

# Language as a Marker of Ethnic Identity in New Zealand's Pasifika Communities

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## 1. Introduction

Ethnicity is a dynamic social phenomenon that defines itself through interactions with others in different situations (Jenkins 1994, 1996). Ethnic awareness, the view of who one is, is sustained by shared objective characteristics such as language, religion, by more subjective contributions (feeling of who one is), or by some combination of both (Edwards 1984, 1994). These criteria alter as groups adapt to confronting social forces. In such situations, a group's original language need not remain as an objective marker of identity (Edwards & Chisholm 1987:393), language shift is common, and language as a key feature in identity is demoted to a symbolic feature or replaced entirely with other cultural features.

This paper examines the issue of ethnic identity in the Pasifika communities in Auckland, New Zealand's largest urban centre. This region has the highest percentage of Pasifika peoples in New Zealand. The Pasifika label covers a wide range of disparate Polynesian communities in the Pacific. The four largest communities in Auckland are the Samoan, Cook Islands, Tongan and Niuean groups. All are relatively recent migrants with the majority of migration between 1960-1970. In this paper we examine the relationship between their self-evaluation of their household identity and their language maintenance. We compare the similarities and differences across time in each of the four Pasifika communities and evaluate the relationship between 'what is talked about' and the relative health of these community languages.

## 2. Method

A 27-page self-report questionnaire was administered to 120 individuals in Manukau (South Auckland), covering 30 members from each community. The questionnaire asked individuals to comment on life histories, social networks, language proficiency, language use, and their attitudes towards language and language maintenance. It included closed as well as open-ended questions. The majority of the interviews took between 1 and 1½ hours to complete, and were conducted in the language of the interviewer's choice. 78 (65%) interviews were in the community language, 42 (35%) in English.

This paper considers two questions which examine the issue of identity. In these, respondents were asked to rank their current and childhood households on a three-point scale from 'very traditional' to 'somewhat traditional' to 'not at all traditional'. They were also asked to explain why they categorised their family households in this way. This paper reports on the quantitative and qualitative findings from their responses, and relates these to observations on the relative health of these community languages.

## 3. Quantitative findings

The quantitative findings show that the communities consider the families that they grew up in to be traditional households. The majority - 93/120 (or 77.5%) - categorize themselves as 'very traditional'. The remainder - 27/120 (or 22.5%) - consider themselves to be 'somewhat traditional'. The trend is consistent across all four communities, as illustrated in Table 1, with no differences between any of the four communities despite their differing levels of language maintenance (see Bell et al, 2000).

**Table 1: Traditionalness of Childhood Household by Community Group**

	<i>Very Traditional</i>		<i>Somewhat Traditional</i>	
	N	%	N	%
Cook Islands	24	80%	6	20%
Niuean	24	80%	6	20%
Samoan	24	80%	6	20%
Tongan	21	70%	9	30%
TOTAL	93		27	

Chi-square 1.290, \*N/S

The responses on the status of the current household identity are presented in Table 2. 76 (or 63%) state that their current household is ‘very traditional’. Although the current household responses are predominantly ‘very traditional’, all four communities show signs of shifts away from traditional lives. In all four communities, there are fewer ‘very traditional’ families, and in two of them, at least one individual reports themselves as ‘not at all traditional’. Although no significant differences occur in the household responses across the four communities, the Niueans report slightly fewer ‘very traditional’ responses, while a greater proportion of Cook Islanders report themselves as ‘very traditional’. This self-reporting of household identity shows no correlation with findings from the language question in the New Zealand Census, which show the Niuean and Cook Islands Maori languages to be in a weaker state of health than their Tongan and Samoan counterparts (Bell et al, 2000). This suggests that factors other than language may play a key role in household identity in these communities.

**Table 2: Traditionalness of Current Household by Community Group**

	<i>Very Traditional</i>		<i>Somewhat Traditional</i>		<i>Not at all Traditional</i>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Cook Islands	21	70%	8	27%	1	3%
Niuean	17	57%	13	43%	-	-
Samoan	19	63%	11	37%	-	-
Tongan	19	63%	9	30%	2	7%
TOTAL	76		41		3	

