between the social and natural ecology of the island.

The identification and naming of fish, in many instances, is directly related to the social practice of communal fishing expeditions in longboats after 1829. The catch would be divided into equal heaps and randomly assigned to one of the families, known locally as a ‘share out’. The person, who first caught a hitherto unknown fish or was given such a fish at a share out, often gave it its name. There are many examples in Pitkern:

Archie – A small light greyish fish named after Archibald Warren, born 1887.

Elwyn’s trousers – This fish looked like the trousers Elwyn Christian, born 1909, wore when this fish was first caught.

Hanna – A small fish in Letas family was named after Hanna Adams, born 1799, a daughter of the mutineer John Adams.

Hattie’s gown – A slim fish with a lot of stripes’. It resembled the gown worn by Hattie Andre, a missionary teacher on the island 1893–1896, which had a lot of stripes, just like the fish.

Isi-fish – According to the Pitcairners, it is ‘blue, small like a finger, sharp and long head’. ‘The piper, or gar-fish’, was named after Isobel Coffin according to Ross and Moverley (1964: 236). A similar fish is called Ise in Norf’k. According to Alice Buffett (1999) it got its name from Aunt Ise (Isobel Christian) “who was particularly skilled at catching, rolling out and cooking garfish”. As regards the date of this name, it must have been in the 1880, when Richard Coffin was wrecked on Pitcairn Island and, if the Norf’k name arose independently, it is a 20th century name.

Mummy – The damselfish *Abudefduf sordidus* was named after Caroline P. Johnson who came from Mangareva and was nicknamed ‘mummy’. After the tragic drowning of her first husband, Louis Johnson, she married Virgil Christian (born 1893).

Sandford – A long, thin fish, which was named after Sandford Warren, born 1864, who was the first islander to get it on his share.

A particularly interesting name is *miti*:

A big, blue fish, resembling the New Zealand butterfish. The first fish of this kind which was caught by the islanders fell on the share of Harriet Melissa McCoy (born 1847) who was nicknamed ‘Miti’ (Källgård, 1981: 10).

Miti is a word of Tahitian origin meaning ‘to kiss and cuddle’ and was the nickname of a person not a Tahitian fish name.

Before fishing from boats by the late 1820s, fishing from rocks and in rock pools was the most common form of fishing. The name Minali or Menalee's stone got its name from one of the six Polynesian men who arrived with the mutineers in 1790 and who used to swim out to this rock to fish. The classificatory name 'rockfish' refers to the class of fishes that could be caught by this method. Rock fishing was a very dangerous process and several men and women sustained serious injuries or died. Accidents incurred while on such fishing expeditions are still remembered by place-names such as:

Down-under-Johnny-fall – Where John Mills had a fatal accident in 1814.

Where-Dan-fall – On April 7, 1855, Daniel McCoy and his young wife were fishing from the rocks. He fell in trying to make his way round to another point, while she was swimming across (Ross and Moverley, 1964: 181).

Where-Minnie-off – Minnie Christian, daughter of Alfonso Christian, was washed from the rocks by a big wave. She floated about in the sea until an alarm was raised. Unfortunately, all the men were away fishing except Skelly Warren, who was ill in bed. He got up, rushed down the cliff, plunged in, and effected a most commendable rescue.

4. People's names and nicknames

Naming practices for people in Pitkern–Norfolk differ significantly from those of acrolectal English. A detailed study is currently being prepared by Mühlhäusler and only a small number of examples can be given here. Again, as in the examples of fish names, people's name and nicknames illustrate the need to integrate an understanding of people and history as well as social practices into understanding the linguistic situation in Pitcairn and Norfolk society. The data thus far suggest that fish names originate either metonymically by virtue of featuring in a social practice or emerge as metaphors that transfer human properties onto other species. A brief look at proper names for people demonstrates that places and non-human life forms can also be metaphorically applied to humans: Thus *myse fish* refers to one's girlfriend as well as to the fish one has just caught. The fish name 'tweed trousers', which reflects a human attribute, has come to be used as a nickname of a person in the more recent past, illustrating a two-way process.²

The fish names *buhi* 'eel' and *pe'ou* 'wrasse' are the nicknames of people on Norfolk Island who are perceived by their fellow human beings of sharing the slipperiness of the eel and the cultural uselessness of the wrasse with these fish.

