

# The Samoan vowel shift: A phenomenon in phonetics and phonological awareness

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**Pacific Dynamics:**  
Volume 3 Number 1 August 2019  
Journal of Interdisciplinary Research  
<http://pacificdynamics.nz>  
ISSN: 2463-641X  
University of Canterbury

## Abstract

*This paper is a response to a phenomenon in the area of Samoan phonology, or to be exact, the vowels' pronunciation. It involves a shift in the utterance of vowels in the past thirty years or so. And it comes to this. A gradual blurring in the articulation of the vowel sound has been noted. It appears that the glottal stop had rubbed off on the vowel for reasons that are linguistic, sociological and even pedagogical. This 'emerging reality' is yet to be addressed in literature even though evidence of its first appearance can be traced back to the early eighties. Time moves on and there hasn't been a question raised for reasons not quite clear to the writers, hence the purpose of this response. In this writing we hope to raise the issue, as we believe it is crucial to any type of research that delves into both Samoan phonetics and phonology, and the extent of both in language and learning application.*

**Keywords:** phenomenon, phonology, vowel sounds, diaspora, dilemma, mistaken identity, diacritical marks, glottalized, glottalization.

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Revised 2022

For the purpose of this discussion the term vowel sound refers to the distinct sound attached to five Samoan vowels as normally sounded and used by a native speaker. 'Native speaker' refers to anyone who was born in Samoa and fully immersed in the language from infancy to adolescence and continues to do so in their adult life. For the uninitiated, the Samoan vowel sound is by its own terms, discrete, approximated to an aspirated h unstressed, and must not be equated with the English a: (art, arson). This is clearly demonstrated in the high-frequently used words beginning with a vowel (*aso* day, *esi* pawpaw, *iloa* know, *ola* life, *ulu* head).

It is important to note that the first significant shift recorded by Pratt,<sup>1</sup> that led to the constitution of a new colloquial, well-known by the term '*tautala leaga*' (k for t and g for n registers), though had made a huge impact on Samoan phonology, yet no hard evidence is shown that it affected vowel pronunciation. There may be other shifts of which the writers are unaware and therefore could not be sustained in this discussion.

## The problem

In New Zealand, sometime in the late eighties, the writers, one in Wellington and the other in Auckland, began to note a shift in the pronunciation of the Samoan vowels. First, in the classrooms, then in the public arena, in arts of entertainment, particularly in the performance of Samoan songs. This experience has been evident in the use of the language mostly by a group of Samoan New Zealand born children who went on to

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<sup>1</sup> "Samoans are doing the same at the present time, to the great injury of the language" citing Pratt in his Dictionary in reference to Hawaiians replacing sounds – t with k, ng with n (tangata-kanaka). For the Samoans the t with k and n with g (tagata – kagaka; nafa – gafa; nofo - gofo).

group, nor used by the official speakers and chiefs, will preserve the beautiful Samoan language from the threatened deterioration."

apply the glottal stop sound without discrimination. One of the writers was a classroom teacher at the time, and a number of new entrants in her class came from a few Samoan preschools in the area, some of whom were quickly identified as having problems with the pronunciation of their vowels. In simple verbs (*alu*, *o* – go) and numbers (*ono* – six, *iva* – nine), were common mistakes; and attention was given to correct an error quickly.

The same pattern was noted when she left Wellington for Auckland and worked there in three different schools. These schools all have Samoan bilingual units and as a teacher she's been involved mostly with the new entrants. Children joined the units from all various backgrounds and brought with them a prior knowledge of the Samoan language. Some of them came from a Samoan preschool in the area and have been instructed in the Samoan alphabet already. They can sing and recite in Samoan well. Some of them can speak and respond to questions competently when asked and their mastery of the vowel pronunciation was excellent. It was proof of the vital role of the home environment. Most of them were members of their churches' Sunday Schools, engaging actively in religious activities that involved a lot of recital and rote learning. The Children's Sunday occasion is Samoa's own formal initiation into the language as a performance tool.

