
Yapese, a Micronesian Language: Past and Future

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ABSTRACT

The following is an examination of the linguistic history of the Micronesian islands in general and the island of Yap more specifically. It explores how through historical events and foreign hegemony, the local languages of Micronesia have lost ground to more globally dominant languages. An in-depth interview was conducted with a small number of the islanders of Yap about their knowledge of the Yapese language, as well as their frequency and situational use of the language. Additionally, the participants were asked about the level of mastery of Yapese and other island languages among their parents and their grandparents. Based on the Yapese interviewed in this study, it seems the local languages are indeed losing ground to English.

Keywords: Yapese, Micronesia, Intergenerational Transmission, Language Erosion

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, linguists around the world have come to the alarming realization that languages are dying at a surprisingly rapid rate. This rate of language death seems to be out-pacing that of endangered biological species. Depending on what is considered a language as opposed to a dialect, it has been estimated that there are between 6,000 to 6,500 living languages currently in existence in the world. Out of this number, it is estimated that between 20% to 50% of these languages are destined for extinction or are currently “moribund”. This shockingly large number of dying languages is thought to have been brought about by causes such as genocides, industrialization, migrations, natural disasters, wars, and more recently, electronic media proliferation (Krauss, 1992; Gordon, 2005).

In the most recent history, environmental causes have led to the displacement of local populations which in turn has led to the eventual loss of those particular local languages. This can be seen in numerous urbanization projects all over the world, where there is forced migration of local populations and the subsequent loss of local languages or dialects. Even major electrical projects and dams can cause population displacement and the loss of languages. The Three Gorges Dam project in China which resulted in the displacement of 1.3 million people, and Aswan Dam in Egypt which displaced at least 100,000 Egyptians, can both be considered examples of this type of man-made phenomenon (Wee, 2002).

This paper will present a brief overview of the recent language history of Micronesia and then share the results of a survey study on local language use that was conducted on Yap, one of the Micronesian islands. The paper will be divided into three main sections: the first section will look at the historical influences on the languages of Micronesia, the second section will consider the concept of intergenerational transmission of language and its importance to language preservation, and the third section will present the results of the research study and discuss what this may reveal about the continued viability of the Yapese language.

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HISTORICAL INFLUENCES ON MICRONESIAN LANGUAGES

The footprint of industrialization and urbanization can be found in all corners of the planet, even in far-reaching and remote areas of the world such as the Pacific islands. The Pacific Ocean, at 69.4 million square miles, covers a vast area of our planet. Many islands in the Pacific are inhabited and their populations speak a group of related languages collectively labeled “Austronesian.” Austronesian, which was recognized as a separate language family as early as the beginning of the 1700s, is a fairly large family that includes one sixth of the world’s languages, approximately 1,200 languages in all. Today several hundred million people, around six percent of the world’s population, speak an Austronesian language (Intoh, 1996; Sakiyama, 1999).

Micronesia includes thousands of islands on the western Pacific, east of the Philippines, with Melanesia to the south and Polynesia to the east in the central Pacific. The total area of these islands is often referred to as Oceania. Approximately 460 languages are spoken across Oceania. Around 350 of the Austronesian languages of the region are spoken in Melanesia, close to 20 in Polynesia, 18 in Micronesia and approximately 100 in New Guinea.

Micronesia includes many countries such as the Federated States of Micronesia which has 607 islands and covers over one million miles of ocean. Currently there are 18 languages spoken in the Federated States of Micronesia which was formed in 1986, and includes the states of Chuuk, Pohnpei, Yap and Kosrae. These islands house a population of over 100,000 people. Yap, the westernmost among the Federated States of Micronesia, includes five islands and fourteen atolls and is home to roughly 7,300 people (Mawyer, 2008; Sakiyama, 1999).

Micronesia was first colonized by the Spanish during the 16th Century. After the defeat of Spain during the Spanish-American war, Spain sold its interest to Germany. Germany held on to the islands until the start of the First World War, and then in 1914 the Japanese took over the islands and gradually over the next few decades 100,000 Japanese migrated to various Micronesian islands. In 1945, American forces took control of the Micronesian islands and during a brief period of about two years, the United States naval forces assumed the administrative role for the islands.

