

PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE IN REEFS-SANTA CRUZ RESEARCH

Åshild Næss
University of Oslo

Reefs-Santa Cruz from Past to Present

Linguistic documentation work is currently undergoing a shift in focus away from the publication of grammars as the only worthwhile goal of descriptive work, and towards a greater emphasis on the annotation and digital archiving of field recordings and notes, which are gaining in status as valuable linguistic materials in their own right. Such materials are of interest not only to the scientific linguistic community, but also to speakers of the languages in question and to local authorities engaged in language planning; a detailed reference grammar, on the other hand, is much more of a specialised enterprise, and in any case can be seen as a derivative product based on the primary field data.

While new generations of field linguists are being trained in state-of-the-art techniques for the recording, annotation and archiving of linguistic materials, one should not lose sight of the importance of making older materials, which tend to be tucked away in the individual researchers' drawers or filing cabinets, available in a similar way. This goes in principle for any language, regardless of how well documented it is considered to be; but the availability of field materials is obviously of greater importance the less documented the languages in question are. This point is illustrated clearly by the languages of the Reefs-Santa Cruz islands.

The Reefs-Santa Cruz (RSC) languages, spoken in the remote and isolated Temotu Province in the easternmost part of the Solomon Islands, are something of an enigma in Oceanic linguistics. They are practically undocumented and have been little studied, and their genetic affiliation is disputed.

Current classification recognises three languages in the Reefs-Santa Cruz group: Reefs or Äiwoo, spoken in the Reef Islands; Natügu or Northern Santa Cruz; and Nagu (Nanggu). The latter two are spoken on Santa Cruz, the largest island in the area, some 70 kilometres to the south of the Reefs. A fourth possible member of the group is Nea or Nalögo, spoken on

south-western Santa Cruz, which is said to be mutually unintelligible with both Natügu and Nagu and may have to be recognised as a distinct language.

Until recently, available linguistic information on RSC was largely restricted to a number of papers by the linguist Stephen A. Wurm, who collected material from all the RSC languages in the 1960s and 70s. In several publications, Wurm (1970; and later publications) argued that the RSC languages could not be strictly classified as belonging to the Austronesian language family, as do all the other languages in the area. Rather, he maintained that they were of a 'mixed' type, including both Austronesian and non-Austronesian ('Papuan') components, and argued that they showed traits in common with the Papuan languages of the main Solomon Islands and Bougainville.

This conclusion is controversial, for several reasons. Firstly, the RSC languages would be the only non-Austronesian languages to the east and south of the border between near Oceania (New Guinea, the islands east of New Guinea, and the main Solomons chain) and remote Oceania (the rest of the Pacific). The spread of Papuan languages in near Oceania is assumed to predate the Austronesian expansion by thousands, possibly tens of thousands of years (Spriggs, 1997); the islands of remote Oceania are thought to have been uninhabited until the Austronesians arrived, with their superior seafaring technology, some 3,000-3,500 years ago. If there was a Papuan population in the Reefs-Santa Cruz islands, the problem is explaining how they got there, when, and from where; a pre-Austronesian Papuan population in the RSC area is unlikely, though it has been suggested that Papuan speakers arrived in the area much later, after they had adopted seafaring technology from the Austronesians (Wurm, 1976, pp. 35-36; Spriggs, 1997, pp. 174-175).

Secondly, the formal linguistic links that Wurm posits between RSC and Papuan languages of the main Solomons and Bougainville are unconvincing. The proposed 'East Papuan Phylum' grouping RSC with Papuan languages of the Solomons, Bougainville, and New Britain (Wurm, 1982) is highly controversial (Ross, 2001; Terrill, 2002; Dunn, Reesink & Terrill, 2002); and the inclusion of RSC into such a phylum in particular is disputed.

Furthermore, ongoing research shows that some of the posited 'Papuan features' in RSC have in fact been misanalysed. One of the main arguments for the presence of Papuan structural features in RSC is the

alleged presence of 'multiple systems of noun classes' (Wurm, 1981), supposedly reminiscent of noun-class systems in Papuan languages such as Touo, Bilua and Savosavo. For Äiwoo at least, Næss (to appear) shows that the systems in question in fact cannot be labelled 'noun classes' in the usual sense of the term, nor are they directly comparable to Papuan-style noun-class systems; rather, they are systems of nominalisation and nominal classification that show clear parallels to structures found in Austronesian languages of Vanuatu.

Although the claim for a Papuan component in RSC has been repeatedly made and is by now generally accepted, the data cited in support of it in published sources is extremely limited. In light of more recent work it would seem that a reassessment of this question is very much required; its results, if deviating from previous assumptions, might significantly change our picture of the linguistic situation and the settlement history of the Pacific.

