

The influence of language description on the standardization of the Palauan orthography

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9th International Conference on Language Documentation & Conservation
March 6-9, 2025
Honolulu, Hawai'i



In this talk

- The Palauan language
- Josephs' grammar
- Standardization efforts
- Reception by different stakeholder
- Anticipated role for linguists
- Conclusion

General research context

- Research trip in August 2025
- Interdisciplinary research delegation consisting of 3 academics, 8 research students, amongst whom 1 local liaison
- Funded by National Chengchi University
- Linguistics team: 3 people







The Republic of Palau

- Micronesia
- Early colonization (3000 BP at latest; Clark & al. 2006)
- Complex colonization history
 - Spanish
 - German
 - Japanese
 - (American)

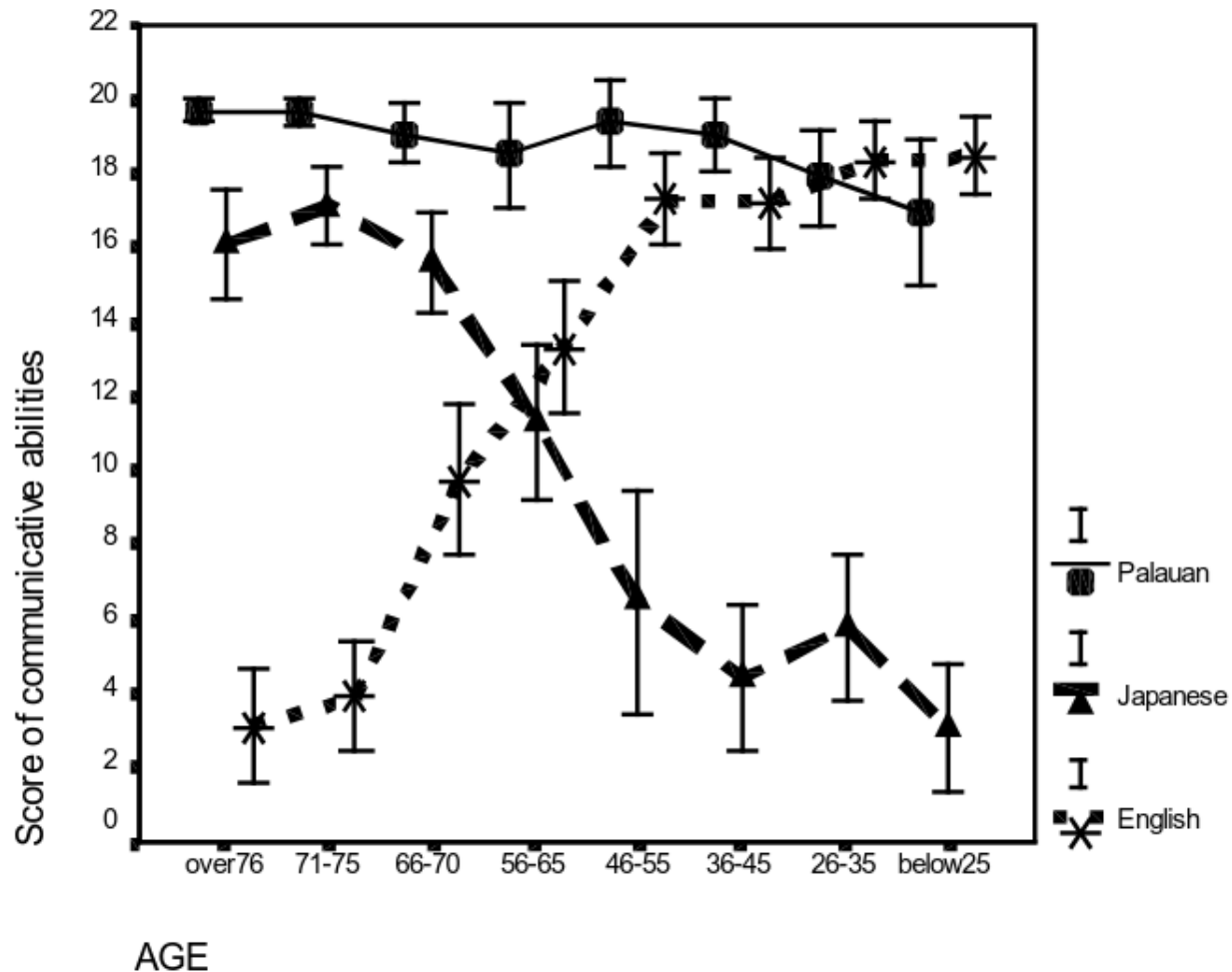




Palauan

- National language of the Republic of Palau
- Speakers: ~18,000 (14,000 + 4,000 acc. to *Ethnologue*)
 - Language family:
 - Austronesian
 - Malayo-Polynesian
 - ? → Palauan (cf. e.g. Zobel, 2002)
- Other languages in Palau
 - English (co-official language)
 - Japanese
 - Sonsorolese, Tobian (Austronesian)

Language situation 25 years ago (Matsumoto, 1999)





... and our first impression now

- **> 30 yo:** prefer Palauan or code-switch w/ Palauan as the dominant language
- **< 20 yo:** often prefer English or code-switch w/ English as the dom. language
- **Differences between regions:**
 - Most English in **Koror** (largest city)
vs.
 - **Ibobang:**
 - has a Palauan language-oriented school
 - young people speak fluent Palauan
 - has a reputation for having the “best” speakers of Palauan



Language documentation status

- Palauan is relatively well-documented:
 - Semper (1874): Earliest mention; three-page account in German
 - Walleser (1911): First modern grammatical description
 - Walleser (1913): First substantial dictionary
 - 1950s onwards: various educational and other works in Palauan by local and foreign writers
 - **Josephs (1975):**
 - Most influential modern descriptive grammar
