

ON THE LACK OF ENGLISH-SPEAKING TUVALUANS IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Doug Munro

Tuvalu (formerly the Ellice Islands) is a cluster of nine small coral atolls and reef islands situated in western Polynesia near the junction of the Equator and the International Date Line. The Tuvalu language is Polynesian and belongs to the Samoic subgroup of languages (Pawley 1966). Today most of the 7000+ Tuvaluans living within their group are at least bilingual. Kiribati, the language of the Gilbert Islands (now Kiribati), is the second language for many. This is in consequence of Tuvalu's previous colonial association, from 1893 until 1975, with this island group. Indeed, Kiribati is still the preferred second language for many Tuvaluans. English, although the language of instruction, comes a poor third. But as the language of government it is nevertheless in widespread use when the occasion demands. This was not always the case: only in the present century has English-speaking ability been in evidence. The present paper seeks to document and explain why that proficiency was lacking last century.

English-speaking ability among Pacific Islanders in the nineteenth century generally depended on the nature and the intensity of their contacts with native English speakers. In the case of Tuvalu these were hardly extensive. Even when the ubiquitous whaleship began cruising the area from the 1820s, a sail on the horizon was still a rare sight. In short Tuvalu held little attraction to whalers: whales were few, the facilities for repairs and reprovisioning were minimal, and the badly charted islands were regarded as dangerous obstacles to navigation. Tuvalu was thus treated as a thoroughfare rather than a resort, with whaleships typically passing through the group to other whaling grounds without contacts of any description taking place between ship and shore. When contacts did occur, they generally took the form of Tuvaluans coming out in their canoes to barter with whalers on the open sea. An estimated 200-250 whaling voyages passed through Tuvalu (Munro 1982:35&n.), a meagre total when one considers that 'some 300 American whalers must have been at sea at any one time from 1820-35 and some 600 from 1835-60' (Wace and Lovett 1973:14).

The Tuvalu experience contrasts with that of several neighbouring islands or clusters of islands. Both Rotuma and Wallis Island, to the south and south-east, were frequently visited by whalers with crewmen frequently going ashore (Campbell 1976:65-66), while in southern Kiribati to the north 'the whaling era

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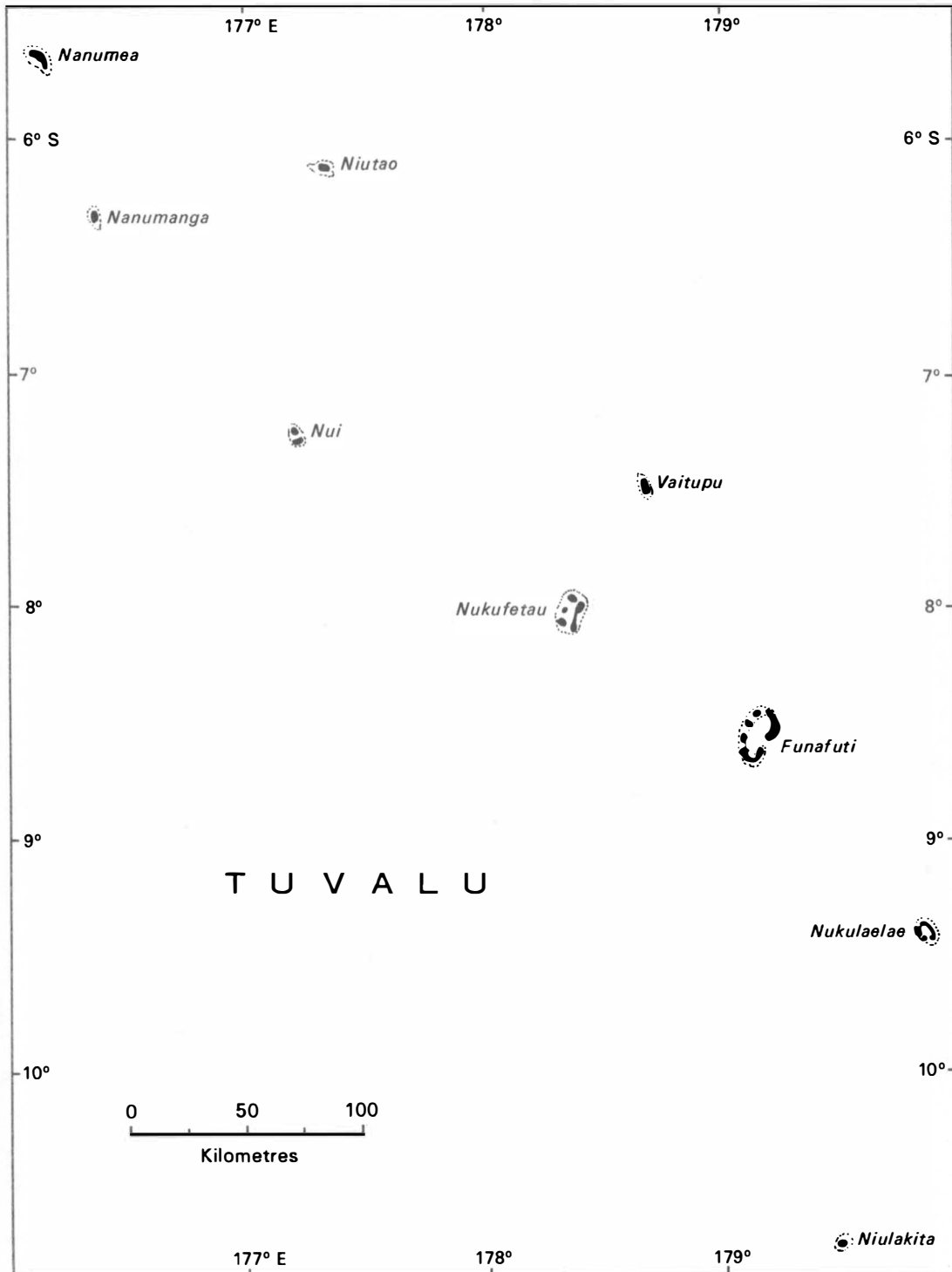