However, the gaps began to appear when they were introduced to reading, particularly when decoding the initial vowel sounds correctly. Many would not be able to distinguish between the 'nasalized' Samoan vowel and the English. This is interesting for the fact that while they can well articulate such a vowel in a word of a song, they could not do that in the context of a sentence. Thus the word *i'a* (fish) in one popular song was mistaken for *'i'a*, a non-meaning composition, when written on the board. Reflecting on a 20 plus years of classroom experience, she has come to the conclusion that the teaching of the Samoan vowels' pronunciation has largely been neglected.

The second writer came into the time frame as a journalist, firstly, working in two Auckland based Samoan newspapers before establishing own bilingual weekly. Networking with schools and the wider Samoan community in Auckland was the nature of the business and with language as his tool of trade, any matter pertaining to its best interests was considered important.

The matter of vowels pronunciation was quickly picked up and reported in his writings. Easy access to schools through the role of media has opened conversation with teachers on the issue among various others of the day. He remembered the first time he turned his car radio on and a group of singers were crooning on a popular Samoan ballad, pulling all the stops in a voicing exercise which was poorly executed linguistically speaking. No reservation was made for the soft utterance of the Samoan vowel at all.

Later on when he changed career and worked as a full-time teacher, he began to explore the issue seriously among his students. The response from his college students who studied Samoan for NCEA 1 and 2 was varied. Many admitted that it was never addressed in their learning at Primary. A lot of them did struggle with the vowel sound in their reading exercises. It was noted early on that this problem was more prevalent among the New Zealand-born than their Samoan-born peers. This he attributed to the quality of different nurturing environments to which students were exposed; in this case, the Samoan born have the advantage. This was more evidentially supported for the Samoan-born group in casual conversations than their New Zealand-born peers. Those who had no prior experience of Samoan in formal learning contexts or during their Primary School years found the challenge daunting to say the least.

The experience from his students prompted more personal observations, in the public arena, more out of curiosity of its prevalence among the older generation, Samoan-born. Listening to conversations as well as actively participating, he would then match a certain word's vocalization with Milner's, then later with Pratt's own written registry. The focus would always be partial to the pronunciation of an initial vowel sound in any word of that group. The verb *au* for instance means to reach to. Its Passive forms are *Ausia*, *Autia*, *Aulia*. *Ausia* (or its noun form *Ausiga*) has become more glottalized in people's speeches, compared with *Aulia* or *Autia* that is rarely used. Here a shift can be noted in this particular verb which impact is viewed as direct in terms of its meaning and origin. There seems to be a connection between the shift in *Ausia* and another similar homograph in *'ausi*, recorded by Milner, which meaning is to attempt to outdo. It is one example of many and is very much part and parcel of the phenomenon under study.

Both writers' observations will form the basis of this discussion.

## The Samoan vowels

Before we ponder on the problem, first, we'll take a look at the basic outline of the Samoan vowel forms and sounds for sake of recapping. The Samoan alphabet consists of 5 vowels and 9 consonants. That makes for 14 altogether even though consensus on the actual role and place of the phonemic glottal stop in the Samoan alphabet is still polarised<sup>2</sup>. This is part of the problem that we will look at in more details later.

The letters H, K and R were incorporated to the original 14 by the LMS missionaries at the time when the Samoan oral language was appropriated with the singular purpose of translating the Bible in Samoan. The Samoan version attests strongly to such linguistic achievement and still serves as a primary reference of the Samoan phonology in written form (Tui Atua, 2001).

The Samoan vowels are facilitatory in language acquisition due to sharing similar characteristics with many other phonetic based languages. All five<sup>3</sup> Samoan vowels are pure, basically monophthongs; and still maintain their sounds and quantities as diphthongs and triphthongs combinations (*maea* – rope, short; *māe'a* – finish, long). Vowel length is classified under short and long. Short vowels are common in the V, CV and CVV formations; in the minimal pairs as well, CVCV and VCV (*mama* – ring; *ata* – photo). The schwa<sup>4</sup> must also be considered given the fact of its commonplace in the Samoan syntax. The long vowel according to Milner may be heard with or without a medial pulse. *O mai!* – *Come!* *Tōfā* – *Goodbye*, involve no medial pulse; *vāiaso* – *week*, *tāga* – *tattooing*, both involve a medial pulse. For the latter especially, the speaker dictates the pulse duration in no certain terms. But bear in mind also that another speaker can say the word with no stress at all and still counted as intelligible.