 - Basis for official educational materials



The Reference Grammar (Josephs, 1975)

- Published here in Hawai'i
- Strong educational implications
- Target group includes non-academic readers



LEWIS S. JOSEPHS

**PALAUAN
REFERENCE
GRAMMAR**

1 Sounds and Spelling of Palauan

1.1. SOUND SYSTEM OF PALAUAN

When a linguist attempts to present a description of a language, he usually finds it desirable to treat the **sound system** of the language separately from the **grammatical system**. Even though this division may seem arbitrary or artificial (for how can we have the words, phrases, and sentences of a language without sound, and vice versa?), we are nevertheless going to examine the sound system of Palauan before proceeding to a description of the grammatical system.

Every language of the world uses its own particular set of sounds to construct words. No two languages have precisely

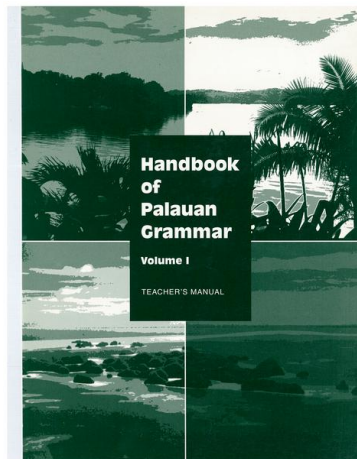
The Reference Grammar (Josephs, 1975)

- Published here in Hawai'i
- Strong educational implications
- Target group includes non-academic readers
- Reworked in set of educational handbooks (Josephs, 1997a–d)
- Reinterpreted as a prescriptive standard:
 - Influential orthography manual (Blailles, 1990)
 - Taken as a basis for a standard orthography by the Palau Language Commission (PLC, 2012)



LEWIS S. JOSEPHS

PALAUAN REFERENCE GRAMMAR





The official orthography

- Based on Joseph (1975)
- Officially published by PLC (2012)
- Grammatically informed orthography
- Tailored to educational needs
- Grammatical transparency rather than phonological faithfulness

<i>Ak</i>	<i>mo</i>	<i>er</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>skuul</i> (official orthography)
I	go	P	LNK	school

“I go to school.”

e. Palauan has many word sequences which function to express a single meaning or idea and which often have single English words as their equivalents. Even though we might want to spell these sequences as single words, detailed grammatical analysis leads us to conclude that they actually involve more than one word and should therefore be spelled as in the examples below:

