

Études

Créoles

Hommage à Philip Baker (1940-1917)¹

Gertrud Aub-Buscher (University of Hull, UK)

Philip Baker came to Creole studies almost by accident. After school in Liverpool, he trained not as a linguist but as an accountant. By the early sixties he had moved on into the media. He edited films for television and the cinema (you will find his name in the small print of the credits for the Peter Sellers film *Waltz of the Toreadors* and Lindsay Anderson's *This Sporting Life*) until the 1990s. In 1965-6 his work took him to Mauritius for a stint with the Mauritius Broadcasting Corporation. That experience was to have a profound influence on his life and career. He continued to spend time in the region; for example in 1966-67, he founded and edited the weekly *Sunday Express*, and in the early seventies, at the invitation of the International Extension College, he was involved in the establishment and direction of a pioneering overseas distance education unit, the Mauritius College of the Air.

The majority of his trips to the Indian Ocean were, however, prompted by his interest in the French-lexifier Creole spoken around him. It caught his attention from the start, and he continued to work on it for most of the rest of his life. His first article on the subject appeared in 1969 and was followed in 1972 by *Kreol: A description of Mauritian Creole*, the first comprehensive study of the language to be published since Baissac's *Etude sur le patois créole mauricien* of 1880. Written before he had any formal training in linguistics, it took account of current linguistic theory and is still well regarded today. Mauritian Creole was to be the focus of both the dissertation for his University of York BPhil/MA in 1976 and his 1982 PhD thesis for the University of London School of Oriental and African Studies. He published on its verbal system, reduplication, grammaticalisation, proverbs and systems of orthography, and wrote extensively on its origins. The monumental *Diksyoner kreol morisyen. Dictionary of Mauritian Creole. Dictionnaire du créole mauricien* he prepared in collaboration with Vinesh Y Hookoomsing is a model of lexicography, giving glosses in English and French as well as detailed and meticulously researched information on etymology and usage. In addition to academic publications, his output also included practical courses on or in Creole: a correspondence course in Creole, and two booklets on rabbit-keeping, containing the same Creole text but in two different orthographies.

If he became known as one of the leading authorities on Mauritian Creole and was credited with laying 'the foundations for Mauritian Kreol as a standard language of the first generation' (Hookoomsing 2016), his interest was not confined to that, but spread in ever widening circles. He examined the languages which surround *mauricien* geographically or linguistically – Mauritian Bhojpuri and the other French-lexifier Creoles of the Indian Ocean and further afield. He explored English-lexicon contact languages in the Pacific, Chinese Pidgin English and Cochin Creole Portuguese, and was the driving spirit behind the workshop and book which firmly put Kittitian on the creolist map (Baker & Bruyn 1998). His research on African languages went well beyond what was needed to establish possible inputs into Creoles, and he investigated the language of the Vedda people of Sri Lanka. His studies were based on detailed research in the field and scrupulous consideration of the published literature and archival material.

1 This is a revised version of an article originally written in 2005 and available online at https://c7riochico.net/carrierpidgin/TPC_back_issues/carrierpidgin_Vol32No1_Fall2008.pdf.

The range and quality of his descriptive work would be enough to secure him a prominent place in the world of creolistics. However, he was also one of its most creative and original thinkers. Signs of this were evident quite early: not many student papers are quoted in standard academic textbooks as is his exam-option paper on ‘The problem of variability with special reference to Derek Bickerton’s study of Guyanese English’, cited in John Holm’s *An introduction to pidgins and creoles*. His exploration of the process of creolisation was ground-breaking: as Robert Le Page said in the preface to *Isle de France Creole*, he gave ‘insights into historical linguistic processes and concomitant social processes of the utmost importance to general linguistics and to creole studies’. What made his work so valuable is the combination of painstaking attention to detail with the ability to see the larger panorama revealed by that detail: he was not one to produce sweeping hypotheses which may or may not be supported by facts on the ground. The resulting articles are a joy to read – elegantly written, ingeniously argued, constructed with rigour and always cool and objective, even when refuting attacks levelled at him in what is one of the more disputatious corners of academia.

