Factors favoring and disfavoring obsolescence in the South Pacific: a case study of Rotuman

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Abstract

The Rotuman language situation is unique in many ways. The language has no official status in Fiji, nor is it the medium of education on the island of Rotuma, though literacy rates are high. There is virtually no reading material in Rotuman, with the exception of the recently published Bible. The language has no close relatives, its nearest relations being Fijian and the Polynesian languages within the Eastern Oceanic subgroup of the Austronesian family. The size of the island and its relative isolation from Fiji's main islands, to and from which there is sparse transportation, are additional obstacles. With no restaurants or hotels, tourism is not encouraged, though there has been wavering on the part of the Council of Chiefs on this matter. The only cash crop is copra; various industries and businesses have failed. The island relies largely on remittances from relatives living overseas. Indeed, recent rumblings about Rotuman independence reflect feelings of frustration over the slow rate of development on the island. This paper looks at the viability of Rotuman, following the approach proposed by Edwards (1992) and modified by Grenoble and Whaley (1998), to provide a picture of the factors which affect language maintenance and obsolescence in insular regions of the South Pacific.

1. Introduction

David Crystal, in his book *Language Death* (2000: 92), claims that the top priority for saving the world's endangered languages is "information gathering." But information gathering must be oriented to some theoretical framework. "Such a framework would yield models which could identify and inter-relate the relevant variables involved in endangerment, and these models would generate empirical hypotheses about such matters as rate of decline or stages in revival."

0165–2516/05/0172–0079

One such framework, produced by John Edwards (1992), suggested eleven perspectives by which human groups can be characterized: demography, sociology, linguistics, psychology, history, political/law/government, geography, education, religion, economics, and the media. Each of these has relevance over three domains: speaker or speakers, language, and setting. This forms 33 cells, each one associated with a question which a researcher can ask to evaluate the cell, eventually compiling sufficient information to form a prognosis about the future viability of a particular language.

Grenoble and Whaley (1998) modified Edwards' original framework (which he viewed as a work in progress) in three major ways (1998: 31). (1) They added the perspective of literacy, creating twelve categories; (2) they suggested that the various perspectives ought to be weighted, with perhaps economics as the most important; and (3) they proposed that Edwards' "setting" be refined into broad area settings, national settings, regional settings, and local settings. In addition, they proposed some name changes to his categories: political / law / government became "political," and the media became "technology."

At the end of his article, Edwards (1992: 52) mentions personal communication with Byram, who notes the value of a series of "case monographs," by which different language situations would be evaluated along the same dimensions. My proposal here is to apply the revised framework to the Rotuman language situation, to try to determine its viability and potential for survival, as well as to try to identify those factors which are the most significant for language survival in the South Pacific context. To simplify my discussion, I have combined similar categories. This is not meant to be taken as a revision of the 12-perspective framework, however. I interpret "setting" as follows: the island of Rotuma is local, the Fiji archipelago is national, and the South Pacific, encompassing Micronesia, Polynesia, and Melanesia, is the broad area setting.

2. Geography and history

The island of Rotuma, with an area of 44 square kilometers, lies 450 kilometers northwest of the main islands of Fiji at approximately 12 degrees south and 177 degrees east. An island in a sea of islands, its closest neighbors are Kiribati, Vanuatu, the Solomons, and Futuna, the latter being the nearest at 400 km to the east. Its isolation is so great that during the British colonial period, political troublemakers were banished from Viti Levu to Rotuma as punishment.

Rotuma is an immensely fertile island of volcanic origin. Its highest peak is 260 meters high. It receives an average of 350 cm of rainfall per year.

It is unknown when people first arrived on the island of Rotuma. Judging from both legends and linguistic borrowings, it is clear that Rotumans had early contact with both Tonga and Samoa. The first known European contact was in 1791 when the *H.M.S. Pandora* stopped in Rotuma, looking for *Bounty* mutineers. Later many Rotumans were recruited to serve on European whaling and trading ships; the Rotuman language thus became one of the sources of Pacific pidgins and creoles which developed throughout the South Pacific (Keesing 1988). In 1881, Rotuman chiefs ceded their island to Great Britain, which chose to administer it together with the islands known collectively as "Fiji." When the colony declared independence in 1970, Rotuma became part of the new nation of Fiji.

The Rotuman language, together with Fijian and the Polynesian languages, form the Central Pacific subgroup of Oceanic languages (Grace 1967), but it is not closely related to any of the others in the group.

