Natqgu Literacy: Capturing Three Domains for Written Language Use

Brenda H. Boerger

SIL and University of North Texas

This article is a field report on the results of the Santa Cruz, Solomon Islands, Natqgu Language Project that encourages the Natqgu-speaking community to begin using the written vernacular in three domains where English and/or Solomon Islands Pijin were already well established: church, school, and home, and where written Natqgu had rarely been used. Ten factors contributed to recovering significant portions of these domains for written Natqgu over a twenty year period: a new orthography, literacy courses led by a national, sufficient vernacular literacy materials, vernacular literacy classes in two primary schools, a desire to learn song lyrics, later island-wide involvement of teachers and the distribution of literacy materials to their schools, the addressing of perceived language inferiority, promoters of written Natqgu in spheres of influence, computer technology, and friendly competition to gain reading fluency. A model incorporating analogous factors could contribute to language conservation efforts elsewhere in the world. The use of written Natqgu can be expected to continue on the island, since the domains that have been established for its use represent three major arenas of Santa Cruz society. It is also expected that increased use of written Natqgu will undergird spoken Natqgu and contribute to its long-term stability and vitality.

1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout a twenty-year period, the Natqgu-speaking community of Santa Cruz, Solomon Islands was encouraged by Natqgu Language Project members to begin using the written vernacular in three domains where English or Solomon Islands Pijin was already well established. This article reports on recovering portions of the church and school domains for written Natqgu, as well as making inroads in the home domain. The language context is described in section 2, and factors that contributed to the

---

1 It is my pleasure to thank Susan F. Schmerling and Daniel Boerger for their substantive and stylistic input to this article at a number of stages. I would also like to thank Alexander François, Åshild Næss, Malcolm Ross, and Paul Unger for constructive discussions by email, and students in my “Structure of Natqgu” course Albert Archer, David Graves, Ashley Lober and Gabrielle Zimmerman for their verbal and written comments. Thanks are also due to my colleagues Karen Ashley, Gerry Beimers, Freddy Boswell, John Bruner, Steve Doty, Roxanne Gebauer, Pamela Gentry, Greg Mellow, James Mudge, and John Rentz for providing information and data cited herein regarding the languages of the Solomons, in which they worked for many years. The content was significantly strengthened by suggestions from two anonymous reviewers. As always, any errors or misinterpretations remain my responsibility.

2 For the purposes of this article, which discusses language maintenance efforts, I use the orthography preferred by the speakers of the language. The q in Natqgu is phonemically /ü/. Vowel equivalences between the old and new orthographies are presented in Table 4.
success of these efforts are discussed in sections 3 to 12. Conclusions and implications regarding maintenance of other endangered languages are considered in the final sections.

The Solomon Islands are located in the South Pacific due east of Papua New Guinea. The country has around 500,000 inhabitants, who speak 70 indigenous languages and a number of immigrant ones. English is the national language and the language of education, while Solomon Islands Pijin is the language of wider communication. In the Solomons, English is commonly used in written communication, and Pijin in spoken communication.

Pijin is now both an expanded pidgin and a creole (largely through nativization). Initially it formed through contact between English and the Oceanic languages of the South Pacific. Once it separated from the other varieties of Melanesian Pidgin it continued to develop in the early 1900s in the central parts of the Solomon Islands, predominantly in the context of Southeast Solomonic Austronesian languages spoken on the island of Malaita (Gerry Beimers, pers. comm.).

Natqgu (or Natigu, *Ethnologue* code stc) belongs to the small Reefs-Santa Cruz (RSC) language group of Temotu Province, whose members also include the Nalrgo (Nalögo, *Ethnologue* code pending, currently classified as stc) and Nagu (*Ethnologue* code ngr) languages on Santa Cruz, and the Âiwoo language (*Ethnologue* code nfl), spoken primarily in the Reef Islands. The RSC group’s wider affiliation continues to be discussed in the literature, especially regarding whether or not there is evidence for any non-Austronesian component in the languages, and if there is, explaining its presence. Recent research by Ross and Næss (2007:45 COOL7 version, by permission) has rather convincingly argued that RSC is a branch of the newly proposed Temotu family, “a distinct Oceanic subgroup, which is also probably a primary subgroup of Oceanic.” For the purposes of this article, I assume the linguistic affiliations they posit.

A variety of names (and spellings) have been used in the linguistics literature and in Solomon Islands government documents, as well as in common parlance, to make reference to Natqgu and the languages to which it is related. This article uses the term Natqgu to refer to the language spoken in northern Santa Cruz, while Nalrgo is used for a closely related language, which has also been called Southern Santa Cruz or Nea, after one of the villages where it is spoken. Natqgu and Nalrgo are at opposite ends of a dialect chain that wraps more than half way around the 17 x 50 km island of Santa Cruz. Though Natqgu and Nalrgo³ have been categorized by linguists under one language name, Santa Cruz, in the Ethnologue coding, they are not mutually intelligible and are perceived as separate languages by their speakers. This has led to their being recorded as separate languages for wider purposes, such as census data, as will be discussed below. Together with Nagu⁴, they comprise the Santa Cruz branch of RSC. Further distinctions will need to be made to accurately represent the genetic relationships among these three languages, perhaps using the

³ The language names Natqgu and Nalrgo mean ‘our-incl language’ in the respective languages.

⁴ Many of the languages of the Solomons, including those in Temotu Province, contain prenasalized voiced stops. These are more accurately written without the nasal consonant, since the nasal is predictable. Natqgu speakers also routinely use a low front vowel for the first vowel in Nagu. Therefore, the sometimes cited spelling Nanggu is more accurately written Nagu or perhaps Nxgu, if the Natqgu pronunciation is accurate and the same orthography is adopted for it, as well.
term Nedr (Nendō, Nedō) languages for one of the levels. Cartographers label the island group of which both Reefs and Santa Cruz are a part as "the Santa Cruz islands," and designate Santa Cruz island as "Nendō." See the maps in the Appendix.

2. LANGUAGE CONTACT IN TEMOTU PROVINCE. In 1987 I became an advisor to the Natqgu Language Project in the Solomon Islands, where I spent most of the next twenty years. For sixteen of those years I resided with my family in Bznwz village along the coast of Graciosa Bay, in northern Santa Cruz. In that advisory role, I worked as a field linguist studying Natqgu, collecting multiple oral and written texts, and accumulating over 5,000 lexical items in a dictionary database that is still under construction. I also assisted in translating and producing written texts.

The four RSC languages — Äiwoo (Reefs), Nalrgo, Natqgu, and Nagu — all appear to be agglutinating languages. Äiwoo is spoken on the Reef Islands, which are surrounded by islands with Polynesian-speaking inhabitants with whom the Äiwoo speakers have regular interactions. (See Næss and Hovdhaugen 2007 for greater detail regarding sociolinguistic factors there.) Natqgu, Nalrgo, and Nagu are spoken on Santa Cruz nearly 70 km across open ocean from the Reef Islands. Although speakers of these languages do have sporadic contact with speakers of Utupua-Vanikoro and Polynesian languages in Lata, the capital of Temotu Province, they have less sustained contact with unrelated languages than Äiwoo does, due to distances between islands. There is also more intermarriage between Äiwoo and Polynesian speakers than between Nalrgo or Natqgu speakers and other groups. Speakers of Nagu have had significant intermarriage with Äiwoo speakers over the past twenty years or more. Äiwoo and various Austronesian languages are now spoken in very recent settlements on the island of Santa Cruz, in the approximate third of the island not encompassed by the Nalrgo-Natqgu dialect chain.

