

One Community's Post-Conflict Response to a Dictionary Project

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“Above all, language survival in modern conditions requires a modicum of awareness of the language, and of the identity and history of the people that speak it. Self-esteem is necessary for self-assertion and no small language will long survive if its speakers lack it.” (Ostler 2003:176)

It may seem that dictionaries would be a low priority for communities struggling with recent ethnic conflict, rapid social change, and economic hardship. However, the potential for dictionaries to have a positive effect on a community's self-esteem has been noted for Melanesian societies. Furthermore, the potential for managing social change may also underpin a dictionary project. This paper describes the initial response to a dictionary project in a Solomon Islands community and how the community decided to combine lexicography with the revitalization of traditional crafts. The community's decision to link the revitalization of cultural skills to the dictionary project moved the project firmly into the community's hands and allowed them to conceive of a future that promotes the maintenance of language and culture. While there is no certainty about the success of the community's plans, the energy and optimism evident in these initial stages of the project support the general assertion that dictionaries can play a role in increasing the self-esteem of a language community. Within the context of a new, national-level languages policy, the dictionary project is also expected to play a concrete role in language and culture maintenance. The factors impacting self-esteem and language maintenance also have implications for other small language communities.

1. INTRODUCTION. In discussing the value and usefulness of dictionaries for small communities whose members have low literacy levels, the emphasis can naturally fall on the final product—the completed dictionary and its use by speakers of the language (e.g., Terrill 2002). However, the process of planning and writing a dictionary may also have the potential to help a community manage social change by combining lexicography with the revitalization of traditional crafts and skills. In the case of the Longgu [ISO: lgu] community in Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands, which has recently been affected by a period of inter-island conflict, it is the planning that has been important to the community and contributed to self-esteem. A factor deemed essential to the survival of small languages (Ostler 2003), self-esteem has, for political and economic reasons, been missing in the community for some time.¹

¹ I would like to acknowledge the support of the Nangali community in helping me to understand the complexity of the issues discussed in this paper, in particular Florence Watepuru for her continued commitment to the Longgu language and people. I also wish to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their insightful and useful comments on this paper. I acknowledge the support of the University of Canberra and the Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Program in funding this field work (2010-2012).

This paper examines the reasons behind the community's decision to embark on a dictionary project and describes the processes that were viewed as significant in deciding to link planning and writing a dictionary to the revitalization of crafts and culture. As has been observed in other communities affected by conflict (e.g., Florey & Ewing 2010), factors that may lead to language loss can sometimes also trigger action that leads to a higher level of community engagement in language maintenance and activism. The Longgu community's attitudes and actions in a post-conflict setting provide insights into the factors that influence small language communities to make decisions that support language maintenance and avoid further language loss.

2. TOWARD LANGUAGE LOSS. Longgu is similar to many Solomon Islands languages in the challenges it faces. Like other Melanesian groups, the Longgu community is concerned about language shift and changes in cultural practices, and faces significant pressures as a result of a growing population. According to the Solomon Islands 2009 census (Solomon Islands Government 2011), the number of people in the Longgu district was over 3,000, almost double that of 1999. While this latest figure may not correspond exactly with the number of Longgu speakers—there was no question about language on the 2009 census—it reflects a growing population, most of whom speak Longgu. As Terrill (2002) has noted for Lavukaleve [lvk], a language of the central Solomons, an increase in population numbers does not necessarily mean an increase in speaker numbers in the Solomon Islands, due to the role of Solomons Pijin as the language of wider communication. However, Longgu is still transmitted from one generation to the next in the villages, although differences in the extent to which Pijin is also used exist between villages. The larger coastal villages have easier access to transportation to the capital, Honiara, as well as more reliable mobile phone coverage, and are shifting more rapidly to Solomons Pijin than are the more remote bush villages. Urbanization and economic disruption are associated with this growing population and, while urbanization as a cause of language shift is well understood, the role of economic disruption as a factor in language shift is also important (Harbert 2011:414).