Following this naval period, in 1947 a trust territory was formed in the area by the United Nations. The United States was named as the trustee of many of the Micronesian islands including Yap and the Marshall Islands. This region was effectively under the control of the US government until the Constitutional Convention of 1978, when the people of four of the islands (Yap, Chuuk, Pohnpei and Kosrae) voted for sovereignty and self-determination. The process of formation and the recognition of the Federated States of Micronesia took many years, but finally in 1986, with the approval of the US Congress, the Federated States of Micronesia effectively took over the governance of the islands (Haglelgam, 2013).

The historical influence of many different governments in Micronesia’s past has left its mark on the cultural landscape and the languages spoken on the islands even today. Two groups of occupiers had a lasting influence on the Micronesian culture and language. Historically, the first was Japan. The Japanese, when they initially came to Micronesia had little interest in trading with the indigenous population and had no industrial exploitation plans. As a result, the early migration to the islands was limited to soldiers and Japanese governmental agents. The initial interactions were limited to the Japanese giving the orders and the locals learning enough Japanese to follow the orders.

During this era, it is speculated that the Japanese were not only interested in increasing their economic and political influence in the Pacific, but also wanted to replace the local languages with the Japanese language. To this end, wherever they would occupy the aim was to establish Japanese schools and

slowly erode the local languages in the interest of promoting Japanese. This goal was much harder to achieve in occupied counties such as Taiwan where there were already well established schools and linguistic institutions, but in Micronesia, with a strong oral tradition and little institutional literacy, the introduction of Japanese schools was better received by the islanders (Oster, 2005).

Additionally, a growing number of Japanese migrated to the islands and within about fifty years of the occupation many islanders learned Japanese in addition to their local languages. This is evidenced by the ability of most of the elderly islanders to speak Japanese to this day. However, the defeat of Japan in the Pacific put an end to the domination of the Japanese government and the Japanese language in Micronesia (Muhlhausler and Tryon, 1996).

The United States is the second country whose language and culture has influenced Micronesia. Although the Federated States of Micronesia today is an independent country, its official language remains English. One argument for the domination of English in the islands is the linguistic diversity of the islands and the need for a unifying language to facilitate the ease of communication, governance and commerce among the islands. But if there is a need for a unifying language, then why English and not Japanese, which had a longer history in the area?

One answer to this question looks to the international domination of English and the more recent historical influence of the US on the islands. Two billion people, nearly one third of the world's population, live in a country where English is an official language. Additionally, English is the main language of over 57 countries. It serves as the lingua franca of our time and is the main language of science, commerce and entertainment. So given the unparalleled domination of English all over the world, why should Micronesia be an exception (Rubenstein, 2013)?

Another reason for the influence of English in the area is of a geo-political and economic nature and the result of historical compromises. At the conclusion of the Second World War when the United States became the main trustee of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands (TTPI), American influence increased in Micronesia. In 1986 the American government and the Federated States signed a Compact of Free Association.

According to the terms of this Compact, the United States military would get the exclusive use of land, water and Micronesian airspace, and in return it would provide the island with over \$100 million in development aid annually. Furthermore, this Compact provided the citizens of Micronesia with the right to enter and work in the United States and all American territories in and outside of the Pacific region. This economic reliance on the United States and the right of free and frequent passage to the English speaking US and its territories clearly has strengthened the hold of the English language on the islands (“The Federated states of Micronesia: The push to Migrate”, 2003).

In addition to English there are numerous indigenous languages spoken throughout the Micronesian Islands. These languages include Chuukese, Kapingamarangi, Kosraean, Mokilese, Mortlockese, Namonuito, Ngatik Men's Creole, Nguluwan, Nukuoro, Paafang, Pingelapese, Pohnpeian, Puluwatese, Satawalese, Ulithian, Woleaian and Yapese. All of these languages are used by the local populations of the islands and like many other languages in the Pacific region, they are each spoken by fairly small populations. Most Pacific Islanders, such as those who live on Yap, are often bilingual or multilingual.

By far the most common among these Oceanic languages is Chuukese which has around 50,000 speakers in different parts of Micronesia, including the Carolina Islands and as far away as Guam. The second common language of this group is Pohnpeian with close to 30,000 users. The rest of these local languages have relatively few speakers ranging from 8,000 (Kosraean) to the least commonly

spoken languages among this group, Nukuoro with an estimated 800 speakers and Nguluwan which is estimated to have fewer than 50 speakers and is nearly extinct. From among these languages the ones that have a writing system such as Yapese, Kosraean and Chuukese use the Latin alphabet (Lewis, Simons & Fennig, 2015).

