

The children need clarification on own sounds: In search of a new paradigm that suffices for Samoan children's literacy needs

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Abstract:

This paper complements a response to a phenomenon that has made its presence felt already in the space of Samoan teaching and learning instructions within New Zealand (Tavita & Aukuso, 2019). It can be acknowledged as a new trend which has the signs of becoming an issue and even a linguistic problem for classroom instructions on a global scale. We wish to make a direct reference to this new phenomenon strictly within the New Zealand context.

The phenomenon, in the pronunciation of Samoan sounds has been noted whereby they have become glottalized (ibid.). First in the vowel sounds. As experienced practitioners in the teaching of Samoan sounds, we have reaffirmed via anecdotal evidence of random observations, the findings of the above study. Certain factors account, on which this paper wishes to comment.

Approaching the task, a historical overview of the Samoan orthography development is presented and analysed. This paper hopes to clarify some of the issues that led to the shift, and suggests own solution on how it can be rectified.

Vocabulary: diphthongs, soft voices, weak voices, phoneme, diacritical marks, grapheme, glottalized vowel

Rationale:

This paper is underscored by an ongoing conversation among Samoan grammarians and teachers on the topic of the place of the diacritical marks in Samoan writing (Mayer, 2016; Hunkin, 2016). It has been the focus of much interest among teachers of the Samoan language, given the mixed signals from authority historically on their application. In other terms, it is both a teaching and a learning need.

Secondly, the need to verify our concern by empirical means of investigation. While there have been ample evidence in literature on the Samoan language and study interests pertaining to, little has been written about the Samoan sounds, or the vowel sounds in particular. We acknowledge this scarcity in literature and implications on its outcome, as more research is needed on this emerging phenomenon is required.

Clarification:

We begin with a consensus that the Samoan vowel has a smooth tonal sound, like an aspirated h unforced. When a sound is pronounced, the vocal tract opens partially, and depending on the type of vowel, whether short or long, sustained. Samoan vowels belong in this category (asu - smoke, esi - pawpaw, isu - nose, oso - jump, ulu - head).

Awareness must also be drawn to the unstressed vowel, commonly found in the first syllable of a group of words, when pronounced can hardly be heard. In two formations, V ātua - god, and VV, māfai - can, this is considered important for good pronunciation from the early stage of literacy development. The English SCHWA belongs in this category.

Samoan Vowel:

All five vowels are monophthongs basically, still maintaining their sounds and quantities as diphthongs and triphthong's combinations (maea - rope, short; māua - be overheard, long). The Samoan vowel sounds are very similar to other Malayo-Polynesian dialects as a sub-group of Austronesian languages in the world. As soft vowels they can be mistaken for the English sound due to sharing the same grapheme basically.

There are two types of vowels - long and short,

Short -

a as in cup

e as in leg

i as in pick

o as in haul

u as in put
Long -
a as in farther
e as in rain
i as in been
o as in though
u as in moon

English vowels are glottal (Bartunkova, 2012; Trudgill, 2008), which are sometimes referred to in Samoan as vaueli ma'ai (pointed vowels) (Tavita & Aukuso, 2008). For clarity they need the diacritical marks to distinguish from the Samoan sound.

Short -

A as in ask (Samoan e.g. 'au - team)
E as in egg (Samoan e.g. 'eu - dab)
I as in ink (Samoan e.g. 'ie - cloth)
O as in all (Samoan e.g. 'oe - you)
U as in took (Samoan e.g. 'u'u - hold)

Long -

A as in Armada (Samoan e.g. pa'a'ā - coarse)
E as in berth (Samoan e.g. 'e'e - scream)
I as in ill (Samoan e.g. fa'a'i - throat)
O as in auto (Samoan e.g. 'oloto - alto)
U as in uber (Samoan e.g. mata'ū - be mean)

Brief history

The question as of which strategy or approach is the best suit for modelling writing in the Samoan language has been debated intensely every now and then. The proponents of the language have acknowledged the need for a uniform practice, now that the language itself has taken a transmigratory step and in New Zealand for example, it has made headways into its education system, as a language of classroom instructions in some of its programmes. Since the Samoan Curriculum was introduced in 1987, it has been taught as a subject in the NCEA at college, and at tertiary level as part of the schools' undergraduate courses/programmes (Fetui, 2014). Samoan is the third most spoken language in Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ Statistics, 2018).

The Samoan diaspora is a small knit community, and the language is very much part of its daily communication and communal activities. Historically, the Bible has been the model of writing and spelling for generations since the missionaries encoded the language. But shifts and changes are part of any language development and Samoan is no exception. Now there are three schools of thought, each proposing own layout or rationale behind its practice (Tamasese, 2015).

The Bible layout.

