

NIUE LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE IN MANUKAU: A PRELIMINARY REPORT

Donna Starks, Tutagaloa Tose Tuhipa, Nuhisifa Williams, Ofania Ikiua and Merry Anno
Lui-Heka

Abstract

The Languages of Manukau study (Bell, Davis & Starks, 2000) investigated the reported language proficiency, language use and language attitudes of the Niuean, Tongan, Samoan and Cook Islands communities in Manukau. This paper reports on the findings from the 30 Niuean respondents who participated in the Languages of Manukau study.

Introduction

A community language is any language used for all or part of a community's activities (Waite, 1992, p.51). Such languages may be restricted to the home, but they may also occur in other community activities such as at religious and community gatherings. The Niue language is one of many community languages spoken in New Zealand. Others include Samoan (Roberts 1999), Tongan ('Aipolo, 1989), Cook Islands Maori (Davis, 1998), as well as non-Pasifika languages, such as Gujarati (Roberts, 1999), Greek (Verivaki, 1990) and Italian (Plimmer, 1994). A community language has no official status and therefore there is no obligation on the part of the New Zealand government to produce materials in these languages. Rather, the onus on language retention remains in the community.

English is fast becoming the dominant language of the globe, and languages are disappearing each decade (see Nettle and Romaine, 2000). As a result, linguists have started to take a more active role in alerting communities to the potential threat of English dominance (eg. Dorian 1989; Trudgill 1991; Cameron, Frazer, Harvey, Rampton, & Richardson, 1992; Chrisp, 1997). One of the first steps a researcher can undertake in a community is to provide access to research findings to help communities assess the status of their languages. This paper attempts to fulfil part of this commitment to the Niuean community in Manukau.

According to the 2001 New Zealand Census, New Zealand's largest Pasifika communities are the Samoan (115,017) Cook Islands (52,569), Tongan (40,716) and Niuean (20,148) (2001 New Census Snapshot 6, 2002). The majority of individuals within these communities are located in Auckland, with the largest count of Pasifika peoples being in Manukau City (2001 New Zealand Census Snapshot 6, 2002). The present findings are taken from a study on the Languages of Manukau, a project that examined language maintenance, language use and language attitudes amongst the four largest Pasifika communities in Manukau. This paper reports on the findings from the 30 Niuean participants in the study.

The Languages of Manukau project selected 120 respondents from the Pasifika communities using the social networks of the bilingual interviews, elders and advisors involved in the project. All respondents had to have either lived in the Manukau region for at least five years, or had been living in New Zealand for the past two years with the

intention of staying in New Zealand. They also needed to identify with the particular ethnic group, and fit within the required age range. The 30 respondents from each Pasifika community were divided equally into fifteen male and fifteen females from three age groups. The younger respondents were aged 15-25 years, the middle-aged group were aged 40-51 years, and the older age group aged 64-85. The sample consisted of both island- and New Zealand-born. These proportions were based on those in each of the three age groups in the 1996 New Zealand Census. Between May 2001 and April 2002, respondents were interviewed in their home by a bilingual interviewer in the language of the interviewee's choice. 78 interviews were in the community language and audiotaped. The interview schedule was devised using a 27-page questionnaire, which included both open and closed questions¹. Most interviews took approximately 1 to 1 and a half hours to complete.

The New Zealand Niuean community is the largest Niuean community in the world, with over 20,000 members. According to the 2001 New Zealand Census, four out of every five Niueans live in the Auckland region, with one out of every three living in Manukau. Seven out of every ten individuals of Niuean ethnicity have been born in New Zealand (2001 New Zealand Census Snapshot 6, 2002). There are presently fewer than 2000 inhabitants in Niue, due to emigration, principally to New Zealand. The main reasons this include the search for improved lifestyles, better education, and more employment opportunities. Substantial emigration has played a role in the attrition of the Niue language. When individuals move to a country where English is the dominant language, English often replaces the community language, as in the case of this 16-year Niuean female from the Languages of Manukau project who moved to New Zealand at the age of six.

Interviewer: [So how old were you when you first started to speak English?]

Respondent: Oh I would have been about seven ... six seven [ya] ... when I first came here it was like, I was, I could just so ... I could just speak Niuean and that was it. Yah, now I am starting to get used to it ... Now it is the other way round.

Later in the interview, the same speaker was asked about her current fluency in Niuean.