Because of movement among the islands and the historical patterns of migration and commerce, there are no rigid geographical boundaries for the speakers of these languages. In fact, most islanders tend to speak not only English but more than one local language depending on the island they live on. For the most part these languages are not taught in elementary or secondary schools, partially due to the lack of trained teachers. There has been some concern among linguists about the lack of emphasis on teaching these local languages.

To this end, in the 1970s there was a fourteen-year multi-million dollar program launched by the University of Hawaii to document and reference these languages as well as train islanders in language education and promote the literacy rates of the various Micronesian languages. Decades later, the first two projects involving documenting and referencing were deemed successful. However, the rate of literacy in Micronesian languages has not significantly improved and the teaching of these languages is still a low priority among the educators and the local government (Rehg, 2004).

INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF LANGUAGES

One of the most important predictors of the survival of a language is the number of children and young people who speak it and whether or not the current speakers teach it to the next generation. If parents stop teaching their heritage language to their children then the future generations don't have the opportunity to learn the language and there will be no intergenerational transmission of that particular language. The decision of parents to spend the time and the effort to teach their heritage language to their children has multi-generational consequences. But why should parents consciously decide to deprive their children and grandchildren of their linguistic heritage? Even beyond the linguistic considerations, we know that a great deal of cultural transmission is only possible through the use of heritage languages and indeed at times a language is the only way to understand a culture in a nuanced way. As Khaled Hosseini so aptly put it, “If culture is a house, then language is the key to the front door” (Hosseini, 2012).

One of the reasons for parents deciding against transmitting their heritage language to the next generation lies in the institutional and societal promotion associated with the use of that language. If a language is hardly ever used outside of the home and provides no clear advantage to its speakers in the community, then the parents may wonder if it is worth the time and the effort to teach it to their children. Gradually, the heritage language is only used among the adults and older members of the family and after the passing of the older generation the language slowly dies in the community.

This is evidenced by the moribund status of about 50 languages including 90% of the languages in Alaska and the northern part of Russia. Alaska has 20 native languages out of which only two, Central and Siberian Yupik Eskimo, as of 1990, were still being learned by children. Another example is the case of Native American languages in the US and Canada. The rate of moribund languages among this group is particularly distressing. Out of the 187 Native American languages traditionally spoken by these populations, 149 (80%) are no longer being learned by the next generation. Even in the Pacific there are aboriginal languages of Australia of which close to 90% are almost certainly destined to extinction. Overall, 75% of the languages that were in use in Australia, Canada and the United States in the 1950s are either extinct or are doomed to extinction in the coming years (Krauss, 1992; Lewis & Simons, 2010; Simons and Lewis, 2013).

How can we be sure that these native languages are following the path of extinction? Is it possible for these languages to become revitalized and once again “vigorous” or “institutional?” Based on governmental policies, economic changes and changes in migration patterns such sudden revitalizations are possible but not probable or likely. Currently, among the most reliable ways to predict the future of a language is to adopt one of the available linguistic endangerment assessment tools.

One of these tools is Fishman’s Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS). This scale focuses on the level of disruption of the language and by using the scale the language can be evaluated from full use to little or no use. It starts from level one where the language is actively used in education, media and government, and progresses to level eight where the only speakers of the language are older generations and with the passing of this generation the language is expected to become extinct. In both the seventh and eighth levels there is no transmission of the language to the next generations. So here intergenerational transmission is considered the main predictor of the future vitality of any language (Fishman, 1991).

Similarly, UNESCO’s Language Endangerment Framework, designed in 2003 by a panel of experts, tries to determine the vitality of a language based on the frequency of usage and intergenerational transmission. This assessment utilizes six categories from “safe,” defined as uninterrupted intergenerational usage, to “extinct,” where there are no speakers. At the fourth level there is no more transmission to children and the language is considered severely endangered (UNESCO, 2009). The main point to consider here is that an integral factor in assessing the vitality of a language is the intergenerational transmission of the language and the role of the younger generation in carrying the torch of this heritage into the future.

