

Tattoo my mouth: Samoan language survival in Australia

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Abstract

Indigenous people experience their worlds simultaneously through and because of language itself. To examine the relationship between language and place, we evaluate the current discourse and state of gagana Sāmoa (Samoan language) in Australia. As Samoan researchers, we situate ourselves accordingly by drawing on our language accounts and those of others in the diaspora. By focusing on these talanoaga—stories, sharing, and discussions across Queensland and Victoria, Australia, the role and value of gagana Sāmoa is reinforced through maintaining, developing and ensuring its survival for present and future generations. In this article, language survival is framed in how (re)connection is mobilised and articulated among this community. Our article shows the value this cohort place on their language, and the need for it to be sustained and passed on to the next generation.

Keywords

diaspora language, Indigenous language, language revival, language survival, Samoa, second generation

Our talanoa (storied) language journey begins here

Dion Enari: early language journey

Growing up in Australia, I came from what some would consider the *plastic group*. I was the child that was *deliberately not taught le gagana* (the language) by my Samoan born parents so we could do well in *western society*. Yes, as a child the only two Samoan phrases I knew were *Ou te le malamalama fa'asāmoa* (I do not understand Samoan) and *manuia fa'afetai* (good, thank you).

It was not until I was 14, and saw my friend's mother at the mall, that my perception of the gagana Sāmoa (Samoan language) would change forever. Having used the only two Samoan phrases I knew when I spoke to her, the response I would receive would painfully resonate both then and for many years to come.

“Did you know it's disgraceful and shameful if you can't speak Samoan?”

It was at this exact point in time that I decided to actively learn gagana Sāmoa. I now speak Samoan every day and do speeches in Samoan. For that, I will forever be grateful.

Lorayma Taula: early language journey

As a child, my earliest learnings and memories of the Samoan language were centred on cleaning. From the very moment that my fingers clasped around the wooden stick of a *salu* (Samoan broom), it was game over. Despite how trivial performing housework and cleaning duties may

seem, they were also contingent upon the construction of my own *Samoan-Australian world*.

This very fundamental site for learning the value of cleaning and especially how to clean together in the *aiga potopoto* (extended family), mirrored the collectivist ethos of the Samoan village and values founded on *tautua* (service), unity, respect, reciprocity, and solidarity (Borero et al., 2009). Although we live in Australia, these core principles are continually configuring and reconstituted throughout the Samoan diaspora (Henderson, 2016). Samoan people who have long been a part of Australia, with reports of arrival in the early twentieth century for “commerce, education and missionary purposes” (Queensland Health Multicultural Services, 2011, para. 2).

Interestingly much of the Samoan population in Australia have arrived via New Zealand. Through the Trans-Tasman Travel Agreement of 1973 between Australia and New Zealand, Samoan people with New Zealand citizenship have been allowed to move freely between countries (Vasta, 2004). Unfortunately, there is either scarce or inaccurate data on the Samoan population in Australia, as many are either counted in the census as New Zealand or Australian citizens.

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Watch your mouth!

Negative Samoan language experiences

A leai se Gagana, ona leai lea o sa ta aganu'u, a leai la ta aganu'u/agaifanua, ona po lea o le nuu

If there is no language, then there is no culture, if there is no culture, then all the village will be in darkness

— Professor Dr Aiono Fanaafi (as cited in Akeripa, 2017)

This *muāgagana* (proverb) suggests the importance that Samoan people place on *gagana Sāmoa* and the effects of language loss. Despite this *muāgagana* warning for Samoans to hold onto their language, there are still those in the diaspora who cannot speak Samoan (Thomsen, 2021), with English being their main language of communication (Macpherson, 1999, as cited in Fa'avale, 2017). Sadly, New Zealand born—and raised—Samoans are disproportionately represented in Samoan language decline (Akeli, 2017).