Figure 1: Tuvalu (formerly the Ellice Islands). After Admiralty Chart No.1830.

saw a frequency of shipping and a degree of contact which has not been matched since' (Macdonald 1982:24). At Wallis Island by the late 1830s the 'volume of shipping had become so great that many of the Islanders spoke a little English' (Campbell 1976:66); and Macdonald (1982:21) considers that the small groups of Europeans scattered through southern Kiribati, who acted as middlemen and interpreters to passing whaleships, had their role usurped by the

number of Islanders, especially those who had worked on whalers themselves, who were soon sufficiently proficient in English to conduct their own trade. In any case, trade was adequately carried on without the benefit of language with the Gilbertese holding up in one hand the article for sale and then holding up the fingers of the other to indicate how many heads or plugs ... of tobacco they wanted in exchange.

Tuvaluans made themselves understood in the same way. On one occasion

...several canoes came off, with cocoa-nuts, which the natives traded for pieces of iron hoop, and fish hooks ... they held up in one hand cocoa-nuts, and the forefinger of the other was hooked in their mouths, exclaiming 'mattaw, mattaw' [matau] meaning fish-hooks

(Jarman 1838:163-164).

At this stage there was no need for Tuvaluans to know English since they could make themselves understood by sign language to passing whalers.

In any case the opportunities for Tuvaluans of this period to acquire even a rudimentary knowledge of English were lacking. Very few Tuvaluans went out into the wider world and fewer still white men lived in the group. Again, comparisons with Wallis Island and Rotuma are instructive. According to Campbell, the historian of beachcomber activity in the Pacific, both places

became beachcomber centres on a scale quite disproportionate to their size. Wallis Island had a floating population of perhaps a few dozen at various times in the 1830's, with several more residing more or less permanently. Rotuma had several beachcombers during the 1820's (Campbell 1976:81).

By 1830, 30 Englishmen alone were living at Rotuma (Bach 1968:6n) and ten white men at Wallis Island in 1839 (Wilkes 1845:II,58). It was the presence of these men, rather than the mere volume of shipping, which was the decisive factor. For this reason a visiting missionary reported in 1842 that Rotumans had 'an extensive knowledge of the English language' (Crocombe and Crocombe 1968:20). The large number of Rotumans and Wallis Islanders who worked on whaleships added to the pool of English-speakers at both places.