Thus, the language contact situation between the RSC languages and other groups in Temotu Province is complex. The province is located some 400 km east of the main Solomons chain. In addition to the RSC languages, until fairly recently another eight or so languages were spoken in a region comprising only 895 square km of land area, and with a total of some 19,000 inhabitants. Table 1 lists the indigenous languages of Temotu Province and home islands where they are spoken and their linguistic affiliations, according to Ross and Næss 2007. Add to the complex language contact situation within Temotu Province the factors of English being the national language and Solomon Islands Pijin the language of wider communication, and we find that the vernaculars experience great pressure toward change.
In fact, the language situation in Temotu Province has been in a rapid state of change. Historically, members of different language groups relied on at least a passive understanding of each other’s languages for trade purposes and for obtaining suitable marriage partners. But during the past thirty or more years, Solomon Islands Pijin has increasingly become the lingua franca not only of the rest of the country, but also of this region, which lies at its outer boundaries. There is no doubt that the effects of the changing linguistic situation are being felt in the RSC languages.

Correspondingly, the number of people who speak Solomon Islands Pijin as their first language has risen dramatically in the past twenty years. This rise is shown in Table 2, which compares for 1976 and 1999 the number of speakers over five years old who claimed each of the RSC languages and Pijin as their first language.5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Island</th>
<th>Affiliations within Austronesian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nalrgo</td>
<td>southern Santa Cruz</td>
<td>Oceanic-Temotu-RSC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natqgu</td>
<td>northern Santa Cruz</td>
<td>Oceanic-Temotu-RSC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagu</td>
<td>south central &amp; SE Santa Cruz</td>
<td>Oceanic-Temotu-RSC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Äiwoo</td>
<td>Reef Islands</td>
<td>Oceanic-Temotu-RSC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amba (Nembao)</td>
<td>Utupua</td>
<td>Oceanic-Temotu-UV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asumbo (nearly extinct)</td>
<td>Utupua</td>
<td>Oceanic-Temotu-UV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanimbili (nearly extinct)</td>
<td>Utupua</td>
<td>Oceanic-Temotu-UV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teanu</td>
<td>Vanikoro</td>
<td>Oceanic-Temotu-UV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lovano (Vano, nearly extinct)</td>
<td>Vanikoro</td>
<td>Oceanic-Temotu-UV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanema (nearly extinct)</td>
<td>Vanikoro</td>
<td>Oceanic-Temotu-UV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vaeakau-Taumako (aka Pileni)</td>
<td>Duffs, outer Reef Islands: Nupani, Nukapu, Pileni, Matema</td>
<td>Oceanic-Polynesian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tikopia</td>
<td>Tikopia</td>
<td>Oceanic-Polynesian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anuta</td>
<td>Anuta</td>
<td>Oceanic-Polynesian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Languages of Temotu

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>1976</th>
<th>1999</th>
<th>+/- %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nalrgo</td>
<td>1,045</td>
<td>1,541</td>
<td>+47.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natqgu</td>
<td>1,658</td>
<td>4,085</td>
<td>+146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagu</td>
<td>238</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>-13.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Äiwoo</td>
<td>3,961</td>
<td>7,926</td>
<td>+100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pijin</td>
<td>1,527</td>
<td>20,038</td>
<td>+1225</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5 No linguistic data were recorded in the 1986 census.
Coupled with this increase in native speakers of Pijin throughout the country, some of the RSC languages are also being restructured. In Aiwoo, Næs (pers. comm.) has found that the complex system of possessive classes is being radically simplified by younger speakers. Similarly, some features of the Natqgu grammar and lexicon are also being simplified. Since my arrival there in the late 1980s, I have observed that there are three age-related dialects of Natqgu spoken in the area of Graciosa Bay. The oldest group uses complex grammatical structures, a richer vocabulary, and also commands the traditional music forms. The middle group still has most of the grammatical structures, but has lost a number of lexical items, and many do not command the traditional music forms. For the youngest group, there is evidence that they expect some aspects of Natqgu grammar to work like Pijin or English and consider as either ungrammatical, or at least as unnatural, constructions that are perfectly well-formed for the older two groups. It is rarer for them to command the traditional music forms, and they have lost further lexical items that the middle group still uses.

Several examples will illustrate the kinds of reanalysis and loss found in the youngest group. These examples are on the phonological, lexical, and syntactic levels, and illustrate the effect that greater use of English and Pijin is having on the Natqgu vernacular.

On the phonological level, I have observed that the three age-related dialects differ with regard to their preference for pronouncing the prenasalized portion of the voiced stops (see footnote 4). The oldest group always prenasalizes, the middle group fluctuates, and the youngest group almost never prenasalizes. This change, which is occurring in a number of the languages of the Solomons, moves toward the English pattern, which does not have prenasalized voiced stops.

In 1991, we held informal evening literacy and coffee nights in our home for the youth of the community. During that time we used song lyrics for teaching reading because nearly everyone in the community enjoys singing. The noun *ztrkipu* ‘darkness’ occurred in one of the songs. The group had been singing it together for several weeks when finally one of the young men asked, “What does *ztrkipu* mean?” We asked the others what they thought it meant, and no one knew except a man in his forties who had joined us to learn to read. The young people said they used *nzlo* for that concept. On further investigation, it became clear that in the older two dialects, *nzlo* is an adjective meaning ‘dark,’ while *ztrkipu* is a noun meaning ‘darkness.’ The youngest group had generalized *nzlo* and were using it in both contexts. Once the word in the song was changed, they were able to sing it and understand it.

Similar loss has been discovered for a number of lexical items, many of which do not have comparable vernacular substitutions. For some of this latter type of loss, Natqgu song lyrics have been used to reintroduce archaic words, rather than use a borrowing. For example, even into the late 1990s only the oldest group of speakers could productively use

---

6 Nalrgo was labeled as Nea in the census materials. The dialect from the Mbaengr region patterns more closely with Nalrgo than with Nagu. So the figure 1045 for the year of 1976 includes 73 Mbaengr speakers who were originally counted with the Nagu total in the census materials. The census figures for 1976 recorded 311 Nagu speakers, of whom there were 73 Mbaengr speakers. The figure 238 reflects the subtraction of this number.
lrpalve ‘fortress.’ And it was clear that borrowing from English would not improve comprehension, since people would also not know the meaning of fotris, or however it ended up being spelled. The oldest group told us that they used to build stone fortresses with slits in them from which to shoot arrows at their enemies. The ruins of one such fortress still exist in the bush. In 1998 it was decided to reintroduce lrpalve and a number of other archaic words and concepts, through song lyrics which also included a descriptive phrase. That resulted in such lines as “the fortress I run to for safety” and “the strong fortress which protects me.” These songs were published in 2000, with the result that a growing number of people in the younger two groups are becoming familiar with these words. For general preservation and documentation of archaic words, a future Natqgu dictionary, surpassing the scope of the 2005 diglot wordlist (section 5), is seen as the appropriate vehicle.

By the late 1990s, the majority of the Natqgu language team, which varied between eight to twelve members, all belonged to the youngest age group. At one of our meetings in 2006, a man in his late 20s, Joseph Kennedy Ciq, said that he’d been given feedback by some people his age who didn’t think it was correct to refer to their language using natq ‘word, language, voice.’ Instead, they thought it would be more proper to nominalize yemne, the verb ‘to speak, to talk,’ yielding a reference to the language which would mean ‘our-incl talking.’ This struck me as strange, since the use of Natqgu to refer to the language had been the practice for at least thirty years and no one had questioned it before. On reflection, I realized that this was probably a calque, with these youngest speakers forcing Natqgu to conform to a Pijin mold, for in Solomon Islands Pijin one commonly says toktok blong iumi for ‘our-incl speech.’ It is used in contexts like the following: Olketa no save minim toktok blong iumi. ‘They can’t understand our-incl. speech.’