3. Demography and sociology

Rotumans are ethnic Polynesians, in contrast to the indigenous people of the main islands of Fiji, who are Melanesians. Of a total of 9,000 speakers of Rotuman (Grimes and Grimes 2000), approximately 2,528 are living on the island of Rotuma; perhaps 6,000 are in scattered, mostly urban, communities in Vanua Levu and Viti Levu (the main islands in Fiji); and the remainder are in overseas communities in Australia, New Zealand, and the US. The population on Rotuma hit its peak in 1966, when it was 3,235; the current population is down 22% from that figure. In 1956, the Rotumans on Rotuma constituted 68% of the total Rotuman population worldwide; in 1986 they constituted but 30%; today the percentage is under 25% (Howard and Rensel 1994). This decrease can be primarily attributed to emigration to Fiji's main islands. Consequently, the population on Rotuma exhibits a high dependency ratio — that is, there are nearly as many people between birth and 14 years of age and over 60 as there are between the ages of 15 and 59 (Chandra and Mason 1998: 44).

There are no real social classes among Rotumans, apart from the chiefs, who inherit their titles. The main social divisions are religion- and territory-based. People hold distinct stereotypes of residents of each of Rotuma's seven districts, especially of those two districts considered to be Roman Catholic, since the majority of the population is Methodist.

Most people on the island are subsistence farmers, planting an average of four hectares of land. Taro, yams, tapioca, breadfruit, and bananas are the main products. The only product which is exported is copra.

Most of the personal income of Rotuman residents comes from overseas remittances.

In the cities and towns of Vanua Levu and Viti Levu, Rotumans hold relatively high positions — for example, in the goldmining industry. They thus form an elite class, distinct from chiefs, and are esteemed based on education, occupation, and wealth. Howard and Howard (1977: 194) reported that, at the time of their study, "quite a few" Rotuman women had Melanesian Fijian servants, but they knew no instances of the reverse situation.

4. Politics and religion

Rotuma is ruled by a Council of Chiefs, which consists of paramount chiefs plus elected representatives from each district. A district officer serves as advisor to the Council. Following the 2000 coup, Rotumans tried to get increased representation in the national government, but they were unsuccessful. Today, as in pre-coup days, they have one representative and one senator. Because of a perceived lack of attention by the Fiji national government, some have called for the government to assign Rotuma a special autonomous status (Howard and Rensel 1997), and others have demanded outright independence.

English is the official language of the nation of Fiji, although Fijian and Hindi are de facto official, due to their large numbers of native speakers. Rotuman has no official status in the country, despite its 8,000+ speakers and the relative prominence of its population.

The first Christian missionaries arrived in Rotuma in the 1860s. Today, the island of Rotuma has 25 churches — 16 Methodist, 8 Roman Catholic, and 1 Seventh Day Adventist. The Catholics were defeated by the Methodists in the religious wars of 1878, and though outward warring has long since ceased, differences, including language differences, remain. For instance, the Catholics don't use the "Methodist" orthography which was devised by the Methodist missionary Maxwell Churchward, and the two groups have until recently used variant forms for "God" and "Jesus." The church holds a key place in the lives of Rotumans. It provides their main sense of community; the church is where people gather; and it is one of the few places where written Rotuman, in the form of Bible and hymnbook, is evident.

On the national level, the Methodist church is named the "Methodist Church of Fiji and Rotuma." In Suva, there is a Rotuman church where the Rotuman language is actively used, even though its worshippers might use another language or languages outside of church.

5. Education and literacy

Rotuma has four primary schools and one high school, which opened in 1965. The most recently available figures indicate that there are 234 high-school students and fourteen teachers, all Rotumans. In line with the transitional bilingual educational policy of Fiji, which was put into effect in 1926, English is the medium of instruction after grade 3, even though, unlike most of Fiji (Lotherington 1997: 92), Rotuman classrooms are homogeneous. Rotuman, which is the medium for the first three years, remains a school subject after that. A series of Rotuman-language readers has been developed by Elizabeth Inia, but only one has been printed. The rest remain unprinted, apparently due to lack of funds. Many Rotuman parents prefer to school their children in the cities of Fiji, or even outside the country, in spite of the fact that Form Five is available on Rotuma. There is no adult education on Rotuma, though there is an informal once-a-week class in which adults learn about Rotuman ceremonies.

On Fiji's main islands, Rotumans are generally more educated than the other Fijians. Howard and Rensel (1997) state that, according to the 1986 census, 58% of Rotumans reported having completed Form One or higher, and over 4% reported some postsecondary education. In contrast, the figures for Fijians from the main islands were 47% and 1.5%. The Rotuman language was once offered as a school subject, for Rotumans and non-Rotumans alike. Likewise, there once was a Rotuman-language course offered at the University of the South Pacific in Suva. Neither opportunity for studying Rotuman outside of Rotuma exists any longer (Fiona Vamarasi, personal communication).