Chi-square 5.527, \*N/S

Although the findings in Table 5 below show that factors other than language are essential in defining household identity, other findings from the household questions provide insights into the role of language in identity in these communities. Respondents were given a choice for the language of their interview; either English or their community language. 72 (or 92%) of the individuals who reported that they grew up in a ‘very traditional’ house chose to use their community language as the language of their interview (see Table 3). This contrasts with respondents who chose to give their interview in English. Here, household status is more mixed. 20 (or 49%) of the English interviews were from individuals who stated that their childhood household is ‘very traditional’ and 21 (or 51%) of the English interviews were from individuals who stated that their childhood household is only ‘somewhat traditional’. A similar situation occurs for the current household status (see Table 4). 65 (or 83%) of those who chose to be interviewed in the community language report their current household as ‘very traditional’. However, of those who chose English as the language of the interview, only 28 (or 68%) report their household as only somewhat traditional. Language choice, as reflected in the language of the interview, is clearly more than a proficiency issue in these Pasifika communities.

The quantitative findings raise a strong possibility that language plays a role in identity in these communities, but that it is not the only factor in their expression of identity.

**Table 3: Traditionalness of Childhood Household & Language of Interview**

	Very Traditional		Somewhat Traditional	
	N	%	N	%
Community Language	72	<b>92%</b>	6	7%
English	20	<b>49%</b>	21	<b>51%</b>
Mixed	1	-		
TOTAL				

Chi-square 29.292; Significance level = .000

**Table 4: Traditionalness of Current Household & Language of Interview**

	Very Traditional		Somewhat Traditional		Not Traditional	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Community Language	65	<b>83%</b>	12	15%	1	1%
English	11	<b>27%</b>	28	68%	2	5%
Mixed	-		1	-	-	
TOTAL	76		41		3	

Chi-square Value 38.898, Significance level = .000

#### 4. Qualitative responses

In addition to the closed-answer questions, we asked individuals why they ranked themselves as they did. Each answer was coded into categories that individuals themselves had used as measures of traditionalness. These categories included comments which were both negative (My family is not very traditional because...) and positive (My family is very traditional because...). Respondents offered up to 10 qualitative comments. The greatest number of comments on identity was from the Samoan community, the least number from the Cook Islands community.

Table 5 reports on an initial investigation of the categories used to define the communities. In interpreting this table, some methodological notes are needed. First, although some respondents may refer to the same category more than once, each respondent is counted only once, in order to avoid skewing the data in favour of a select segment of the sample. Although the multiple mention of a category may be a sign of relative importance in the communities, this is not investigated here. Furthermore, Table 5 does not distinguish between positive and negative comments, as both types provide insights into the categories that communities view as important. Further, the findings represent an objectified analysis, where respondents' comments are divided into categories devised by the researchers. There has been no analysis of how these researcher-derived categories relate to community members' own subjective evaluations of such comments.

Table 5 is organised by community, and is divided into household responses during childhood (labeled THEN in Table 5) and responses concerning the individual's current household (labeled NOW in Table 5).

The first category in Table 5 is language. LANGUAGE refers to both positive and negative statements about the importance of the community language in the household, as well as comments on the role of English in household identity. WAY OF LIFE covers statements which mention cultural traditions, attendance at social gatherings, Pacific-style discipline, chores, work ethics, and relationships within the household such as brother-sister avoidance. PLACE focuses on where from, where born, where grew up, and where educated. ANCESTRY includes details about the race of parents and grandparents, as well as comments about the race of spouses and in-laws. FOOD refers to the type of food, but more often to its preparation, serving and quantity. IDENTITY is comprised of comments which include terms such as 'real', 'true', '100%' and 'everything'. FAMILY AND FRIENDS refer to statements about others living in the same household, as well as visitors, friends and

neighbours. The feature labelled VALUES & BELIEFS includes statements community members believe are values or beliefs central to the community, e.g., ‘wisdom’, ‘love’. RELIGION refers to church and Sunday school attendance, prayers, and bible readings. ARTEFACTS and CRAFTS includes anything within the home identified with the culture (e.g., mats, ukulele, clothing). Only two ambiguous comments fell outside the scope of these categories, that is ‘history’ and ‘appearance’. Each occur only once in the dataset.