These preconditions did not obtain in Tuvalu. Very few Tuvaluans worked on whaleships. The first known to have done so was a man from Nui in 1827 and, significantly, he was not recruited at his home island but at Rotuma (*Independence II* 1825-1828: entry for 7 November 1827). Only a handful of others followed his example, such as 'Ben', the son of a chief of Nukufetau, who was returned in 1850 by a passing trading vessel the *Rodolph* (Kemble 1966: 142-143). Nor did many Europeans live ashore during the whaling era. Because whaling captains passing through the group tended to avoid sending parties ashore, there was little scope for crewmen deserting; and in any case few

potential deserters would have chosen such an improbable haven as a small coral atoll or worse still a reef island. Charlie Douglas jumped ship at Niutao (Dana 1935:247) and a couple of men from the *Stafford* made an unsuccessful attempt to stay ashore at Nukufetau in 1861 (*Stafford* 1860-1863: entry for 20 October 1861). A fortnight later the captain of the *Stafford* discharged one of his crew at Vaitupu. Whether the two unnamed white men who greeted the whaleship *Elizabeth* at Nui the same year were deserters, or whether they were bona fide traders, is not specified (*Elizabeth* 1859-1864: entry for 16 September 1861). Into the same ambivalent category falls Jack O'Brien, who stayed on as a trader to become an established identity in the group (Restieaux n.d.). But what is certain is that it was rare to find a white man living in Tuvalu before the advent of traders proper in the mid-1850s (Maude 1968:265n.). The only example revealed by the fragmentary documentary evidence is an Englishman from Sydney named 'Heiti Bill' whom the *Rodolph* took from Nukufetau to Vaitupu in 1850 (Kemble 1966:147).

In the circumstances there was little scope, or need, for Tuvaluans of the time to acquire a knowledge of English. The men of the *Rodolph* had a 'verry [sic] poor' interpreter as a crewman, presumably a Polynesian from another island group, and had to rely on 'Ben' and 'Heiti Bill' to make themselves understood (Kemble 1966:141-147). Three years later, in 1853, at Nanumea, the captain of the whaleship *Planter* had to rely on his third mate, from Vava'u in Tonga, to interpret. He described the mate as being able to 'talk more or less in all of the languages spoken on the different islands of those seas'. But the Nanumea and the Vava'u dialects are not mutually intelligible and the mate's abilities were found wanting when the captain attempted to explain to the chiefs such matters as the nature of the universe, the change of seasons, and the way in which rain formed by condensation (Pease n.d.).

Further evidence is provided by the experiences of the Rev. A.W. Murray of the London Missionary Society (L.M.S.), who made the pioneering missionary voyage to Tuvalu in 1865. On that occasion he only visited the five southern islands of the group. At Nukufetau he met a high ranking man called Taukiei who had served on European ships and 'who understands and talks English amazingly well' (Murray 1865:341). A few days later at Nui, the limit of his cruise, 'canoes met us, and the first words we heard were the following, in English, from a young man in one of them: "Is this the ship with the missionaries?"' (Murray 1876:389). The population of the five southern islands in 1865 numbered approximately 1,100 (Bedford, Macdonald and Munro 1980:237), and yet Murray could discover only two who could speak English. The following year the absence of English-speakers at Nanumea resulted in a very tense moment for Murray who considered himself lucky not to have been killed. In an attempt to make himself understood, Murray spoke in Samoan. He tried to say words to the effect that Christianity would change the life of the island, and he used the unfortunate phrase *vau o fuli te fenua*, which means to *turn the island sideways or even upside down*. Had he said *fuli tino change the people* he would have been on safer ground. But instead his perceived threat angered the Nanumeans who repulsed him with spears and clubs (Munro 1982:120n.).

The period from 1865 to 1900 saw increasing outside contacts with Tuvalu. The L.M.S. established Samoan pastors on all islands; trading companies landed resident traders throughout the group; and in 1892 Great Britain declared a Protectorate over the group. Nevertheless the need and the opportunities for Tuvaluans to acquire English did not correspondingly broaden. Tuvaluans became bilingual but in Samoan and Tuvaluan, as a result of the schools run by the influential L.M.S. pastors. Most of the pastors had some knowledge of English,

some a very fluent grasp. Kirisome of Nui (1865-1899), in the estimate of one English missionary, 'possessed a knowledge of the English language and idiom [that] far exceeds that of any other native I have met...' (Newell 1885:19). But he never gave instruction in English which would have been inimical to the propagation of fa'a Samoa *the Samoan way* (Besnier n.d.; Brady 1970:21-25; Munro 1978:89).