The demographic profile of the Solomon Islands is one that can be described as a youth bulge (Ware 2004). For example, in 2007 the mean age was 19.6 years². This has led to many young men leaving the villages to stay in Honiara, regardless of their job prospects. Dobrin makes the point that “[l]anguages die when they have no speakers, but in Melanesia, part of the reason they die is that they are felt to have no listeners” (2005:50). The mobility of young men and a changing village culture has resulted in a community that has older speakers, but fewer listeners from the next generation. Families still pass time in the evening telling stories and sharing the day's events with one another, and elders have the knowledge and authority to pass on significant cultural stories. However, the changing cultural context in which young men spend more time in Honiara, or with friends and family of their own age, means that they are less interested in listening to their elders. This situation has contributed to a gradual attrition of language. As Grenoble & Whaley note: “Because the attrition is gradual, it is often not a cause for alarm until the point where

² cf the section Population characteristics in <http://www.spc.int/prism/country/sb/stats/Censuses%20and%20Surveys/DHS.htm>

revitalization becomes quite difficult" (2006:17). The lack of listeners in the villages also demonstrates the reality of the reciprocal nature of family relationships, as well as its importance in language transmission. The older generation needs to tell the stories, and the younger people need to be there to listen to them.

While this gradual attrition has been occurring, and has been a cause for concern, Longgu has also faced the radical attrition (Grenoble & Whaley 2006:17) of a particular language domain as a direct result of the Solomons conflict between Guadalcanal and Malaita (1998–2003). For the purposes of this paper, it could be said that the key issue in the conflict between the people of Guadalcanal and the Malaitan people living there was whether Malaitans had the right to settle there and own land. This is not to say the causes were simple. Writing about the conflict, Naitoro comments that in trying to understand it, "What has struck me most about this conflict is its illusive nature" (2000:2).³

Longgu is a member of the Southeast Solomonic family of the Central/Eastern Oceanic subgroup of languages (Lynch, Ross & Crowley 2002:108–110). The Southeast Solomonic family can be separated into two further groups: Bugotu/Gela/Guadalcanal and Longgu/Malaita/Makira. Longgu is a member of the Longgu/Malaita/Makira branch, but is spoken on the island of Guadalcanal, and with the exception of the Marau area, its geographic neighbors speak languages from the Bugotu/Gela/Guadalcanal branch. The Solomons conflict was fought between people who were originally from the island of Malaita and Longgu's geographic neighbors on the island of Guadalcanal. For the Longgu people, this meant that identifying with either group during the ethnic tension would put them in opposition to the other, both being groups with whom they felt a connection. Longgu people responded by withdrawing and sublimating their identity. This, in turn, resulted in uncertainties of identity and—crucially related to the potential for language survival—low self-esteem.

The complex relationships between Longgu, Guadalcanal, and Malaita led to Longgu people choosing not to fight during the conflict. Older people were instrumental in persuading younger men not to fight, reflecting a level of social cohesion and adherence to traditional ways of decision-making within the community. This contrasts with the situation in another Melanesian community where young men rejected the leadership of elders in a time of conflict (Wiessner 2010). Significantly, the conflict also resulted in older Longgu people blocking the telling of clan stories that express their belief system and identity out of fear that the stories could be misinterpreted, thereby potentially causing further conflict in the future.⁴

The consequences of blocking the clan stories included despondency among community members and a sense of hopelessness about the community's future, since without the clan stories, knowledge about kinship, clan relationships, and land ownership is quickly

³ A detailed account of different perspectives on the causes of the conflict is given in Kabutaulaka (2001).

⁴ The blocking of the stories reflects the complexity of the situation rather than concerns over specific content. See Kwa'ioloa & Burt (2007:114) for a controversial Malaitan perspective on the conflict and a discussion of the belief that Guadalcanal people "are descended from Malaitans."

lost.⁵ As White notes, “Land issues have both economic importance as well as symbolic and emotional significance for people who find their identity in the land. Local knowledge of genealogies and local histories underpins management of land and land disputes” (2007:10). Thus, while blocking the clan stories may potentially prevent future conflict with groups outside the language community, it has negatively impacted the community in the present by indirectly causing land disputes as a result of gaps in knowledge about clan relationships and land ownership. These land disputes in turn contribute to economic difficulties faced by the village. The blocking of information in a time of crisis has been described as a form of self-defense that can lead to the radical attrition of the associated language domain (Grenoble & Whaley 2006:17). Longgu, then, while not an endangered language, has an endangered language domain. As Sheriff (2000) notes, when some forms of knowledge are censored, other forms become more significant. The blocking of information about one aspect of culture has heightened community awareness of the value of other aspects, such as traditional stories told to children and the cultural skills of weaving and carving.

