

## How Many Languages will Survive in the Pacific?

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### **Extinct and moribund languages**

Many languages have disappeared in the Pacific since Europeans first settled in 1788 in New South Wales, with Dharug being one of the first to disappear. Europeans settled in Hobart in 1803 and the last speaker of any Tasmanian language died in 1876. Languages can clearly be lost very rapidly, and massive language loss accompanied the spread of European settlement to inland Australia. It is estimated that more than half of the 300 Australian languages are now completely extinct (Schmidt 1990). Of the remainder, probably less than two dozen can be considered “strong”, in the sense that they are now being actively passed on to the younger generation. All remaining languages spoken in Australia today can be classified as either “weak” or “dying” (Schmidt 1990). A weak language is one that might have a hundred or so speakers, but a knowledge has not been passed on to the younger generations. Dying languages might have only a handful of elderly speakers, who are often geographically dispersed, so the opportunities to use them may be minimal.

It is not just in Australia—as well as Hawaii and New Zealand—that we find evidence of language attrition. Although most of the Pacific islands have not been demographically swamped in the same way, the arrival of Europeans was often immediately followed by rapid and massive loss among the indigenous population as a result of introduced diseases to which local people had no immunity (Campbell 1989:152–54). On Erromango in southern Vanuatu, for example, the population in the mid-1800s is estimated to have been up to about 6,000 (Crowley 1997). Within the space of a single human lifetime, the population dropped catastrophically, reaching its nadir of 381 in 1931. We know from both oral tradition and recorded evidence that there were originally at least three distinct languages on the island, and possibly as many as six. The last speaker of Utaha died in 1954 and Ura now claims only half a dozen competent speakers, the youngest of whom is in his sixties. That leaves us with just one remaining language—Sye—which is spoken by the entire population of about 1,250, and *is* being actively passed on to monolingual Sye-speaking youngsters.

### **Threatened languages**

The widespread evidence of massive language shift in some areas the Pacific and other areas—particularly the Americas and Russia—has been partly

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responsible for a number of calls by well-known linguists to recognise that many more languages are threatened. Krauss, in Hale et al. (1992), states that 50% of the languages spoken today are moribund, and that perhaps only 10% of the world's languages can be considered to be "safe". Non-linguistic publications have also begun to sound similar warnings. Vines (1996: 24), for example, states in *New Scientist* that:

*If language is a virus ... then a handful have proved remarkably easy to catch. Just five languages—Chinese, English, Spanish, Russian and Hindi—have now infected more than half of the world's people. Add fewer than 100 other languages to the list and the infection rate is more than 95 per cent of the Earth's population.*

With specific reference to the Pacific, Dixon (1991: 230) argues:

*The tragic saga of language extinction which has swept across Australia is likely to extend into other parts of this region during the twenty-first century. An optimistic prediction is that of these ... languages perhaps 200 will be spoken in AD 2200 (some linguists would prefer a figure of twenty or thirty).*

and these views are reiterated in Dixon (1997:103–117). Mühlhäusler (1996: 323–34) asks:

*Having surveyed a number of approaches to language maintenance, the question is not so much 'Will all 1200 [regional languages] survive? ...', but rather 'How many languages will survive?' or even 'Will any languages survive?'*

Taumoeofolau (1998: 125–33) describes the rise of English in her country, resulting in the domination of English in official contexts at the national level, in education, and in literary and scholarly writing, while her native Tongan is reserved for the religious and domestic domains. Taufe'ulungaki is reported in Fonua (1991) as arguing that the future of spoken Tongan is under threat, observing that while members of parliament debate in the chamber in Tongan, private conversation outside is often conducted in English.<sup>1</sup>

It does not take much imagination to think of scenarios which could threaten any number of the languages in the Pacific. For some communities,

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<sup>1</sup> However, her explanation of why this is so is unique both to Tonga and to this particular context, in that people belonging to three different social levels—commoners, nobles and royalty—are mixing in situations that would ordinarily require strict and complex lexical choices to be made. English, without its separate hierarchically organised vocabularies, allows people to speak with no immediate indication of social status, and it also allows people to be able to speak without risk of making embarrassing mistakes.