Pijin does have the word languis ‘language,’ which refers to specific regional and national tongues. But in the context above, toktok is more common. My hypothesis is that the youngest group has internalized many Pijin structures as a result of its use in spoken instruction in the schools, and now thinks Natqgu should conform to those structures. Other structures in the speech of the youngest group also seem to be affected, moving Natqgu toward the existing creole—Solomon Islands Pijin.
3. ORTHOGRAPHY MODIFICATION. The phonemic inventory of Natqgu includes fifteen or sixteen consonants, ten oral vowels, and four or five nasalized vowels, depending on dialect considerations. The consonants are given in Table 3. The nasal [ŋ] is written as the digraph ng in the orthography. Ross and Næss (2007:7, COOL7 version) assume a palatal nasal for Natqgu. However, there are only three vowels which follow it, making its status as a distinct phoneme in Natqgu suspect. The other three nasal consonants are followed by a fuller representation of possible vowels. Regarding [dʒ], although included as a phoneme of Natqgu, it actually occurs only in words borrowed from other RSC languages or English, and is written as j in the orthography. I categorize it as “semi-native” for two reasons. First, it has phonemic status in both Nalrgo and Nagu, the languages most closely related to Natqgu. And second, Natqgu speakers easily produce the sound. The consonants [f], [h], and [r] occur with parentheses in the chart because they are used exclusively for writing borrowed words. That topic appears again, near the end of this section, in the description of how alternate vowel symbols are selected.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONSONANTS</th>
<th>labial</th>
<th>alveolar</th>
<th>alveo-palatal</th>
<th>palatal</th>
<th>velar</th>
<th>glottal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(oral) stop</td>
<td>p</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>t</td>
<td>d</td>
<td>k</td>
<td>g</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nasal stop</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>n</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>η</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fricative</td>
<td>(f)</td>
<td>v ~β</td>
<td>s</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(h)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>affricate</td>
<td></td>
<td>dʒ</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lateral liquid</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>flap</td>
<td></td>
<td>(r)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>glide</td>
<td>w</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>y</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Natqgu Consonants

The consonant symbols then are relatively straightforward and present no real obstacles to literacy. However, the five “extra” vowels—those in addition to the ones represented by the letters a, e, i, o and u in Solomon Islands Pijin—have presented a problem. Three of the nonstandard vowels, /ə/, /ɔ/, and /æ/, which occurred with umlauts in the first Natqgu orthography, have a higher frequency than the vowels that did not require diacritics (see Table 4). In addition, /a/, /ʌ/, /a/, and /a/ have phonemically nasalized counterparts. So the frequency of the nonstandard vowels and their occurrence with nasalized forms mean that it is especially important that readers be able to recognize their symbols quickly and easily. During the 1980s, an orthography suggested by Stephen Wurm in his work with speakers of the language was introduced. In that orthography, the five nonstandard oral vowels were written using diacritics: four with umlauts and one with an underline, as in Table 4. The nasalized vowels in Wurm’s orthography were marked with a tilde.

Natqgu language advisors Rick and Sue Buchan, who preceded our family, produced health, song lyric, and religious booklets using the orthography described above. There was a period of about three years between the time when the Buchans left Santa Cruz and
when our family arrived. They had reported that the written vernacular was in use in a number of villages in the language area at the time they left. But from what I could perceive on my arrival, most of that momentum had been lost, and people had returned to the use of English in written documents.

My earliest language work was done in collaboration with a committee that had been formed by the Buchans while advisors to the Natqgu Language Project. One or two of the committee members were comfortably literate in Natqgu, both in reading and writing. However, it gradually became clear that the remaining members were not fluent readers; nor were they able to produce written materials in Natqgu. Several of them expressed to me their difficulty in conceptualizing the umlauted vowels as distinct characters, and persisted in thinking there should be a phonological or grammatical relationship between forms with the umlauted vowels and those with nonumlauted vowels. Repeated instruction had no significant impact on improving oral reading fluency, as they struggled to remember which sound correlated with which symbol. For example, they regularly failed to distinguish ü from u in written materials.

Given the difficulties these people experienced, in 1989 the Natqgu Language Project suggested to the language group that they consider a modification of the orthography. Having an orthography which would be easier to read and remember would be critical to the success of literacy and language maintenance efforts. We attended the meeting called to discuss making a change, but there was no support for it at that time. An important leader in the language group had some remaining reservations about making any change, but he was unable to attend. Therefore, it was culturally inappropriate for the others to make a decision without his input, for it might have been viewed as premature.

But by the mid-1990s, when Wurm’s Natqgu orthography had been in use for over ten years, there had still been little increase in vernacular literacy. So the local community was again asked by the Natqgu Language Project to consider modifying the orthography in order to eliminate the diacritics. This time there was sufficient support for it, and with the consent of the leader who had had reservations, the language group decided to change the orthography. Their reasons were primarily two-fold. The first was exactly what was reported above. That is, speakers continued to find it difficult to learn to read and write Natqgu, apparently as a result of their lack of experience in identifying the letters with diacritics as separate symbols and sounds from those without. Their second reason was related to producing printed materials. Typing the diacritics demanded a special typewriter with at least a tilde. The double quote mark was often used in place of the umlaut. For vowels with both an umlaut and a tilde, it was necessary for the typist to scroll the paper slightly, so that the tilde would be over the umlaut (double quote mark). Typing was tedious, and the end result was not the clean copy normally expected for printed texts. Furthermore, no printing business in the Solomons at that time was able to typeset text with the Natqgu diacritics.

Since the earlier language committee had become inactive, an ad hoc orthography committee composed of leaders literate in Natqgu was formed to make the change. They discussed a number of possible ways to modify the alphabet. For each proposal a paragraph was printed so the committee members could see text in the revised orthography. One proposal included using digraphs to replace the letters with diacritics. Another pattern suggested digraphs, which had Natqgu attempting follow English pronunciation and spelling conventions, by representing /ә/ as uh and /ә/ as ah. However, since this went against the
convention for most languages in the world, including Pijin and other Solomons vernaculars, all of which represent /a/ as a, this alternative was rejected. As other digraphs were examined, the committee quickly rejected them all. They realized that not only would using digraphs add to the length of words, but that the added length would also make them even more difficult to read, especially since three of the vowels with diacritics occurred most frequently.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>old</th>
<th>new</th>
<th>IPA</th>
<th>sample words</th>
<th>English glosses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>kalva</td>
<td>betel nut</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e</td>
<td>e</td>
<td>e</td>
<td>neke</td>
<td>who, interrogative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i</td>
<td>i</td>
<td>i</td>
<td>mibi</td>
<td>rotten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>ioto</td>
<td>infant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>u</td>
<td>u</td>
<td>u</td>
<td>tumu</td>
<td>fish species</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o</td>
<td>c</td>
<td>q</td>
<td>ncdc</td>
<td>carrying stick from which things hang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>û</td>
<td>q</td>
<td>q</td>
<td>nqmq</td>
<td>way, tradition, character</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ö</td>
<td>r</td>
<td>r</td>
<td>mrbr</td>
<td>to forget</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ä</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>æ</td>
<td>kxrkx</td>
<td>which is spicy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>öe</td>
<td>z</td>
<td>ə</td>
<td>zvz</td>
<td>always, habitually</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Vowel Equivalences in the Old and New Natqgu Orthographies

That situation left the committee with the “one sound, one symbol” alternative. As an advisor to the committee, I showed them orthographic and IPA vowel symbols from other languages in the world to consider as possibilities, some of which had the same disadvantages as the orthography with diacritics. They expressed a strong desire to stick to the letters they already recognized as symbols for written language—those on an English typewriter. As a consequence, they decided to represent the five diacritic vowels by using consonant letters from the English alphabet which were not necessary for writing Natqgu words. The inventory of possible letters was: c, f, h, q, r, x, and z. They rejected the use of f and h because, “Vowels should only be one space high,” leaving only five letters remaining for the five vowels under consideration. They compromised on the descending leg of q because, “Its body has the round shape like most vowels.” Assigning each vowel to a symbol was fairly straightforward. There was already the practice of writing /æ/ as ir, so leaving out the i seemed logical. The letter c was the mirror image of the open o which they’d been shown. The pronunciation of the name of the letter q was similar to the sound of /u/. And the name of x sounded almost like axe, which begins with the sound /æ/. That left z to represent /æ/. Thus, the spelling of Natqgu became Natqgu, as in the majority of the relevant bibliographical references in this article. They also decided to represent phonemic nasalization with a straight apostrophe following the vowel symbol, so that it could be typed sequentially and no vowel would require a diacritic.