Named after the book itself, the BL follows the layout of the book mentioned. Two editions - 1887 and 1969 - are cited as samples, particularly the latter. Basically, the BL layout adopted a simple formula, that is, the diacritical marks are applied sparingly. For example, in distinguishing words such as homonyms where it is absolutely necessary (pau - end; paū - stern; lau - your; la'u - my). Note that the Samoan vowel sound has been taken for granted in the BL approach, assuming the reader has the experience in differentiating between the authentic Samoan sound and the glottal. For example, the word api in Samoan, which common meaning is to lodge in a place temporarily. The same can be mistaken for *book* by an inexperienced reader, unless the glottal stop mark is placed in front of the word ('api) to distinguish.

The same standard is applied for mid-vowels and end-vowels throughout the Biblical text. For example the word faaumatia - destroyed, of which the vowel [u] is preceded by a glottal sound regardless of its absence. Another word fauu - to anoint, can also mean differently unless in the context of a sentence. Proponents of the diacritical marks will insist on their usage for sake of clarity. In other terms, the BL approach has been the standard for the Samoan orthography for generations. As noted, it has own advantages as well as disadvantages.

Ma'ia'i Freestyle

The Ma'ia'i Freestyle is named after a Samoan educator, Dr Fanaafi Ma'ia'i, who held the position of Director of Education, the first Samoan to be appointed to the role. Dr Ma'ia'i, who acquired her higher education from London, introduced own approach that more or less emulated the English or more exactly its attitude against accents and diacritical marks (Tagaloa, 1996).

Thus, a freestyle approach was introduced to Samoan classrooms, where all accents and diacritical marks have been quashed. The rationale has been that children can learn better by decoding sounds and meanings without the support of marks. Take for example the common words such as pronouns. While lau means your/yours, it also means my/mine in this approach. So when a teacher asks a student, Where is your book? O fea lau tusi? The student can easily differentiate between the two pronunciations /lau and la'u/. Unless of course the question is presented in writing then there may be a miscommunication to come up.

There never has been research conducted to assess the success or otherwise of the MF approach. Suffice to say that the legacy of the MF has withstood the test of time, about 30 years since its introduction to a change of policy direction by the government authority in the late eighties. The language thrived and still delivered though which means that the MF approach had not much adverse impact on its overall development. As former students under the MF regime, the writers can attest to its own pros especially in the harnessing of decoding skills in contexts. Such interdependence of letter sounds and symbols, or words in texts called for higher intuition and skills, all of which encouraged a holistic view or understanding of a story.

In saying that, we can argue that the MF approach wouldn't have sustained for long had it not been for the BL as the backdrop of the Samoan literacy landscape. While the Education Department went on its promotion of the new approach, the majority of the young population also attended the pastors' school where the Bible was read, and basic literacy was taught.

Thus, if there was any lesson to be had for them from this experience, it was in the area of effectively harnessing decoding skills/sounds irrespective of any support from diacritical marks, at least. On the other hand, the cons in reference to, particularly in promoting oral fluency are obvious as alluded to in other studies (Tamasese, 2015). Such legacy still pervades in today's pragmatic use of the language.

Full marks on Approach

The full marks on is hereby used to describe a latest approach in writing Samoan, urged on by a government policy which intent was to reinstate the use of diacritical marks in the language. The intention was made clear by the leader of the government at the time, that the MF approach would no longer suffice for the needs of the language or at least its promotion as a global language to sustain. The same leader was actually referring to the Bible Layout Approach as the object of reversion (Tamasese, 2015).

But rather than following in that direction, a new practice somehow emerged; a full marks on was applied in terms of every accentuation of speech or words to that effect. It appeared that the two marks have been readapted to serve the task of good pronunciation rather than basic indications of phonemic properties or the sounds they represent.

A number of publications that emerged at the time will attest to this new style. It was

obvious that this new approach could not be sustained for long. For a number of reasons mainly. First, the dilemma of coding. Encoding a word that is dependent on pronunciation or articulation of each phoneme is untenable in the realm of phonemics. Such is the role of phonetics where symbols facilitate the process of proper articulation.

Secondly, such practice could not be maintained in its entirety by any average student; even also in the task of assessment, the question of how a child's work can be marked in the context of such idiosyncrasies is fraught with many issues. One of the main criticisms against FM was to do with its muddled appearance as opposed to the tidiness of the former approaches. So rather than help, it makes for difficult reading, among other issues.

All three approaches mentioned haven't been submitted to any critical scrutiny in terms of research, therefore their merits or flaws could not be fully acknowledged.

Update

In 2015 the Samoan Language Commission decided to readopt the BL's standard policy of using diacritical marks sparingly (see Tavita & Aukuso, 2019).

Implications

We argue that the Samoan vowel sounds are not well represented by their universal equivalents or related symbols (a, e, i, o, u), and for that reason, poses a number of problems in terms of its use as an academic tool.