A STUDY OF YAPESE SPEAKERS ON THE ISLAND OF YAP

The population of Micronesia is relatively young and it is expected that within a few years 50% of the population will be between 15 and 24 years old. Additionally, as a result of the Free Association Compact that enables the Micronesians to travel and work in the US and its territories, along with local economic problems and the shortage of jobs, Micronesia has a high rate of migration of about 3% a year (Government of the Federated States of Micronesia, 2015).

This high rate of migration is a result of the US economic policies in the area. Before the infusion of US economic aid in the 1970s, most households on the islands were involved in farming and raising their own food. After the influx of US aid, the same households became more and more wage dependent. Furthermore, during the 1970s a great deal of emphasis was paid to education (mostly in English), which resulted in a large number of high school and college graduates on the islands creating a larger class of educated people in search of better jobs.

The last economic factor was the later significant reduction in US aid to the islands after 1986, when the Federated States were formed. As a consequence of this act of defiance and independence, US aid was reduced significantly and quickly which in turn caused a great shock to the economy of the islands and resulted in further unemployment (Migration Policy Institute, 2003). These factors have helped maintain a high rate of outward migration and as a result correspondingly fewer young speakers of Micronesian language as the young native population often migrates out of the country. The native languages of Micronesia are now spoken by relatively few speakers, and it is not clear whether some of these languages are going to erode or even survive in the years to come.

One of the four states of Micronesia is Yap. Yap is the most western state about 1,200 miles east of the Philippines. It spans an area of about 45 miles and includes four larger and seven smaller islands in

addition to many coral islands or atolls. As of the 2000 census, Yap had a population of over 11,000 people. The main subsistence economy of Yap, like other parts of Micronesia, is agriculture or fishing. The main language of Yap is Yapese which like many other languages of the area is considered Malayo- Polynesian, a branch of the Austronesian language family. In addition, English is widely spoken on the island and is the first or the second language of most of the islanders. Other local languages include Satawalese, Ulithian and Woleaian. As with other Micronesian islands, Japanese is also in use by the oldest generation of Yapese. The Yapese used to have a Spanish-based spelling system until the 1970s, at that time, based on the efforts of linguists from the University of Hawaii a new spelling system was introduced. This change naturally caused some confusion and led to resistance by the islanders to adopt the new system of orthography. Some observers believe the spelling system change further set back the literacy rate of the Yapese on the islands (FSM.gov; Rehg, 2004).

Yap is of special interest to this paper because for several years groups of students from Queens University of Charlotte, in Charlotte, North Carolina, US, have been visiting these islands to do research in the areas of environmental science, nursing and education. In the summer of 2014 a small study was launched to look at the linguistic background and usage of Yapese among the islanders. The Queens students spent close to three weeks on Yap working on various research projects, including conducting interviews with the Yapese about their native language. The aim of this study was to examine the level of mastery, use and interest in Yapese among the younger islanders. Due to the small population of the island and some level of hesitance to trust and engage with outsiders only seven subjects were able to be interviewed.

The central hypotheses for this study were that young islanders would have less mastery of and fluency in Yapese, and as the language for the most part is not taught in schools, they would also have fewer opportunities to use their local language.

METHODOLOGY

In this study two trained undergraduate students conducted an in-depth one-on-one interview with seven islanders on Yap asking them over 50 survey questions. Three other individuals were interviewed but were found not to have been born on Yap or to speak Yapese; they were excluded from the rest of the study. The structured interview form included basic demographic questions such as age, place of birth, sex, marital status, number of children and level of education. The key respondent demographic characteristics are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. *Respondent Demographic Characteristics*

Number of respondents	7
Age range	15-38 years
Median age	17 years
Gender	Male 14% Female 86%
Born on Yap	100%
Parents can speak Yapese	86%

The subjects were asked about their own and their family’s complete language history and level of literacy in each language. They were also asked about their situational use of Yapese versus English and the level of comfort they as islanders felt in using their native language in the presence of outsiders. Finally the subjects were asked to briefly converse in their native Yapese in order to confirm some level of linguistic ability. The interviews were conducted in English, and each interview was audio-recorded. The subjects were chosen from among the local population, were willing to participate and gave their consent to be interviewed and recorded.

RESULTS

Even based on the limited data that could be collected some interesting trends were evident. Table 2 presents a summary of the subjects' responses regarding use of and attitudes toward the Yapese language.