Nor did the presence of increased numbers of resident traders, especially in the late 1870s and 1880s (Munro 1982:186-190), make an appreciable difference. Most were English-speakers although other nationalities included Germans, a couple of Chinese and a Dane. But whatever their native tongue, traders had little linguistic influence: instead they were anxious to learn Tuvalu for the sake of the business and for their social well-being. This was just one of the ways in which resident traders conformed to the needs of their wider environment. Louis Becke's astonishment when he discovered that another trader, George Winchcombe, had been 'four years on Niutao and cannot yet talk the language in fact I had to translate for him' (Becke 1880) reveals that Winchcombe was quite out of the ordinary. When Winchcombe moved to Nukufetau he solved his problem to a degree by teaching the Islanders English. 'Certainly they speak it very well', remarked a visitor (Woodford 1884:17). It would appear, however, that this observation applies only to a handful of Nukufetauans - those who had actually learnt English from Winchcombe - rather than the island as a whole.

Otherwise, very few Tuvaluans last century learnt English despite increased European contact. The documentary record on the subject is meagre indeed. On most islands there was at least one Tuvaluan who could speak English sufficiently well to interpret for visiting Royal Navy captains. Captain Maxwell found one at Nui in 1881 and Captain Bridge found another in Vaitupu in 1883 (Maxwell 1881:5; Bridge 1883:3). At Nukulaelae in 1883 the Judicial Commissioner accompanying Captain Bridge met a man who had never been off the island but who 'spoke English very fairly' (Le Hunte 1883:6). On some other islands, however, such as Niutao in 1881, no Tuvaluans at all could speak English (Maxwell 1881:5).

It was only after the commencement of large scale return labour migration to the phosphate works at Ocean Island and Nauru that the need arose for Tuvaluans in any number to learn English. The opportunities for labour migration increased dramatically after the Second World War with educated Tuvaluans finding employment in growing numbers at Tarawa, the administrative centre of the then Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony; and since the late-1960s young men have recruited for overseas merchant marines. Because of the circular nature of labour migration, and because of its near universality, overseas work has become part of the pattern of expectations and life experience for Tuvaluan males.

These developments greatly encouraged English-speaking proficiency. In the case of work at Ocean Island and Nauru, 'The most important prerequisite for obtaining skilled work and/or advanced training was a good command of English' (Chambers 1984:173). In the cases of work with the Colony civil service (and now in the Tuvaluan civil service) and with overseas merchant marines, a good command of English is quite essential. Most of those civil servants in the Colony days were pupils of Donald Kennedy who ran the Ellice Islands School at Funafuti then Vaitupu from 1924 until the late-1930s. Instruction was carried out in English, not nominally but in reality. It was a radical departure for the time but it paid dividends and had unforeseen repercussions.

The educational achievements of those taught by Kennedy and his disciples were such that they won a high proportion of the scholarships available for overseas study, and they rapidly came to dominate the higher levels of the local civil service in the 1950s and 1960s. The consequent resentment felt by the Gilbertese, and the ill-feeling that developed between races, were important factors in the eventual partition of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony in 1975. (Macdonald 1982:137).

The fact that those Tuvaluans, both of the phosphate islands and at Tarawa, worked alongside large numbers of Gilbertese men, had the added result that Tuvaluans abroad acquired fluency in the Gilbertese language.¹

In summary, nineteenth century Tuvaluans had neither the need nor the opportunity to become proficient in English. This was a function of the nature and the intensity of their contacts with the outside world, which mitigated against the acquisition of English-speaking ability by large numbers of Tuvaluans. In the present century the accumulated pressures of labour migration and the use of English as the medium of instruction (at least nominally) and the language of government, together with the enhancement of employment prospects for those with a sound command of English, have combined to encourage the widespread use of the language. Once the older generation passes away, there will be very few Tuvaluans indeed without at least some command of English.

NOTES

¹ It must be emphasised that more Tuvaluan men than women have acquired a knowledge of English, although the situation is rapidly becoming more even. This is because overseas employment was, and still is, primarily for men. Generally, wives and children only join the men once sufficient seniority has been established. The women usually remain in a domestic situation removed from the English-speaking work environment. On the other hand, because they are in close association with Gilbertese women in the labourers' quarters, they readily acquire Gilbertese. Today, however, the large number of women employed in the Tuvalu civil service at Funafuti, and as school teachers on the outer islands, is resulting in a significant increase in the numbers of English-speaking Tuvaluan women.

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