

## *Making a Case for Tongan as an Endangered Language*

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At first glance, Tongan appears far from being endangered. It has nearly 100,000 speakers—remarkably sizable compared to other languages of Oceania—and is spoken in a predominantly monolingual and monocultural society.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, Tonga is an independent nation-state, in fact, the last kingdom in Polynesia. Why should one be talking at all about Tongan being endangered? This paper examines the linguistic situation in Tonga and argues that there are reasons to be concerned about the future of the Tongan language in the long run.

The position put forward in this paper is as follows: In the postcolonial context, many instances of language endangerment should be defined in terms of a unit larger than a nation-state. Globalization has put small island nations like Tonga in a position such that, in order to survive, they are compelled to conform to the Western development model that is associated with English as a socioeconomically privileged language. Here, the term “globalization” refers to a particular aspect of the phenomenon, that is, interconnectedness facilitated by the expansion of Euro-American values. Interconnectedness certainly has beneficial consequences, such as bringing new opportunities. Epeli Hau’ofa, for example, has argued that it has empowered the peoples of Oceania, liberating them from the artificial boundaries imposed by nineteenth-century imperialism (1993, 10). The following discussion, however, focuses on the adverse effects of interconnectedness, especially as it affects language maintenance.

### LANGUAGE SHIFT AND ENDANGERED LANGUAGES

There has been much discussion of endangered languages in the literature. Language death can be understood as proceeding through five stages:

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*potentially endangered*, in which a language is socioeconomically disadvantaged, under heavy pressure from a larger language, and beginning to lose child speakers; *endangered*, in which a language has few or no children learning the language and the youngest good speakers are young adults; *seriously endangered*, in which the youngest good speakers of a language are age fifty or older; *moribund*, in which there is only a handful of good speakers left; and *extinct*, in which the language has no speakers at all (Wurm 1998).

Note that this scale does not mention a specific number of speakers. In fact, the actual number of speakers is not necessarily a crucial factor in assessing the vitality of a language. Five hundred speakers in an isolated rural setting are not subject to the same risks as five hundred in a minority community scattered about the fringes of a rapidly growing city (Crystal 2000). Rather, the key factor is intergenerational transmission, that is, whether or not children are learning the language. It has been observed that a language has a better chance of survival against all odds if it is spoken in the home (Fishman 1997).

The socioeconomic environment that surrounds the language constitutes another significant factor. Language communities can be small, but viable, if they satisfy all or some of the following criteria: (a) the community is geographically isolated; (b) the society is traditional and conservative; (c) the community has a high status relative to neighboring groups; and (d) the language is valued as a marker of identity. In contrast, language communities whose future is uncertain in the long term show the following characteristics: (a) speakers feel that they are socially and economically disadvantaged because of their language; and (b) peer pressure to use the language is weak (Wright 2004). These socioeconomic factors contribute to a speaker's decision on whether to maintain or give up the intergenerational transmission of the language. Language endangerment, therefore, is not merely a linguistic problem; it should also be understood as a socioeconomic problem (see, eg, Fishman 1997; Nettle and Romaine 2000).

A language may disappear abruptly because of the sudden extinction of the population due to natural disasters, famine and drought, epidemic diseases, genocide, or a combination of such factors. However, in most cases, language death is gradual: a language goes through all the possible stages described above before it reaches the point of extinction. The phenomenon that a language experiences in these transitional stages is called "language shift." Thus, language maintenance or revitalization mostly deals with the phenomenon of language shift, rather than language death.

There are two major types of language shift: forced and voluntary. The former refers to a situation in which an external agent imposes a language other than the indigenous one(s), forcing cultural assimilation, for example, by making the dominant language compulsory, which is often accompanied with a ban on the use of indigenous language(s) in public domains. However, the cause of forced language shift is not necessarily policies directed at language as such. Forced language shift can be achieved by other means, such as enslaving minorities, relegating them to subordinate roles, and depriving them of their economic power by seizing the land and resources on which their communities are based. The domain of language use is not entirely controllable, but the key goods of the economic and social domains are; therefore, “it is policies directed at the economic roles available to indigenous people—and not policies directed straight at the language—which kill minority languages” (Nettle and Romaine 2000, 91).

Forced language shift is the typical scenario when one speaks of endangered languages, particularly in the context of colonization. With respect to Polynesia, examples of forced language shift that come readily to mind include Hawaiian, Māori, and Moriori. Of these, Moriori is unique in that it is extinct due to the genocide executed by the Māori rather than by a colonial government (King 1989; Clark 1994).

In the postcolonial context, many instances of language shift fall in the category of voluntary language shift. This type of shift occurs when members of a language community come to perceive that they would be better off speaking the dominant language than speaking their own. Examples of voluntary language shift include the shift to Tok Pisin observed in the Gapun community in Papua New Guinea (Kulick 1992) and the resistance to efforts to revitalize Irish Gaelic in Ireland (Cooper 1989; Wright 2004). Generally, the dominant language is associated with economic success, modernity, or both, and thus children choose to follow role models associated with the dominant language—and parents encourage them to do so.<sup>2</sup> As many have noted, including Joshua A Fishman (2001), the major cause of voluntary language shift in the postcolonial context is globalization. This is clearly the case in Tongan, as this article demonstrates.

