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Obituary Philip Baker

(with a bibliography of his writings, not included in the printed version).

The final printed version of the obituary can be found here:

Bakker, Peter. 2018. Philip Baker (1940–2017). *Journal of Pidgin and Creole Languages* 33:2, pp. 231–239. <https://benjamins.com/catalog/jpcl.00014.obit>

Peter Bakker, Aarhus University

Philip Baker was born in Liverpool, England, on the 26th of July 1940. He attended school in Liverpool until he was 16 years old. He was one of two persons who became professors in creole studies without ever having finished their high school (the other is Ian Hancock).

Philip collected postage stamps in his youth, and the legendary and valuable postage stamp “The Blue Mauritius” may have drawn his attention to the island. Postage stamp catalogues certainly did have an impact on his work as a publisher.

Britain was a very stratified society when Philip went to school, and the injustice he experienced there may have influenced his view of the world. Going to school in Maghull near Liverpool, some pupils arrived barefoot in class, because they could not afford shoes in the 1950s. In a book on childhood memories of Liverpool (Russell 2012), Philip related how one of his best friends received a lower grade in school than Philip, for a comprehensive exam. The friend’s father came to tell Philip that their paths had to part, as his young friend would have to do manual labor for the rest of his life, whereas Philip could continue school. Philip never saw his friend again. Philip also played guitar in a “skiffle band,” a music genre where young people made music on instruments they often built themselves, very popular in the 1950s, and which created later rock stars like Jimmy Page and John Lennon. Philip’s band was called *Caldoni*, and the band once played at the same stage where later the same evening (what was to become) the Beatles were performing.

Philip’s first job was in an accounting firm, where he worked a few years. In 1961 he started as a film laboratory technician in London. John Ladhams informs that he worked as an assistant editor on at least 4 major feature films, alongside his good friend and leading British film editor Tom Priestley (b. 1932). These films include *Waltz of the Toreadors* (1962),

dir. John Guillermin; *This Sporting Life* (1963), dir. Lindsay Anderson; *Unearthly Stranger* (1963), dir. John Crish; *Isadora* (1968), dir. Karel Reisz.

His experience brought him to Mauritius in 1965-1966, where he worked as a film clipper for the Mauritian Broadcasting Corporation for a year. In 1966 and 1967 he became editor of the Mauritian Sunday newspaper *Sunday Express*, which he had established himself, and where he wrote about, among other topics, the language situation on the island. In these three years his love for the island and for Mauritian Creole blossomed. He made copious notes on the language, which he also learned to speak. In 1967 he returned to London where he worked as a film editor for five years, in fact sporadically also later, until 1990. In the meantime he worked on improving his knowledge of linguistics, and he worked on a grammatical description of Mauritian Creole based on what he had learned in Mauritius. In 1969, he published his first academic paper in *African Language Review* about the language situation in Mauritius. Peter Stein says that this was one of the most important papers that he read on the way to do his study on the language situation of Mauritius (Stein 1982).

In the meantime, Philip used his notes to write what was conceived of as an aid to non-Mauritians to learn Mauritian Kreol, but his sketch grew and grew and ended as his landmark grammar of the Mauritian language published in 1972. He had had no academic background or linguistic training, but the Africanist David Dalby, the linguist Neil Smith and others had been generous with advice for the grammar.

That same year, in May 1972, he returned to Mauritius for a period of two years, until January 1974, during which he was employed by the Mauritian College of the Air and the International Extension College. During those years, he made the first version of his *Correspondence Course in Mauritian Creole*, being involved in distance learning as a co-director of the college. (A tenth edition of the course was published by the Open University in 1984.) In the meantime, he was responsible for a number of publications in Kreol, about subjects including raising rabbits (1973). He used the feedback to make the orthographic system as user-friendly as possible.

In the following years, Philip turned his attention to Africa, living in Lesotho and other places from 1974 to May 1975.