There are at least 20 diphthongs identified so far, the majority of which are words in their own rights, and some classified as homonyms. Vowel 'a' is the most frequently used as a monophthong or as part of a diphthong (Tavita & Fetui, 2012). Triphthongs and even quadthongs are not uncommon too.

2. H, K, and R have now become part of the alphabet of 17 phonemes, well embedded in the literature. K has dominated the Samoan *Tautala Leaga* register and made huge inroads into the T register in terms of spelling and writing.

3. Diphthongs and long vowels can be considered vowel phonemes also. Thus as many as 30 or even more. See also Lyovin (1997) p.259

## The pronunciation

A Samoan vowel is described as having a smooth tonal sound when uttered (Le Tagaloa, 1996; Pratt, 1893). A Samoan elder hinted that it has a nasal quality to it, or as another local source put it, 'an aspirated h unstressed'. When pronounced the sound negotiates a register as the vocal tract partially opens, wide enough not to be blocking the air flow; nor too wide to be slipping into the consonantal h mode. The mouth (vocal organs) and nose (nasal function) operate simultaneously which end result is quite distinct from the English sounds or the h consonant for that matter.

Considering the fact that the IPA register cannot subscribe adequately in some cases, including the Samoan vowels (Le Tagaloa, 1996, Churchill, 1908, Pratt, 1893), we can only approximate the locus of their processing at this point. The close vowels are I and U. The I resembles the English E /i:/ and is described as a close front unrounded vowel; U /u/ is described as a close back rounded vowel. E and O are mid vowels, E /e/ is described as mid front unrounded while O /o/ as mid back rounded. The closest sound on the IPA is e and o with a small capital T underscore. The A /ɐ/ is a near open central vowel which on the registered IPA sound is a rotated lower-case a. These are close approximations, phonemically and phonetically, as the acceptable sound must adhere to the manner of good articulation as described.

But it is not unique to the Samoan, it is shared by other Polynesian dialects as well, though more prominently within the praxis of their oral traditions and usage. In Maori *te reo* for instance, the same vowel sounds I E A O U are shared; it is sustained in its own oral tradition and nurturing. The most popular terms as Aotearoa, Kia Ora and own namesake are well-known examples internationally.

4. Schwa in Samoan commonly occurs in the first syllable of a group of words and signified by the breve symbol in the old Samoan writing style.

## Situation and evidence

Most of the evidence referred to are observant-based, recorded by the writers, supported by teaching colleagues' own observations and discussed freely during open conversations. The writers have recorded a number of such evidence from a choice of various situations and contexts, in personal diaries but mostly by memory. For the purpose of this writing, two situations are selected to elaborate. One in the context of a school (A), the other in the context of a community (B). Both situations provide concrete evidence of the phenomenon among young users of the language.

### *In recitals*

#### (A) *The Lord's Prayer in Samoan*

Lo matou Tamā e 'o i le lagi,  
Ia pa'ia lou suafa,  
Ia o'o mai lou malo,  
Ia faia lou finagalo i le lalolagi  
E pei 'ona faia i le lagi;  
Ia 'e foa'i mai ia te i matou a matou mea e 'ai  
e tatau ma le aso;  
Ia 'e fa'amagalo ia te i matou ia matou agasala,  
e pei o i matou fo'i 'ona matou fa'amagaloina atu  
i e ua agaleaga mai ia te i matou;  
Aua fo'i e te ta'ita'iina i matou i le tofotofoga,  
A ia e lavea'i ia te i matou 'ai le leaga;  
Auā e ou le malo ma le mana  
Atoa ma le vi'iga, e fa'avavau lava. Amene.