The literacy rate among Rotumans is estimated to be as high as 85%–90%. However, very little vernacular literature is available, and almost no secular literature. Most people own a Bible and a hymnal; a book of legends, *Tales of a Lonely Island*, which was first published in 1939 and reprinted in 1998, is owned by few Rotumans. Perhaps because of this lack of literature, there is relatively little literacy practice on the island. The main exception is in church, where only Rotuman Bibles and hymnbooks are used. The prospect of making traditional stories available in writing is dim, as there are no longer any recognized storytellers. This is a serious matter, as Lotherington (1999: 424) notes: "Without vernacular literature, vernacular literacy cannot be taught." The few written signs that one encounters around the island are sometimes in English, sometimes in Rotuman. An announcement put up in the Rotuman post office in late 2000 about an aerobics class was, predictably, written in English. Others about more traditional topics were in Rotuman.

Vilsoni Hereniko, a Rotuman who grew up in Rotuma, is a celebrated and much-published playwright at the University of Hawaii. His plays, mostly about Rotuman subjects, have been written in English. In 2004, a feature film, *The Land Has Eyes*, written and directed by Hereniko, was released. It was filmed in Rotuma, used mostly Rotuman actors, and was in the Rotuman language. It has played in film festivals around the world to much acclaim. This notoriety could give the language new credibility as a literary medium.

The standard orthography was developed by Dr. Maxwell Churchward (1940), a Methodist missionary who lived on the island for six years between 1922 and 1936. It replaced an extremely chaotic situation which existed up to that point. Content words in Rotuman have two forms (called by Churchward "complete" and "incomplete"), one derived from the other by one of four processes. For example, "flower" is *hosa* in the complete and *hoas* in the incomplete. Each form is used in particular syntactic-semantic situations; in other words, their use is not interchangeable. Before Churchward, the Methodists wrote all words in the complete form only, regardless of which one was actually required in the context, while the Catholics wrote all words in the incomplete form only. Churchward decided that a word should be written as it was spoken, sometimes in the complete, sometimes in the incomplete. But this necessitated extra vowel symbols, to represent, for example, front rounded vowels which only occur as the result of the process of umlauting in the incomplete. His orthography uses diacritics — an ⟨å⟩ represents a lower-mid front vowel; an ⟨ạ̊⟩ represents a low back rounded vowel; ⟨ä⟩, ⟨ö⟩, and ⟨ü⟩ represent a low front vowel, a mid front rounded vowel, and a high front rounded vowel, respectively; and ⟨ā⟩ ⟨ē⟩ ⟨ī⟩ ⟨ō⟩ ⟨ū⟩ represent long vowels.

This "official" or "standard" orthography remains problematic some seventy years after it was proposed. One reason is that Catholics have never accepted it. For example, where the standard uses ⟨j⟩ to represent a voiceless affricate, the Catholics write ⟨ts⟩; where the standard writes the sequence ⟨äe⟩, Catholics write ⟨ee⟩. Traditionally the Catholic name for "God" has been *'atua* (which means 'ghost' to the Protestants) while the Protestant word is *ạ̊itu*. A recent church ruling has changed the Catholic word to conform to the Protestant one, but a faction of Catholics on Rotuma has refused to accept this change. The other main problem with the orthography is that when people write Rotuman, they often omit the diacritics altogether, because they are cumbersome, often hard to see when handwritten, and most people are unsure about when to use them. Several recent publications, including a book of Rotuman proverbs (Inia 1998), *A New Rotuman Dictionary* (Inia et al. 1998), and

the complete Bible, all diverge from Churchward's orthography by using an ⟨å⟩ when it occurs after ⟨u⟩. For example, *hanua* 'land, country' in Churchward's dictionary appears with a final ⟨å⟩ in the newer publications. This change was made by the authors to indicate the low back rounded pronunciation of the ⟨a⟩, even though that pronunciation is predictable and not phonemic. This policy has been abandoned in a 2001 publication on Rotuman ceremonies. In any case, it seems that all the diacritics could easily be left out, and little ambiguity would result.