It is often difficult to distinguish forced and voluntary language shift. For example, the use of Hawaiian language in Hawai'i schools was banned in 1896 by the passage of School Law 1896, Section 30. Although it is often claimed otherwise, the law did not state anything about the use of Hawaiian outside the domain of education. Nevertheless, its passage marked the starting point of the radical decline of the Hawaiian language;

because of this law, people stopped using Hawaiian elsewhere in the society, including in their own homes. What pushed the shift to English was the speakers' recognition that English was key to socioeconomic success. The unfortunate outcome of language shift was brought about largely due to the willingness of the people to give up Hawaiian for English for socioeconomic reasons (voluntary language shift), which in turn was the result of the enforcement of the School Law 1896 (forced language shift).

The problem with voluntary language shift is that it stems from a conscious decision made by the speakers of minority languages. Should anything be done when speakers willingly give up their language? Would it be advisable or even ethical for outsiders to tell them to reverse the language shift? Sue Wright's point is well taken: "speakers themselves are the ultimate arbiter of language revitalization, and the other players need to be sensitive if they aspire to play a role" (2004, 230). Shortly, we return to this question of what to do about voluntary language shift.

## WHERE THE TONGAN LANGUAGE STANDS

In this section, I diagnose the vitality of Tongan, using nine criteria abstracted from John Edwards's list of factors that contribute to language maintenance (1992): political recognition and autonomy; religious and cultural cohesiveness; demographic stability; geographic isolation; high socioeconomic status of speakers; intergenerational transmission; standard orthography and literacy; use of the language in education; and use of the language in literacy promotion and the media.

### *Political Recognition and Autonomy*

The Kingdom of Tonga has been a constitutional monarchy since 1875 and is the last monarchy in Polynesia. It has never been colonized, although it was a British protectorate from 1900 until 1970. Tongan is officially recognized as the national language. Both Tongan and English are official languages of the country. Ability in Tongan is compulsory along with English for entry into the civil service. As far as political factors are concerned, the community in which Tongan is spoken is indisputably favorable for language maintenance.

### *Religious and Cultural Cohesiveness*

In terms of ethnicity, Tonga's population is predominantly Tongan. According to the 1996 Census, 98.1 percent of the population was either Tongan (96.4 percent) or part Tongan (1.7 percent). The remainder consisted

of Europeans (0.7 percent of the total population) and “others,” a category that includes Fijians, Samoans and other Pacific Islanders, Indians, Chinese, Japanese, and other Asians (Tonga Statistics Department 1999). These are the latest census data currently available, but recent years have seen an influx of Chinese immigrants. Some estimate that there are now several hundred Chinese residents in Tonga (US Department of State 2005). Still, the Tongan-speaking group can be characterized as culturally and religiously cohesive, with Christianity being the national religion. Again, these factors favor language maintenance.

### *Demographic Stability*

With approximately 98 percent of the population being Tongan and an annual growth rate of 1.94 percent (2002 estimate), the language group appears to be demographically secure (US Department of State 2005). However, demographic security should not be considered a crucial factor by itself; rather, it supports language maintenance when combined with other factors, such as concentration of the population in an area with a tradition of endogamy (marrying within the community) and little in- or out-migration (Wright 2004). In this respect, we cannot ignore the fact that there is a sizable Tongan population outside Tonga as a result of massive out-migration. Today it is estimated that half of the Tongan population in the world is abroad, mainly in Australia, New Zealand, and the United States, and almost every household has a relative resident in another country (Small 1997; Small and Dixon 2004; Ka’ili 2005). Given that there are as many Tongans overseas as living in Tonga, it is hard to claim that the Tongan-speaking group is concentrated in a single area.

The mobility and flexibility of these transnational migrants should also be noted. A considerable number of overseas Tongans visit their relatives in Tonga every year. According to the Tonga Visitors Bureau Annual Report, such visitors numbered 16,954 in 2002, constituting approximately 46 percent of the total number of tourist arrivals (Tonga Statistics Department 2005). It should also be noted that many of these people, especially second-generation immigrants, speak little or no Tongan. Niko Besnier has observed, for example, that many of the sellers at the fea (second-hand marketplace) in Nuku’alofa are transnational migrants who “commute” between Tonga and the United States, and that they prefer to use English at least in the context of fea (Besnier 2004). About 40 percent of overseas-born Tongans are reportedly unable to hold an everyday conversation in Tongan (Small and Dixon 2004).

*Geographic Isolation*

Geographic isolation is considered favorable for language maintenance because it presumably protects the integrity of the group, and inhibits contact with speakers of other languages. Polynesian people have always been extremely mobile, navigating through the vast Pacific Ocean between their islands. Thus, in the Polynesian context, geographical isolation historically did not play an important role in language maintenance. The strong influence of Tongan on languages such as Rotuman and East Uvean provides evidence for such contact in the past. Rapanui, undoubtedly isolated, was not fully protected from the influence of Tahitian. Today, the fluid nature of Polynesian populations is evidenced by massive migrations to Australia, New Zealand, and the United States. Geographic isolation is an advantage when the community in question is self-sustainable, in the sense that the traditional way of living is still intact. In a case like Tonga, however, its geographic isolation works against it and instead contributes to out-migration.

*Socioeconomic Status of Speakers*

The socioeconomic status of the group should also be considered in conjunction with sub-factors, such as the range of employment opportunities available within the speech community that permit or require the use of the vernacular. Tonga has a small, open economy, with a narrow export base in agricultural goods such as squash, root crops, vanilla beans, and kava, which contributed about 23 percent to the gross domestic product in 2003 (Tonga Statistics Department 2005). However, the country's imports greatly exceed its exports. In 2004, for example, the value of exports equaled only 14.8 percent of imports (Tonga Statistics Department 2005). Tonga is best described as a MIRAB economy, dependent on Migration, Remittances, external Aid, and government Bureaucracy as its major sources of revenue (Small and Dixon 2004).