### *In song performance*

#### (B1) *Ua mamalu ma pa'ia*

Ua mamalu ma pa'ia lenei aso  
Fa'afetai ma fa'amalo mua ia mua o  
Avea ia lo'u leo e auauna atu ai  
Mo oe Samoa pe a e finagalo i ai

I le ava ma le fa'aaloalo ou te fa'atulou  
Afai e sala se fati fa'amagalo o i matou  
Ia teu ita i si ou fatu fa'amagalo ia te a'u  
E itiiti e ua leva o ni manatu  
Chorus: Lalalala o tofiga ia 'u'umau i ou lima  
Muagagana a le atunuu  
E mamae le tava'e i ona fulu

## Critical Observations (Analysis)

(A):

1. Reciting the Lord's prayer has become standard practice for many Samoan bilingual units (ECE and Primary) in New Zealand schools. Many children learn the Lord's Prayer at home or in church then bring such prior knowledge with them to ECE nests and Primary (Samoan bilingual units) later on. Some teachers at these levels normally reinforce correct pronunciation but that is not a rule.

2. Children tend to err mostly on the pronunciation of vowels as an initial sound of a word. There are four content words in the text starting with a vowel. In terms of occurrence, this is how they are placed from high to low in normal usage, according to the writers' observations generally: *agasala*, *aso*, *o'o*, *agaleaga*. In this case, the initial a and o sounds are glottalized indiscriminately.

3. Diphthongal vowels as in the content word *leaga* are also mispronounced. The error is twofold; phonological and orthographical (or lack of word knowledge) that leads to applying the glottal stop unnecessarily; in this case, between the vowels. The vowel diphthong *ea* mimics the English hair for the best approximation and mustn't be confused with 'ea which is the equivalent of English air; *e'a* is a non-meaning composition unless a party to others.

4. The practice of reciting loudly usually changes the audio dynamics of pronunciation from a reading to a performance mode. Children habitually attempt to outperform each other and affect their pronunciation as a result. Also, the fact of generalizing based on group performance is a limitation on this observation as a whole; firstly, from a research perspective, it is not clear how much influence those who erred have on those who have not; or otherwise.

(B):

1. This particular song *Ua mamalu ma pa'ia*, was uploaded on UTube website by a Resa E since 2011 and holds a record of 1,311,390 visits to date. Other uploads all have high scores, so it is obvious that the song has a lot of influence on the listeners which no doubt comprises mainly of the young population.

2. The performers mispronounced two vowel sounds, i and a; i as the initial sound of the word ia in the third line of 1st stanza; and vowel a as the initial sound of the word ava in the first line of the 2nd stanza. Also, one content word, *tava'e*, in the chorus, is also

mispronounced. In this case, the performers failed to articulate the glottal stop, turning the va'e into a diphthong. But they can well articulate the glottal stop sound in other key words of the song – *pa'ia, fa'afetai, fa'amalo, fa'aaloalo, fa'atulou*.

3. Another rendition of the same song on UTube had the word *aso* mispronounced as 'aso. The error was made more glaring by the way it was displayed to the listeners on such a global medium. While the matter was raised on the local Samoan media at the time, any impact that matches the scale of the song's outreach is likely to be minimal. But from both pedagogical and linguistic viewpoints, the impact on Samoan pronunciation is no less imposing. (Please refer to UTube website as labelled).

4. The second song, *Afai ua e musu* was recorded by Jamoa Jam, and uploaded by a *Afa913* on UTube in 2011, was viewed 181,076 times since. Two vowels, a and o, have been glottalised; a as the initial sound of *a'u* in stanza 3 (*ua e tu'ua a'u*); o as the initial sound of the pronoun *ona* (his/her) in the last stanza of chorus (*a e pupula mai ona mata*). A mispronunciation of the glottal u in the word 'u'u of stanza 7 (*ae 'u'u lona 'afa*) as a pure vowel, is indicative of the problem as pointed out. Again, as in the first example, the impact on listeners who are unaware can be significant.