Interviewer: When you speak can you say

1. Anything you want to say
2. Say most of what you want to say
3. Hold only a simple conversation
4. Say only a few words or phrases
5. Not speak it at all

Respondent: [This is Niuean?]

Interviewer: Mhmm

Respondent: Five. Yah, ahm...I would have to say number [five].

¹ The Languages of Manukau questionnaire is to be posted on the Languages of Manukau project website. The website is currently under construction.

Language shift is the major force in the New Zealand Niuean community. According to the 2001 New Zealand Census, only $\frac{1}{4}$ of the New Zealand Niuean population (5,154 speakers) claim that they can have a conversation about a lot of everyday things in the Niue language (2001 New Zealand Census, Table 5, 2002). Major initiatives are underway in both New Zealand and Niue to encourage language maintenance. In the local New Zealand context, these include the development of curriculum guidelines for the teaching of Vagahau Niue (Niue language) and the development of unit standards under NZQA (New Zealand Qualifications Authority) in the areas of Vagahau Niue, Niue Culture and Traditions, and the Arts of Niue. The Niuean language committee (Matakau Vagahau Niue), established in 1970, also provides a strong support network for language maintenance initiatives. The committee has been responsible for a nationwide conference (Hulaaga Vahahau Niue on the status of the Niue language maintenance and has had a substantial role in the development of Niue language courses through Continuing Education at the University of Auckland. Niuean researchers have also written on language attrition (Taeuevihi 2000a, 2000b, Head 2000, Nelisi 2000) and a series of works has been compiled to help document and support the Niue language. These include a dictionary of the language (Sperlich 1997), as well as several grammars and phrase books (see Whittaker, 1982; Kaulima & Beaumont 1994; Rex et al., nd). In addition, the New Zealand Ministry of Education has compiled a series of publications for teaching Niue language and culture in schools (see Long, 1999 for details). Materials and resources are also available from the Niue Ministry of Education (see Lui, 1996).

The health of the Niue language

Linguists often use scales to assess the relative health of a community language (see Schmidt, 1990; Kinkade, 1991; Fishman, 2000). Fishman, for example, has an eight point GIDS (Graded Intergenerational Disruption Stages) scale based on a combination of intergenerational and language maintenance criteria. At present, the preliminary findings from the Languages of Manukau project show that the New Zealand Niuean community is between Stages 5 and 6 on Fishman's scale. The community is transmitting the community language to the younger generation and there are still individuals in the community who speak the Niue language who are within child-rearing age. There is a demographic concentration in Manukau where individuals can speak the language outside the home, and there is some institutional support through the church and schools e.g., the Niue language is used in some church services and Niuean pre-schools (see Bell et al, 2000). The language is also used on websites and in a radio programme that broadcasts one evening per week. Census figures indicate a number of individuals in the community who are monolingual in the Niue language (Bell et al, 2000). These individuals can provide valuable linguistic resources to their community. In addition, most of the Niueans in our study report some knowledge of their language. Almost all can understand the Niue language, and those with limited or no skills retain positive attitudes towards it. Many comments from our Niuean respondents highlight the important link between language and identity in the New Zealand community. The following is one such comment from one of our young male respondents:

Language is a marker of cultural identity; it shows other people who you are

The Languages of Manukau findings show that the New Zealand Niuean community is strong. Niueans regularly interact in many different ways including attendance at Niuean events, church, social gatherings as well as visits to Niue. Strong communities provide a

means whereby ideas and information can be easily transmitted, and from where a strong forum for language maintenance initiatives can be launched (see Holmes et al, 1993). If the Niuean community in Manukau decide to maintain their language actively, they have community networks to support these efforts. Given the current proficiency levels, and the strong relationship between language and identity in the community, the language is still at a stage where steps can be put into place to promote language maintenance programmes. However, although there is a strong community to promote the Niue language, if current trends continue the long-term survival prospects of this community language may be in doubt. The findings from our study show that English is encroaching into 'places and spaces' where the Niue language used to be spoken. The most worrying signs are change as measured by generational differences and country of birth.

Generational change

Younger members of the New Zealand Niuean community are growing up in an different environment from their parents and grandparents. More young Niueans are growing up in New Zealand where the dominant language of the society is English. More young Niueans are attending New Zealand schools where the language of the curriculum is English.