First and middle names of Pitcairn Islanders and their descendants often refer to visitors, places and events. In the 19th century Pitcairn Island derived most of its income from goods supplied to visiting vessels and, because of the charismatic status the Pitcairners enjoyed in the discourses of the Christian churches and social theoreticians, ships often arrived with generous gifts. This enabled the islanders to emulate the material culture of 19th century England and the USA. The close links between visiting ships and Pitcairn Islanders in the first half of the 19th century, for instance, accounts of a number of unusual names.

Mayhew Young (born 1823) and William Mayhew Young (born 1827) both referred to Captain Mayhew Folger, who visited Pitcairn in 1809, the first visitor to the island after the mutiny. Details of all ships that called on Pitcairn and the nature of their visits are given by Ford (1996). Their captains are remembered in names such as:

Abraham Blatchley Quintal born 1828;
 John Valentine Mansell Evans born 1829;
 Charles Driver Christian, born 1831;
 Francis Mason Nobbs, born 1835;
 Caleb Quintal, born 1837;
 Gilbert Warren Fysh Adams, born 1845;
 Abby Louisa Taber Quintal, born 1846;
 William B. Swain Christian, born 1847;
 Eliza Coffin Palmer Young, born 1893.

The Pitcairn Register of births and deaths contains many other examples as well as other unusual naming practices.

The first child born on Pitcairn Island was Thursday October Christian, born 1790. It turned out that the day of birth had been miscalculated and some outsiders therefore referred to him as Friday October Christian. This did not prevent Thursday calling his son Thursday October Christian II, born 1820. Day names were common in many West Indian Creole societies among African slaves and it is conceivable that the mutineer Edward Young from St. Kitts was involved in the choice of this name.

That the name Robert Pitcairn Buffett, born 1830, contains a reference to a placename is easy to see, but to recognize that the name Lucy Anne Quintal, born 1831 refers to her birthplace requires an understanding of the historical circumstances of

² A few other pertinent examples are:

<i>dudwe</i>	'the Candlenut tree or its fruit either used for eating. The expression <i>yu silli dudwe</i> is at times used to reprimand children'.
<i>a'u</i>	'the unspawned eggs of a crab or the exact likeness of someone's parents'.
<i>haad baeli</i>	'species of fish with little meat or a person who is unwilling to share or a difficult person, a tough nut to crack.'

her birth. She was born on board the Lucy Anne, the vessel that took the Pitcairners to be relocated in Tahiti, an ill-fated and short lived episode, which led to much social upheaval and loss of life, including that of Lucy Anne's mother, Catherine.

Numerous other names illustrate the close link between people, places and life forms.

5. People words

Our discussion has shown how proper names in Pitkern–Norf'k are rarely arbitrary, but developed, both metaphorically and metonymically, as indices of the interconnectedness between places, life forms, events and people. Such links are not restricted to proper nouns, however, but are in evidence in the core lexicon and in grammar.

Observers, beginning with Bishop [Montgomery \(1896\)](#), have been struck by the large number of anthroponymic verbs and adjectives in Pitkern and Norf'k. Let us illustrate this with some examples:

Allen (noun) – Poor food, after Allen Christian (1879–1960) who, when disappointed with dinner said grace with the words 'where's the food we are about to receive?';

Bop (verb) – To give a hint, begging indirectly, after an islander whose nickname was Bopper;

You same as Dorcas – Said of someone who stumbles, after Dorcas Christian, born 1873, who once stumbled, stepped on a plate and broke it;

Wait same as Edna – To take food after everyone else, after Edna Christian born 1898, who was once very late for a public dinner;

Fred feet (noun) – Very big feet, after Frederick Christian, born 1883;

Saia (verb) – To invite oneself to a meal, after Josiah Evans, who lived on Norfolk at the beginning of the twentieth century;

Breman (adjective, verb) – To be skinny, after Mr. Breman a short term visitor in the late 19th century;

Luusi (verb) – To cry in public, to be weepy; after a recently deceased Norfolk woman named Lucy. It is a very sensitive word;

Toebi – To help oneself to other people's garden produce. After a Norfolk Islander named Toby.

