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Reo Ra'ivavae (Ra'ivavae, Austral Archipelago, French-occupied Polynesia) – Language Snapshot

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Language Name:	Reo Ra'ivavae
Language Family:	Eastern Polynesian; Austronesian
ISO 639-3 Code:	none
Glottolog Code:	raiv1237
Number of speakers:	approximately 524
Location:	Ra'ivavae, French-occupied Polynesia
Vitality rating:	unknown

Summary

Reo Ra'ivavae is the autochthonous language of the people of Ra'ivavae, in the Austral Islands of French-occupied Polynesia. It is also spoken in the administrative centre of French-occupied Polynesia, Tahiti, by the Ra'ivavae diaspora. Historically, the language is considered an Eastern Polynesian language that exhibits some unique sound changes, not found elsewhere in the subgroup. The Ra'ivavae population is undergoing language shift to Tahitian and there exists some degree of multilingualism on the island with French as well. While the exact degree of endangerment is unclear, the language is under threat and urgently requires significant study as there is as of yet very little documentation or description of the language.

Français

Reo Ra'ivavae est une langue vernaculaire de l'île de Ra'ivavae des Australes en Polynésie française. Cette langue est également parlée à Tahiti, centre administratif de la Polynésie française, par la diaspora de Ra'ivavae. Elle est historiquement considérée comme l'une des langues de Polynésie orientale marquée par des changements de sons uniques, qui n'ont été identifiés nulle part ailleurs dans ce sous-groupe de langues. La population de Ra'ivavae utilise actuellement la langue tahitienne en priorité, et un certain niveau de multilinguisme est présent sur l'île, avec en outre l'usage du français. Bien que le statut exact de cette langue soit mal défini, il est clair qu'elle est actuellement menacée et il est nécessaire de l'étudier rapidement car très peu de documentation ou de description de cette langue ont été effectuées jusqu'à présent.

Reo Tahiti (translated by Teremu'ura Rurua)

E reo tumu te reo ra'ivavae nō te fenua Ra'ivavae i te ta'amotu Tuhaa pae, i Porinetia farāni. 'Ia fano te ta'ata Ra'ivavae i Tahiti, 'oia te pū fa'aterera'a nō Porinetia farāni no Porinetia farāni, nō te noho i reira, e paraparau ato'a rātou i tō rātou reo. I roto i 'āpapara'a o te mau reo, tei roto te reo ra'ivavae i te pupu o te mau reo no Porinetia hitia'a o te rā. Nō tōna huru topara'a reo, e reo ta'a 'ē mau 'oia 'ia faaaupia e te tahi atu mau reo nō taua pupu nei. I teie mahana, te reo mātāmua roa a tō Ra'ivavae, 'o te reo tahiti ia, 'āpitihia mai e te tahi atu mau reo mā'ohi, nā reira ato'a te reo farāni. Mai te mea 'aita e numera nō teie taima e fa'a'ite ra tē vai maita'i ra ānei teie nei reo, mea ti'a e ha'apāpū ē, tē morohi noa atu ra 'oia. 'E nō te mea 'aore re'a e puta e 'aore re'a e parau papa i pāpā'ihia i ni'a i teie nei reo, mea tītauhia e fa'atupu i te mau tuatāpapara'a hohonu i ni'a i teie nei reo.

1. Overview

Reo Ra'ivavae is an under-documented and under-described Eastern Polynesian language. It is spoken on the island of Ra'ivavae in the Austral Island archipelago of French-occupied Polynesia (Section 3). Figures 1 and 2 situate Ra'ivavae in the broader region of French-occupied Polynesia and within the Austral Islands.