Viewed in the context of language shift, the role of remittances, both at the national and individual levels, is particularly noteworthy. Remittances received in 2002 accounted for 50 percent of the gross domestic product (Asian Development Bank 2003). On average, remittances from overseas account for approximately 20 percent of the annual total household cash income (Tonga Statistics Department 2002). But Hau'ofa has argued that remittances should be understood as a reflection of "the ancient practice of reciprocity, the core of all Oceanic cultures" (1993, 12). He pointed

out that those living in the homeland also send traditional goods and food items to their relatives in the diaspora in exchange for the remittances they receive. Thus, if we define the Tongan community to include diasporic Tongans, as Hau'ofa has suggested, remittances cannot be regarded as economic dependence on other countries. Nonetheless, the fact remains that, as a nation-state, Tonga is economically dependent.

Job opportunities are limited within the country. According to a 2003 labor force survey, the unemployment rate for youth (ages 15–24) was 11.9 percent (Tonga Statistics Department 2005). It is true that virtually all households in Tonga receive some noncash income, including consumption of their own produce, which accounted for 14 percent of the total annual household income in 2000–2001. On the other hand, non-cash expenditures (including the estimated value of foods consumed from a household's own garden, owner-occupied housing, and goods received or bartered) accounted for only 32.3 percent of total annual household expenditure—which means cash expenditures constituted 67.7 percent. Furthermore, expenditures on food accounted for a higher proportion of total cash expenditures (30.2 percent) than of noncash expenditures (13.5 percent), indicating the importance of cash in daily life (Tonga Statistics Department 2002). These numbers suggest that we should not underestimate the pervasive nature of the cash economy and the rising value of paid employment in Tongan society.

What brought about the spread of the cash economy and subsequent economic dependence, I propose, is globalization. At the national level, it is impossible for a small island nation with very limited natural resources to compete economically in the capitalist world. Thus, economic dependence is inevitable (but see Hau'ofa 1993). At the individual level, globalization has led to changes in lifestyle. The country has undergone a shift from subsistence farming to cash economy, with far more goods available for purchase in the islands. The process of globalization at the individual level is accelerated by migration.

Cathy Small has also observed that the subsistence base of the traditional village economy is eroding as it has come to rely heavily on remittances (1997). The number of Tongan-owned small village businesses is increasing, and people now consume more store-bought food and equip their houses with household appliances and furnishings that were not available or affordable in the past (Small 1997, 133–134). According to Small, these changes have made some village Tongans affluent, but left others (ie, those

without help from overseas) poorer than before. The influx of money and goods has enhanced the value of money in Tongan society.

The socioeconomic status of the Tongan-speaking group is underprivileged when seen in a larger picture, that is, compared with other countries. In the better-known instances of language shift, a minority language group is opposed by a dominant, socioeconomically privileged language group within a single society, typically a nation-state (eg, speakers of Breton in France, Irish in Britain, and Hawaiian in Hawai'i). The Tongan case shows that a minority language group can be defined in terms of a unit much larger than a state, namely, the whole global community.

### *Intergenerational Transmission*

Globalization is affecting other factors in language maintenance, such as intergenerational transmission and the use of language in education and other essential domains. Because of their underprivileged economic status (in relation to the English-speaking population), Tongans are keenly aware that English is key to success and a brighter future. This is manifested in their strong support for English as a medium of education.

From a study she conducted in 1986–1987, 'Ana Maui Taufe'ulungaki concluded that people's attitudes toward Tongan were generally positive with respect to the following six categories: community, learning, identity, aesthetic, maintenance, and function (1994). People generally valued Tongan for its function as a group language, had pride in the Tongan language community, and were confident that the Tongan language would continue to thrive. However, Taufe'ulungaki's study also revealed some signs of language decline. First, the older generation showed more positive attitudes toward Tongan than the younger speakers. In contrast, attitudes toward English were more favorable among the younger speakers than the older group. As the attitudes of the younger speakers determine the future of the language, this result is rather alarming. Second, competent speakers of Tongan showed more positive attitudes toward Tongan than less competent speakers. This is an important point, because speakers' insecurity in itself generally discourages use of the language and ultimately leads to language loss (de Bot 2001). Third, "there were doubts about [Tongan's] continuing efficiency and suitability as an official language and a medium of higher education" (Taufe'ulungaki 1994, 97). Fourth, while Tongan was considered an important marker for group identity, its role in individual identity was increasingly questioned. This point is also intriguing,



as language shift often arises when the elite start using the new language (eg, English) as a means to distinguish themselves from the rest of the society (Wright 2004).

Comparing the results of her 1980s study and the current situation, Taufē'ulungaki observed that language attitudes have noticeably changed, and for the worse: parents are far more eager to encourage their children to speak English (pers comm, 2005). There are now three primary schools in Tonga that use English as the medium of education, to which parents are anxious to send their children. There are also many families in which the language of the home is English instead of Tongan. While it would be premature to interpret these facts as indicating the end of intergenerational transmission, they do raise concern.