**Table 5: Comparison of the Childhood (THEN) and Current Households (NOW) by Community Group**

	Cook Islands		Niuean		Samoaan		Tongan	
	<i>Then</i>	<i>Now</i>	<i>Then</i>	<i>Now</i>	<i>Then</i>	<i>Now</i>	<i>Then</i>	<i>Now</i>
<b>LANGUAGE</b>	11	15	16	16	18	22	13	15
WAY OF LIFE	6	3	13	14	27	20	25	14
PLACE	21	13	9	6	3	0	4	5
ANCESTRY	11	4	5	1	0	4	4	4
FOOD	0	0	7	13	4	5	0	5
IDENTITY	1	2	4	9	2	4	4	3
FAMILY & FRIENDS	5	10	7	7	9	8	4	8
VALUES & BELIEFS	0	0	1	0	8	8	3	0
RELIGION	0	2	1	0	4	5	5	5
ARTEFACTS/CRAFTS	0	2	3	7	5	8	0	3

Table 5 shows that identity, as reflected through frequency of talk, is dynamic and that it has different manifestations in each of the four Pasifika communities. Features that identify traditionalness during childhood do not always correspond to the features that identify traditionalness in current households. Many features appear to be losing their status as identity markers while other features appear to be taking on new roles in identity. To consider this issue further, we examine separately the types of comments made by individuals from the four Pasifika communities.

#### 4.1 Cook Islands

For the Cook Islands community, the central features of household identity are PLACE, ANCESTRY, LANGUAGE and FAMILY & FRIENDS. While the roles of PLACE & ANCESTRY appear to be diminishing over time, the importance of LANGUAGE and FAMILY & FRIENDS appears to be gaining in importance.

Of particular interest in the Cook Islands community is the category PLACE. A greater number of Cook Islands respondents mention PLACE as a feature of their identity than any other Pasifika group. The Cook Islanders are also very specific, with six respondents mentioning a precise location where they grew up, as in the following two examples:

‘Because I was born in **Aitutaki**. I grew up there, attended school and was speaking Cook Island Maori language’ (C11)

‘Because my family come from **Ma‘uke**, we were born there and raised [there]’ (C13)

Within the Cook Islands community, there is a shift away from PLACE between the childhood to the current household. In the current household, PLACE is mentioned by 13 Cook Island respondents (as opposed to 21 for the childhood household). There are also qualitative differences in their responses. There is more mention in the current household of the country of origin rather than a specific location in the Cook Islands, as in the excerpt below. In the current household, there are only two mentions of the island of origin.

‘Because I come from the Cook Islands, therefore I can claim that my family is Cook Island’ (C18)

ANCESTRY is important in the traditional Cook Islands household (11 mentions) but it seems to have lost value in the current household, where there are only four mentions. Furthermore, in two of the current household examples, the comment about ANCESTRY is negative or neutral rather than positive, as in the following example:

‘The family that I am living with are half Cook Island and half European’ (C12)

Unlike PLACE and ANCESTRY, there is an increase in the mention of LANGUAGE in the current Cook Islands household. 11 individuals mention language as a feature of their identity in their childhood household, whereas 15 refer to LANGUAGE in their response to their current household identity. Below is one of these excerpts.

‘Because we are from the Cook Islands, and we speak Cook Islands Maori, but if someone else comes in the home we will then speak English’ (C15)

A unique feature of the Cook Islands community is the number of negative and neutral comments made about the community language in both the childhood and current households. Approximately half of the LANGUAGE comments by the Cook Islands respondents were statements about the non-use of Cook Islands Maori, as in the following example.

‘No one in the household can speak Cook Islands Maori’ (C11)

The fourth feature mentioned by the Cook Islanders is FAMILY & FRIENDS. While only five respondents mention FAMILY & FRIENDS in the childhood responses, 10 mention this feature as an identifying marker of their current household identity, as in the following example. This may suggest a shift in identification towards identity through association.

‘Because we are the only people in our home, we always speak Cook Islands Maori, [my]self and husband. Our children also visit us, they are also Cook Island’ (C15)

#### 4.2 Niuean community

The Niuean community is more varied in the features they use to define themselves both when growing up and currently. LANGUAGE is the most important feature for the Niuean community both THEN and NOW. 16 Niueans in the sample refer to LANGUAGE in their analysis of their childhood and current household identity, and almost all make positive statements about the Niuean language in both household types. Here is one comment:

‘Very Niuean, the way we were brought up, discipline, beliefs, values, language’ (N15)

WAY OF LIFE is also frequently mentioned in the Niuean responses. There are 13 mentions of WAY OF LIFE in the childhood household and 14 cases in the current household, as in the following excerpts where comments are made about ‘culture’, ‘traditions,’ and ‘lifestyle’.