## Discussion: The dilemma of Samoan vowels phonology:

For the past 30 years researchers have put more effort on the orthography and grammatical functions for example, sometimes in response to reading demands such as clarity and fluency. While there has been an ongoing interest among researchers on the prosodic aspects of Samoan speech, phonological awareness has hardly been in the fore (Ballard & Farao, 2008). It can be argued that vowel sounds have been taken for granted all these years. A study by a Pacific linguist mentioned so with regards to the Tongan language; that seemed to highlight a case of sound transfer that somehow resembled the Samoan's own dilemma (Taumoe-folau, 1998). The *Tonganisation* of the English glottal is ascribed to a freer assimilation of English sounds, particularly the glottal onset that defines English vowels (Ibid.). The argument for the Tongan is yet to be developed as far we are aware. How *ofa* (unit of measurement) can still be maintained while 'ofa (love) becomes

glottalized is a case in point, for example. Ballard & Farao (ibid.) is the latest so far on Samoan phonology since Pawley's take on the topic (1960). Recent studies still refer to early observations (Pratt, 1893; Milner, 1966; Churchward, 1951) for example.

Ballard & Farao's own looked at the phonological acquisition of Samoan speaking children in New Zealand in their own language. Before that a paper by Hamilton & Gillon (2005) was drawn upon a study's findings into the phonological awareness skills of Samoan-English bilingual children in New Zealand; highlighting its importance for research. All of the studies mentioned so far have not alluded to this aspect of Samoan initial vowel pronunciation as an issue.

Four things the writers would like to point out pertaining to this dilemma.

### 1. A case of mistaken identity

When Samoan was officially coded as a written language, the five pure sounds were more or less approximated along the English, the Latin and other sounds familiar to the coders. But while English and other languages have appropriated their sounds closely with the world's IPA, Samoan hasn't phonetically (Churchill, 1908). As it turned out attempts have been made to identify its vowel sounds with English or Latin, which was problematic (Devine, 1971).

In schools, Samoan bilingual children learn both the English and the Samoan alphabet alongside each other. So while they can transfer information both ways they too are inclined to misrepresent either code based on their rationalizing at face level. Hence the English A (artist, apple) can be transferred to Samoan via an exercise at vowel pronunciation unconsciously. This is strongly implied in the evidence in both examples, in which the error is prominent in the initial vowel sound of a word. A student then can be mistaken for two vowel phonemes, the English creaky /a/ (art) and the Samoan nasalized /ɛ/ (*aso* – day). Confusion arises when a glottal stop sign (inverted comma) is omitted resulting in a blur; firstly, in phonetics or the need to articulate well. Secondly, in the phonemics or the need to adequately represent sound. The question is obvious, How sufficient an inverted comma symbol is in sustaining the demands of the Samoan phonology?

Such a dilemma puts into perspective this whole idea of approximation for bilingual children (Mack, 1989), in

which phonetics, as Devine (1971) describes, is about what is similar and what is less similar; or in the case of phonemics, what is distinctive and what is non-distinctive. According to Devine, the term ‘phonetic transcription’ is a misnomer for the fact that it implies that the basis of a transcription is phonetic; as if not considering the phonemic functions involved. As Devine pointed out the reality is that the IPA register does not provide an infinite number of phonetic symbols that meet the world’s phonological demand. Even further, text segmentation is not based on phonetics but on universals that is the domain of phonemic analysis (Ibid.).

In phonetics three main distinctions are made: the hard, the soft, and the aspirated vocal onsets. The hard refers to the harsh and strident phonation in which the glottal stop is prominent. This is clearly demonstrated in words beginning with vowels. English belongs in this category. This can be observed in an audio demonstration to contrast and compare. For example, compare English *affection* with French *amour* and Samoan *alofa*, as natives of the latter would say them. In the process the phonatory quality that differentiates French Nasal and English ‘glottal’ from Samoan can be felt. As shown, the Samoan vowels ideally match the aspirated vocal onset. Unlike the ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ onsets, the glottis is a lot more relaxed, the ‘nasal h’ is a distinct feature. So it is obvious that an error in transfer is likely to occur when children mistook one sound for another.<sup>5</sup> In the case of bilingual children whose first language is English, it is clearly an issue, as the evidence from our observations suggested.