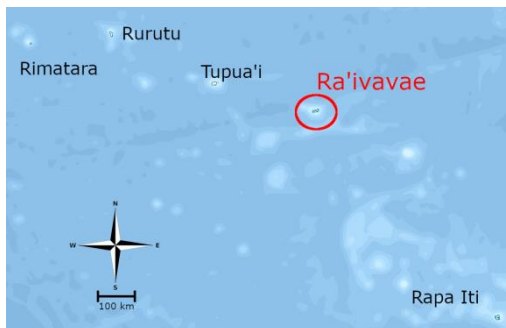


Figure 1: The Austral Archipelago within French-occupied Polynesia (Claudiel 2008)

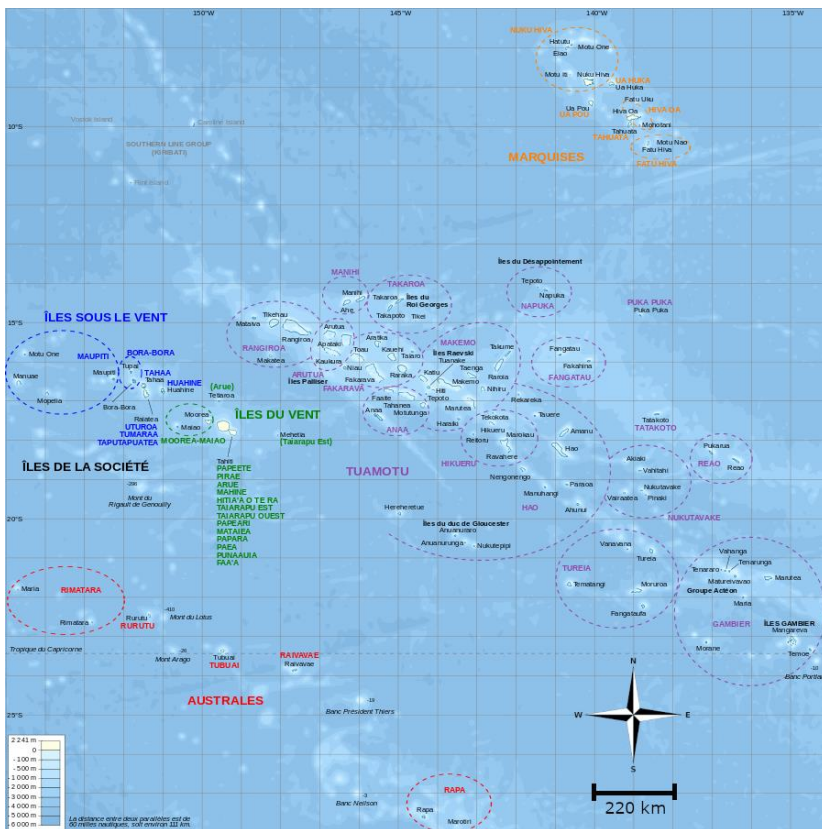


Figure 2: Ra'ivavae within the Austral Archipelago (modified from Sémhur 2015)

Reo Ra'ivavae is the autochthonous language of Ra'ivavae, however French is official on the island and is used in governmental and educational domains. No formal language-use survey has been conducted yet, but based on the authors' firsthand observations, the majority of children are no longer learning Reo Ra'ivavae at home. Education is conducted mostly in French, with a few hours per week dedicated to Reo Ra'ivavae. Tahitian, as the lingua franca of French-occupied Polynesia, is also spoken, particularly between immigrants from other islands. For the Ra'ivavae diaspora on Tahiti, almost all are multilingual in both Tahitian and French.

2. History

The earliest evidence of human habitation on Ra'ivavae is CE ~1190-1290 (Wilmshurst et al. 2011), followed by a period of interaction with other islands within the immediate neighbourhood and beyond (Marshall & Walter 2017; Rolett et al. 2015; Walworth 2017a). Tahiti asserted political and cultural domination with the arrival of King Pōmare II, and representatives from the London Missionary Society in 1819 (Charpentier & François 2015: 102). The missionaries established Tahitian as the local prestige language, using it as the Church language. Since then, Reo Ra'ivavae has been undergoing Tahitianisation (see Charpentier & François 2015; Fischer 2000; Stimson n.d.).