On a rainy Sunday, the 18th of May 1975, he returned from Lesotho to Mauritius for five months, and continued working on a comprehensive dictionary of Mauritian. He had already collected 10,000 words at that moment, with a team of collaborators. One of them

(Vinesh Hookoomsing) became the co-author of the monumental dictionary with 18,000 entries on 370 pages, with etymologies from more than a dozen languages. It was published in 1987 (1987b).

As Philip felt that he needed more academic background knowledge, he had started to study for a formal BA/MA degree with Robert LePage at York University (1975-1976), and from 1977 at the School of African and Oriental Studies. In the absence of a high school diploma, his published grammar of Kreol (1972) was accepted as his ticket into the academic world. In 1976, Philip Baker and Peter Stein published a bibliographic overview of works on French-based creoles in the short-lived *Journal of Creole Studies*, which was intended to be a supplement to Reinecke et al. (1975).

When he returned to Mauritius in January 1978 to continue to work on the dictionary and to work on an improved orthography, his stay was shorter than he had hoped, as the government ordered him to leave the island by the 6th of June. He had to leave the island within 48 hours; a reason was never given (Hookoomsing 2017).

Between 1979 and 1983 he was a research fellow (half time) with the International African Institute, London, concerned with the classification and geographical spread of all the languages of Africa (including African islands), together with a study of their use in the media and education, and a survey of their orthographies. In those years, he also worked on a number of bibliographical guides to African studies, four of which were published (1980, 1987a, 1987c, 1994).

In 1982, he defended his voluminous dissertation about the settling of Mauritius, and its connection with the other Indian Ocean creoles (1982), and the influential Baker & Corne book of the same year. The book was received very well, but it also created a heated discussion: a debate between Robert Chaudenson on the one hand and Baker, Corne on the other, and which also involved others, about the peopling, migrations and linguistic influences between Réunion and Mauritius (see e.g. Daval-Markussen 2013). Perhaps this led Philip to be as inclusive as possible in his work. Not many people supported Chaudenson's position.

Philip Baker rarely had a full-time academic position where he could devote all his time to creole studies, however. He mostly lived off freelance jobs as a researcher that provided an irregular income. He cooperated with a.o. David Dalby, Africanist at SOAS in London, and Peter Mühlhäusler in Oxford, later Adelaide in the 1980s and 1990s. Philip had a part-time employment (50 percent) with *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* from 1980 to

1983 in order to work on the project of the *Dictionnaire étymologique des creoles français* (DEC, for both the Indian Ocean and the Americas) (Bollée 1993-2007, 2017). He collected words of non-French origin from old texts and modern sources and tried to establish their etymology. He did his research in London, in the British Museum and in the SOAS. He also conducted field trips to the Seychelles, Saint Lucia and Haiti. The result was the “dossier bleu” of 575 pages, which was used for both the Indian Ocean etymological dictionaries and the book about the American creoles (Bollée et al. eds., 1993-2007, 2017). From 1985 to 1993 he did research for the monumental *Atlas of Languages of Inter-cultural Communication in the Pacific, Asia and the Americas* (Wurm et al, eds., 1996), to which he contributed several articles and maps. He collaborated intensively with Peter Mühlhäusler in Adelaide, also in subsequent years. He also visited St. Kitts in the Caribbean a number of times. The important Baker & Bruyn book (1998) was the principal outcome.

Beside his work in linguistics, he co-authored books and studies of the languages of London’s schoolchildren, and a guide to London’s ethnic places (2000, 2003). He also worked as a consultant on words of African origin for the Oxford English dictionaries. From 1994 he was employed with the University of Westminster, keeping his connections with the School of Oriental and African Studies.

Philip Baker’s work is characterized by a meticulous study of sources and details. His work was always based on massive data on the pidgins and creoles of the world. The main languages for which he had collected data from historical sources were Chinese Pidgin English, Melanesian English, English-lexifier pidgins and creoles of the Caribbean and of course the French-lexifier creoles of the Indian Ocean. His work was so well-researched and well-written that he never had an article rejected, and only once he was asked to “revise and resubmit”. He had compiled hundreds if not thousands of data sets, which led him to a number of breakthroughs, of which I mention just a few.