Rejecting f and h as possible vowel symbols at this stage was fortuitous, given that a
number of years later Natqgu Language Project team members decided to use these two symbols as consonants in certain words borrowed from English. It also turns out that these symbols were useful for writing borrowed words from other languages in the Solomons which have these as phonemes. In Natqgu, since [f] is an allophone of /p/, and speakers can easily pronounce it, the team decided to write f in borrowed words having that sound, rather than p. In some Solomons languages /p/ and /f/ contrast, such as in Owa [SE Solomonic], spoken on the island of Santa Ana (Greg Mellow, pers. comm.), Cheke Holo [Meso-Melanesian], of Isabel Island (Freddy Boswell, pers. comm.), and Utupua [Utupua-Vanikoro], of Temotu Province. Others languages, such as Natqgu, have only one voiceless labial phoneme, but may have the other as an allophone. Sa’a on Small Malaita (Karen Ashley, pers. comm.) patterns like Natqgu, with a /p/ phoneme and an [f] allophone, while north Malaitan languages, such as Lau (Doty 1985:1), have an /fl/ phoneme. Both the Malaitan languages are SE Solomonic. Also unlike Sa’a, and its close relative ‘Are’are (Roxanne Gebauer, pers. comm.), as well as a number of other languages in the Solomons, especially some of the Polynesian ones such as Luaniua (Pamela Gentry, pers. comm.), Natqgu makes no phonemic distinction between [h] and [ʔ]. The names Ellen and Helen are both produced with an initial glottal stop and are perceived as being the same.

The Natqgu team also established the practice of writing h in words borrowed from English to identify them as borrowed words. This distinction actually helps people read more fluently. For example, the English borrowing honey had been spelled ane, which made it identical to Natqgu ane ‘to measure.’ Once the spelling was changed to hane, I perceived a decrease in people’s processing time when reading aloud. In addition, even though the r symbol does double duty as a consonant in borrowed words and a vowel in Natqgu ones, there has been little interference or confusion regarding it. Readers reliably pronounce it as a vowel when it is adjacent to consonants and as a consonant when it is adjacent to vowels.7

Given that there was little local identification with the old orthography, the new one was easily accepted, even though orthographies have been hotly disputed elsewhere in the Solomon Islands. Occasionally a leader from a more distant village would drop in and say, “I heard you changed our writing.” I countered that a committee of Natqgu speakers had made the change, and gave a quick lesson on how to read the new orthography, complete with a handout delineating the correspondences between the two orthographies and giving key words for each vowel. Each key word used the focus vowel twice. The handout contained the material in Table 4, minus the IPA symbols, and could be used to explain the changes to others.

A side benefit of the orthography change was the continued production of this half-page handout, which over the years took on a life of its own. The team eventually requested that it be the first page in all of our publications. People would regularly come to the door and say, “I want the vowels,” meaning they needed a copy of the pronunciation guide. These copies were simple and cheap to produce, so they could be given without charge. Having a

7 The sequence Rr, used initially to translate a Biblical proper name, proved to be ambiguous. Understandably, readers did not know whether the first or the second symbol was the consonant, though CV would be the prevalent pattern. This was easily solved by writing the name Er, rather than Rr.
copy of the vowel handout was the starting point for those who decided to informally teach a friend to read, and demonstrated their desire to use Natqgu in its written form, as well as its spoken one. I suggest that the “vowel paper” became so popular because it significantly increased the ease of access to Natqgu literacy using the new orthography, in part by eliminating the need for a teacher on the part of those already literate in English.

As reported in the next section, the most important result of adopting the new orthography has been that speakers are able to learn to read and write in it more easily, apparently because it is more intuitive to them.

4. TRANSITION LITERACY COURSES LED BY A NATIONAL. The primary thrust of the literacy effort in Natqgu was one- to two-week courses in transition literacy. The goal of these courses was to move people from being able to read English, which is taught in the schools, to being able to read Natqgu. The courses had only a minor component on writing, partly because spelling and punctuation conventions had never been established and were in a state of flux.

In 1994, I led two such literacy courses on Graciosa Bay, which were held about a month apart. As it turned out, the first course was taught using the old orthography and the second one with the new orthography, since the orthography decision had been made in the intervening weeks. Otherwise the materials, content, and instructors for both courses were identical. In fact, the demographics of the two groups were essentially identical, too, with regard to numbers, ages, genders, and educational levels of the participants. It was our impression that the people in the second course were able to learn the five vowels changed in the new orthography more quickly, and that they were more fluent at the end of one week than the participants in the first course (Boerger 1996a). This led to the conclusion that the new orthography was easier for Natqgu speakers to learn than the old one had been, and was borne out when a series of three additional workshops in the next couple of years began to produce a growing number of readers that included women and teenagers. Up until
that point, Natqgu literacy had mainly been restricted to older married men.

One participant in that second course in 1994 was teenager Joseph Kennedy Clq, first mentioned in section 2. In a two-week course in 1995, Clq assisted me by circulating between small groups to give them feedback on their written work. Over time, his responsibilities and abilities increased to the point that he could give some of the lectures and eventually teach an appropriately modified version of the entire one-week course. When he left school, Clq joined the Natqgu language team with his primary responsibility being that of heading up the literacy effort. He and a teammate made literacy tours around the island, teaching one-week transition literacy courses at a series of villages. By March 2000, all of the villages outside Graciosa Bay had hosted the one-week course — 15-20 Natqgu-and Nalrgo-speaking villages, and one Nagu-speaking village. The team’s literacy workers also taught further literacy courses on Natqgu-speaking Graciosa Bay, which had been our initial focus. Due to Clq’s long-term involvement as a literacy teacher, he was selected by his teammates as Chair of the Natqgu Spelling Committee.

After Clq’s initial courses in a village, nearly all of the villages invited him back to teach them again. Many invited him more than once, so that he could conduct review classes or teach further literacy skills. Having a trained national teacher to lead the transition literacy courses freed me to work in other areas of the Natqgu Language Project. But even more importantly, it brought with it all the advantages of teaching in one’s own culture: appropriate methods, awareness of expectations, availability of the teacher, and greater geographical coverage, to name a few. The result has been that each village now has a group of readers that continues to grow in numbers and fluency.

5. SUFFICIENT VERNACULAR LITERACY MATERIALS. Concomitant with the one-week transition literacy courses, the Natqgu language team was also producing a corpus of reading materials. Their purpose was to provide further materials for use in the literacy courses, in addition to the printed handouts, as well as to provide reading books for those newly literate in their own language. In 1990, a consultant visited our area to lead a one-week writers’ workshop. The result was a 21-page foolscap-sized anthology, for which the cover and the stories were all produced by the participants using a hand silkscreen printing process. This was prior to the orthography change, and the resulting publication, containing 17 stories, was entitled *Buk ngö Be Nëyö Më Natügu*, (Book of Stories Written in Natqgu). These folk stories and first-person accounts were too long and too complex to serve as primer stories or easy readers, but they were appropriate for those who already had some fluency in Natqgu. I served as co-teacher for the workshop, plus spell-checker, editor, compiler, and facilitator for the volume.