6. Technology and economics

In the eight years between 1992 and 2000, the only technological advance on Rotuma was the introduction of a Telecom satellite telephone system, which makes intra-island and overseas communication possible. This allows Rotumans to speak to emigrants in the rest of Fiji, and in so doing maintain some contact with the outside world, and for migrant Rotumans to keep in touch with their island home. However, the rate is high — reported to be around 45 Fijian cents per minute. As a consequence, over the period of a few weeks in 2001, 250 phones were disconnected due to unpaid bills. In other areas, however, it seems that the island has stagnated technologically. Radios are used very little, since the only station that can be received is Radio Tuvalu. There is still no island-wide electricity, only individual generators and some solar panels. The EEC has committed to providing a generator for the entire community, according to Howard and Rensel (1994: 28), but the seriousness of its promise remains to be seen. Transportation around the island is difficult, relying on two buses and privately owned trucks and motor bikes. One of the biggest needs is reliable shipping service to and from the other islands of Fiji. When the scheduled ship fails to make its monthly trip, shops run dry, fuel runs out, and taro rots. A fuel depot at Hunsolo, run by Mobil, was open for a few years before closing in 2004. The lack of fuel, in turn, affects the air connections with the other islands. Immediately after Christmas of 2000, when scores of visitors were wanting to return to Suva, some with ongoing overseas connections, many flights had to be cancelled because there was no fuel on Rotuma to allow planes to refuel for the return flight. Air Fiji flights between Rotuma and Viti Levu now cost about F$439 return. This is a huge amount for people who make their living by occasionally selling copra.

With no reliable electricity and no available server, Internet connections with Rotuma are not likely in the near future. One report estimates that one of twelve phone lines would have to be dedicated to Internet access and would cost F$1200 per month. One hopeful sign in the media occurred in December 2000, when the *Daily Post* newspaper in Fiji began a weekly Rotuman-language edition, *Noa'ia Rotuma*. Volume 1, Number 1 included four pages of articles and photographs about Rotuman events and customs. However, this paper was not shipped directly to Rotuma, so that the only way its residents could receive it was by post from individuals in other parts of Fiji. When a personnel change was made at the newspaper, *Noa'ia Rotuma* was eliminated after less than two years in circulation.

Signs of economic well-being are hard to find. The cooperatives which had been a mainstay of Rotuman island life for decades, first the Rotuma Co-operative Association and later Raho, have both closed. The only stores that remain are small ones, mostly in individual houses, which sell a few basic foodstuffs and toiletry articles at a high cost. There once was a Rotuman branch of the National Bank of Fiji, until it closed due to scandal. Since the bank was financing Raho, it collapsed, putting thirty employees out of work. There is no place on the island to exchange foreign currency, though during the Christmas holidays there are a number of foreign visitors. The Rotuma Hospital, as of this writing, has no ambulance and no doctor in residence, and a lack of medicines has long been a problem. Funds to improve the hospital are being solicited from overseas Rotumans.

Copra is the only agricultural product which brings in cash, though its export is dependent on the uncertain shipping lines. Overseas remittances are very important to the island's economic health. According to Rensel (1993), between 1982 and 1988 monthly remittances averaged F$10,000; one could reasonably surmise that those amounts have risen since that time. Among income-earners, truckers earn the highest income, while the government and schools employ the most people. However, the majority of people remain subsistence farmers. A potential source of income is the *Daystar* cruise ship, which began landing once or twice a year in 1986; 1,000 passengers spent a day on the island, for which the line paid F$20,000. But in 1989, disagreements over the distribution of landing fees terminated this agreement.

The May 2000 coup and its aftermath in Fiji seriously hurt tourism, one of the nation's main revenue sources, as well as other industries such as sugar cane production, which depend on access to markets. It still remains to be seen what the long-term consequences of this will be on the economic health of the nation, and on Rotuma.

7. Linguistics and psychology

Nearly all people on Rotuma use Rotuman. The only exception would be the few residents of Rotuma who are not Rotumans. It is the language of home, church, and everyday social activities. In addition, younger people are bi- or multilingual — in English (at the very least), Fijian, and Hindi, the last two being required school subjects. Away from the school compound English is used mostly with overseas visitors, and for more formal writing tasks. A Rotuman who speaks English to other Rotumans is considered to be "showing off," since Rotuman will always be adequate for such communication (Jotama Vamarasi, personal communication).

Away from Rotuma the language situation is quite different. Some speak the language natively, some Rotumans know no Rotuman, and for others it is a second or third language, after English and Fijian. Melanesian Fijians and Indians do not, for the most part, know Rotuman, but use English as the language of interethnic communication.