First, in the teaching and learning of Samoan as a second language in bilingual/multilingual contexts. While children whose stronger language is English, who have familiarized themselves with its sounds and letter identification, they will have to be fully cognizant of the distinct Samoan sounds also, vowels for instance. As argued, there is bound to be a problem of the negative transfer of sound as the writers attested to in their observations.

Noted earlier, sharing the same graphemes between the two languages is fraught with linguistic difficulties, first, erroneous identification of one sound for another, or when children transfer the English glottal to their Samoan reading. Thus, the question of whether the glottal stop sign (inverted comma) suffices for the task of identifying Samoan sounds or else differentiating between Samoan vowels and the glottal, will require more discussion or in-depth look through research.

For now, we make do with the three approaches offered and ask as of which one can cater to the reading needs of the children much more effectively. For the first two approaches, it is obvious that children of the Samoan diaspora are disadvantaged for a number of reasons. First, by the environment itself which is predominantly English. Almost every agent of socialization such as schools, the media, are English oriented. Most of the teachers in classrooms are monolingual whose predominant language is English.

So without any reinforcement of their languages in schools they are much poorer than their counterparts in Samoa who have the full advantage of immersion in such environment that is predominantly Samoan. Even the full marks on Approach can only make matters more complicated for them (Tamasese, 2015). We have pointed out the reasons for this concern.

In the final analysis, the Bible Layout is the most preferable option with a few adjustments grammatically speaking. The argument is, children of the diaspora need as much clarity as possible when they engage with the language. Hence a consistent application of the diacritical marks will help with their decoding and even encoding of the language. More so, their fluency when they communicate verbally or in writing.

As noted, the BL is premised on the idea of applying the diacritical marks sparingly or where it is deemed necessary. However, adjustments in terms of adhering to shifts and changes in the language are necessary, for example, the updates in the spelling of some of the common words in the vocabulary. The challenge for educators is in the task of maintaining the balance between the two approaches. For example, when diacritical marks come in the way of a simple comprehensive reading, it can be a problem, as NUS students pointed out in their own assessment (Tamasese, 2015).

Hence for this dilemma particularly, we believe that the issue is with the coding system. We have argued that the Samoan vowels are prone to misrepresentation due to the predominant influence of the English sounds in today's classrooms. The problem can only be resolved one way or another. For the time being, the onus is on the teachers who need to create as much awareness of the nature of vowel sounds or their distinct difference from the glottal English. While the glottal mark helps, children must be well informed of such difference, especially when they are faced with Samoan texts where

diacritical marks are shunned. Experience has proven that the more children are exposed to such text, the better they are at singling out the genuine Samoan sound.

Samoan is predominantly oral and we believe that children learn better by means of verbal instructions, wherein language is modelled directly to the children. The parents and homes have a collective responsibility in doing the same, thus supporting the teachers and schools.

One of the writers observed three families in Christchurch whose parents are proactive in promoting Samoan in their homes. The rule of 'Samoan only' means children once they enter the home from school, will revert to their home language to converse among themselves and all members of the family. These families believe that they have the opportunity to practise English in school or outside the house among their peers.

As a result, their communication skills in both languages are on an equal bar in terms of fluency and overall competency. Two of the families involved live with grandparents who have proven to be effective roles models for the children in using the language.

The next option is an extension of the argument, that is, to find a code for the Samoan vowel sound. We believe that this will resolve the problem of a negative transfer due to sharing the same grapheme among two sounds. Hence we propose the use of the circumflex mark to depict the Samoan vowel sound. Here is an extract from a Samoan text to demonstrate:

Na te'í ā'e Lino i le pogisā. O lo'ō susulu pea fetu ma ua tau vavala mai sina malamalama i le itulagi i sasa'e. Ua lē mapu le vivini o toa ua leva fo'i ona amata le galuega a pua'a o le sua i luga o le laumea to'ulu po'o toe āi ni toega mai ānanafi. I fafo o le fale i luga o la'au o lo'ō ua pepese āi ni tama'i manulele ma talatala ō latou fulu. Na pupula ātu Lino, ma tau lana va'ai i le tafafā o le faitoto'a ua malama mai, ona tilotilo lea i le ātigipusa e taupe, o lo'ō moe āi i totonu Penetito. Mulimuli āne ua fa'atafa lona ūlu e fa'asaga iā Susana, lona to'alua, o lo'ō ta'oto āne i luga o le fala, o lona ūfiūlu lanumoana i luga o lona ūsu ma lona fatafata e tau i lona tuāua. Ua āla fo'i Susana. E lē manatua e Lino pe na moeiini ōna mata i se taimi na āla ā'e āi. E sulugia mai āi ni tama'i fetu i ōna mata lanuūli. Na mau le pupula a ōna mata iā te ūa. Na savali Susana i le ta'igaafi ma sua ā'e i luga se malala ma ūa tapiliina nei, a o ūa gauia ni tama'i lālā mamago ma togi i āi.