His *JPCL* column “Off Target” (1990) led to a paradigm shift in the field, in that he successfully attacked the idea that English, French etc. had been target languages in the colonies, arguing that people just created a medium of communication: it was important for people to communicate and to understand one another, and not to use the correct grammatical constructions. This idea makes perfect sense, even though some people still think in terms of “missed targets” in pidgin and creole genesis.

Another breakthrough was his use of detailed demographic data and information on the languages of the settlers, both European and otherwise, in order to get a picture of the communication patterns in the early years of the colonies, in his case from Mauritius. Colleagues remember that he would visit London archives with card files in his pockets with biographical information about individual Mauritian slaves. This led to the idea of important moments in the history of creoles, namely when the number of locally born exceeded the number of imported people. Event 1 was the moment where, in the case of Mauritius, the number of non-French speakers exceeded the French speakers. Event 2 was the moment when the number of locally-born slaves surpassed the total number of other people in the colony. Event 3 was, in the case of a slave colony, the end of slave imports (Baker 1982, Baker & Corne 1982). Such measures could explain much with regard to the distance of the creoles from the lexifiers. In an article coauthored with Peter Mühlhäusler (2013), his last article, he showed a similar eye for details in the biography of Edward Young, who can be taken personally responsible for Caribbean English Creole on the language of Pitcairn in the Pacific.

A third major contribution can be found in his search for etymologies for African-derived words in creoles. He had started this for Mauritian, and expanded it to all the French-lexifier creoles (1993a, 1993b, 2012a,b,c). In the recent etymological dictionary of the creoles of the Americas, Philip Baker's contribution is significant (Bollée et al. 2017).

Another innovation is the documentation of special creole words shared between lexifiers. Some of Philip's articles contain long lists of these words, with indications of their first attestation in a certain creole, and during which period it was documented. These detailed studies shed a light on the spread of populations between different part of the world, and about the history, origin and development of creole languages (Baker 1993c, Baker & Huber 2001a, and others).

Finally we can mention that Philip remained a firm believer in the once widespread idea that creoles find their origins in pidgins, most convincingly shown in Baker (2001b). The idea became controversial in the 1990s, and seems to have caused a major change in creole studies. Philip Baker has discussed this in his studies of the transition between pidgins and creoles in the Pacific, and in this landmark article on pidgin traits in the creoles of the world (2001b). His encyclopedic knowledge prevented him from accepting the idea of a smooth generational transmission from the lexifiers to the creoles.

Gertrud Aub-Buscher described Philip Baker's work as follows in 2008: "What makes his work so valuable is the combination of painstaking attention to detail with the ability to see the larger panorama revealed by that detail: not the sweeping hypothesis which may or may not be supported by facts on the ground."

Philip Baker was also the driving force behind the Creole Workshops: small conferences with no invited speakers, no conference fee, no thresholds for newcomers and student participants, and a collegial spirit of open discussion. These have taken place in London, Amsterdam, Giessen, and Aarhus and the next one, number 12, will take place in Paris. Up until his death, he was instrumental in discussions on locations and themes for these workshops.

Philip was always happy to share information with others, and he was an avid correspondent. He exchanged hundreds of letters and emails with many colleagues and students around the world. His legendary generosity and hospitality add to the fondness with which he is remembered.

Outside of his favorite island, Philip was not an avid fieldworker. Even though he met speakers of endangered languages like Chinese Pidgin English in Hongkong, Cochin Portuguese Creole in India, and the indigenous language Vedda in Sri Lanka, he did not publish on these. The latter population inspired him to relocate to Sri Lanka in 2004, after he retired from the University of Westminster, to spend the last 13 years of his life there. Even though he lost most of his papers, computers, back-up disks and files during the catastrophic tsunami of 2004, he kept on working. There were a number of projects he wanted to finish before his death, such as his books on Vedda and Chinese Pidgin English, but that will no longer be possible.