‘True Niuean, grew up in Niue, with its culture and traditions’ (N9)

‘Family play an important role, lifestyle we live, traditions we keep, cooking food, really who we are’ (N18)

Although LANGUAGE and WAY OF LIFE show little evidence of change across time, there is evidence of identity shift in the community. PLACE and ANCESTRY appear to be decreasing in importance, while frequency of talk about IDENTITY, FOOD and ARTEFACTS/CRAFTS is on the increase. Talk about IDENTITY features more prominently in the Niuean responses than in those from the other three Pasifika communities. Although IDENTITY occurs in only four instances in childhood

household discussions, it appears in nine instances in descriptions of the current Niuean household, as in the excerpt below. This may indicate an increase in ethnic awareness in this community.

‘Truly Niuean, to know what I know and see what I see’ (N6)

An increase in the frequency of talk about FOOD together with the more physical attributes of ARTEFACTS AND CRAFTS in the current household could point to a shift in identity towards more superficial aspects of identity in the Niuean community.

‘Parents talk Niuean, Dad’s music, food we eat’ (N23)

‘Niuean things in the household, speaking the language, Niuean artefacts, crafts’ (N4)

### 4.3 Tongan community

The Tongan participants are again varied in the list of features they use to define themselves, but only two categories feature prominently in the responses: WAY OF LIFE and LANGUAGE.

Tongan WAY OF LIFE is heavily weighted towards traditional roles, such as respect between brothers and sisters, brother/sister avoidance rules and attendance at cultural events such as weddings and funerals. WAY OF LIFE is mentioned by 25 of the respondents as identifying traditionalness within their childhood home, and by 14 of the respondents as an identifying feature of their current household. The following is typical of many of the WAY OF LIFE childhood responses:

‘We were not allowed to go out, *faka’apa’apa* (respect) between brothers & sisters, *talangofua* (obedience)’ (T18)

There is considerable shift away from WAY OF LIFE in the current household, with only 14 of the respondents referring to WAY OF LIFE as the identifying feature of their current home. It is the only category where there is a substantial decrease in frequency of mention over time. Yet, WAY OF LIFE comments are still more frequent than the third category, FAMILY & FRIENDS, which appears in only eight of the current household responses. Two categories, FAMILY & FRIENDS and FOOD, show a notable increase in the current household. In the Tongan sample, FOOD did not occur in the childhood definition of traditionalness, but was mentioned by five respondents for their current household, two of which occur below, with comments such as:

‘Funerals, obligations, people, food –always plenty (of it)’ (T13)

‘Family gathering[s], make food, family shares food together’ (T15)

Talk about LANGUAGE is relatively stable, mentioned by 13 respondents for their childhood household and 15 respondents for the current household. As with the Niuean community, the vast majority of comments about language can be viewed as positive statements, for example:

‘Because we are real Tongan and mostly speak in Tongan’ (T11)

‘Everyday lives are conducted in a Tongan way, using language and everything was basically Tongan’ (T16)

### 4.4 Samoan community

Talk about household identity in the Samoan community has a strong focus on WAY OF LIFE. This category figures in 27 comments about childhood identity and 20 comments about current household identity. Under Samoan WAY OF LIFE, there is frequent reference to discipline, chores, respect, and *Fa’a-Samoa*, as in the following two excerpts:

‘Strictness, chores, not lazy at home, always work[ing] hard. Respect. Samoan values. Respect elders and sisters. Hardworking Samoan people’ (S5)

'Samoan language use, respectful language, doing chores, Samoan respect for one to the other, relationships, teachings in Samoan culture, Samoan values, *Fa'a-Samoa*' (S29)

LANGUAGE is the second most frequent topic of talk for both the childhood and current household. LANGUAGE is mentioned more often in the SAMOAN community than in any of the other three Pasifika communities. Although the majority of the comments about LANGUAGE and childhood household identity are positive as in the next example, half of the comments about LANGUAGE and current household identity refer to weakening skills in Samoan, or to English. Typical examples are:

'100 percent Language spoken every day. Way they live daily life, values and *fa'a-Samoa* living' (S21)

'Food, attitudes, use of the Samoan language. Children chores, respect, relationships' (S2)

'Most people in the household speak English' (S5)

'Respectful language, older people a lot of talk in Samoan, only a little English, but majority of time Samoan' (S9)

While talk about less frequently mentioned categories in the Samoan community, such as FAMILY & FRIENDS and VALUES & BELIEFS, has remained fairly steady over time, talk about other categories such as ARTEFACTS/CRAFTS has shown a slight increase. This could be an indication of incipient shifts in identity within the community.