Knowledge within a community can be lost due to fear, as well as to the fragmentation or uneven distribution of knowledge within the community (Bonshek 2008). For Longgu, such fear has resulted in the loss of the clan story language domain and, at the same time, a fragmented distribution of knowledge has meant that cultural practices, traditions, and skills are gradually being lost. The pressure from Solomons Pijin as a language of wider communication and from an education system that uses English as the medium of instruction has created a more mobile and less stable community where traditional skills—and other kinds of cultural knowledge associated with them—are not being securely transmitted. For example, the traditional skills of weaving and carving are known and practiced within the community, but while the knowledge is considered public, it tends to be held within just a few families.⁶ There is no restriction on who can learn to weave or carve (although carving is done only by men), but in a rapidly changing society, if the children of today’s carvers and weavers move to town, are uninterested in local traditions and skills, or marry outside of the area, then soon the skills and knowledge will be lost to the community.

3. LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL MAINTENANCE. Within this sociopolitical context, I proposed a documentation project through discussions between clan chiefs and elders in 2010. The introduction of a new National Languages policy (Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development 2010), which is currently in the pilot stage, has provided the community with a top-down context for their plans (Crystal 2003; Florey & Ewing 2010). The new languages policy will mean that vernacular languages will be used as the

⁵ Under Solomon Islands law, customary land rights are claimed through demonstrating a relationship to a clan in a particular area (Foukona 2007, White 2007).

⁶ In 2012 in the village of Nangali, there was only one man who was considered a “master weaver” in one of its more time-consuming forms, and only one other family of adult siblings who were acknowledged as skilled weavers of the culturally significant *pera* basket. However, many people were able to weave a range of products that are used in daily life.

medium of instruction during the first years of school in the future.⁷ School readers, curriculum materials, and dictionaries will all be needed as part of the policy's implementation. Romaine cautions that language policies that support endangered languages do not necessarily have the desired effect, and that "[w]hat is ostensibly the 'same' policy may lead to different outcomes, depending on the situation in which it operates" (Romaine 2002:196). The new National Languages Policy will not necessarily achieve its authors' vision, which is that "[a]ll Solomon Islanders will learn to speak, write and read in their mother tongue, and the use of our local languages will help to promote literacy and educational achievement in all sectors of our community" (2010:9). However, the policy's conveyed vision of an outcome in which "our languages will continue to be used as a medium of communication to transmit worthwhile information such as knowledge (including indigenous knowledge), skills, values and attitudes from person to person or from generation to generation" (2010:9) is one shared by the Longgu community. The change in government policy, then, fits in well with their desire to maintain their language and culture at a time when they feel the need to do something about language attrition, rather than just talk about it.

As part of the proposed documentation project, the community decided it would like to make a dictionary and suggested topics for a thematic dictionary focused on traditional crafts such as weaving.⁸ Weaving is central to the daily life of the people, and is carried out by both men and women. Weaving skills are used in making mats and a variety of baskets, as well as in building houses. Community leaders made the link between language and cultural revitalization by suggesting that writing a dictionary could be linked to teaching more young people how to weave. The community understands that the languages policy, once implemented, will provide opportunities for both traditional skills and language to be taught within the school context. In this way, planning and writing a dictionary can potentially help solve the problem of fragmented knowledge about some non-secret cultural areas by linking the language to the revitalization of crafts and cultural practices.⁹

Moreover, weaving fits well with the criteria suggested for choosing the topic of a thematic dictionary: it is concrete, a part of daily life, and of interest to the community (Mosel 2004, 2011). Maintaining weaving skills within the village also has a positive impact on the natural environment and on the economic situation of individuals, since through the continued use of woven products and traditional houses the community can remain more self-sufficient, and unnecessary products do not have to be purchased. Harbert (2011:414) has noted that if economic disruption underpins language shift in a community, then activities that contribute to the economic stability of the community should in turn strengthen

⁷ The government is still deliberating on the timing of the policy's implementation.

⁸ There were additional factors connected to the author's earlier work on the language that resulted in the choice of weaving as the topic for the thematic dictionary.

⁹ Participants in a three-day dictionary workshop in July 2012 in Nangali village included teachers, community leaders, and weavers and carvers. On the last day of the workshop, community members including children and people who had not attended the workshop engaged in a morning of weaving. On completion, some participants recorded descriptions of their woven items, or of the cultural significance of the products. Some of these audio files will be included in the electronic version of the weaving dictionary.

a threatened language. In terms of community interest in embarking on the process of writing a dictionary, developing awareness of the connection between economic improvement and language and culture maintenance played a role. For example, through familiarity with life in Honiara, the community is aware of the successes that some Western Province Solomon Islands communities have had in selling traditionally made products to tourists, or for use in both privately owned and official government buildings. Thus, the community's response to the proposed dictionary project was positive and demonstrated the importance of linking practical knowledge and skills to language maintenance. Further, their favorable response reflected the fact that it was a community-directed project rather than a linguist-directed one (Yamada 2007, Czaykowska-Higgins 2009, Florey & Ewing 2010). Fortuitously, a separate interdisciplinary project involving the author and the community (Bonshek & Hill 2011) provided yet greater incentive to act, and also moved the project further into the hands of the community.