Our study indicates a shift in identity, language acquisition, language proficiency, language use, and language attitudes within the New Zealand Niuean community. In regards to identity, our study shows that only 6 of our young Niueans (as compared with 8 middle-aged and 10 older Niueans) report the childhood household as 'very Niuean'; and that only 4 of our young Niueans report their current household as 'very Niuean'. This compares with 5 middle-aged Niueans and 8 older Niueans who report their current households as 'very Niuean'.

Our findings show the following shifts in language acquisition. There is a decrease in the number of monolingual parents across the generations. While older and middle-aged respondents tend to report their parents as monolingual in the Niue language, this is less common amongst younger Niuean respondents who report their parents as bilingual in the Niue language and English. See Table 1 below.

Table 1: Individuals whose caregivers are monolingual in the Niue language by age

	Old	Middle-aged	Young
Caregiver 1	10	8	4
Caregiver 2	10	7	5

While all of the older respondents and 8 of the middle-aged respondents report that the first language they learned was the Niue language, only 5 of the young respondents report this. The other five young Niueans report their first language as English.

While all 10 of the older respondents report that they always spoke the Niue language when they were growing up, only 3 of the middle-aged and 2 of the young Niueans report this.

Young Niueans report weaker reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills in the Niue language than their middle-aged and older counterparts. All of the older respondents

report themselves as fully proficient in speaking, listening, reading and writing the Niue language. Fewer middle-aged respondents report themselves as fully proficient in the four skills (7-8 rank themselves as fully proficient depending on the selected skill), and even fewer younger respondents who fit into this category (3 rank themselves as fully proficient in one or more of the four skills). Younger Niueans report fewer instances where they 'always' speak the Niue language. This group is more likely to speak it on an occasional basis.

There are several similarities between older, middle-aged and younger interviewees. Social networks are relatively unchanged across the generations. Young Niueans are active in their communities and attitudes towards the language are the same, with two exceptions. Young Niueans are less likely to state that they would send their children to a school where the language of instruction is the Niue language. 4 young Niueans would send children to a primary school where the language of instruction is the Niue language compared with 8 middle-aged Niueans and 10 older Niueans. 2 young Niueans would send children to a secondary school where the language of instruction is the Niue language as compared with 7 middle-aged and 8 older Niueans. 7 younger and middle-aged Niueans believe that the Niue language is endangered in New Zealand. 9 older Niueans are pessimistic in their assessment of the ultimate fate of the Niue language in New Zealand, making comments such as the following:

I can see my grandchildren growing up not using the Niuean language.

Tauevihi (2000a) notes negative attitudes can have a negative effect on language maintenance. Negative attitudes range from general pessimism about the survival of the Niue language to the assessment of the greater relative importance of the English language in comparison with the Niue language, as illustrated by the following two comments from two Niuean females:

Niuean language is not that important, so they hardly use it.

Very few people are speaking [Niuean] because their mind is set that English alone can offer them jobs.

Birthplace

In addition to generational changes, there is also a worrying relationship between language and birthplace. As noted, New Zealand is home to the majority of the Niue people. There are ten times as many Niueans in New Zealand as there are in Niue, and the proportion of New Zealand-born is increasing each year. When we correlated birthplace with language use, we found relatively weaker Niue language skills amongst the New Zealand-born.

Of the 10 New Zealand-born in this study, six report being able to understand everything in the Niue language (three can understand only simple conversations); one reports being able to say everything in the Niue language (seven report they can participate in only simple conversations, or sometimes they can only say a few words); one reports being able to read everything in the Niue language; and no participants report being able to write about everything in the Niue language

This is typical of what linguists refer to as 'passive bilinguals', individuals who understand and can say little, and have few reading/writing skills in the community language (Dorian, 1989; Schmidt, 1990). Passive bilinguals have a language learning advantage. They have knowledge of the sound system of their language, and in many

cases they have an extensive passive vocabulary. They are able to understand basic conversations, and to respond, although the response is often in English. Unless passive bilinguals actively engage in learning the language they will not be able to pass their language on to the next generation successfully.

Although the Niue-borns (who will be a minority of the New Zealand Niuean community in the near future) have relatively positive attitudes towards the Niue language, there is less optimism from the New Zealand-born. Six out of seven of the New Zealand-born respondents said they would speak English in front of a Niuean who couldn't speak English (usually because they felt they had no other option). Of the 20 Niue-born, not one reported that they would speak English in this context.