### *Standard Orthography and Literacy*

Tongan employs a standard orthography, and Tonga boasts a literacy rate of nearly 100 percent. According to the 1996 census, 98.5 percent of Tongans and part-Tongans aged six years and above were literate in Tongan. Tongan is taught in school at both primary and secondary levels. Standard orthography and literacy are considered to be important factors in language maintenance because (a) literacy in one's own language is often a source of pride and (b) an established orthography facilitates the use of the group language in education, literature, media, and administration. With respect to orthography and literacy, Tongan has the potential to maintain and expand its domains. In reality, however, Tongans have not taken full advantage of these conditions to expand and secure the domains of the Tongan language in their society, as I show later in this article.

### *Use of Tongan in Education*

Free and compulsory education is available for all children in Tonga between the ages of six and fourteen. Primary education is provided for six years (Classes 1–6) and secondary education for seven years (Forms 1–7). Tongan is the medium of instruction in primary school. Tongan language is taught in schools and the Curriculum Development Unit has developed a syllabus and teaching materials for the Tongan primary and secondary curricula. Furthermore, all teacher trainees are required to take classes in Tongan studies, regardless of their teaching majors. In secondary school, however, the medium of instruction is English, except for Tongan studies.

'Ana Maui Taufē'ulungaki, the leading advocate of bilingual education in Tonga, brought some positive changes in the education system in Tonga

in the 1980s. The new and comprehensive curriculum of Tongan studies was introduced and Tongan became a compulsory subject, along with English, for Tonga School Certificate, the examination after Form 5. For primary school, transitional bilingual education has been adopted.

Despite such efforts, the general climate has deteriorated in recent years. Government schools such as Tonga High School and Vava'u High School, which are considered the best schools in the country, have adopted an English-only policy, prohibiting the use of Tongan on the school site, even outside the classroom. When a student is caught using Tongan, he or she is reported and punished. Similar prohibitions and punishments typically happened when outside colonizers imposed their language on the speakers of indigenous languages. What is striking about the case of Tongan is that the speakers themselves willingly subject the younger speakers to such punishment for speaking their own language.

As for postsecondary education, six government schools offer various certificate and diploma programs. Tonga Institute of Higher Education, established in 2002, offers certificates in information technology, agriculture, accounting, tourism, and hospitality. Other government schools include Tonga Teachers' Training College, Queen Sālote School of Nursing, Tonga Defense Force School, and Police Training School. Some non-government schools, such as Ahopanilolo Technical College (Hospitality and Tourism) and Sia'atoutai Theological College, also offer certificate and diploma programs.

Although Tonga does not have a national university, there are opportunities to pursue university-level education. The University of South Pacific, of which Tonga is co-owner with other Pacific states, operates an extension center in Tonga to enroll students for degree and nondegree courses. 'Atenisi Institute, a private university, has offered various degree and postgraduate programs including master's since 1991, and doctorates since 1996; the postgraduate programs are run in cooperation with the University of Auckland.

While postsecondary education opportunities are increasing and it is possible to complete a degree without leaving Tonga, opportunities for university-level education are still limited. Because the medium of instruction is English in secondary and postsecondary education, if one wishes to pursue a college degree, it is mandatory to be proficient in English, whether a student stays in Tonga or moves to another country. It is not surprising, then, that English is associated with educational and employment opportunities and is seen as a language that promises a better life.

The presence of Tonga Side Schools—government-run English immersion schools—provides further evidence for the preference of English over Tongan in education. The first Tonga Side School started out as a primary school attached to Tonga High School in the capital, Nuku‘alofa, and set itself outside the government primary school system, in which the general policy was to use Tongan as the medium of instruction. Due to the increasing demand, however, there are now three Side Schools in Tongatapu and there are plans to build more, not only in the capital, but also in the rural areas (‘Ana Maui Taufe‘ulungaki, pers comm, 2005). Parents are eager to send their children to a Side School instead of a regular primary school, hoping that it will help them achieve high proficiency in English and possibly win their admission to the highly competitive Tonga High School.

Tonga Side Schools have two negative effects on intergenerational transmission. First, the children who study at Tonga Side Schools tend to use English, even outside school. During my visit to Tonga in 2001, several people expressed their concern about this as a strange and disturbing phenomenon. Second, to make matters worse, some parents encourage children to use English in their home. This has also been pointed out to me by several people, although I am unable to provide a specific figure or comment on how widespread this phenomenon is.

#### *Use of Tongan in Literary Production and the Media*

Attitudinal change among Tongan speakers has also been accelerated by the prevalent use of English in literary production and the popular media. Probably the most influential was the drastic change in the mass media in the past decade. In the early 1990s, Tonga had Radio Tonga and some newspapers, *Kalonikali (Tonga Chronicle)* and *Taimi ‘o Tonga (Tonga Times)* being the two major ones. The programs of Radio Tonga were generally in Tongan, with occasional English news coming from Australia and New Zealand. *Kalonikali*, the government newspaper, was published weekly in two separate editions, Tongan and English. *Taimi ‘o Tonga* was bilingual and published twice weekly in New Zealand, with a separate edition for Tonga.

Today, in addition to a few weekly newspapers published in Tongan, people living in Tonga have access to FM radio and television. Although there are some Tongan programs, including local news and religious programs, the amount of English that people are exposed to when watching television is astonishing. For example, Tonfon TV provides five chan-

nels, all of which broadcast exclusively English programs: a news channel (BBC and ABC Australia), children's channel, two movie channels, and a sports channel. These programs are neither dubbed nor subtitled in Tongan. FM stations play American pop music incessantly, with DJs preferring to use English instead of Tongan. Radio and television broadcasting in a dominant language is recognized as a contributing factor to language shift away from minority languages (Dixon 1991; Dorian 1991; de Graaf 1992; Grenoble and Whaley 1998; Rouchdy 1989).

