

Chapter 5

Preserving the Nauruan Language and Pidgin English in Nauru

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ABSTRACT

First of all, this chapter surveys sociolinguistic features with a special emphasis on Japanese on Nauru Island. Second, it considers factors affecting the stability of the Nauruan language and Pidgin English. The cline theory helps to explain the degree of language decline. Both geographical and socio-political factors may account for them. In particular, the living environment is the most influential factor in a decline. This chapter concludes that the cline showing language decline is a valid argument. In Nauru, the Nauruan language on the island is one of the most stable languages today. Pidgin English is positioned in the middle of a continuum. Due to the linguistic dissimilarities between the indigenous language and Pidgin English, both languages can be maintained. The hierarchy of languages in Nauru today should be sustained in order to ensure the maintenance of the indigenous language and Pidgin English.

INTRODUCTION

Nauru is the smallest nation republic in the world (21 square kilometers). It is situated just south of the equator near Ocean Island. Germany administered Nauru from 1888 until 1914. The Japanese occupied Nauru in 1942 and remained there for three years. In 1947, a trusteeship was established by Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom. In 1968, Nauru became an independent republic. Three main languages are spoken on the island: Nauruan, English and Pidgin English.

The latest estimates from the UN's "World Population Prospects" shows Nauru has a population in the year 2019 of 11,260. There are many different ethnic groups in Nauru. Roughly 60% of Nauru's population is made up of indigenous Nauruans; almost 25% are from Pacific Islands such as Kiribati and Tuvalu and 8% are originally from Asian countries such as China and the Philippines. The remainder are of European descent.

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Taking into account these realities and influences, the aim of this paper is to consider the stability and viability of languages spoken in Nauru. The research question examines the kinds of factors that contribute to the decline of a language or languages. This includes the factors that led to a decline in the use of Japanese on the island.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND PREVIOUS STUDIES

In August 1942, Japan occupied the island. Japan tried to facilitate a consciousness of membership in the Japanese Empire among the local people and to obtain phosphate for development. The actual situation regarding Japanese language teaching in Nauru during the occupation has never been examined. Thus, Okamura (2002), through interviews, explored in detail this question. Since archival records are insufficient in terms of quantity, interviews were conducted. Six Nauruans were interviewed in order to understand the actual conditions in relation to Japanese language teaching in Nauru. The respondents were grouped according to age and sex. The results reflect the different roles of men and women in wartime. Japanese soldiers who served in Nauru were also interviewed. However, those who were interviewed by the author arrived on Nauru after 1943; so they did not know directly what had happened before then. It is impossible to ask higher-ranking officers because they have all already died or were executed by Allied forces. The “*Nauru Tsuushinkai*” is a group of Japanese veterans who experienced war in Nauru. There used to be many members in the past, and they organized a meeting each year, but there are fewer than ten members today since many have died, and those who are still alive are too old to actively participate and volunteer in the group. The average age of those interviewed was 83. All of the various interviews were conducted in Japan in March 2000, and in Nauru in June 2000.

There is another contact language called Pidgin English. Siegel (1990) is the first scholar to have analyzed the use of the language on Nauru. And Okamura (2007) advanced research a little further with regards to the nature of the language. In 1907, Chinese laborers were first brought to the island in order to dig for phosphate. After that, approximately 1,000 Chinese laborers worked on the island each year. Their contracts were for three years, but they could renew their contracts if they wished. Many of these laborers could speak a form of Pidgin English. Pidgin English was thus introduced to the island through their communication with Nauruan people in the stores, restaurants, and workshops in and around the area of the phosphate mines. Over the years, it developed and changed and is still spoken today. This is based on so-called China Coast Pidgin English. Since then, this version of pidgin has been influenced by several Pacific region forms of Pidgin English such as Tok Pisin and Solomon Islands Pidgin English. It has also been altered at various levels over the years.

A great deal of work has been conducted on grammatical descriptions of the indigenous language by Rensch (1993). What seems to be lacking, however, are attempts to explore language maintenance. The following section investigates the current situation regarding the remnants of Japanese in Nauru. It also shows how the use of the indigenous language declined.

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