## 2. The role of the diacritical marks

An ongoing debate on the role of diacritical marks in Pasifika orthography and phonology can be traced back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, among linguists of the period which revolved on the question of their place and demand in the writing task. The argument that Samoan stemmed from a common Proto-Polynesian, in which the glottal stop was phonemic /k/, until Samoan let go of the ‘k’ for the glottal, marking a clear shift from the

others. The roles of two diacritical marks (macron and glottal stop) in modern Samoan is still an open discussion (Mayer, 2016; Tualualelei, et al., 2015; Milner, 1966). Taumoeofolau (1998) remarked that Milner’s primary intention for use of the marks was to do with informing non-native speakers in terms of correct pronunciation. So there are those who argue that the function of the glottal stop in Samoan orthography is more to do with the need to articulate sound properly, than any claim at its phonemic status in Samoan phonology (Tavita & Fetui, 2016). The same can be said about the macron. Many Samoan writers avoid using both marks; many still can read and understand without the aid of the marks. Unless of course writing is processed professionally for speeches presentation or academic publication.

In a latest development, a bureaucratic directive was issued for the marks to be applied on the basis of clarity basically, after a commission review took into account critical feedbacks of their overuse, leading to unnecessary distractions for the readers. Hence the commission’s decision to use them sparingly. The decision clearly implied the democratic choice of the majority.<sup>6</sup> Ballard & Farao (2008) viewed the deletion of the glottal stop sign in word initial position as a case of transfer, that is from English to Samoan. But the practice has long entrenched before government sanctioned its reinforcement lately. From a practical viewpoint however, the marks are still seen as essential for good pronunciation and reading practice particularly for the young emergent learners and foreigners who learn the language. A macron for instance denotes a long vowel and a signal to accentuate accordingly.

The glottal stop sign (inverted comma) is still required to distinguish the group of words beginning with the glottal sound from Samoan pure vowel sounds. But as alluded to earlier, it is not a rule. The primary concern is that once the marks are done away with altogether then the impact on the task of ‘word disambiguation’ will be challenging.<sup>7</sup> The debate on the status of the glottal stop is ongoing. The reality is that English will

5. Some resource makers of the Samoan language for sake of clarity refer to two vowels: that is, the glottalized vowel (leo ma’ ai) and the non-glottalized (leo molemole) or the pure vowel sound to differentiate.

<sup>6</sup> The Samoan language at one point was fully immersed in a ‘marks free’ environment in which both the diacritical marks were dropped altogether. Its proponents commented favourably of similarities with English in which readers read for meaning and contexts rather than depending on direction of diacritical or accent marks. There has been no research done to prove its long-term merits. By contrast, Samoan with full marks on is another academic exercise that is yet to be proven. Suffice it to say that students at NUS

(Samoa’s national university) have voted against its overuse, resulting in the commission’s decision. Either way, the capacity to read fluently without the aid of accent marks is due mainly to practice, underpinned by a solid foundation in oral skills and discernment for sound differences in homonyms/homographs.

<sup>7</sup> The concern for Milner was the extent to which diacritic marks can be applied significantly; a problem he, in his own words, “cannot yet claim to have solved entirely.”

continue to influence the transfer of sounds and even symbols across languages, impacting strongly on minority languages such as Pasifika's own. Its own stance as non-phonetic and avoidance of accent marks is part of such influence.

### 3. Role of education in teaching phonology

As argued, the Samoan vowel sound is not part of the IPA phonetic code, nor is it well acknowledged by researchers as an integral part of the modern Samoan phonology. Neither is it given so much attention in teaching curriculums, both Samoa and overseas, in language development and application. Such a taken for granted attitude can be described in the early formation of Samoan literacy, through a very important tool that spearheaded the nationwide campaign for reading and writing. We're referring to the *Pi Tautau* (also known as Pi Faitau). The *Pi Tautau* was Samoa's first Alphabet Chart, introduced by the missionaries who first appropriated Samoan in its written form. It was Samoa's first experience with phonics and its system of sound-symbol relationships. Learners were taught to identify a vowel letter by name then reinforced so by saying the name of the image placed beside (a 'ato, e 'elefane, i ipu, o 'ofu, u uati). In this case the initial sounds.

If Pratt and proponents of the native sound can be taken for their words then the *Pi Tautau* has been fraught with issues of ambiguity from the start. The concern is both phonetic and phonemic. By all appearances it seemed that the English sound and not Samoan, has been promoted all along; the exceptions were i and u, which support images comply with the sound respectively.