When asked about whether a Niuean needed to speak the Niue language, nine (90%) New Zealand-born think that they do not need to speak the language to be Niuean. Only 12/20 (60%) of the Niue-born think this.

Although the New Zealand born and the Niue-born have similar views about the survival of the language (50-60% believing that the Niue language is endangered in Niue and 70-80% believing the Niue language is endangered in New Zealand), 70% of the New Zealand-born believe that it would matter if the Niue language were lost altogether. 100% of the Niue-born believe this.

No New Zealand-born in this study have a rule to 'always speak the Niue language at home'.

There is less support for the Niue language at the primary and secondary school level amongst the New Zealand-born. New Zealand-born report less willingness to send their children to primary schools where the Niue language is the language of the curriculum (5/9 or 55% for the NZ born vs 17/20 or 85% for the Niue-born). A similar situation is reported for secondary school. While only 3/10 (30%) of the New Zealand born reported that they would send their children to a school where the Niue language was the language of the curriculum, 14/18 (77%) of the Niue-born respondents would send their children to such a school.

Throughout this paper, we have made reference to attitudes. Attitudes have a complex and ambiguous role in language maintenance. Strong positive attitudes sometimes help maintain community languages, but at other times they do not (often because the community's attempt is too late). Negative attitudes can have a negative effect on the retention of the community language (Trudgill, 1983; Malathi, 2001). If the Niuean community in Manukau wishes to keep their language alive in New Zealand, they need to maintain strong positive attitudes towards it, especially in the home. The shift away from the Niue language in the home environment has been noted in the New Zealand Niue community (see Tauevihi, 2000a), and has been the subject of comments by many of our Niue respondents, such as the following made by an older female:

Ha ko e tau fanau mogonei, kua uka ke vagahau Niue, lahi ke vagahau palagi, ha ko e tau mamatua ni ka ha ne ai fakaako e tau fanau he tau kaina ke vagahau Niue.

[Because the children nowadays, it is difficult for them to speak in Niuean, they mostly speak in English, because the parents do not teach the children in the home how to speak in Niuean]

Although Niue language appears to have a relatively strong hold in the home domain in Niue (see Sperlich, 1995; Siegel, 1996, p.134), this language use needs to be encouraged

in New Zealand homes. Positive attitudes and affirmative language maintenance within the home are the key to the survival of the Niue language in New Zealand. In the words of one of our respondents:

Encourage families to use [Niuean] at home...everything starts at home.

Conclusion

This study presents comments on the language proficiency, language use and language attitudes of the 30 Niuean respondents living in Manukau. The findings show that the language is relatively healthy but that steps need to be put into place to help maintain the present status. If the Niuean community continues to migrate to New Zealand, the chances of language attrition increase. Generational differences point to potential language loss in the New Zealand Niuean community unless steps are put in to ensure its survival. Changes in community attitudes are needed to ensure more Niue language is spoken in the home. What are also needed are changes in the greater New Zealand community. All New Zealanders need to accept languages other than English in the schools, playgrounds, streets and businesses of Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Notes:

¹ A preliminary version of this paper was presented at a community meeting held on November 19, 2002 at Tangaroa College, Otara. In this paper, the term Niue language is used as the language of the Niuean people.

² We would like to thank the Niue people who were interviewed as part of this study. Without their valuable insights this study would never have been completed.

³ Tose Tuhipa is the present chair of the Matakau Vagahau Niue committee. Tose may be contacted at t.tuhipa@ace.ac.nz. Pefi King is the Deputy Chair. Pefi may be contacted at axtrix@co.nz.

References

- 'Aipolo, 'A. (1989). *Profile of language maintenance and shift within the Tongan speech community in Wellington, New Zealand*. Wellington: Victoria University of Wellington.
- Bell, A., Davis, K & Starks, D. (2000). *Languages of Manukau region: A pilot study of use, maintenance, and educational dimensions of languages in South Auckland*. Report to Woolf Fisher Research Centre. Auckland: University of Auckland.
- Cameron, D., Frazer, E., Harvey, P., Rampton, M. B. H., & Richardson, K., (Eds). (1992). *Researching languages: Issues of power and method*. London/New York: Longman.
- Chrisp, S. (1997). Home and community language re-vitalisation. *New Zealand Studies in Applied Linguistics*, 3, 1-20.
- Davis, K. M. (1998). *Cook Islands Maori language in Auckland and the Cook Islands: A study of reported proficiency, patterns of use and attitudes*. Unpublished MA thesis: University of Auckland.