more people live away from “home” than at home. Compare the figures in Table 1 indicating the numbers of people living locally and abroad (mostly in New Zealand) as migrants, or descendants of migrants.<sup>2</sup>

	<i>Living “at home”</i>	<i>Living abroad</i>
Tokelau	1,600	3,300 (67%)
Niue	2,887	8,500 (75%)
Cook Islands	16,900	24,000 (59%)
Tonga <sup>3</sup>	100,000	100,000 (50%)
Samoa <sup>4</sup>	156,400	65,000 (29%)

**Table 1: People living “at home” and abroad from Pacific communities**

The usual trend is for the third generation to shift almost exclusively to the language of their adoptive country (Holmes 1991), so we could expect that large numbers of New Zealand-born Pacific Islanders do not have a command of their ancestral language. Now, imagine a situation—renascent Muldoonism?, economic collapse in New Zealand?, an electorally expedient minor political party seeking some convenient scapegoats?—which results in a mass return of Pacific Islanders. Some communities could therefore be swamped by native-speakers of English.

If predictions about rising sea levels turn out to be correct, the low-lying atolls of Micronesia and parts of Polynesia, would be some of the first parts of the world to become uninhabitable.<sup>5</sup> Such communities would have to relocate, which might result in demographic dispersal beyond which it would be difficult for many languages to survive.

The people of the Pacific have for the most part been demographically swamped by immigrant settlers only in Australia, New Zealand and Hawaii. However, the Indonesians have a policy of *transmigrasi* by which people from overpopulated Java are encouraged to relocate to less densely

<sup>2</sup> Figures taken from Antheaume and Bonnemaïson (1988). These figures mostly date from the early 1980s, and it is likely that more recent figures would point to even higher proportions of people living abroad.

<sup>3</sup> These figures are estimates from Wendy Cowling (personal communication).

<sup>4</sup> Formerly known as Western Samoa.

<sup>5</sup> To illustrate the vulnerability of coastal populations, it should be noted that the tsunami which killed several thousand coastal people in Papua New Guinea in July 1998 could easily have eliminated one or two complete languages if it had hit a slightly different part of the coast.

populated parts of the country. The province of Irian Jaya now has large numbers of immigrant Javanese, and the indigenous Melanesian languages could easily be threatened as a result. Urbanisation also represents a kind of voluntary transmigration, with shifts taking place to major urban centres especially in Fiji, New Caledonia and Papua New Guinea.<sup>6</sup>

Pacific Islanders, for the most part, now have complete control of their own political affairs, and foreigners are usually only permitted to take up residence on an annually renewable basis, subject to their skills or money being of direct assistance. However, there is no absolute guarantee that this will always be the case. For instance, schemes initiated by self-interested politicians in Vanuatu to sell passports to large numbers of Asians in a bid to encourage resettlement were recently thwarted only by exposure by the ombudsman's office.

Even if the overall integrity of a Pacific nation's population were to be preserved, there is still the possibility for some local communities to be disproportionately affected. While Syc on Erromango is now being actively passed on to younger generations, this could be threatened if Malaysian logging companies are ever given a green light to clear-fell the extensive forests. These companies have already destroyed much of the forest ecology of East Malaysia, which has led to protests by the indigenous Penan people. With the limited operations that have commenced on Erromango, culturally and archaeologically important sites have already been damaged—sometimes knowingly—and operations have been conducted closer than contractually permitted to water sources, resulting in increased silting of rivers at times of heavy rain, or putrid stagnation at times of low water.

### **The threats assessed**

Most of these fairly grim-looking scenarios are really worst-case scenarios, which were not even mentioned in the arguments of Krauss (in Hale *et al.* 1992), Dixon (1991, 1997) and Mühlhäusler (1996). The claims of Krauss and Dixon are in some ways more difficult to deal with than those of Mühlhäusler, as they are very general, and based on little more than a passing acquaintance with this region. Krauss writes from the University of Fairbanks and he seems to be extrapolating largely from his experience in Alaska, and Dixon, writing from the Australian National University, apparently bases his observations on Aboriginal Australia.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> However, the effects of urbanisation are likely to be limited in other countries. This is because the economic potential of the main urban centres is restricted by a lack of exploitable resources in the country as a whole, given the lack of substantial commercial, mining, agricultural or pastoral development that could sustain a large urban population.