Although access is limited, the Internet is available in the islands, which also increases exposure to English and fuels desires for fluency in English. In the private sector, some Web sites use the Tongan language; these are usually run by Tongans living abroad, and their contents are bilingual. It is intriguing that the diasporic population seems enthusiastic about using Tongan on the Internet. For example, the messages posted on Web sites popular among the diasporic Tongans such as Paenga Fe'ao 'o e 'Amanaki (<http://www.users.bigpond.com/jhavea/>) and Taimi Tonga (<http://www.taimiotonga.com/>) are all in Tongan (Tēvita Ka'ili, pers comm, 2005).

Literature in Tongan, fiction as well as nonfiction, is almost nonexistent. The articles in *Matangi Tonga*, the most well circulated magazine in Tonga, are written in English. Pesi Fonua, the editor of *Matangi Tonga* and the president of Vava'u Press, analyzes this situation as follows. When he founded Vava'u Press, the idea was to function as a publisher for materials written in Tongan and for local writers. However, his vision failed to materialize for the simple fact that the market was too small to make a profit. Thus, he switched to publishing books on Tongan issues, written in English (pers comm, 2001).<sup>3</sup>

Fonua also pointed out that Tongan journalists, including himself, are trained in English, and they have never learned how to write as journalists in Tongan. He acknowledged that people sometimes find the expressions used in articles in Tongan newspapers unnatural, for they are literal translations of English phrasings (Pesi Fonua, pers comm, 2001). Writing in English and writing in Tongan should follow different rules, but nowhere can one acquire the art of writing in Tongan. This may help to explain why many Polynesian writers write almost exclusively in English, although another important reason must be to make their work accessible to a larger readership. Albert Wendt, for example, stated that he writes in English instead of Samoan because having been educated in New Zealand, he became more fluent in English than in Samoan (Hereniko 1993). Konai

Helu Thaman also stated that she feels “more comfortable writing in English” (pers comm, 2001).

It should also be noted that Tongan, like other Polynesian languages, has a much stronger and richer oral tradition compared to its written tradition. In any language, written language differs from spoken language in many respects (see, eg, Chafe and Tannen 1987; Hymes 1996). In order to enrich literary production in Tongan, it may be necessary to develop a distinct form and style that can be used in writing. In this respect, a Kenyan writer, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, has set an inspiring example. He argued that African writers should express themselves in indigenous languages in order to reach the underprivileged people in Africa; he now works exclusively in his native tongue, Gĩkũyũ instead of in English (wa Thiong’o 1986).<sup>4</sup>

#### IMPOVERISHMENT OF THE INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE

The preceding discussion suggests that the environment surrounding the Tongan-speaking community points to language shift rather than language maintenance. In the course of gradual language shift, the influence of the dominant language is manifested by contraction of the minority language before the shift is complete. When younger speakers do not fully acquire the language, their use of the language shows some deficits compared to the language use of the older group. Such speakers are often referred to as semi-speakers or terminal speakers. Semi-speakers and terminal speakers exhibit unbalanced language skill development. Typically, their phonology includes nonindigenous phonemes (distinctive speech sounds) or lacks some phonemic contrasts that are present in the original language; their vocabulary is significantly impoverished; their passive competence is by far better than their active competence; and their grammatical paradigms are simplified through reduction in allomorphic variation (Tsitsipis 1981).<sup>5</sup> It has also been observed that contraction in grammar is correlated with reduction in speech genres that were once highly valued specimens of verbal art and competence (Hill 1978; Tsitsipis 1984). For example, in the case of the Albanian speakers of Greece (Avanítika), terminal speakers demonstrate poor competence, particularly in the domain of traditional storytelling. The most prominent feature of terminal speakers is their dependence on formulaic expressions (Tsitsipis 1989). In the next subsection, I provide some evidence that the Tongan language shows signs of contraction.

*Speech Levels and Honorific Expressions*

One distinctive characteristic of the Tongan language is the honorific speech register. Reflecting the three-way distinction of social classes, Tongan has three speech levels: *lea fakatu'i* (language of the king), *lea fakahou'eiki* (language of the chiefs), and *lea tu'a* (language of the commoners). The king's language is used when addressing and referring to the king, as well as to God and Jesus. Chiefly language is used to talk to and about any person of chiefly status. Among commoners, and when anyone talks about a commoner, commoner's language is used. For example, in Tongan there are three verbs at different speech levels, all meaning "to go": *'alu* (commoner), *me'a* (chief), and *ha'ele* (king). Formally, the honorific speech register is included in the Tongan language syllabus and is taught in school. Informally, one acquires competence in the honorific speech register through attending public formal events, such as church service and traditional ceremonies. (See Philips 1991 for an excellent study on the use of the honorific speech register in Tongan.)

This special linguistic characteristic, however, is being lost among young speakers. Many young speakers recognize the different levels of speech but feel insecure about their competence in using the honorific forms. In fact, this negative trend is observed not only among young speakers but also more generally throughout the population. Some have suggested that an increasing number of nobles prefer to use English among themselves and at home. Nobles are commonly educated overseas and are often not very fluent in Tongan (Heather Young Leslie, pers comm, 2005), which could be the main reason why English is preferred among this group. Since those of chiefly status are the main users of the honorific speech register, that register has little chance of survival if members of that group stop using it.