- Dorian, N. (Ed.). (1989). *Investigating obsolescence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fishman, J. A. (2000). *Can threatened languages be saved? Reversing language shift revisited: A 21st century perspective*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Head, B. (2000). Keeping the Niue Leo (Language) alive? In S. R. Fischer & W. B. Sperlich (Eds), *Leo Pasifika: Proceedings of the fourth International Conference on Oceanic Linguistics* (pp.142-155). New Zealand: Institute of Polynesian Languages and Literatures.
- Holmes, J., Roberts, M., Verivaki, V., & 'Aipolo, 'A. (1993). Language maintenance and shift in three New Zealand speech communities. *Applied Linguistics*, 14, 1-24.
- Kaulima, A. & Beaumont, C. (1994). *A first book for learning Niuean*. Ranui, Auckland.
- Kinkade, M. D. (1991). The decline of native languages in Canada. In R. H. Robins & E. M. Uhlenbeck (Eds), *Endangered languages* (pp.157-176). Oxford: Berg.
- Lui, R. I. (1996). Niuean as a medium of instruction in primary school in Niue. In F. Mugler, J. & Lynch (Eds), *Pacific languages in education*. Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies.
- Long, D. (1999). Niuean learning materials for the New Zealand curriculum. *Many Voices*, 14, 24-32.
- Malathi, K. R. (2001). *The Telegu language in the recent Indian community in Auckland: The role of attitudes in language shift and language maintenance*. Unpublished MA thesis. University of Auckland.
- Nelisi, L. (2000). Educational needs of Pacific Island students in New Zealand. In S. R. Fischer & W. B. Sperlich (Eds), *Leo Pasifika: Proceedings of the fourth International Conference on Oceanic Linguistics* (p.277-282). New Zealand: Institute of Polynesian Languages and Literatures.
- Nettle, D. & Romaine, S. (2000). *Vanishing voices: The extinction of the world's languages*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- New Zealand Census. (2002). *2001 New Zealand Census, Populations and Dwellings*. Wellington: Department of Statistics.
- Plimmer, C. (1994). *Language maintenance and shift in the Italian community in Wellington*. Wellington Working Papers in Linguistics, 6, Wellington: Victoria University of Wellington.
- Rex, L., Tongakilo, T. V., Ahetoa, A., Hafe V., Ikpa, T., & Talagi, T. (Eds), (n.d.). *Everyday words and phrases in English and Niuean*. Alofi, Niue: University of the South Pacific, Niue Centre.
- Roberts, M. L. (1999). *Immigrant language maintenance and shift in the Gujarati, Dutch and Samoan communities in Wellington*. Unpublished PhD. Dissertation, Victoria University of Wellington.
- Schmidt, A. (1990). *The loss of Australia's aboriginal language heritage*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press.
- Siegel, J. (1996). Vernacular education in the South Pacific. *International Development Issues*, 45.

- Sperlich, W. B. (1995). Is Niuean an endangered language species? Annotated results of a Niue schools language survey. *Journal of Educational Studies*, 17, 37-55.
- Sperlich, W. (1997). *Tohi vagahu Niue: Niue language dictionary*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press and the Government of Niue.
- Tauevihi, J. T. M. (2000a). Welcome to my language, my identity: Being bilingual. *Many Voices*, 15, 7-9.
- Tauevihi, J. T. M. (2000b). Welcome to my language, my identity: being bilingual. In S. R. Fischer & W. B. Sperlich (Eds), *Leo Pasifika: Proceedings of the fourth International Conference on Oceanic Linguistics* (pp. 343-354). New Zealand: Institute of Polynesian Languages and Literatures.
- Trudgill, P. (1983). *On dialect: Social and geographical perspectives*. New York: New York University Press.
- Trudgill, P. (1991). Language maintenance and language shift: Preservation versus extinction. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 1, 61-69.
- Verivaki, M. (1990). *Language maintenance and shift in the Greek community of Wellington, New Zealand*. Unpublished MA thesis. Wellington, Victoria University of Wellington.
- Waite, J. (1992). *Aotearoa: Speaking for ourselves*. Wellington: Ministry of Education.
- Whittaker, G. (1982). *The Niuean language: An elementary grammar and basic vocabulary*. Alofi, Niue: University of the South Pacific, Niue Centre.