While the language is undoubtedly Eastern Polynesian (EP) (Walworth & Davletshin 2019), its closest internal EP affinities are uncertain. Fischer (2000) argued that it was part of an Austral subgroup internal to the Tahitic group of EP, comprising Rurutuan, Rimataran, Tupua'ian, and Reo Ra'ivavae. This classification, however, has received significant criticism (Rutter 2002; Marck 2002; Wilson 2012; Walworth 2014, 2017a). Charpentier & François (2015) also contend that Reo Ra'ivavae may be part of an Austral dialect group, although they do not assign it to a particular subgroup of EP. Walworth (2017b) argues that there is not enough evidence to substantiate an Austral dialect group, given the scarcity of quality documentation and intensity of Tahitianisation over the last 150 years. She instead claimed that Reo Ra'ivavae is historically distinct from other languages in the Austral Islands based on independent sound changes from Proto Eastern Polynesian and unique lexical innovations. Further documentation on Ra'ivavae will help to clarify the Austral islands languages classification, and the position of Reo Ra'ivavae in the Eastern Polynesian subgroup.

3. Vitality

The vitality of Reo Ra'ivavae is undeterminable with the currently available data. The most recent census reports 524 out of 703 people over fifteen years of age in Ra'ivavae speak the language at home (Institut de la Statistique de la Polynésie française 2017), however it is unclear whether this represents people speaking a local variety of Tahitian or traditional Reo Ra'ivavae. The full data for home-language by respondents over 15 is in Table 1.

Table 1: Home-Language, Respondents Over 15 Years Old

Language	Number of Respondents
Austral (presumed Reo Ra'ivavae)	524
French	146
Tahitian	30
English	2
Marquesan	1
Total	703

Despite the unreliability of the census data in differentiating Reo Ra'ivavae from Tahitian, and from other Austral Islands varieties, there is clear language shift ongoing in all districts. Fieldworkers who surveyed Ra'ivavae in the 1930s and 1980s noted an already high degree of Tahitianisation (Schooling 1981; Stimson n.d.), and continued shift to Tahitian has also been observed more recently in the authors' preliminary field studies. Furthermore, there is anecdotal evidence of hyper-insertion of uniquely Reo Ra'ivavae phonemes in otherwise Tahitian speech as a marker of authenticity in the midst of heavy Tahitianisation, similar to what Walworth (2017c) describes for Rapa Iti.

4. Existing Description

There is little existing descriptive literature on Reo Ra'ivavae. In the 1930s, Frank J. Stimson (n.d.) conducted fieldwork in support of writing a dictionary, the manuscript of which was later improved by David Marshall, however it was never published. It is an invaluable collection of lexical information but marred by a lack of linguistic commentary, a colonial focus on certain vocabulary subsets, and an equally colonial romanticism in translating terms

(cf. the criticism in Elbert 1965). Additionally, there is a wordlist of 200 entries in Schooling (1981).¹

Zamponi (1996) reviewed differences between the extant lexical materials and discussed the historical sources for glottal stop in contemporary Reo Ra'ivavae. He suggested that Tahitian influence has led to a convergence of several different Proto-Eastern-Polynesian phonemes, including */k/ and */ŋ/, into glottal stop in present day Reo Ra'ivavae. Both changes were incomplete during Stimson's (n.d.) fieldwork, and future research needs to track the progress of these shifts.

5. Ongoing Research

In 2010, Mary Walworth began preliminary Ra'ivavae documentation, resulting in a wordlist in the Austronesian Basic Vocabulary Database², and a historical linguistic assessment of Reo Ra'ivavae's unique consonant inventory (Walworth, 2018). Materials from this research have been archived³ with the Pacific and Regional Archive for Digital Sources in Endangered Cultures (PARADISEC). J. Drew Hancock-Teed is undertaking a long-term documentation and description project, which began in 2021. Language vitality workshops with community members are planned for January 2022.

The authors have also recently collaborated on digitising Stimson's manuscript dictionary to make it more accessible and useable to both the Ra'ivavae community and the general public.

¹ There are some discrepancies between Stimson (n.d.) and Schooling (1981) which may be attributable to language change or to author errors (see Zamponi 1996 for some discussion)

² <https://abvd.shh.mpg.de/austronesian/language.php?id=1213> (accessed 2021-10-06)

³ <https://catalog.paradisec.org.au/collections/MW2> (accessed 2021-10-06)

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