Whereas intermarriage was once frowned upon, it is now quite acceptable. Because of intermarriage and bi-ethnic children, the concept of "Rotumanness" has become rather fuzzy. It is not only language that is being lost by Rotuman migrants; it is also cultural knowledge, such as how to conduct a *mamasa* 'drying ceremony'. Rotuman parents in Viti Levu and Vanua Levu have expressed concern over these cultural losses, and are trying to provide extra language and culture instruction for their children.

Rotumans are a very proud people. They are proud of their island, their culture, and their language. Rotumans have some kinship with Melanesian Fijians, inasmuch as both groups consider their two cultures to be indigenous to the islands. Rotumans are apparently not sufficiently numerous or politically powerful to inspire strong feelings, either positive or negative, on the part of Melanesian Fijians and Indians.

Movements toward independence of Rotuma from the nation of Fiji have sprung up from time to time, most recently in 2000. Rotumans feel ignored by the Fiji national government and believe that development is proceeding too slowly. Political and economic factors may do more to create an ethnic rift than any cultural animosity would.

8. Conclusion: the viability of Rotuman

I have examined here the twelve factors of the Grenoble and Whaley version of the Edwards framework, looking at each factor in two areas, the island of Rotuma and Fiji proper. It is clear that these factors influence

each other, and any discussion of one inevitably makes reference to others. Issues of language endangerment and loss are complex and multi-faceted, and no single factor can ever account for disastrous results. Nor is it true that a particular combination of factors which explains one situation necessarily accounts for another situation in the same geographical area. Each case is unique, and the factors involved will also be unique.

A number of factors weigh in favor of the continued health and viability of the Rotuman language. One of these is geography — both the isolation of the island, and its agricultural richness. Its people are not constantly being exposed to English-language speakers. They live on the island because, for the most part, they have chosen to live there, apart from the rest of the world, including its forms of communication. It is possible to hear the Rotuman language being used nearly all of the time, except when there are a lot of visitors, as at Christmas time. The extreme fertility of the island means that people can survive there, and have plenty to eat, even at such a great distance from other places.

Linguistics and psychology are also on the side of Rotuman maintenance. The Rotumans have a linguistic and ethnic uniqueness that makes them distinct from other groups in Fiji, and promotes their strong identity. Their language, though genetically related to Fijian, is structurally very different from it. If the two languages were more similar, as is the case with the various other indigenous languages of Fiji, there might be more blending of morphosyntactic properties. This has not happened to any noticeable degree. Likewise, the Polynesian Rotumans are physically distinguishable from the Melanesian Fijians, the Indians, and the Anglo-Fijians. Their Polynesian culture is distinct.

Religion is another factor which, in the Rotuman situation, supports the continued use of the Rotuman language. The Methodist church is strong in both Rotuma and the rest of Fiji, and it uses the Rotuman language almost exclusively. More importantly, it uses written Rotuman in its hymnbooks and Bibles, providing the single domain where Rotumans routinely participate in literacy practices in their own language.

But there are also factors that suggest the language is in trouble. One of these is demographic. Even though the language situation on the island is strong, as I have indicated, Rotumans on Rotuma constitute only about 25% of the worldwide Rotuman population. 2,500 people is very few, especially when they lack political power in the nation, and in the Pacific region. Overseas Rotumans, in Fiji or elsewhere, are not concentrated in large communities, so language loss in those places is happening rapidly.

The educational system is threatening to language maintenance. With English as the medium of education after grade 3, the younger generation of Rotumans is growing up to view English as the language of choice

over Rotuman, as the language that will bring them financial independence and material success. A corollary of the bilingual education policy is that there is no incentive to produce written Rotuman-language materials when there is no great need for them in the schools. As a result, Rotumans do not have anything to read in their own language, apart from a few religious materials. Down the line it will certainly be easier to give up a language which does not have a literary tradition of any kind.

Another key factor is economics. Rotuma has been a subsistence agricultural area for centuries. With its rich alluvial soil, there is abundant food, and people are satisfied to live off the land. But at some point in the future, perhaps the near future, subsistence farming may no longer be enough, and people will question whether it is necessary for people to die due to inadequate local medical facilities and poor transportation to better regional facilities. The lure of material goods may also have a greater impact than it now has.

It is the education and the economy together which are driving young people to move away from Rotuma, in search of more and better education and jobs. As the remittances of these Rotumans come to play a larger and larger role in the economy of the island, the influence of the overseas Rotumans will also increase. And it is they who are rapidly losing their hold on the Rotuman language and culture. This reversal of influence could possibly facilitate bringing foreign, mostly Western, values and ways of life to Rotuma, which has so long resisted them. And along with a new way of life will come a new way of thinking and, eventually, a new system for expressing those thoughts. There is still time to avoid this, but work must begin soon.

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