The Present State

After Stephen Wurm's death in 2001, his linguistic materials were donated to the Australian National University, with the request that they be kept safe and made available to researchers. PARADISEC (the Pacific and Regional Archive for Digital Sources in Endangered Cultures) has digitised the tape recordings, and adopted a novel imaging technique developed by the Australian Science and Technology Heritage Centre to place the papers online and to archive representational images. As a result, a large set of online data has recently (2006) been made available in a relatively short time. The material includes, among other things, some 120 annotated tape recordings from the Reefs-Santa Cruz area.

It is impossible to overstate the importance of easy access to this material for current research on RSC. Firstly, access to the original data on which Wurm's work was based will be of great help in assessing the validity of the claims that RSC shows a 'non-Austronesian structure'. Although Wurm published a number of papers on RSC, the actual data cited in these publications is limited to word lists and a few handfuls of frequently repeated example sentences. This makes it difficult to determine to what extent the structural claims, in particular, are actually supported by the data. Being able to evaluate and analyse Wurm's primary data will be of invaluable help in the effort to resolve the question of the origins of the Reefs-Santa Cruz languages.

Secondly, the material is unique in that it dates back to the 1960s and 1970s, a time when the influence of English and Pijin in the area was much less significant than it is today. There is no doubt that the recent increase in the use of English and the local lingua franca Solomon Islands Pijin, has significantly influenced the language situation in the Reefs-Santa Cruz islands. Wurm noted in his later publications that the language of younger speakers was undergoing a process of change and simplification compared to that found in older material. The introduction of Pijin as the main language of communication between different linguistic groups has further complicated the linguistic situation in an area where language contact and multilingualism has been the norm for centuries. Comparing Wurm's material with RSC data collected more recently may help us form an understanding of the diachronic development of the languages over the last few decades, and how this development has been influenced by the relatively recent introduction of English and Pijin.

Furthermore, much of the material was collected, transcribed and annotated by speakers of the languages themselves. This makes it particularly valuable for questions of orthography and of morphological and morphophonemic analysis. The Reefs-Santa Cruz languages have very complex morphological structures, and identifying morpheme and word boundaries is a challenging task. Furthermore, the complex phonologies of the language have posed considerable difficulties for the creation of simple and consistent orthographies. Seeing how speakers themselves represent their languages in writing is of great help both in establishing criteria for wordhood and in deciding on orthographic conventions.

Finally, of course, making Wurm's collection digitally available means that the amount of linguistic material available from the RSC area is greatly increased. Given that the RSC islands are isolated and difficult to reach, and that political instability in the area in recent years has made transport to the area even more unreliable and, potentially, dangerous, digital access to linguistic data means that fewer resources will have to be spent and fewer risks taken in the effort to document and study the languages.

The least described of the RSC languages is also the one in most immediate danger of extinction: Nagu, the smallest of the Santa Cruz languages, currently has some 200 speakers and is under great pressure from its larger neighbours and from Pijin. In a worst-case scenario, the digital archive of Wurm's data will ensure that there is at least some material generally available on the language even after it becomes extinct.

More optimistically, if ongoing efforts to secure funding for the documentation of Nagu are successful, being able to build on existing data will mean that documentation work will be able to proceed much more quickly and efficiently than if a fieldworker were to start entirely from scratch. Thus any effort to preserve the language will benefit greatly from PARADISEC's digital archive of Wurm's RSC material.

The Future of RSC Research

Since 2002, an Oslo-based research group working within the cross-disciplinary 'Oceania project' has worked on the documentation and description of the RSC language Äiwoo, as well as studying the effects of long-term linguistic contact between Äiwoo and its Polynesian neighbour Vaeakau-Taumako, also known as Pileni. In Santa Cruz, a Bible translation into Natügu (Northern Santa Cruz) has recently been completed. There are plans for a collaborative research project involving the Oslo team and the currently USA-based Bible translators, to document and describe all the RSC languages, and to carry out comparative work with a view to resolving the question of their genetic affiliation. At LACITO-CNRS in Paris, recently collected data from Vanikoro to the south of Santa Cruz has led to doubts being cast on the status of the Vanikoro languages as Austronesian (François, 2006), further complicating the linguistic picture of an already very complex and understudied area.

It is clear that any significant progress in our understanding of the language situation of the Reefs-Santa Cruz area will require collaborative efforts across institutions and across considerable geographical distances. A keystone in these efforts will be the shared access to available linguistic materials from the area, and in particular to the original materials collected by Stephen Wurm. Digital access to these materials will help create a shared basis from which research on the RSC languages can proceed as a joint effort between the various researchers and institutions involved. In turn, further linguistic materials collected by these researchers may be added to the digital archive, further enhancing its value to linguistic research. In short, the future of Reefs-Santa Cruz research will largely be shaped by the digital archive serving as an electronic link to the past.

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