Recognizing the need for some easy reading books, the team began work on a set of six titles, which were eventually published in 1996. The books were selected to provide a progression in reading difficulty. All of them were Shell books, based on materials created by the branch of SIL in Papua New Guinea. The illustrations for each book came with a blank space for the words, along with an accompanying text in English. The Natqgu team translated or retold each story in Natqgu, and the books were then printed with the Natqgu text. The theme of the Shell Book Project was “a library in every language,” and this was a small beginning toward a library in Natqgu. The titles translated for Natqgu, starting with the easiest, were:
Over the next six years, the Natqgu team produced an illustrated, graded reader, *Be Kang Kqulu Mz Natqgu (Many Stories in Natqgu)*, which the team self-published in 2002. It contained a total of 43 stories and essays, including the 17 stories from 1990 and the six stories from 1996. The graded reader could help prepare readers for more difficult material, such as the trial editions of translated Christian scriptures the Natqgu team was also producing. Scripture material is inherently more difficult two reasons: the lack of a shared cultural grid and the complexity of theological argumentation. Given that difficulty, the team looked for other ways to facilitate comprehension, including font selection and size, illustrations, footnotes, and in the case of the full NT and Psalms publication, a detailed glossary.

A Natqgu-English and English-Natqgu wordlist for spelling (Boerger and Boerger 2005) was included as an appendix to a publication for which there was already funding. The wordlist met an expressed need in the community for a place to look up the spelling of their words. The school and community teachers who attended a Natqgu primer workshop in 2004 (section 8) requested that a spelling guide be made a priority. The wordlist was provided because the Natqgu team decided it was better to have a preliminary spelling resource soon, rather than to wait for a fuller Natqgu dictionary to be produced at some unknown time in the future. The headmasters and teachers who attended that workshop were exactly the audience equipped to use it, because their competence in English surpassed that of the general populace.

The number and difficulty levels of the publications noted above provided the community with sufficient vernacular literacy materials to acquire and maintain reading and writing skills in the vernacular. A number of these publications will be referred to in sections discussing further language maintenance strategies.

6. VERNACULAR LITERACY CLASSES IN TWO PRIMARY SCHOOLS. Mr. Lionel Nuboa, the headmaster at Kati Primary School on Graciosa Bay, made a request in 1996 for the Natqgu Language Project to provide literacy materials for him to use with his Class Six students. The school year in the Solomons follows the calendar year, and in August each year the Class Six students take the national-level exam, which determines whether they have earned a place in Form 1 at one of the secondary schools in the country. Mr. Lionel 8 was concerned that after the students had completed the exam they would lose interest in attending school for the remainder of the academic year. He thought that a vernacular language component would make it attractive for them to continue to attend, as well as

8 The titles “Mister” and “Miss” followed by a first name are used as titles for school teachers in the Solomon Islands.
give them a skill that they should have before leaving school. He considered this especially important since for some of them, Class Six would be their final year of formal schooling and they might not get another chance at a literacy class in Natqgu or take advantage of one if they had it.

Starting that year and continuing for more than ten years since, Mr. Lionel has faithfully taught Natqgu lessons for the final few months of the school year. The success of his efforts was brought home to me one rainy Sunday morning. Not realizing that the church service had been cancelled due to the heavy rain, I set out for the church building and on the way met a neighbor, her mother, her daughter, and a few other girls who were also going. When no one else turned up, we decided to read the Morning Prayer liturgy on our own. The neighbor took the lead for the liturgy, and I led the singing. The Natqgu team had just drafted a number of hymns in translation which we wanted to test, and I happened to have a copy with me. With one reader on each side of me and three sitting behind us to read over our shoulders, the six of us sang the new hymns together in three-part harmony. I was amazed that the girls could follow along and sing the songs without stumbling. On the way back to our houses, with the three girls and me huddled under my large umbrella, I asked them how they were able to read so well. They said that they were Class Six students and Mr. Lionel was teaching them.

After a couple years, not to be outdone, the other primary school headmaster on Graciosa Bay decided that he should also offer vernacular literacy to his Class Six students at Mona Primary School after they had taken their exam. As a result, the numbers of literate young people on Graciosa Bay reached a critical mass and they began to outstrip their elders in fluency and speed of reading.

The vernacular literacy classes in two schools were significant for several reasons. We had discovered after a number of years on the island that the older men on the original Natqgu Translation Committee were essentially the only people literate in Natqgu, rather than being a subset of that population as we had formerly thought. So the school-led vernacular literacy thrust was significant because young people, including the female segment of the population, now had the same opportunity for vernacular literacy as the older men, who had previously dominated it. Also significant was that from our arrival until the time when Mr. Lionel started Natqgu lessons in Class Six, virtually all the vernacular literacy efforts on Santa Cruz had been those initiated by the Natqgu language team. This community interest in vernacular literacy was the first sign we had that literacy training might continue without the support of outsiders.

7. DESIRE TO LEARN SONG LYRICS. Repeated successes using song lyrics to teach literacy caused us to include songs as an integral part of all the transition literacy courses taught by Natqgu language team members (Boerger 1998:9). Several incidents drove this home. In section 2 of the present article, I discussed the informal evening literacy gatherings for youth in 1991, during which we used song lyrics for teaching reading. In that group was a young woman, Julia Ibqrka, who had thereby taught herself to read and gained fluency in Natqgu. She showed me the bookmark halfway through a small 50-page book (Meabr and Boerger, 1991) that had recently been published.

Then in 1994, the Natqgu team wrote and translated a corpus of songs in an effort to add meaning to the Easter Vigil of the Church of Melanesia (COM, Anglican). These songs
were taught to an ad hoc Easter choir, which sang them at the vigil in place of the Old Testament lessons which would have covered the same content. I found once again that people who were literate in English learned to read their own language by learning the songs that were taught in Natqgu. One man in the choir was Samuel Mwe'kou, the catechist of St. James church, whose job was to lead the daily Morning and Evening Prayer services. After learning to read Natqgu through song lyrics, he began using it to read the daily scripture lessons aloud in the services. He told me, “I used to think I knew English. But now I read the Natqgu to find out what the English really means.”

The leap from song lyrics to Natqgu literacy happened a third time. After completing Class Six, Joseph Kennedy Clq attended the Luesalo Rural Training Centre on Santa Cruz island from 1995 to 1997. Every Wednesday was declared “island service night,” during which the students who spanned six to eight of the language groups of Temotu Province, were encouraged to use the vernacular. When it was Natqgu’s turn, Clq taught fellow students the Natqgu version of “Amazing Grace” and other songs the Natqgu language team was in the process of translating and had made available to the students there on song sheets. One of Clq’s fellow students was his cousin, Matthias Meabr, who made the transition to reading Natqgu through learning to sing the translated lyrics of “Amazing Grace.” He soon became a fluent reader and voluntarily read scripture lessons in Natqgu during worship services when he returned to the language area, after leaving school.

At this point I was ten years into the Natqgu language assignment. Seeing that people’s desire to learn the song lyrics was a significant motivation for vernacular literacy led to these being an integral part of the transition literacy courses, mentioned in section 4. It also caused me to make my primary translation focus from late 1998 to mid-2000 the Natqgu Book of Worship, which is based on the Anglican Book of Common Prayer. During that time the senior translator, Mr. Saemon Meabr, a retired schoolteacher, and I produced the liturgies, prayers, song lyrics, and Psalms, which are all part of the Anglican prayer book.

During church services, I had observed that the youngest age group enjoyed sing-
ing choruses, while the middle group appreciated hymns, and the oldest group wanted to continue to sing following their traditional patterns. Therefore, Mr. Saemon, who is from the oldest group, and I made it a priority to include lyrics for all three music styles in our work, and ended up with 80 choruses, 213 hymns, and 162 songs following the traditional pattern.

The songs in the traditional pattern are generally quatrains in which lines A and D are identical lexically, but not musically (Boerger 1998:7-8). Whether singing in a community or a church context, the song leader sings the entire song through once. Then for multiple repetitions, the leader sings the first two lines, while others respond by singing the second two lines. Mr. Saemon had already written over fifty such songs for worship, and a number of his compatriots had also written liturgical songs in the traditional form. He collected as many of these as possible for inclusion in the published song corpus. In addition, Mr. Saemon and I found that the Hebrew forms of some psalms were compatible with this Natqgu form, and a number of full psalms and psalm portions were translated according to the indigenous Natqgu pattern.