It appears that the honorific speech register is one of the most vulnerable aspects of a language in the context of language shift. In arguing for the preservation of the indigenous languages, the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) Language Policy mentions declining use of honorific terms and high language (used to address chiefs) as examples of disturbing trends that may seriously affect the indigenous languages and cultures in the long run. One chief is quoted in the FSM report as saying that he lost 70 to 80 percent of his friends because they could not communicate with him in the proper language (ie, high language) (FSM Division of Education 1997). Many older Pohnpeians are concerned that younger speakers have

limited control of the rich honorific system of the language (Rehg 1998). These observations about Micronesian languages are strikingly similar to the Tongan case.

### *Gratuitous Borrowing*

Although one should not take language borrowing in itself as a sign of language contraction, extensive borrowing from English raises concern. There are two possible situations in which borrowing takes place: (1) The language may need new words to refer to new concepts. This type of borrowing is relatively harmless. (2) In contrast, gratuitous loanwords can replace lexical items already present in the language concerned, thereby reducing the size of indigenous vocabulary. Extensive gratuitous borrowing is a concern because it often indicates openness to the influence of the dominant language and eagerness for assimilation to the dominant language (Woolard 1989).

When speakers are highly conscious of language maintenance, every effort is made to avoid borrowing. In their ongoing efforts of revitalization, defenders of the Hawaiian language, for example, are extremely resistant to borrowing. Being aware that the language must incorporate new and modern concepts in order to function as an everyday language, a committee was formed to discuss and determine the new Hawaiian terms for new concepts such as “computer” and “cellular phone.” Instead of opting to borrow, the Hawaiian Lexicon Committee (Kōmike Hua‘ōlelo) decided to translate each concept into Hawaiian, for example, *lolo uila* (electric brain) for computer. The new vocabulary created by the committee is now available to the general public in the form of a dictionary, *Māmaka Kaiāo: A Modern Hawaiian Vocabulary* (Kōmike Hua‘ōlelo 2003). In New Zealand, the Māori Language Commission (Te Taura Whiri te Reo Māori) plays a similar role. In fact, this commission not only rejects direct borrowing from English as a means of further vocabulary extension, but also tries to eliminate existing loanwords from English (Harlow 2004).

If Hawaiian and Māori are extreme cases, Tongan speakers’ behavior toward borrowing represents the other extreme. Terry Crowley observed that, in contrast to the Māori, Hawaiian, and Tahitian communities, “the attitude at large in places such as Tonga, Fiji and Samoa seems to be that lexical development [to avoid borrowing] is not particularly important” (2004, 43). During my visit to Tonga in 1999, five years after a previous visit, I was struck by the amount and frequency of loanwords in everyday

conversation. Many new loanwords seem to be results of gratuitous borrowing. For example, the clerk and the teachers at the Distant Education and Research Centre frequently used the term “mītingi” to mean “meeting,” even though there is a word in Tongan for this meaning: “fakataha.” Such borrowing does not necessarily replace the indigenous word, as long as some semantic difference exists between the indigenous word and the borrowed one. For example, it is possible that “fakataha” is used as a generic term for a meeting or gathering, while “mītingi” is used to refer specifically to a business meeting. Although I have yet to investigate whether all of the new borrowings are in fact instances of gratuitous borrowing, as well as the extent of such gratuitous borrowing, it appears that many people consider it fashionable to use loanwords instead of indigenous terms. Gratuitous borrowing should not be taken as direct evidence for language shift, however. It is indirect evidence, suggesting that speakers consider English to be better or “cool” in relation to their indigenous language. It is their eagerness for assimilation that raises concern.

#### PREVENTIVE MEASURES

I am by no means arguing that Tongan is in imminent danger. However, I wish to emphasize that once a language has become endangered, it requires tremendous effort to reverse the shift. Thus, in my view, it is very important to pay attention to cases like Tongan, in which it is still possible to prevent or reverse the shift.

#### *Is English Really the Bad Guy?*

But first, let us question the position put forward in the preceding discussion. Is English really the bad guy? It is true that English plays a powerful role in the global economy and that it has tremendous influence on minority languages. However, it is unrealistic to deny speakers of minority languages access to English. As Fishman has warned against characterizing English as a “killer” language (2002), the phenomenon is not as simple as some have suggested. In the present case, it would be outrageous to argue that Tongans should give up the use of English and stick to their own language in every domain of life. It would be tantamount to telling them to stick to their traditional way of living and ignore the outside world. Such a proposal would be not only unrealistic but also quite arrogant, especially coming from an outsider. Cautioning that “there is more than a little



neo-colonial paternalism involved when westerners advise citizens of the developing world not to learn international languages,” Douglas A Kibbee asked, “How can one ask parents to risk the economic future of their children if they feel that knowledge of an international language gives their children hope for a higher standard of living?” (2003, 56–57).

A more practical and effective approach would be to advocate for coexistence with English. Acknowledging the inevitability of English becoming *the* lingua franca in the globalizing world, Humphrey Tonkin also argued that it is necessary to develop strategies to prevent English from invading the domains of other languages (2003). This may be achieved most effectively by means of strict compartmentalization, that is, by differentiating the roles of the two languages so they are reserved for different functions that do not overlap (Fishman 1967; Romaine 1995). In particular, it is of utmost importance to keep Tongan as the language of home, protecting this domain from the invasion by English.