In later life, Philip combined his scholarly work with running a publishing company. Some of his earliest edited books had been published by his employer's press, the University of Westminster Press, which had started a creolistics series at Philip's initiative. When the university no longer had an interest in publishing or distribution, he was offered the books in 1999. This made him start the small Battlebridge Press, which continued to publish titles as part of the *Westminster Creolistics* series until 2007, as well as other titles, starting with Mikael Parkvall's dissertation *Out of Africa* in 2000, until 2017. Philip read the books that he published, and gave authors and editors expert comments. He wanted the books

to be affordable for any people interested in creole languages. In order to save costs, he also tried to have as much text on a page as possible!

Apart from books on creole languages, Philip also began publishing books about islands. He wanted these books to look like the books for stamp collectors, and he wanted the books to start with information which tourists visiting these islands would be interested in, and then add information about the languages therein and other more academic matters. Books have come out on Saint Helena, Bequia, St Kitts, Tristan Da Cunha, Norfolk, and Palmerston Island.

Philip Baker was a modest and humble man, frugal and generous, respectful of others and supportive to many. He was not interested in a festschrift devoted to him, or any other form of public honor. Nevertheless, a group of younger-generation creolists who consider Philip as their mentor or model, prepared an electronic festschrift for Philip, as a birthday present in 2015, with articles, pictures, anecdotes, memories, songs and more. Contributors included Sarah Roberts, Mikael Parkvall, Guillaume Fon Sing, Peter Bakker, Viveka Velupillai, and Anthony Grant, at the initiative of Viveka Velupillai. The *Festdisk* was personally delivered to his house in Sri Lanka. He appreciated the initiative, as we heard back: "I met Philip Baker and he was so happy to have the gifts. He went through the cards and read out the names very gladly."

One may surmise that Philip's work on Mauritian, both as a scholar and a community teacher, contributed to the fact that the small island of Mauritius has produced so many excellent linguists, lexicographers and sociolinguists, among them: Dany Adone, Arnaud Carpooran, Guillaume Fon Sing, Diana Guillemin, Fabiola Henry, Vinesh Hookoomsing, Aaliya Rajah-Carrim, Ambarin Mooznah Auleear Owodally, Didier de Robillard, Anand Syea and Daniel Veronique.

In later years his health was deteriorating, and although that did not stop him, it did slow him down. Battlebridge Press took most of his time.

Philip Baker once revealed in a private conversation not only that he loved creole languages so much – that he thought he loved them more than anybody else! Indeed his energy and passion left little time for other distractions or temptations.

Philip Baker was once called an "amazing Renaissance man". He is one of very few creolists who published both a dictionary and a grammar of a creole, the two of them

exemplary in themselves, alongside an enormous contribution to both documentation and theorizing. The creolist community has lost one of its heroes.

Even though this obituary bears my name only, the following people contributed information and inspiration: Gertrud Aub-Buscher, Annegret Bollée, Guillaume Fon Sing, Anthony Grant, Vinesh Hookoomsing, John Ladhams, Magnus Huber, Susanne M. Michaelis, Joshua Nash, Mikael Parkvall, Peter Stein, Viveka Velupillai, Lise Winer.

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A full list of Philip Baker's publications compiled by Peter Bakker and Anthony Grant, including Battlebridge publications, is available on request from the author.

APPENDIX.

Philip Baker (1940-2017)

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Compiled by Peter Bakker & Anthony Grant, December 2017. Version 2.1

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PHILIP BAKER AS A PUBLISHER, 2000(1995)-2017

Philip Baker started the *Westminster Creolistics* series in the early 1990s, largely as a place of publication for the proceedings of the Westminster Creolistics Conference (which now continues as the Creolistics Workshop at different locations, among them the University of Giessen and Aarhus University). He acquired the University of Westminster Press, which had previously published only a couple of items, for free from the governors of the University Westminster (which before John Major's Conservative Government's granting of university status to former polytechnics and colleges of higher education in 1992 had been the

Polytechnic of Central London, and formerly the Regent Street Polytechnic, the world's first polytechnic). For a time he was assisted in running Battlebridge by Tanya Pascual.

In the year 2000, Battlebridge publishing house was started by Philip Baker in London in order to continue quality publications on creole languages for affordable prices. Battlebridge continued to publish some books also in the Westminster Creolistics series until 2007.

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