Ethnic tensions, culminating in a coup in June 2000, led to our subsequent evacuation in August of that year, interrupting our work on the songs and Psalms. The Natqgu team decided that it was better to publish what we’d already completed rather than wait for my uncertain return to complete it. The resulting Book of Worship contains 125 of the 150 Psalms and 455 songs, as well as most of the expected Anglican liturgies.

8. ISLAND-WIDE TEACHER INVOLVEMENT AND NATQGU BOOK DISTRIBUTION TO SCHOOLS. A Primer Workshop in November 2004 brought together a number of factors, all of which contributed to language maintenance and the potential for on-going success in capturing language domains for the vernacular. In that workshop, primary, secondary, and community teachers from across the island were trained to teach literacy by using the Natqgu primer that had been produced in August of that year. Some of those who came were not native speakers of a RSC language, since a number of school teachers on Santa Cruz are native speakers of other languages. It showed a significant rise in the level of interest in vernacular literacy among school teachers, in that about half of the 30 people attending the Primer Workshop were primary school teachers. In contrast, when the island’s teachers were invited to a vernacular literacy course held in June 1995, only a handful had attended.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Book</th>
<th># Distributed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>class 1 &amp; 2</td>
<td>The First Book for Reading</td>
<td>30-40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>class 3 &amp; 4</td>
<td>Many Stories in Natqgu</td>
<td>270</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>class 5</td>
<td>illustrated excerpts from the Gospel of Mark</td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>class 5</td>
<td>Book of Worship</td>
<td>280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>class 6</td>
<td>Paul’s Writing to the Galatians</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5. Books Distributed to Primary Schools

9 The population of Santa Cruz was evangelized in the early twentieth century, and most of the inhabitants are affiliated with one of the Christian denominations on the island. The COM is the
The Natggu primer, called *The First Book for Reading in Natggu*, (Bck et al. 2004), was the final volume that would enable the Natggu-speaking primary schools on the island to have a vernacular component in every grade. It was designed so that only the teacher needed to have a copy, and the rest of the work was done on the blackboard. The last four lines of Table 5 show the books previously donated and delivered to the fourteen Natggu-speaking primary schools in 2002 and their intended readers. They had been accompanied by a letter to each headmaster suggesting that they be used starting at class three, since they were useful only for helping students make the transition from English to Natggu literacy. But the delivery of the books two years earlier had not created the impetus needed for them to be used, nor did regular offers to send Clq or another team member to the schools to teach the teachers. Now, with the primer available and the teachers having attended the workshop, vernacular literacy in the lower grades might actually begin. The team hoped that momentum from the workshop would carry over to the use of these older materials as well. Reliable communications are a challenge on the island, so it is not yet clear what the results have been.

The Primer Workshop also provided an opportunity to affirm the teachers in their work. I did this by distributing among them some books and maps in English that we had used to home-school our sons. The teachers all said they would like similar workshops as periodic review courses on a variety of topics, so we know that they appreciated the workshop and acknowledged its benefit. I expect that in the future we will see more clearly the results of a full set of graded reading materials and the fact that the teachers were given a second chance to learn to teach Natggu literacy.

9. FEELINGS OF LANGUAGE INFERIORITY ADDRESSED. It has been my observation over the course of the years spent on Santa Cruz that the speakers of Natggu, and probably all the indigenous languages of the island, have had low cultural self-esteem based on the difficulty of writing their languages. I was told numerous times that when Natggu speakers went to one of the national secondary schools they told speakers of other languages that Natggu couldn’t be written. Speakers of other languages would reply, “Of course it can. Say something and I’ll write it for you.” But when they heard all the nonstandard vowels, they would agree with the Natggu speaker saying, “You’re right. It can’t be written.” Natggu speakers have heard this kind of statement many times over the years, and accepted it as fact. Their own attempts to write Natggu, including representing its complex morphophonemics, were unsuccessful. Over time a feeling developed that their languages, and therefore their culture, were somehow inferior to those elsewhere.

majority denomination, comprising perhaps 75% of the population. Given this Christian context, the Natggu community has welcomed the religious aspects of the materials supplied to the schools for advanced reading practice.
In view of this feeling of inferiority, it was particularly satisfying to take the opportunity during the primer workshop to lecture about the complexities of Natqgu. For example, it can make lexical distinctions among the forms for ‘slave,’ ‘employee,’ ‘volunteer,’ and ‘worker’ by using combinations of a causative prefix, a third person plural agent prefix, and an adverbial suffix meaning ‘for nothing’ with the verbal root for ‘work,’ as shown in Table 6. Over the twenty years I worked in the Solomon Islands, colleagues there routinely commented that Natqgu structures looked significantly different than the structures of the Western and Eastern branches of the Oceanic languages in which they worked (Steve Doty, John Bruner, and James Mudge, pers. comm.). For example, many of these languages apparently only have the form for ‘worker’ as part of the lexicon, and the other Natqgu meanings would occur within full clauses rather than the nominalized forms seen in Table 6. As stated previously, Temotu is now being proposed as a distinct and primary subgroup of Oceanic on a par with the Eastern and Western branches (Ross and Næss 2007). Therefore, it is no wonder that languages from both the RSC and UV branches (François 2006) are perceived as so dissimilar to Oceanic languages of the other branches that both linguists and native speakers of those languages have difficulty recognizing any kinship between their languages and the Temotu language family based on the surface forms and structures today, in spite of the possibility of positing reconstructed forms that distantly relate them.

Later in the workshop, in speeches given by teachers during the closing ceremonies, many of them related that the value they place on the languages of Santa Cruz had increased. At that time, the course participants also expressed their need for a Natqgu reference for standardized spellings. That is why the Natqgu-English, English-Natqgu wordlist mentioned above in section 5 was included as an appendix to a publication for which there was already funding. Concrete results from this lecture will be hard to measure reliably. But if those same teachers actually do incorporate Natqgu literacy components into their lessons, it will go a long way toward eliminating the factors which led to the feelings of inferiority in the first place.

10. PROMOTERS OF WRITTEN NATQGU IN SPHERES OF INFLUENCE. Over the past twenty years, I had the opportunity to train eleven men and six women, many of them for years. The Natqgu team members became some of the most fluent readers of Natqgu. They also attended the primer workshop and are able to function as community literacy teachers. Among them, and others in the community with whom I’ve worked, are people with influ-
ence in the schools, churches, and communities on the island. Their language awareness
has increased in the years we have worked together, so that one can be confident that they
will continue to actively promote both written and oral use of Natqgu.

I had always been interested in empowering Santa Cruz women. In 1997 I began work-
ing with Elsie Balq, the wife of a local clergyman, whom I selected because she voluntarily
took adult education courses in math and English even after she left formal schooling. The
Natqgu Language Project sent her for workshop-level training in linguistics and literacy
in the capital, and following that she worked with me for several years as a translator. She
later developed her abilities by assisting SIL's national-level literacy coordinator with a
course he was leading in the capital. She returned briefly to Santa Cruz, between studies
in Fiji for several years, followed by further studies in New Zealand, where she lives and
studies now.

Natqgu Language Project team members were not the only key players in vernacular
literacy. Roslyn Iwz Lemoba, a secondary school teacher at Lata Community High School,
was a participant in the 2004 Natqgu Primer Workshop. As a result of my “structure of
Natqgu” presentation she requested instruction in linguistics, which we began in 2005. I
plan to involve her in future language data collection to increase her competence and prac-
tical experience in linguistics.