#### *Need for a Bottom-up Approach*

It has been observed again and again that top-down policies do not guarantee language maintenance (Fishman 1997). Yet, in order to ensure intergenerational transmission, there must be a motivation for doing so.

A radical approach to this problem is to raise the status of Tongan in terms of its economic advantages. John Aitchison and Harold Carter observed that the Welsh-speaking population has increased slowly but steadily in Wales, especially in and around some of the main towns. They related this achievement to the fact that society provides economic advantages for knowing Welsh. In compliance with 1997 legislation entitled Devolution for Wales, based on the Welsh Language Act (1993), government departments were required to provide bilingual services. Business and commerce followed suit in voluntarily providing bilingual services, which led to an increase in employment of bilinguals (Aitchison and Carter 1987). From a slightly different perspective, Daniel Nettle and Suzanne Romaine argued that language maintenance and revitalization must go hand in hand with raising the living standards of the rural poor in the developing world (2000).

From this perspective, then, the most effective means to prevent language shift away from Tongan is to create jobs that require competence in Tongan. It would also be beneficial to increase opportunities for university-level education within the country and in Tongan. Establishment of a national university would contribute toward raising the status of Tongan

if the language was used in higher education. The aforementioned Tongan Institute of Higher Education is certainly a significant first step toward this goal. Again, it may be too idealistic to hope that all courses at the university level would be taught in Tongan. The National University of Samoa, for example, uses English as the medium of instruction. However, it does offer a BA in Samoan studies, for which the classes are taught in Samoan. In Tonga, 'Atenisi Institute offers postgraduate degrees in Tongan studies. If the government decides to establish a national university, it is essential that they offer a BA in Tongan studies.

Another way of creating incentives is through the media. This has proven to be highly effective, as evidenced by the way English now pervades every corner of Tongan society. Earlier I mentioned the serious lack of entertainment programs and literature in Tongan. Developing the role of Tongan in the domain of entertainment will play a crucial role in language maintenance. True, there are traditional forms of entertainment: traditional dance, faikava (kava party), choir competitions, and other church-related activities. However, people find other forms of entertainment such as movies and television equally attractive. The use of indigenous languages in the electronic media such as radio and television is often expected to raise valuations of the languages involved, as they are associated with notions of prestige and modernity (Browne 1996). In this respect, Vilsoni Hereniko's feature film *The Land Has Eyes* (*Pear ta ma 'on maf*) is highly acclaimed as an especially valuable enterprise (2004). The film not only addresses the issues relevant to contemporary Rotuman society but also does so in the indigenous language, Rotuman.

Although it does not appear that reading books is commonly enjoyed entertainment in Tonga, this may also change if more variety becomes available. The development of creative writing in Tongan can be incorporated in the concept of a national university, with courses in creative writing in Tongan. Again, all of these plans are dependent on the availability of funding and will require much time and patience.

Computer-based mediation, on the other hand, is more cost-efficient. The use of the Internet technology in language revitalization and maintenance has proved highly effective (see Eisenlohr 2004 and references therein). Digital technology makes it relatively easier and much cheaper to produce new language materials for minority languages (Brandt 1988; Warschauer 1998), thereby making it possible for these materials to reach a larger audience. Electronic publication also provides the possibility of authorship to a potentially larger group of people than does conventional

publishing (Eisenlohr 2004). Furthermore, the interactive, multimedia nature of the Internet is said to be well suited to cultures based on communication and education in oral and visual media (Warschauer 1998). The use of computer-based mediation contributes to the transformation of ideological valuations of an indigenous language in that the language is viewed as part of the contemporary world and as relevant for the future (Brandt 1988; McHenry 2002; Ouakrime 2001; Warschauer 1998).

Finally, I wish to emphasize the importance of ensuring the high quality of Tongan-based bilingual education in primary school. In a study conducted in 1995, Jeff Siegel drew an optimistic and hopeful conclusion on the future of vernacular education in Tonga (1996). In the past few years, the situation has changed and in the opposite direction: Tongan-based bilingual education has lost ground to English immersion schools. This suggests that the advocates for transitional bilingual education have thus far failed to convince society of the benefits of vernacular education, especially in primary school. Presently, parents are sending their children to English immersion schools, perhaps not knowing what consequences it will bring in the long run. It is essential to educate parents regarding the value of vernacular-based bilingual education. It is obvious that we cannot change the fact that English has high status and that Tonga cannot compete with English in the same domains. Most people in Tonga currently take for granted the status of Tongan as the language of the home. But while difficult, it should be possible to convince them that the Tongan language could lose the home domain to English, too, and that if it does, it will be too late to reverse the shift.

#### CONCLUSION: RAISING AWARENESS AND THE ROLE OF TONGANS IN THE DIASPORA

I have argued that Tongan, in spite of its apparent stability, shows some signs of voluntary language shift when relevant socioeconomic factors are taken into consideration. The most notable feature of the type of voluntary language shift represented by the Tongan case is that the speakers are unaware of the possible consequences of their actions. The status of Tongan as the language of the home is taken for granted. For most Tongans, it is inconceivable that they could lose their language. However, as evidenced by a number of examples from various minority languages around the world, it is actually quite possible for a language to be lost, sometimes

in a period as short as one generation. As noted earlier, I do not claim that Tongan is in imminent danger. In fact, that is exactly the point: it is not too late to prevent language loss. I wish to emphasize that early signs of language shift deserve much more careful and serious attention.