According to Victoria Tauli Corpuz, UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the majority of languages in “danger of disappearing” are Indigenous (as cited in Papagiannis, 2021). If deliberate language measures are not in place, complete language loss can occur within three generations (Fishman, 1991). This is concerning as *gagana Sāmoa* could disappear by the 3rd generation within the diaspora. Although Samoan is the second most spoken language in Auckland and third most spoken in New Zealand (Pasefika Proud, 2016), it is experiencing a decline both in New Zealand and Australia (Hunkin, 2012). Sadder yet, Wilson’s (2017) research on Samoan families in New Zealand and their usage of the Samoan language shows that Samoan language decrease may be worse than what is statistically shown, as she found people overstated their actual language use. Many of her study participants spoke less Samoan and relied on English to communicate. While these same language patterns could also be seen among our Samoan communities in Australia, for Samoan Australians whose first language was English, Stanley and Kearney (2017) identified that being around other Samoans and church attendance helped to “develop and maintain Samoan language” and “fa’a Samoa [the Samoan culture or way of life]” (p. 57).

With the languages of our Pacific cousins Niue and Tuvalu officially listed as endangered, studies on other ethnic groups in Australia, such as the Chinese community also show native language decrease among the second and third generation (“Endangered Languages: The Full List,” 2011; Mak & Chan, 1995). There are also other international studies on second generation people that show the decline in native language use and the dominance of English (Alba et al., 2002; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Stanley & Kearney, 2017). According to Macpherson (1997), New Zealand-born Samoans are educated in a Palagi (Caucasian) system that constantly enforces the Palagi language (as cited in Akeripa, 2017).

Reasons for *gagana Sāmoa* decline in the diaspora include the emphasis placed on learning English to do well in the host country (Wilson, 2017). Other reasons for

language decline also include its lack of implementation in the school curriculum (Tagoilelagi-Leota, 2017). *Gagana Sāmoa* use and education can now be seen in New Zealand and is included in community learning programmes, through early childhood, secondary school and university education spaces.

Samoan language decline in Australia

Although quantitative statistics show Samoan as a language widely spoken in some parts of Australia, being the second most frequently spoken language after English in Logan City (City of Logan, n.d.), Moreton Bay (Moreton Bay Region, n.d.), and Ipswich City (City of Ipswich, n.d.), there are still Samoans within this cohort who cannot speak their language. Unfortunately, there is also a lack of Samoan language in the Australian curriculum, where they are educated in the English language with minimal exposure to the Samoan (Kearney et al., 2011). Singh (2001) believes that although some Samoan parents in the state of Queensland speak Samoan at home; their children lack adequate language skills to respond back.

Similar language decline was also evident in Victoria, where many New Zealand and Australian born Samoan young people were unable to speak Samoan. Many in this cohort indicated that they lacked sufficient *gagana Sāmoa* fluency, comprehension and coherency skills to have a conversation. While some could understand colloquial Samoan language, they found it challenging to speak or read. This cohort of young people across Victoria and Queensland also found it challenging to speak Samoan in formal settings, such as Samoan traditional ceremonies or during church sermons and bible study classes.

For many with limited *gagana Sāmoa* capacities, the communication breakdown meant they were unable to communicate effectively to their elders and non-English speaking relatives. Sadly, most of these young Samoans equated their “poor Samoan language skills” to shame and embarrassment while they were among other Samoan people. Some believed they lacked confidence because of their inability to speak the language and the ridicule they would face, being called names such as *plastic* and *fia Palagi* (wannabe Caucasian). Many also attributed their lack of fluency in *gagana Sāmoa* to living away from the islands or lack of exposure to other fluent speakers.

Although there is language decline among some in the Samoan Australian community, there is a global shift among indigenous, colonised and diasporic peoples to maintain our indigenous languages in an ever-globalised world. From the progress of our Maori cousins in Aotearoa to the native peoples in the Americas (Forrester, 2019; Grunewald, 2016). Interestingly, all of the Samoans we have spoken to both among our personal networks and wider communities, see the value of the *gagana Sāmoa*. Despite the negative and challenging experiences that were faced by some, all the Samoans in Australia we had met and spoken to remained proud of their cultural heritage. Despite this group’s lack of fluency in the Samoan language or knowledge in the Samoan culture—they held reverence and pride for their cultural ancestry (Enari & Matapo, 2020).