Sir John Ini Lapli was the Governor General of the Solomon Islands from 2000-2004.
Before that he was Premier of Temotu Province for ten years. He is also a COM priest and
was one of the translators for the Solomon Islands Pijin New Testament. Sir John has a
long-standing interest in documenting and preserving the languages and cultures of the is-
land, and in order to preserve details of a previous era he has himself recorded a number of
folk stories told by older members of the community. His interest is so high that he attended
the first two days of the Natqgu primer workshop to convey his support. He has also do-
nated a traditionally built house, furnishings, and a set of artifacts to serve as a Santa Cruz
cultural museum on the island of Santa Cruz. My husband and I worked closely with him
in a number of key cultural and literacy efforts undertaken in our position as advisors to the
Natqgu Language Project. As his responsibilities on the national level grew, he turned over
most of his local cultural preservation efforts to the Natqgu Language Project.

In 1993, the Solomon Islands Translation Advisory Group (SITAG) was invited to
provide a staff member at the COM training school, Bishop Patteson Theological College
(BPTC) to train future clergy in literacy and Bible translation principles. As members of
SITAG, my husband and I held that post for one semester during the second half of 1993.
We taught translation principles and Pijin literacy at three levels in the academic course
offerings. In addition, I taught an informal night course in English literacy for the women
of the BPTC community to improve their fluency. We were followed by another team who
worked there for more than four years. The principal result of SITAG’s having the post
there has been a greater awareness on the part of BPTC’s graduates of the importance of
using the vernacular in the church context. Fr. Jerry Bilvx, mentioned below in section 12,
was one of those graduates. A number of other Natqgu-speaking priests have also gradu-
ated since the vernacular translation component was added and they have all been support-
ive of the move to vernacular worship.
Thus, a critical mass of respected people from the younger two population groups, both male and female, are in positions from which they can promote the use of written Natqgu and have a positive effect on its continuing and increased use on the island.

11. COMPUTER TECHNOLOGY AND EMAIL CAPABILITIES. One of our goals was for as many team members as possible to become computer literate, and computer classes were held one night per week for the equivalent of one semester. Clq and Frank Yrpusz had already acquired some skill in typing. So they were further taught to keyboard Natqgu materials. Both men learned file management skills such as saving files, backing them up, copying them on floppy and thumb drives, and renaming them each time they worked on them. The other team members, who had less opportunity to practice the skills learned in the night classes, did not become competent computer users.

In 2003, a remote email station opened at Kati Primary School. The abilities Clq gained with us have enabled him to substitute informally for the manager of the local email station in the village. He is now slated to take her place to operate the email station when the Kati Distance Learning Centre opens in 2008 and she moves up to direct that. Since April 2006, Clq has successfully opened attached files, edited them, and sent back the edited files as attachments. This represents a significant accomplishment in a part of the world where computer technology has only recently become available.

Clq’s ability to type in Natqgu has also made it possible for letters in Natqgu to be sent out from the Kati email station to Natqgu speakers in Honiara, the capital of the Solomons, as well as those living elsewhere in the world. When we were visiting Honiara, we had several occasions to keyboard the hand-written Natqgu emails of townspeople to be sent to their relatives on Santa Cruz. There is also an Internet café in Honiara that can be used by those who do not otherwise have access to a computer and the Internet. The volume of email has been gradually increasing, especially from Santa Cruz students studying abroad. Fr. Joses and Elsie Balq use it as the most reliable means of communicating with relatives on Santa Cruz.

Before the literacy efforts in Natqgu, personal letters were always handwritten in English. Then someone who knew English had to be found to read the letters and tell family members what they said. Now due to the higher vernacular literacy rate of recent years, and thanks in part to computer technology and the e-mail station, Natqgu speakers can correspond with each other using Natqgu.

12. FRIENDLY COMPETITION TO GAIN READING FLUENCY. In Temotu Province, the English language followed Mota, an Oceanic language, as the language used for liturgical purposes in the COM. The advantage of English is that it is easy to include visitors or speakers of other languages in worship services. The disadvantage is that even though they can chant the words of prayers, services, and songs by rote, the majority do not understand

---

10 The Mota language of Vanuatu (New Hebrides) was introduced as a liturgical language by the Melanesian Mission of the Anglican Church in Australia and New Zealand, starting in the mid-nineteenth century with periodic tours by ship through Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands. The first Mota Bible was published in 1928. The oldest population on Santa Cruz grew up using Mota in the church context, and they still sing Mota carols at Christmas. In the 1970s or earlier there was a shift to English, coupled with the establishment of the indigenous COM.
what they are saying. It was clear that the community knew that Natqgu had to be used when comprehension was the goal, because even when English was used for the liturgy, Natqgu was the default language for the church and community announcements.

While many church leaders paid lip service to the ideal of vernacular services, they did not follow up by using the Natqgu service booklets (Meabr et al. 1995, 1996) that were produced in advance of the Book of Worship (Meabr 2000). As an explanation, I suggest that the clergy and lay leaders did not want to be shamed by stumbling and reading poorly in their native language, and knew it was less critical to read clearly in English since it was not well comprehended and fewer people would notice.

As a consequence, between 1987 and 1995, Natqgu was used only for special church services. For example, in 1994 the COM’s District Priest for Graciosa Bay, Fr. Joses Balq, set Pentecost as “Translation Sunday” for the years that he served in that position. And as mentioned in the context of song lyrics, in 1995 some of the lessons for the Easter Vigil were set to choruses for that service. Then in 1999 the new District Priest, Fr. Jerry Bilvx, led a service entitled “The Amalgamation of Culture in Worship,” one goal of which was to move people toward using the vernacular in worship.

Fr. Jerry also recruited younger speakers and helped reestablish the Translation Committee, which had become defunct. This new committee soon became the Natqgu Language Project team. The Natqgu team actively promoted using the vernacular, and by 2000 we heard reports that a few more COM churches on the island were sometimes using Natqgu for both Morning and Evening Prayer services. Just one day after the coup in June of 2000, the Book of Worship was submitted to a printer, and our family soon left the country.

Progress on printing and binding was slow during the height of the post-coup ethnic tensions, and as a result the Book of Worship was not available until nearly a year later. Sales were nearly nil, so the Natqgu team held a Worship Workshop in April 2002 to promote interest. It taught the importance of using the vernacular and provided instruction in the use of the Book of Worship to achieve this goal. The team invited all the Natqgu-speaking priests, plus the catechist and choirmaster from each COM church on the island, most of whom attended.

To prepare for the workshop, the Natqgu team and St. Thomas choir recorded cassette tapes of the Morning and Evening Prayer services and Holy Communion liturgy in Natqgu for the leaders to use for practice. The choir at St. James church recorded sung congregational responses in Natqgu for use with sung Holy Communion. This prompted St. Thomas’ choir to also prepare and regularly use their own sung responses to different tunes, which might not have happened as quickly without the competition.

The Natqgu team donated copies of the Book of Worship to the choirs of the COM churches and Clq took books for sale along with him on his literacy tours. Its publication and the workshop dovetailed nicely with Clq’s return visits to villages which had hosted literacy workshops previously (section 4). They wanted further help, so that they could prepare special music for the feast days celebrating their respective saints, using songs from the Book of Worship. Eventually, the closer villages began inviting the St. Thomas church choir, which included four Natqgu team members, to provide that kind of help. The more literate helped the less literate. Temotu Diocesan Bishop David Vunagi, from the island of Isabel, supported this move to using the vernacular in church services. He does his part in English and encourages the choirs and congregations to do the responses
in Natqgu. His approval has strengthened people’s determination to use the vernacular in the church context.

By the last time I was on the island, in 2006, I had heard an increasing number of positive reports about vernacular worship. Local contacts would return from visiting other villages for their Saint’s day celebrations, bringing stories of grown men crying because using the vernacular had now made the service comprehensible to them. People also told us that it was particularly meaningful to have Natqgu songs to sing during funeral services. Whereas before, they had just pronounced syllables to the tunes, now they could understand the lyrics as well. Later, it was reported from Honiara that small Natqgu choirs of three or four people were singing at wakes, and again those present cried—not just in mourning for the person who had died, but also as a result of the impact of the vernacular lyrics.