## 5. Discussion

The quantitative and qualitative findings show that all four Pasifika communities are undergoing shift in identity perhaps due to their new and changing environment in New Zealand. These findings suggest that although the community language is not central to identity in these communities, it plays an important part in their expression of identity. The evidence is based on both quantitative findings concerning the language of the interview, and on the trends reported in the qualitative data.

In the Samoan, Tongan and Cook Islands communities, there is an increased mention of language in the current household. This is unexpected given the language shift in the present context, and needs to be evaluated with caution. It is possible that the weakening of the languages in the New Zealand context is increasing awareness in the community, and this could have an effect on the frequency of talk about language. It is equally possible that the questionnaire had an effect on the responses. The questionnaire focussed on language maintenance, and the current household question was positioned later in the interview than the question about childhood household. This may have increased respondents' awareness of language and their frequency of talk about this category. However, the topic and order of presentation of the interview would have had little effect on talk about other categories, as they were not the topic of the interview. It is here that the most interesting findings occur.

Frequency of talk provides a unique perspective on each of the four Pasifika communities. The strongest linguistic communities have the most talk about identity. There is more talk about childhood and current household identity in the Samoan and Tongan interviews than in the Niuean and Cook Islands ones. The Cook Islands community make the fewest comments on identity.

What is talked about also provides insights into identity issues. In the Samoan and Tongan communities, WAY OF LIFE is the most common topic in talk. WAY OF LIFE is second in the Niuean community, and fifth in order of frequency in the Cook Islands community. In the Samoan and Tongan communities, talk about WAY OF LIFE is more common than talk about LANGUAGE. This could indicate that WAY OF LIFE and LANGUAGE are intimately connected. A decrease in talk about WAY OF LIFE may be an important predecessor to language shift.

If a link can be drawn between frequency of talk and identity, it may be able to provide insights into how communities undergo acculturation as peripheral aspects of communities gain in importance. For example, in both the Tongan and the Niuean communities peripheral features of the current household, e.g., FOOD, are taking on more significance in expressions of household identity.

When 'type of talk' is examined, the Samoan community stands out from the other three Pasifika communities. Comments about language in the Samoan community show evidence of change. Comments about language are generally positive in talk about Samoan childhood identity, but are more mixed in discussions about the current household. Half of the comments about language in the current

household are negative, neutral or ambiguous. The type of talk may correspond to changes in the status of language in the Samoan community. The Samoan community has been traditionally strong, but there is linguistic change amongst the youngest generation. The New Zealand Census findings show incipient shift in the community, and these household responses tend to support this.

The other three Pasifika communities show little evidence of shift in their comments about language. The comments in the Tongan community are generally positive, and the overall status of the community language is strong at present. The Cook Islands Maori language is the weakest overall, and the nature of the respondents' childhood and current household comments about language reflect this status. The Niuean community is the only anomaly. They show little evidence of shift in the type of talk about household identity. It is possible that the increased awareness, driven by recent pro-active language maintenance in the Niuean community, may have affected language attitudes in this community, and this in turn may have affected talk. Positive attitudes are necessary in language maintenance, and this may be a sign of such change.

## 6. Conclusion

The issue of identity is based on a sense of being, knowing and believing that is constantly in the process of being re-defined (Fishman 1983), which often involves talk (see Sebba & Tate 2002, Winter & Pauwels 2000). The analysis of frequency and type of talk highlights the shifts in identity in four Pasifika communities. Identity involves a classification and categorisation of the world around us which includes physical attributes, customs, cultural items and beliefs as well as language. In all four communities individuals have defined themselves on the basis of these categories, with each community drawing on different combinations. Although some of the categories used to define individuals in the different communities are identical, the ranking of these categories is not.

A primary feature for all four communities is language, but it is not the only defining feature of their identity. The comments about language from the community members paint a clear picture of the strongest and weakest of the communities, and point to incipient shifts in the stronger communities.

Researchers too often take language out of the cultural mix and look at it in isolation. Cultural links are needed in making informed decisions on language policy. One must be aware of not only community identity, but also of constant identity shifts as communities adopt and redefine themselves to new situations. If language is isolated from other dimensions, findings are not integrated and may fail to be in line with the overall views of the community. For example, in this survey individuals were asked if it would matter if their language were lost forever. As in many other studies of communities undergoing language shift, 92.5% (111/120) reported that it would matter, with few differences noted between the four communities. The qualitative analysis of household features presented here suggests that although it does matter in all four communities, it may matter more in some communities than in others.

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