The points made about Tongan in this article hold true for many other languages in Polynesia and the Pacific in general. In fact, some languages are in a more vulnerable position than Tongan. Small island nations are inevitably swallowed by the wave of globalization, often due to such seemingly innocent causes as relatives living overseas and access to the mass media, including the Internet. Globalization in this sense is not a visibly imposing power that deprives indigenous people of what is dear to them. Rather, it is perceived as something beneficial, something that makes life better and more prosperous. As there is no obvious external agent forcing language shift and cultural assimilation, people are unaware of the process—as well as the cost. In such a case, it is extremely difficult to convince them of the risks to which they are subjecting themselves.

I propose that we may find possible solutions in the diaspora. Tongans overseas are minorities in the strictest sense: they live in English-speaking communities and are forced to assimilate. It is not uncommon for second-generation immigrants to have only passive competence in the Tongan language or not to speak Tongan at all. In New Zealand in 2001, for example, only 54 percent of Tongans reported that they were able to hold an everyday conversation in Tongan (Statistics New Zealand 2004). Only 45 percent of second-generation Tongan-Americans over five years of age spoke Tongan in their homes in 1990 (Small 1997). Through their own experiences, Tongans in the diaspora know how difficult it can be to maintain a language, even their native tongue, which previously they took for granted.

Given the size of the diaspora, this population could potentially have tremendous power and influence to control the language shift or loss in their homeland. They can share their experiences and stress the importance of language maintenance in Tonga. Although geographically separated, Tongans in the diaspora still hold strong ties with the population in the islands. Thus initiatives taken by members of the diasporic population could still be regarded as coming from within the Tongan community, and as such should be more meaningful and effective. The Internet can play a significant role in community building among the speakers of a minority language, connecting the population in the homeland with those in

the diaspora, as well as bringing together diasporic communities scattered across the globe (Ouakrime 2001; Sperlich 2005).

As a final note, I should mention another, more crucial role that the diasporic population plays in language maintenance in Polynesia. For some languages such as Niuean and Rarotongan, language maintenance relies heavily on migrant speakers, because the population in the diaspora is significantly larger than that living in the homeland, which is steadily getting smaller and older. As a result, the language is losing its speakers. Given this unique situation, language maintenance in the diaspora is crucial (Taumoefolau and others 2002). New Zealand has already taken action to support language maintenance in the diasporic Polynesian communities and embraces these languages along with Māori as languages of the country. This is an interesting and admirable attempt in that it supports the language rights of nonindigenous peoples.

I hope that this discussion has made the following three points: First, language shift and language loss are not simply linguistic problems; rather, they generally stem from socioeconomic problems. Second, in the postcolonial context, small island nations are facing a new dominant power—globalization. It is therefore possible to define “minority” at the global rather than the local level. Put in the global context, languages like Tongan do count as minority languages that are subject to cultural assimilation, whether forced or voluntary. Finally, we should not underestimate the role of a diasporic population with respect to language maintenance, both outside and within the homeland. In this sense, a language community in Polynesia should be understood as encompassing the whole population around the globe, rather than a group living in a single area defined geographically. To conclude, something had better be done before it reaches the point at which everyone agrees, without hesitation, that yes, indeed, Tongan *is* endangered.

\* \* \*

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## Notes

1 There is a minority language, Niuafou'ou, whose speakers live on the islands of Niuafou'ou and 'Eua. Although the issue of language endangerment is more pressing with respect to Niuafou'ou, it is beyond the scope of this paper.

2 Don Kulick argued that the language shift in the Gapun village is not driven by the desire for socioeconomic mobility, but by the process of reproducing and transforming the traditional cultural categories (1992).

3 Vava'u Press recently published *Songs and Poems of Queen Sālote* (Wood-Ellem 2004), which is written in both English and Tongan and has been very popular with Tongans. As one reviewer rightly pointed out, this should be considered a materialization of Fonua's aim for his press.

4 'Okusitino Māhina, Tēvita Ka'ili, and 'Anapesi Ka'ili have taken a significant step in this respect. Their book *Ko e Ngaahi 'Ata mei he Hisitōlia mo e Kal-atua 'a Tonga: Ke Tufunga'i ha Lea Tonga Fakaako* (which translates in English as *Some Images from the History and Culture of Tonga: Towards Creating a Tongan Academic Language*) is written entirely in Tongan and has been published in 2006 by the Centre for Pacific Studies, University of Auckland.

5 Allomorphic variation refers to different forms of a morpheme, for example, the English plurals dog-s, octop-i, child-ren. A morpheme is the smallest meaning-bearing unit in speech.

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*Abstract*

This paper examines the sociolinguistic situation in Tonga and discusses its relevance to language maintenance in Polynesia. The environment surrounding Tongan is not visibly ominous: it is an official language of an independent state and is spoken by a sizable population in a predominantly monolingual community. Tongan represents an instance of language shift as a result of globalization, wherein a speech community voluntarily gives up its indigenous language(s) for another, more socioeconomically beneficial language, in this case, English. The paper proposes that language endangerment should be understood in terms of a unit larger than the nation-state. This is particularly relevant in the Polynesian context, in which international borders are obscured by transnational migrants. The paper also discusses some positive roles the diasporic communities may potentially play in language maintenance.

**KEYWORDS:** Tongan, Polynesian, endangered languages, globalization, diaspora, language shift, language maintenance