<sup>7</sup> Dixon has conducted some fieldwork in Fiji, but his period of residence was less than six months in total, and he has no firsthand experience with any other part of the region.

My own assessment is that such claims are probably unduly pessimistic, at least for most of Melanesia (Crowley 1995). Based on a combination of observed usage in a number of Melanesian communities over a long period of residence and visiting, I argued that while there was some evidence of language shift in Vanuatu in the direction of the English-lexifier pidgin known as Bislama—though not English—the overall trend was probably not sufficient to threaten most languages.

On Erromango, for example, I have *never* heard two Erromangans conduct a conversation in English. Although primary school children are required to use English at school, this rule is regularly thwarted, and I have never heard of any children who do not immediately abandon English away from school, even with their own teachers. I know of one Erromangan who occasionally attempts to use English in a conversational way, but this is always greeted with howls of laughter, which is his desired effect anyway as he is very much a practical joker. For one Erromangan to speak English to another Erromangan is much the same as baring one's bottom in public (which this particular character is also wont to do): it is hilarious precisely because it breaks all the accepted rules.

People who are very drunk may sometimes lapse into English (or Bislama)—as commonly happens throughout Melanesia—but this is a manifestation of what ethnographers refer to as “wild man behaviour” (Haiman 1979:40). This is a tolerated way of allowing males to let off steam, which may also include punching or kicking walls, knocking down banana plants, or causing fights. One is effectively less accountable for one's behaviour afterwards because, in speaking English (or Bislama), one is not “being Erromangan”.

In fact, even the tiny minority of tertiary educated people from Vanuatu—whose English is necessarily of a sufficiently high level that they could easily maintain an extended conversation in English if they wanted to—invariably comment that they feel more confident speaking Bislama than they do speaking English. Even when overseas and studying among English-speaking New Zealanders, I have observed that Vanuatu students almost invariably opt to speak Bislama with each other rather than English.

The claims of Mühlhäusler are more explicit than those of Dixon and Krauss, and are therefore worthy of more detailed consideration. It would be quite impossible to address all of the issues that he raises, so I will choose the three points which I believe it is most important to address.

(i) *Structural homogenisation*

Mühlhäusler argues that mere population size alone should not be regarded as an indicator of the future viability of a language. With many tens of thousands of native speakers, Māori is arguably a much more seriously threatened language than Sye on Erromango, with just 1,250 speakers. The difference is that Sye is being actively passed on to all Erromangan children, who grow up speaking only the ancestral language, while Māori is only

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being passed on to a small proportion of Māori children, almost all of whom are also acquiring English at the same time.

However, he argues that even with a seemingly healthy language such as Sye we should not be lulled into thinking that all is well, as Pacific languages in general are losing both vocabulary and grammatical structures under a constant onslaught from English, via the media and the education systems of the region:

*The cumulative evidence ... suggests that most traditional languages of the area have begun to undergo a massive restructuring in the direction of intertranslatability with S[tandard]A[verage]E[uropean] languages and this process is unlikely to stop before it has run its full course. (Mühlhäusler 1996:307–8)*

He presents evidence in the form of the widespread loss of indigenous counting systems, as well as reductions in complexity in the gender systems of some languages. I have often found it impossible to elicit numbers higher than five from young people. In response, it could be pointed out that while borrowed numerals have indeed been incorporated into many local languages, they still behave grammatically in exactly the same way as did the indigenous numerals. In Sye, for example, numerals were postposed after the noun, rather than being preposed as in English and Bislama. Borrowed forms have in addition been incorporated as postmodifiers rather than as premodifiers. Thus, we find *noki sikis* 'six coconuts' and not \**sikis noki*.