There are also examples of lexical items derived from animal names:

Skinner's shit – A grass variety, that grew first from the road apples produced by a horse called Skinner;

Jamu – Poor tasting, this is based on the expression 'it tastes dog'. Jamu was the Oliver Clark's family name for his dogs;

Logan se kiket – Ugly, after the name of a horse that kicked an islander's face.

What is remarkable with such people and animal words is that Pitkern–Norf'k users are often fully aware of the origin of these expressions, a fact that makes them dangerous. Expressions such as *snel* 'not to have enough to eat, to cater insufficiently' or *saia* 'to invite oneself for a meal' can be used to taunt the descendants from whom the expression originates.

The Pitcairn Islanders who arrived on Norfolk Island in 1856 and their descendants were referred to by others and themselves as Pitcairners until the beginning of the 20th century as they did not consider Norfolk Island was their home. It would seem that the term 'Norfolker' for the local kingfish predates the use of this term to apply to people. Over time the name of the bird became contracted to *Nuffka* and is now being used metaphorically to refer to a true Norfolk Islander. It was also at this point that the Norfolk Islanders began naming places signifying strongly that Norfolk Island was indeed their emotional as well as their geographical home.

6. Place-knowledge and fishing ground names

What needs to be emphasized concerning the social knowledge of placenames on Norfolk Island is that:

1. There has never been a comprehensive placename survey for the island across its brief yet varied history.
2. A lot of the placename and place-knowledge is in the minds of a few (generally) elderly islanders. There is also a large discrepancy between what knowledge people have and what knowledge the community allege people to have.
3. Much placename knowledge is lost and will never be retrieved.

In this sense we agree with [Fox \(1997: 7\)](#) who claims, "a landscape of places forms a complex structure of social memory".

Our work documenting the Norf'k lexicon has involved collecting little known placenames and placenames associated with offshore fishing. These have been the mainstay of the islanders' sea-based livelihoods since their arrival in 1856. Much of this insider knowledge has been made redundant by modern technologies such as GPS and sounders. The death of one

highly knowledgeable informant during this fieldwork process has stressed the immediacy required in documenting such placenames and their importance in the overall of the Norfolk lexicon.³ These names fall into three major categories:

1. Anthroponyms;
2. Names describing landscape features;
3. Names based on events or other ephemera.

Some examples of fishing ground names referring to natural and cultural phenomena are:

1. Dar Fig Valley (The Fig Valley) – An area about 200–300 yards offshore from where the Fig Valley is near Old Hundred Acres. Found and named by local fishermen Bear and Tardy.
2. Frankie's – Named in honour of Frankie Christian, a respected member of the Norfolk Island community who was an engineer by trade. He had a high IQ and remembered all the fishing marks in his head. He joined the airforce during the war. His mother was a schoolteacher.
3. No Trouble – The large reef just to the north of Norfolk. Named such as you would have no trouble catching fish there.
4. Horse & Cart – Named Horse & Cart because when you line up the geographical marks to find this offshore location, there is just about enough space to drive a horse and cart through it. It is nine miles out from Norfolk, from the Steeles Point side. Horse & Cart is a new name created by the younger generation.

There are over 60 fishing ground names recollecting people, landscape and events around Norfolk, some of which fishermen still use today. These names are also inherently linked to a system of fixed spatial orientation that has developed and adapted specifically to the topography of Norfolk Island and its surrounds (see Mühlhäusler and Nash, *submitted for publication*). Analysis of these names shows that:

1. There are no eponymous names of fishing grounds commemorating women;
2. This knowledge is entirely in the minds and memory of the male members of the community;
3. There is a great amount of acceptable variation in the grammatical form of fishing grounds and what location it is denoting, e.g. Frankie's, (Dar) Side fer Frankie's (Frankie's Place), Dar fer Frankie's (literally 'the one for Frankie's'). This variation in grammatical form is driven by form preference of the users of these names.

In these examples we are suggesting that what Norfolk speakers consider grammatical in placenames is not necessarily how they depict them and how they actually use them in the environment of Norfolk Island. Knowledge of the place and the people affects what is considered grammatical.

