Languages in contact in the Pacific:
An observation of Palauan orthography

Kazuko Matsumoto
University of Tokyo

SUMMARY:

This paper presents an ethnographic study of Palauan language contact and preservation with reference to its orthography in the Republic of Palau in the Western Pacific. Owing to its history of occupations (Spain 1885-1899; Germany 1899-1914; Japan 1914-1945; the U.S. 1945-1994), its lately achieved political independence (as the Republic of Palau in 1994) and its economic reliance on prolonged financial support from Japan and the U.S., a rather unique and interesting diglossic situation has arisen.

This paper firstly assesses the extent to which the heritage language, Palauan, is preserved, by conducting a domain analysis of language use from the past to present in this multilingual diglossic nation-state. Secondly, it discusses the reasons why it is difficult to preserve Palauan.

My ethnographic questionnaire survey and long-term participant observation uncover two different patterns in the way that Palauan is preserved. Firstly, Palauan as a “spoken” language is, at this point in time, well preserved, particularly, in the home domain. Secondly, Palauan as a “written” language is not widely accepted nor practiced, whereas English as the “high” and written language is predominantly learnt in the school domain and used in the work and media domains as well as in official documents. Although the use of Palauan as a “written” language is so rare in reality, it is also the case that the Palauan writing system currently has dual orthographies depending on the age of the user. The older generation still mainly use Japanese script kana (both katakana and hiragana) as phonogram for Palauan, while the younger generation adopt the Roman alphabet.

The five main reasons why Palauan orthography is not widely used are discussed. First and foremost, the past colonial legacy continues to engender a diglossic mind that recognises Palauan
as a “low” and solely “spoken” language. Secondly, Palau is a traditionally oral society and did not have an established orthography before the colonial period; this further strengthens the diglossic way of thinking. Thirdly, how to spell Palauan has been controversial and is still unstable. Fourthly, educational attempts to teach Palauan at school do not seem to be effective. Finally, not Palauan but English writing ability is highly valued and required in order to obtain a job in the public sector which offers more jobs and pays better than the private sector. Overall, a language situation typical of post-colonial nations is highlighted: Palauan as the national, official and written language is merely decorative and symbolic, regardless of what the Constitution of the country states.

This paper concludes with an emphasis upon the importance of the language being in demand in the wider world of work, supporting the similar claims by Bourdieu (1982), Nichols (1983), Milroy (1987), Lippi-Green (1989) and Eckert (1990). It will be extremely difficult to preserve the heritage language in the long run, if the language is only taught at school yet is not highly valued and practiced in the ‘real’ world of work which follows.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY:**

AUTHOR:

Kazuko MATSUMOTO, Ph.D.
Department of Language Information Sciences
University of Tokyo
3-8-1 Komaba, Meguro
Tokyo 153-8902
Japan
URL: http://gamp.c.u-tokyo.ac.jp/~kmatsu/index_eng.html