Mühlhäusler's claim that the grammar of Pacific languages is undergoing homogenisation in the direction of English is particularly difficult to sustain. Erromango represents one of the most disrupted linguistic situations of the entire Pacific, which should have predisposed Sye to either complete replacement with English, or at least to be well on the way to becoming an indigenous relexification of some form of English grammar.

However, there is no evidence that this is showing even the slightest sign of taking place. I have conducted linguistic fieldwork on a good number of typologically diverse languages over the years, in both Australia and Melanesia, and Sye is without a doubt the most difficult, and in most respects least English-like, language that I have ever dealt with. Its verbal morphology, in particular, is unusually complex. Each verb appears in literally hundreds of different inflected forms according to the pronominal category of the subject, the tense, whether it is affirmative or negative, and a number of other categories besides. A considerable number of these morphological categories involve irregular or partly irregular patterns which have to be learned independently of any general rules.

Mühlhäusler specifically mentions the fact that borrowed verbs tend to be more disruptive of indigenous grammars than borrowings from other word classes, because they do not accept the regular verbal affixes. However, borrowed verbs in Sye do not simply copy English grammar in this respect, as they have to be preceded by the indigenous verb *ompi* 'do,

make', which functions as a dummy "carrier" for the obligatory inflectional material. Thus, compare the indigenous verb *k-aruvo* 'you sang' with borrowed *k-ompi televon* 'you telephoned'. While Sye has indeed developed a new grammatical pattern as a result of the introduction of borrowings, it is *not* an English structure. This pattern reflects a creative indigenous response to the need to accommodate introduced vocabulary, and is not simply an instance of the grammatical hegemony of English.

(ii) *The negative impact of literacy*

UNESCO promotes literacy around the world in order to bestow empowerment on previously disempowered people by providing them with access to new and essential information and ideologies. With no written literature, it is tempting for people to view their language negatively, which may predispose them to abandoning their language in favour of another language in which there is a substantial body of written literature. The provision of a written literature is sometimes seen as serving to enhance the prestige of a language in the eyes of its speakers, so giving it a greater chance of withstanding pressures from other languages (Crowley 1989, Lynch 1979).

Mühlhäusler, however, argues quite the opposite. Literacy in the Pacific has tended to be introduced initially as vernacular-only literacy, though the practice has typically been then to switch to transitional literacy from the vernacular to the dominant language, and then finally to literacy in which the vernacular is completely excluded. This kind of development, of course, can only serve to weaken a language, and this is exactly what happened in the history of Māori. The Māori became very early and enthusiastic converts to literacy in their own language, so much so, in fact, that among Māori soon after 1840, there was a higher literacy rate than there was in English among Pākehā settlers. Within a few decades, literacy came to be associated more and more with literacy in both Māori and English. Eventually, literacy among Māori was conducted almost exclusively in English, and this represented the period in which the major shift from Māori to English took place.

While these observations are of course historically quite accurate, one could easily argue that it is not literacy itself that is at fault here. As Grenoble and Whaley (1998:34) argue, "... the interplay between literacy and language viability is a rather complex matter", and Mühlhäusler seems to have oversimplified the issue. Rather than literacy per se being at fault, it is the practices associated with it, and in particular, the medium through which it was promoted, or, in Grenoble and Whaley's (1998) terms, it is the micro-variables accompanying the macro-variables.

Contrary to what Mühlhäusler argues, literacy does not inherently weaken a language. What weakens a language is the assumption that worthwhile literacy can only be conducted in a European language. A literacy that provides a wide-ranging and creative written literature in a language can surely enhance its status in the eyes of its speakers just as much as a literacy

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that is restricted in scope and poor in technical quality can reduce the status of a language. Admittedly, this has not happened to a great extent in most of the Pacific to date, but the only reasons why this is so are purely practical, and there are no principled objections to the promotion of worthwhile literacies in the Pacific.

