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**A historical mystery, tackled with a handful of recordings  
and an “inappropriate” method**

The comparative method is usually applied to languages that are connected by a fairly direct “parent-child” relationship, and it has even been claimed that it is entirely irrelevant for creoles (e.g. Thomason 2002). In this paper I will show that in at least some limited applications, the comparative method, in particular evidence from regular sound correspondences, can provide valuable insights into the origins of contact languages.

Palmerston Island English is an English-lexifier contact language spoken on the tiny island of Palmerston in the Cook Islands group, by the descendants of a small group of settlers from 1860, only one of whom was a native English speaker (Hendery 2013, Hendery & Ehrhart 2013). The origins of this English speaker, William Marsters, have remained somewhat of a mystery, with several different proposed theories. The most well documented proposal is by Maureen Hilyard (2008), who argues that he was a Richard Masters from Walcote village in Leicestershire. Other proposals have placed him in Birmingham, or even Gloucester.

In this paper I compare recordings of modern day speakers from Walcote with those from Palmerston Island. I also discuss what is known about the history of dialects from that region of England. In this talk I will primarily focus on accent. There are two approaches that can be taken and I will briefly discuss each of them.

The first is to quantify the differences between Palmerston English and each of Walcote (Leicestershire), Birmingham, and Gloucester English, and to use Occam’s Razor to conclude that the most likely origin theory is the one that requires the least amount of change. The problem with this approach is that it does not take into account what we know about the regularity of sound change: regularity that we should expect to apply to some extent even in more indirect relationships such as contact languages, as patterns of borrowing and learner adaptations also generally result in regular sound correspondences.

The second approach is to apply the equivalent of the comparative method: to take words from the Walcote recordings and the same words from the Palmerston recordings, and to reconstruct the most plausible ancestor pronunciation for each of these. Regular patterns of sound change and reconstructions that are plausible in light of what is known about the history of Midlands dialects would be linguistic evidence that Walcote is a likely place of origin for Marsters.

I will show that this approach does not work perfectly either, but the remaining mysteries provide clues to the role played by the Cook Island Māori inputs into the language, and likely inputs from other varieties of English with which William Marsters and his family would have had contact.

**References**

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