From Pratt of the mid-19th century to the Samoan diaspora of the 21st century worldwide, the Samoan language has undergone many changes as any other minority language would under present circumstances. As Samoans migrate overseas the younger generations are more prone to such adverse influences, who no longer have the nurturing support of their parents' village communities; and were it not for churches and such bodies in their adopted countries, many of them would be isolated altogether. Part of the transition involves role shifting, as more is expected of the state to play an active role in language maintenance and nurturing, particularly in contexts of modern global forces in which minority diasporas take place (Cummins, 2000). Bilingualism and bilingual education has been the favoured choice for such environment (Ibid.).

The state therefore can be expected to provide the means to address any critical language matter.

In terms of language development, the involvement of a small independent state in world affairs—political and economic—can only reinforce the monopoly of English in state and educational institutions (Taumoeolau, 2011). English is the language of commerce and business; the language identified with employment opportunities and for many parents an obvious choice that must be given first priority in their children's education. Samoan by contrast is seen as 'the language of the home', reserved for social and cultural purposes only. So there's a discriminating choice in favour of English over Samoan based on such classifications. Such attitude is prevalent among migrant parents; a contributing factor in the gradual loss of Pasifika languages, and a major hindrance to its academic development (Tuafuti, 2016; McCaffery & McFall-McCaffery, 2011; Taumoeolau, 1998).

The irony lies in the fact that the majority of Samoans enjoy using their language. The Polyfest Festival will attest to such a great display of phonological skills at the highest level; not just for Samoans but other Pasifika cultures as well. The same can be said of the written Samoan and its development. In 2017, Samoa's Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture (MESC) released a report of the nation's children's outcomes in reading proficiency; decoding skills was one in the list that scored an overall average, and which needs improvement (MESC Samoa, 2017). In New Zealand, a number of Samoan bilingual nests are implicated in ERO reports now and then, with the need to improve basic skills in biliteracy, including reading comprehension. While progress can be noted in the use of Samoan as a learning tool across its diasporic community, there are new gaps that need attention.

In lexicographical development for instance, written Samoan still depends on two standard dictionaries, the more recent is 60 years to date. Even their access for classroom use is limited. Limitations can also be viewed in terms of difficulty and biases involved in the design, thus making a resource inaccessible to an average learner (Taumoeolau, 1998). International collaboration; even between the two Samoas, may be hindered by geopolitical interests. On the other hand, the option of a free for all dissemination approach, by which various interest groups and private individuals, researchers from outside, take the initiative, has its own issues.

#### 4. Glottalization in modern language shifts

Vowel-initial glottalization is a complex subject as Bartunkova (2012) testified to in her study of this particular title. Part of this complexity is to do with the absence of any rules to govern the presence or absence of glottalization in languages. Five languages were targeted – French, Czech, German and American English. French for instance has a straightforward approach in terms of placing it unlike English of which glottalization is taken as a free variant (Ibid.). In her research, three types of glottalization were distinguished: canonical, creaky and breathy. The findings of her study pointed out two factors: 1. The effect of accent (pitch) on glottalization. 2. The tendency to glottalize content words. Bartunkova's conclusion is, there is no clear pattern to show in the way these languages have been glottalized in the case of vowel-initial word position.

Smith & Holmes-Elliott (2017) is one of the most recent studies which focus is tracking the 'rapid change' in glottal replacement to have occurred in British English of modern times. Such change in the use of the glottal has been noted among at least 90 per cent of the younger generation, is by any general estimate overwhelming. The origins of the shift can be traced back some 150 years past, a relatively recent phenomenon although, according to Trudgill (2008). How the spread of the glottal across the English-speaking world affects minority languages is yet to be determined and has not been the focus of the Smith & Holmes-Elliott study. The same concern can be raised about the widespread and impact of English glottalization among Pasifika languages, as Taumoevalu initially pointed out for the Tongan (Ibid.).

For all studies mentioned, the concern is very much shared. Bartunkova's own dilemma of whether glottalization is governed by phonetic context or speaker habits rather than word-class or accent is the same that these writers also grapple with. The glottalization of English is another discussion. Suffice it to say that the concern on such impact in the area of language transfer for bilingual minorities is real.