Rather than being complacent or drowning in the ocean of silence (Wendt, 1984), they were proactive in seeking practical ways to learn about their Samoan roots, at their own accord. They understood that their *inability* in gagana Sāmoa, represented a space for them to seek out, to learn and further develop their knowledge of their mother tongue. What matters is to *watch our own mouths*, to be prepared and culturally aligned and to learn gagana Sāmoa.

Tattoo your mouth!

Tā muamua le gutu “ona tā ai lea ‘o le tino—the literal translation for this muāgagana means one must first strike—(tattoo)—their mouth before they strike—tattoo—their body. An analysis of this muāgagana implies that one must first validate their life by learning to speak Samoan before validating their status and adorning their bodies with Samoan tattoos. Despite the nuanced meanings and its relevance within Samoans’ contemporary lives—such an expression of “tattooing our mouths” invokes a cultural and spiritual mindfulness for our customs, traditions and language.

Increased awareness of the importance of maintaining gagana Sāmoa in Australia has sparked conscious efforts to proactively learn the language. All the Samoans we observed now either regularly attend Samoan churches, family gatherings or take regular trips back to the islands, for both guidance and improving their gagana Sāmoa skills. There were also those who (re)connected with gagana Sāmoa through attending language classes or cultural workshops. Those physically unable to attend these learning spaces, were able to engage alternatively through the internet. Through the World Wide Web, they were able to not only access linguistic resources, but could also connect frequently with Samoan speaking relatives and friends in Australian, New Zealand and Samoa (Enari & Faleolo, 2020).

Popular culture also brings gagana Sāmoa to the public discourse, with Samoan celebrities such as rugby players Fa’alogo Tana Umaga, Togafau Scott Sio and actors such as Seiuli Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson speaking the language both in the sporting arena, on film set and during interviews. Social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Tik Tok have also been popular media for gagana Sāmoa usage. COVID-19 messaging, political debates and comedy videos in Samoan language could all be found on various social media and other websites (Enari & Fa’aea, 2020).

Moving forward

“O le tama a le tagata e fafaga i upu ma tala . . . The offspring of [people] are fed with words” (Akeripa, 2017, p. 12).

Despite the prevalence of English in Australia and gagana Sāmoa decline experienced by some, this situation report highlights how gagana Sāmoa is valued. The two greatest challenges of language sustainability among this cohort is ensuring it is taught and learnt in an English dominated country and overcoming barriers of shame. Despite this, we believe the vested interest and passion among this cohort to

speak the language will help its survival and sustainability. Many in this group are now making deliberate and intentional steps to (re)connect with this measina (treasure). For this measina to survive and be sustained, our people must continue speaking it.

As Samoan researchers in language, we have seen the effectiveness of attending Samoan events where people gather and speak the language. Through these life events Australian and New Zealand born Samoans are able to listen and practice using their mother tongue. We also believe that the internet is a useful tool that can also help increase gagana Sāmoa use in unprecedented ways. The internet’s international interconnectivity coupled with its speed, make it an effective space for language acquisition. The very tenets of Samoan ways of knowing and being are encapsulated, performed and (re)presented through the language. Having gagana Sāmoa not only gives a Samoan the ability to communicate with their family and fellow countrymen and women, but also helps (re)claim and (re)store one’s connection to the Samoan world. By (re)claiming our language we are simultaneously connecting intergenerational knowledge transfer and relations. Our ability to speak Samoan will allow us to better connect with our parents and grandparents, many of whom Samoan is their first language. In essence, it will help us connect our children’s generations to that of our parents, grandparents and great grandparents, as providing them with the gagana Sāmoa will mean they could communicate to all the generations before them, learning from their wisdom, in our language. In symbolic terms, we pray all Samoans and indigenous people are ready to tattoo their mouths and carve new words into their heart, body and soul.

Soifua manuia—Good health

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