His career path was not that of the traditional academic. For much of the time he worked freelance, combining a continuation of his earlier pursuits (film and video, distance education) with appointments to participate in a wide range of linguistic projects. As a Research Fellow with the International African Institute in London, he was concerned with the classification and geographical spread of all the languages of Africa, their use in education and the media, and questions of orthography; he was employed by the University of Bamberg to establish the African and other non-French origins of Indian Ocean and Caribbean French Creoles for the series of etymological dictionaries edited by Annegret Bollée²; he did archival research and fieldwork for the *Atlas of languages of intercultural communication in the Pacific, Asia, and the Americas*; his expertise was sought to advise on words of African origin for the Oxford English dictionaries; at the London School of Oriental and African Studies, he was the Research Co-ordinator for its Logosphere Programme; and he held a joint appointment at SOAS and the University of Westminster as Research Co-ordinator of the Languages of London Project, which culminated in the publication of *Multilingual Capital*, the amazing account of the 307 home languages represented in London schools.

In 1994 he became a Research Fellow at the University of Westminster and soon made his mark at that institution, being appointed to a chair in 2006. He taught a very successful module on Creole, and the Creole linguistics research group which he helped to set up was an important element in the classification of linguistics at Westminster as a centre of international excellence in the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise. He was the chief organiser of the Westminster Creolistics Workshops, which brought together young researchers and the big names in Creole studies in an informal atmosphere that was uniquely conducive to the fruitful exchange of ideas. Out of this venture grew the *Westminster Creolistics Series*, a collection of books on Pidgins and Creoles, for which he was the general editor (a grand title which hid the fact that the job also included menial tasks such as copy-editing and formatting). He was editor or co-editor for several of the titles which arose from the workshops. When the University of Westminster decided to stop underwriting the

2 He was the major contributor to the two volumes of the series devoted to words of non-French or unknown origin, the second of which appeared in early 2017, just a few months before his death.

venture, he took it over under the imprint of Battlebridge, his own publishing firm, whose list included not only the Westminster series but also other Creole-related studies, as well as volumes on Norfolk Island, St Helena and Tristan da Cunha and a guide to Global London. The books were carefully edited and beautifully produced, and they often reached parts that other publishers did not.

Much of Philip Baker's output resulted from productive collaboration with established scholars (Annegret Bollée, Chris Corne, David Dalby, Peter Mühlhäusler, to mention but a few) and they readily acknowledged the help they had from him. Equally important was his contribution to the career of younger researchers, whom he welcomed into the world of creolistics and encouraged to get involved in projects and publications, allowing them to make their name. His generosity was legendary, and many a creolist had the benefit of his hospitality at his London flat.

In the summer of 2004, after partially retiring from the University of Westminster, he moved to Sri Lanka, not for a life of leisure in the sun, but to continue the publication of Battlebridge books and his research on the Vedda language. He had been there for only a few months when the great tsunami struck and swept away or damaged parts of his house and most of its contents, including not only two computers, but all back-up discs and most of his papers. Undeterred by a disaster which would probably have persuaded lesser mortals to give up and resort to the more conventional delights of retirement, he started rebuilding, and three months later was giving a party to celebrate the completion of the extension to his house designed to accommodate Battlebridge. Another 18 Battlebridge volumes came out and he himself continued to publish on subjects ranging from the history of Creole studies via the African input into the lexicon of diverse Creoles to the process of creolisation.

Philip Baker would no doubt have been a richer man if he had stuck with accountancy or continued to make films, but the world of Creole studies would have been the loser. His contribution was immense, as a scholar, an organiser, a publisher and as a friend to creolists from all over the world. His sudden death in August 2017 came as a shock to us all, but his legacy will live on - in the Creolistics Workshops, which, since his departure for Sri Lanka, have been continued in various European cities, and in the work of younger scholars, whom he nurtured and inspired.

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