The interdisciplinary project links the community with photographs and objects collected by anthropologist Ian Hogbin, who spent four months in the Longgu area in 1933. Hogbin was an excellent photographer, and his photographs are housed in collections at Sydney University's Fisher Archives and Macleay Museum, as well as the Australian Museum in Sydney. In 2011, the author showed a small number of these photographs to people from Nangali village, the most traditional village of the Longgu area, as part of the project. The intention was twofold: to see what could be identified from the photographs (i.e., people, customs) and to show photos of objects displayed in the Australia Museum, which were identified by museum curators as being from Guadalcanal. In viewing and discussing the photographs and objects, community members established the extent of cultural knowledge in a preliminary way, and two Longgu people were invited to Sydney in February 2012 to view and help further annotate the photographs and objects at the Macleay and Australia Museums.

One result was that the old photographs of daily objects including woven baskets and feasting bowls, and of events such as the carving process, furthered the community's resolve to link the revitalization of crafts to the lexicographic process. The photographs provided a concrete reminder of how life had been, what had been lost, and what had remained the same over the course of nearly 80 years. The photographs were not unknown to some older members of the community who had seen copies of Hogbin's book about Longgu society (Hogbin 1964), or who had seen photocopies of its pictures. The effect of seeing the photographs while planning the dictionary project was that the community could see ways to use them in the dictionary. The Hogbin photographs provided the basis for much discussion between village elders and, significantly, between older and younger people about what had changed in their villages and cultural practices. They provided evidence of "the identity and history of the people" that Ostler (2003:176) links to the self-esteem necessary for language survival. While the Solomons conflict had left the community despondent and fearful, with younger people showing significantly less interest in listening to their elders, the photographs and the ideas that sprung from viewing them provided a context for moving forward.

Discussions followed traditional practices with regard to how, and whether, to undertake the project: chiefs of each clan, together with other village elders, first discussed their ideas with one another, and then with the author. At a later stage, younger people

were included and their opinions heard. Following such traditional decision-making procedures was an important step in ensuring that the project had general community support (Czaykowska-Higgins 2009:26). While the initial plan had been to develop one thematic dictionary based on the topic of weaving, the discussions about Hogbin's photographs—particularly those of a feasting bowl from Guadalcanal in the Australian Museum—resulted in the decision to develop three thematic dictionaries. Two of these would be linked to revitalization of the traditional crafts of weaving and carving, while the third would focus on the traditional skills and knowledge related to fishing. Again, traditional modes of working were important, with a group leader established for each thematic dictionary.

Loss of a significant language domain as a result of conflict—at least for now—has had a profound effect on the morale of Longgu people. On the other hand, the community's awareness of the seriousness of this situation has played a role in their determination to take action and maintain their language in general. While the gradual attrition of language may not be a cause for alarm (Grenoble & Whaley 2006), a traumatic loss or event can provide a trigger for a community to take action.

4. CONCLUSION. The initial positive response of the Longgu community to a dictionary project highlights the importance of three things. First, the triggers of language loss can also be triggers of language maintenance. Awareness of the consequences of losing a culturally essential language domain created an environment in which it was important to the community to do something constructive and healing, and to prevent further language loss. Secondly, while top-down policies were essential in providing a purpose for writing a dictionary (i.e., its use in schools), seeing photographs of their families and villages from nearly 80 years ago allowed the community to imagine the future. While the political conflict had left them feeling despondent and inward-looking, the photographs acted as a mirror reflecting their lives and culture—and they liked what they saw. In a small but concrete way, this connection with the community's history improved self-esteem, giving community members a sense of pride and a desire to protect their culture and language. Thirdly, discussing and planning the dictionary project according to traditional decision-making processes enabled community members to envisage the lexicographic project and its outcomes as beneficial to them and to their children. While there is no certainty about the prospect for success in the community's plans to revitalize crafts, the energy and optimism evident in the initial stages of the project supports the general point that dictionaries can play a role in increasing the self-esteem of a language community. Within the context of a new languages policy, it should also play a concrete role in language and cultural maintenance.

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