A similar process of naming offshore fishing grounds commemorating place and people has developed on Pitcairn Island, despite there being a great difference in the offshore topography of these two islands. It appears the methods for naming fishing grounds on Pitcairn – that is, people who located them first, an event associated with discovering the area or some element of the natural landscape including especially the fish found in that area – is very similar to that found on Norfolk. A short list from Göthesson (2000: 36–37) shows:

1. Middle Bank – An offshore bank situated due south of Small Bank, about 800 m to the south of the beach at Down Rope. Probably used for fishing.
2. Nanwi Bank – An offshore fishing bank situated near Nancy Stone due south of St. Paul's Point (the easternmost point of the island). NANWI or NANWE is the local name for the brown club (*Kyphosus bigibbus*), the most popular fish caught by the islanders. It is an interesting place-name of English and Tahitian components.
3. Ron's Fishing Place – Situated about 800 m south-west off Gudgeon on the south-west coast, this fishing-place is probably named after Ronnie ("Ron") Christian (b. 1969).

That two similar locational and nomenclature systems, though apparently common in coastal communities (Forman, 1967), developed in two distinct and varied locations suggests an intimate link between place, names and how the Pitcairn and Norfolk Islands think about and talk about their island homes.

7. Greater implications of research into Pitkern–Norfolk for ecolinguistics

Our experience with observing the Pitkern–Norfolk language is that such an acute empirical investigation lends itself well to outlining general principles involved in any ecolinguistic analysis. We adhere to an approach we label *empirical minimalism*. This method focuses on documenting and analyzing language ecologies that are manageable. In particular, we advocate looking at small Oceanic islands with small population numbers and a brief settlement history. By doing so such a process treats each language ecology as a unique and specific situation.

³ Once again we emphasize the significance of engaging directly with the community in environmental, cultural and language-based matters and how these play an integral part in (1) the quality of data one receives, and (2) the ability to interact positively with the natural and social ecology of the research setting.

Treating particular language ecologies as distinctive and singular case studies for observing interconnections between language and environment is an important element in what descriptive ecolinguistics has striven to achieve. As each ecology is unique, the generalizability of particularistic results to different social and natural ecologies is potentially limited, although we feel our linguistic work in Australia and the Pacific lends itself well to general linguistic enquiry as well as what has come to be termed ecolinguistics. As there is yet to be established a tried and tested methodology and theory of ecolinguistics, we adhere to a method common and acceptable to modern linguistics while incorporating principles common to ecolinguistics, e.g. being parameter rich and possibly conclusion poor.

We feel that an analysis comprising three tiers, namely structural, social and ecological, can help in further understanding the factors at play when describing a language such as Pitkern–Norf’k. Often we take for granted that taking a diachronic perspective will help with a synchronic analysis. The complex social and environmental history of Pitcairn and Norfolk reveal that this is not necessarily the case, as the memory of past events cannot be separated from the present ecological situation. Nevertheless, this three-tiered approach can help us understand the social and ecological factors shaping both individual lexical, grammatical and pragmatic phenomena and help establish the type ‘ecologically embedded language’ for Pitkern–Norf’k. Previous classifications have labelled Pitkern–Norfolk a canonical Creole, a pidgin, a cant, a dialect, a mixed dialect or New English. What is questionable, however, is what these classifications can do to help us obtain data, analyze them and employ them in making sense of the language and its history and use. Our research on Pitkern–Norf’k highlights the importance of new and singular perspectives of doing ecolinguistic work; what works for Pitkern–Norf’k may not be applicable to other language ecologies and languages.

We have observed that ecolinguistics, particularly in the European context (e.g. Bang and Døør, 2007; Trampe, 1990a,b; Fill, 1993, 1996), has commonly been treated from a philosophical rather than from an empirical perspective. Our goal, by contrast, has been to be staunchly empirical. As we have noted earlier, we have been engaged in active ecolinguistic fieldwork for several years where we have striven to obtain large amounts of reliable diachronic and synchronic data from written and personal sources, respectively. While empiricism cannot survive in the (eco)linguistic sphere without philosophical reflection, the logical approach of speculating about the nature of ecolinguistics and actual language ecologies seems not to offer empirical ecolinguistics very much. Creating ‘data cemeteries’ (see papers at 1st International Conference on Language Documentation, Hawai’i, 2009) and large ‘butterfly collections’ of unanalyzed data is not ideal. The challenge is to create functional interconnections between philosophical and empirical approaches to ecolinguistics and to apply such an integrated approach to practical problems faced by the users of languages.

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