#### Conclusion

This paper is a response to a phenomenon that concerns Samoan phonetics and phonology. It involves a shift in vowel pronunciation particularly in initial word position. As argued the Samoan vowels and their pronunciation very much differentiate native speakers from non-natives who are introduced into the language. Early observers of Samoan have testified strongly.<sup>8</sup> While the 'shift' may be viewed as minor, as some folks of ours opined, it is hugely impacting at this time and space. For example, the opportunities offered by digital social media to the public to use a language can impact thousands of listeners and viewers enormously, especially for young potential carriers of the language.

The concern as stated earlier, that as development in Samoan tends to focus more on the lexical and morphological aspects of the written language, other equally important aspects are not having their fair share of attention. The findings as deduced from the observations have highlighted the pressing need for proper instructions in Samoan phonology to say the least. As an oral-oriented language explicit modelling is still by far the most effective way to reinforce good pronunciation.

This leads to the issue of sufficiency, herein wrapped up as a case of mistaken identity, which the writers viewed as one piece of an entangled dilemma; the question of how adequate the present coded transcription is in representing or clarifying Samoan sounds. The lingering issue of the role of diacritical marks, the importance of their presence or otherwise in Samoan orthography will continue to challenge, particularly at a time when the young Samoan population converts to digitized technology to communicate; in which context they are shunned and may be considered irrelevant.

In relation to teaching Samoan phonology, there is definitely a need conveyed for authentic resources as well as assessment tools and such assortment of material in Samoan to which schools can easily access. We've mentioned the case of the *Pi Tautau* to highlight the problem of ambiguity in letter symbol and sound relationships for Samoan, hoping to raise awareness.

<sup>8</sup> Rev. G. Pratt was the first to acknowledge the natives' competency in vowel articulation compared with their careless use of consonants; W. Churchill commented on the subtle nature of the Samoan pronunciation: "That basic fact is that any given character in the Samoan alphabet is not exactly the same as that character in English. The most that can be said is that it is a reasonably close approximation, but there yet remains a difference sensible

to the ear even though it be regarded negligible in the written record of the speech"; Le Tagaloa affirmed preceding references in her capacity as an academic and a guardian of the language.



There are signs of some positive developments however, spurred on by own local initiatives, which pushed for the promotion of phonological awareness and phonics system as an effective intervention strategy for children with speech impairment; as well, children of minority languages, learning their own in Aotearoa New Zealand (Gillon & McNeill, 2017).

An initiative by a cohort of researchers, under the auspices of the University of Canterbury School of Education and its *A Better Start E Tipu E Rea National Science Challenges Project*, has come up with a tool to test the phonological awareness of Samoan children, age 6, in their own language. Such an assessment tool is much needed, particularly at a time when the Samoan language is facing a real challenge from English as the more popular medium of communication among the young population.

Finally, this shift in the vowel sound could be viewed as defining, since the first major one Pratt talked about, the colloquial K (*Tautala Leaga*) which continues to impact the pure (formalised) sound adversely. Unless some intervening measures can be done now, it may end up staying, just as it happened with its precedent.

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**Levi Tavita** is a PhD student of the University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand who is doing a research under its Pacific Studies Faculty on Samoan politics. His topic is power relations and political continuity in Samoa. He has a multidisciplinary working background, taking on roles in both Samoa and New Zealand's public service; worked as editor for a bilingual newspaper; served as a teacher; his current role as publisher of educational material highlights his preoccupation with languages and their facilitation for the service of minority learners. His hobbies are reading and writing; with a number of literary works on various topics, including educational material for learning. Apart from study, he publishes an online weekly bulletin OLA; as well as contribute to an Auckland-based Samoan newspaper.

**Saili Aukuso** is a PhD candidate and recipient of a scholarships award of the University of Canterbury. She is studying and working as a researcher of a project that is part of the Better Start, E Tipu e Rea, National Science Challenges Research Programme in New Zealand. She has 30 years of classroom experience as a primary school teacher; with skills in bilingual education and biliteracy programmes. She is presently involved in a trialling of an assessment in phonological awareness in the Samoan language.