Table2. Respondent Use of and Attitudes toward Yapese Language

Can speak Yapese	100%
Can speak Yapese fluently	71%
Yapese is considered first language	71%
English considered second language	100%
Can read and write Yapese well	43%
Learned Yapese as an infant	43%
Median age if learned later	6 years
Learned Yapese at home	71%
Learned Yapese at school	29%
Studied Yapese in school	43%
Speak Yapese with friends	29%
Speak Yapese in front of non-islanders	29%
Embarrassed to speak Yapese in front of strangers	29%
Ever been made fun of for speaking Yapese	14%
Think younger generation speaks Yapese	71%
Feel municipal government encourages young people to learn Yapese	14%

As hypothesized, native young islanders born into Yapese-speaking households reported very limited local language mastery and for the most part had a lack of full literacy in the Yapese language. Although 71% considered Yapese their first language, only 43% said they could both read and write well in the language. Surprisingly, most subjects reported first learning to speak Yapese later in childhood (age six or seven) even though all but one were born and raised in Yapese-speaking households. The majority of subjects reported attending schools which taught primarily in English and only two of the seven subjects indicated that they had learned Yapese (at least in part) in school. Five of the seven subjects reported a level of hesitancy in speaking Yapese in the presence of outsiders (at least one because she felt she spoke the language so poorly) and most reported that when they used Yapese, it was only in specific situations such as with parents. Indeed, only 29% indicated that they usually spoke Yapese when conversing with their friends. All subjects reported that to their knowledge their elders, parents and grandparents were more fluent in Yapese than they seemed to be.

DISCUSSION

From these results one can preliminarily conclude that the level of intergenerational transmission of Yapese appears to be low and that the widespread use of the Yapese language among the younger generation seems to be in decline. Of course, it is important to bear in mind that this was a small preliminary study at one point in time. Although the student researchers spent three weeks on Yap, the remoteness of the islands, the small population and the strong reluctance of the local population to cooperate with outsiders on a research project focusing on their language made it difficult to conduct a greater number of interviews.

Furthermore, some specific customs of the Yapese observed by the student researchers made this particular linguistic study even more challenging than originally expected. For example, it seemed to be a local tradition to speak softly both in public and in private settings. In general the islanders seemed to value silence and shy away from loud voices and noise (including music). Perhaps this is to be more in harmony with the natural setting that surrounds them. Another one of our students' observations was that the islanders avoided any type of cursing or use of foul language. In general, respect, especially in the realm of language, seemed to be an integral part of this island's life and culture.

The central hypothesis of this study was that young islanders would have less interest in and mastery of Yapese. This is logical, as Yapese for the most part is not taught in schools, and the mostly young population have fewer opportunities to use their local language in day-to-day life. These hypotheses were confirmed in this study. Even though this research was necessarily limited in scope, what is clear is that Yapese is on downward path of remaining the dominant local language. Ten years ago when last reported by the 15th edition of *Ethnologue* (Gordon, 2005), Yapese was seen as being a vigorous language with users in all generations. A decade later that no longer seems to be the case. As discussed earlier, the most pivotal factor guaranteeing the long-term survival of a language is intergenerational transmission. Based on our findings specifically for Yapese, but in line with other Micronesian languages, the intergenerational transmission of these languages seems to be in clear decline. This may be a result of the historic events since the end of the Second World War in 1945 which led to the strong domination of English as a regional language (Migration Policy Institute, 2003). Also the ability of the Micronesians to travel freely to the US and the resulting high migration rate of the Micronesians in general has further eroded the use and stability of local languages and customs.

The erosion of Yapese and other Micronesian languages is also due to the lack of institutional support from the Federated States government. There is little interest in training qualified teachers to teach or developing curriculum in native languages which further pushes these languages to be used only in the home and informal settings. One surprising finding of this study is that most of our subjects, even though they were born in Yapese-speaking homes, reported learning their language later on in childhood in school or other settings. This could be an indication of lack of parental interest in teaching the local language to their children early on in life. Again, as the local languages are the integral parts of the culture of the islands both the local languages of the islands and their culture seem to be on a path to eventual extinction.

CONCLUSION

Based on a small scale interview on the level of mastery, frequency of usage and intergenerational transmission of Yapese to younger generations, we found that Yapese appears to be in decline and, like many other local languages across the world, at danger of eventual extinction.

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