The workshop made it possible for priests and catechists to make the shift from English to Natqgu for the liturgy in three ways. First, it provided Morning and Evening Prayer practice times during the workshop. Second, it culminated with a community Holy Communion service that modeled that liturgy. And finally, it sent each leader home with a practice cassette tape. In the months following the workshop, as more and more catechists and churches moved to using Natqgu, a similar positive effect of competition was seen. The catechists and priests who were slow to make the change felt pressure from their fellow catechists and priests who had made the shift, as well as from the congregations who responded with enthusiasm to the use of the vernacular. The old women, who understood neither English nor Pijin, and who are generally illiterate in any language, were particularly vocal in their support because they could now participate with understanding. Four years after the Worship Workshop, at the farewell feast held for us, I saw this happen again. In the speeches following the meal, a priest who regularly used the vernacular in worship exhorted his fellow priests to start doing it too.

13. CONCLUSION AND SIGNIFICANCE. In the history of the COM on Santa Cruz, until the twenty-first century, the Santa Cruz people had never regularly used their own language for church worship. But since about 2002, with the introduction of the Natqgu Book of Worship, the vernacular has captured for the first time the domain of church worship that was previously dominated by English, and before that by Mota. A translation of the New Testament and the Book of Psalms into Natqgu is due for publication in 2008. Given the anticipated publication of the scriptures, it is expected that the progress made in using Natqgu for church services will sustain its current momentum. The reading of the written vernacular is most advanced for this domain.

The Natqgu publications that have been distributed to the primary schools, as reported above, are a necessary precursor toward fulfilling the Solomon Islands Department of Education’s desire to move toward vernacular education in the early grades, and to move away from English and Solomon Islands Pijin as the instructional languages. So these publications contribute toward achieving national, as well as local goals in the domain of early formal education.

The email station at Kati school and the skill of typing in Natqgu have made it possible for people to send letters back and forth between the village and the capital using Natqgu, as discussed in section 11. This small advance puts us at the very outset of capturing the domain of home life for the written vernacular. It is hoped that use of the written vernacular
will spread into other aspects of home life, such as in shopping lists for those going to Honiara, or in the recording of personal, historical, and traditional stories. Perhaps the written vernacular will even make its way into the business arena.

In the church domain, using the written vernacular is primarily the more passive act of reading aloud or singing from written lyrics. In the school domain, the focus is also primarily on reading, as opposed to writing. And while a writing component in the schools would strengthen that subject, I was not informed about the actual day-to-day content of the instruction, but merely saw the results in the community. What makes the use of Natqgu in letter writing significant, then, is that it requires people to compose, write, and spell in the vernacular, rather than just process text produced by others. Thus, while the reading and comprehension sides of Natqgu literacy have increased, there is considerable room for growth of competence in the area of writing and spelling.

Vernacular literacy and the establishment of standard orthographies have been seen to correlate with language maintenance (Ostler and Rudes 2000:11, Crowley 2001:259). I also expect that such standardization will serve to increase people’s confidence as they write, and that the increased use of written Natqgu will undergird spoken Natqgu, contributing to its long-term stability and vitality. The domains discussed in this paper are significant because they represent three major arenas of Santa Cruz society. Given this broad scope, the use of written Natqgu is expected to remain vital for the foreseeable future.

14. IMPLICATIONS FOR OTHER LANGUAGES. In Table 2 we learn that there are two other endangered languages on the island of Santa Cruz that also need documentation and conservation efforts if they are to remain viable. These are Natqgu’s two closest relatives, Nalrgo and Nagu. In spite of the rise in the number of Nalrgo speakers, this increase has not kept pace with increases in the population at large. The relative number of native speakers of Nagu is declining, and the language is close to dying out. The speakers of Nalrgo and Nagu are aware of a decline in the command of the language by younger speakers. Already English numerals are used, and with English being the language of education, many concepts are no longer being expressed in the vernacular. The place of English as the national language and the increase in the use of Pijin may explain some of the language loss. In both of the Nalrgo- and Nagu-speaking areas of the island, the only generally available written materials are in English, with some in Natqgu. No one has yet published significant written materials in Nalrgo or Nagu.

Therefore, there is considerable local interest in the possibility of linguistic work on these languages comparable to the work already done on Natqgu. When the literacy workers I trained were touring the island to teach transition literacy, the Nalrgo- and Nagu-speaking people requested that the literacy team be sent to their communities to teach them the new orthography designed for Natqgu because they recognized that it could also be used to write their languages. After the literacy workers had visited their area, the Nalrgo-speaking villages of Bibr and Nonia asked for further help in producing vernacular materials in their language. They reported that when reading or listening to the Natqgu materials the Nalrgo speakers’ comprehension is still cloudy, even though given the number of cognates and structural similarities, they often felt just on the verge of being able to grasp it. Work was started by a handful of mostly bilingual men, who used Natqgu publications as their source text. When the middle-aged main promoter of this effort died unexpectedly in late...
2005 or early 2006, I thought that the effort would collapse. However, in late August 2007, a 166-page, hand-written manuscript of Nalrgo materials reached me in Dallas, Texas, confirming their commitment to vernacular literacy in their own language and affirming the Natggu successes.\footnote{I noted in section 8 that passing information on the island can be a challenge. So can passing materials. The journey of the Nalrgo manuscript illustrates both the norm there and the shrinking size of the world. A Nalrgo team member, who may have traveled by foot, truck, or canoe, entrusted the manuscript to Joseph Kennedy Clq of the Natggu team. Clq emailed to ask for instructions and on 21 June 2007, I suggested he send it with a reliable person going by plane to Honiara on one of the two weekly flights, and I would ask colleagues there to pick it up from that person. Kennedy gave the manuscript to Fr. Joses Balq, who was on his way to New Zealand for further schooling. The SITAG Deputy picked up the manuscript on 29 June, and handed it to the SITAG Director, who took it with him to a meeting in Australia. After the meeting, he and his wife met their son and daughter-in-law there, who were themselves en route back to the US following a trip to the language group in Papua New Guinea in which the daughter-in-law had grown up. The director handed it over to his son, whose wife dropped it off at her mother’s house in Dallas. Our son retrieved it on a visit he made to the son of that family and delivered it into my hands on 24 August.}

Thus, the following factors reported in this article for Natggu have all contributed to capturing the written domains of church, school, and personal correspondence for the Natggu vernacular:

- a new orthography,
- literacy courses led by a national,
- sufficient vernacular literacy materials,
- vernacular literacy classes in two primary schools,
- a desire to learn song lyrics,
- island-wide involvement of teachers and distribution of literacy materials to their schools,
- addressing of perceived language inferiority,
- promoters of written Natggu in spheres of influence,
- computer technology with email capabilities and friendly competition to gain reading fluency

Parallel results to a lesser degree are also reported for Æiwoo in Reef Islands, as a result of the growing corpus of vernacular reading materials available there (John Rentz, pers. comm.). I expect similar successes if a number of the positive factors for Natggu can be applied to language conservation elsewhere in the world. I am convinced that such strategies would not only be successful for Nalrgo and Nagu, but that they would require minimal changes for success elsewhere in Temotu Province, the Solomon Islands, and Melanesia as a whole, given the cultural similarities there. Language documentation and conservation workers from other regions will best know which of these might be successfully applied in their own contexts.
REFERENCES


at the 2nd Conference on Austronesian Languages and Linguistics, St. Catherine’s College, Oxford, June 3rd, 2006.


Tryon, Darrell T. 1994. Language contact and contact-induced language change in the eastern outer islands, Solomon Islands. In Language contact and change in the Austronesian world, ed By Tom Dutton and Darrell Tryon, 611-648. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.


Appendix: Maps


Santa Cruz Island (Nendö)


Brenda H. Boerger
brenda_boerger@sil.org