### *(iii) Linguists as part of the problem*

Mühlhäusler states:

*This book is about ... the study of human languages and the inability of most practising linguists to understand what is happening around them, [and] that their very object of study is disappearing at an alarming rate .... (Mühlhäusler 1996: 1)*

He also says that western linguists are themselves part of the process that is so adversely affecting the linguistic ecologies of the region because we "identify and name" languages with our practice of writing grammars and dictionaries. In identifying and describing languages, we are guilty of arbitrarily choosing one particular geographical/social variant and giving only that variant sanction as against all others. In his view, a healthy linguistic ecosystem is one that exhibits considerable variability, while an ailing ecosystem is one with diminished variability. In setting out to reduce variability, then, traditional linguistic descriptions serve to weaken linguistic ecologies. As Mühlhäusler (1996: 5) says himself, describing languages is:

*... far from being an act of objective description, and it can constitute a very serious trespass on the linguistic ecology of an area. The very view that languages can be counted and named may be part of the disease that has affected the linguistic ecology of the Pacific ....*

However, given that the educational systems of most of the small Pacific island states typically exclude vernaculars altogether, or give them only a fairly marginal position in the education system, I would argue that Mühlhäusler has seriously exaggerated any possible effects that our grammars and dictionaries might have. In most cases, people are unlikely to come into contact with the kinds of glottophagic grammars and dictionaries to which Mühlhäusler refers. My own grammar of Paamese (Crowley 1982) and my own dictionary of the language (Crowley 1992) are—rather regrettably—not suitable for students to use in school given their primary audience of linguists. This means that most people, in fact, have probably never bothered to refer to either of these volumes, so their impact can only be minimal.

### **Conclusions**

I have to admit now in my concluding comments that I cannot give a definitive answer to the question that I set myself in my title. Mühlhäusler would have us believe that possibly no languages will survive, and any languages which do survive will be structurally so influenced by English



that their indigenous character will have been largely lost. Dixon thinks that of the thousand or so that are spoken now, there may be as few as twenty left, or possibly as many as two hundred.

I have little doubt that the number of languages in the Pacific in the future will be fewer than what are spoken now. There is a number of weak and dying languages in Australia which will inevitably disappear, and I would guess that even those that are considered "strong" will quite possibly no longer be spoken a century from now. Hawaiian, and of course Māori, could also easily disappear unless the current enthusiasm for revival is maintained into succeeding generations, and there will also need to be continuing political will from the mainstream for these languages to be fostered. There are also some teetering languages in other parts of the rest of the Pacific, including Ura on Erromango. But ignoring the worst case scenarios that I presented earlier, I would think that a substantial amount of linguistic diversity *will* survive into the future.

Dixon, of course, is talking about two hundred years down the track, and Mühlhäusler is careful not to put *any* time limit on his predictions, so their very generalised predictions can never be tested against my own. I think it would be far more useful if they could have presented their arguments also in terms of intermediate stages against which we could manage to stack up competing sets of predictions with a view to making more specific sorts of claims about the future. That is, apart from ultimate extinction, what sorts of things could we expect to see in, say, twenty-five years time, fifty years time, and so on.

It is my prediction that in a more testable twenty-five years time, Sye will continue to be spoken, and it will continue to be more complex and less English-like in its morphology than most other Oceanic languages, and some of the vocabulary that I have been able to record may have been forgotten. However, despite what Krauss, Dixon and Mühlhäusler say, I believe that the tiny Sye language probably has a fairly healthy future for the coming century.

Having argued against some of the predictions about the future viability of much of the linguistic diversity of the Pacific, I would not want to go down in history as fiddling while Babel burns. There clearly *are* inequalities in the linguistic ecologies of our region, with the cards in many respects stacked in favour of major languages such as English (Lynch 1979, Crowley 1989). Each situation needs to be considered in terms of the particular set of pressures that apply to that particular language, but in general it would probably help Pacific languages to survive and adapt more successfully to an evolving world if the languages were included in the education systems of the region rather than excluded as they often are at present. In addition, the encouragement of broad-ranging, creative and socio-culturally relevant written literatures which empower and promote critical thinking—instead of the literatures which we typically find at present which are restricted in their content to unquestioning acceptance of The Word—could also serve to promote linguistic vitality.

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