(54) e le ak	[ɛlɛk ^h]	'because I...'
e le ng	[ɛlɛŋ]	'because he...'
mɛ a	[ma]	'and'
mɛ ak	[mak ^h]	'so I...'
mɛ ng	[mɛŋ]	'so he...'
e ng di	[ɛndi, ɛndi]	'but'
er se ɛr a	[ɛrsɛra, ɛrsɛra]	'when'
el kmo	[ɛlkmo, ɛlkmo]	'[say] that...'
el ua se	[ɛlwase, ɛlwase]	'[say] that...'
ng diak	[ndiak ^h]	'isn't'
ng di kea	[ndigɛa]	'no longer is'
di mle ngii	[dimlɛŋiy]	'by himself'
ko ɛr a	[kora]	'kind of, like'
a lɛko (ak)	[alɛgo(k)]	'(I) intended to...'
a lsɛkum	[alsɛgum]	'if, when'



Resulting issues

- Grammatical transparency rather than phonological faithfulness

<i>Ak</i>	<i>mo</i>	<i>er</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>skuul</i> (official orthography)
I	go	P	LNK	school
“I go to school.”				

- Speakers often prefer to write contracted forms found in fluent speech

Ak mora skuul.

- **Consequences:**
 - Logical but counterintuitive
 - Lengthy
 - Little knowledge in older generations that did not learn the new orthography in school
 - Greater variation in informal, non-standardized variants
 - To avoid the embarrassment of making errors, people might avoid writing in Palauan entirely
 - Possibly based on outdated linguistic research (from the 1970s)



Orthography vs. pronunciation

official orthography	vulgar (phonetic) spelling variant
<i>mo er a</i>	<i>mora</i>
<i>er a</i>	<i>ra</i>
<i>me a</i>	<i>ma</i>
<i>ngka el, aika el, tirka el, ...</i>	<i>ngkal, aikal, tirkal, ...</i>
<i>e le ak</i>	<i>elek</i>
<i>ngar er ngii</i>	<i>ngarngii</i>



Why do we need an orthography at all?

“[W]hen an orthography is available, then there is more confidence in creating

- dictionaries,
- instructional materials, and
- picture books for language learning.

For the Boro of Assam, standardized spelling and other writing conventions have made it easier to create

- textbooks for mathematics and
- [textbooks for] social studies (Basumatary, p.c. 2020).”

(Chelliah 2021, p. 18-20)



Why do we need an orthography at all?

“While writing is not necessary for maintaining the vitality of a language, it can be a powerful intervention to encourage language use through social media and for valorizing language through language and culture websites.”

(Chelliah 2021, p. 18-20)



More advantages

- Practical advantages
 - Standardized educational materials
 - Standardization of legal and official documents
 - Consistency is needed for IT applications, e.g. input methods, autocorrect, AI, ...
 - ...
- Standardized writing can help keep a language alive by:
 - increasing the “felt status” of the language when juxtaposed with more dominant languages
 - increasing confidence of speakers to use it in writing
 - ...



Common challenges of orthographies

“What constitutes a word and, when should we write parts of the word together, and when separately? For example, in English we write *want to* as two words but it is often pronounced as *wanna* because the word *to* is unstressed. However, in the writing system we choose to write *to* as a separate word.”

“community members can have strong opinions about all aspects of writing, including the aesthetics of the written word”

(Chelliah 2021, p. 18-20)



Politics

- “[A]ll orthographies are political [...]”
- “Sometimes orthographies become attached to a certain group [...] (“You’re an evangelico, I’m a Catholic; so I support this one.”)”
- “These types of affiliations must be considered when proposing or revising an orthography.”

(Cahill & Karan 2008, p. 10)

Palau Language Commission (PLC)

- Official government body
- Tasked with implementation of Palauan language policies
- Committee members include officials of the Ministry of Education and representatives of language communities
- Strongly influenced by Joseph's work
- Orthography standards



...ity, also not in dictionary
Dekkellel or Dekllel
② Obuokel

Chereomei
el Kerrekar er

Otane

Klalo

Ngeso

Omekako

meloko

mo er a bebul a rois

ngar er a bebuk

Ikou hukk
ko teko

Klalo

mo er a mlai

mo er a eou

mo er a bab

mo er a Babeldoo

mo er a school

mo er a rois

mo er a bebul

ngbik

a dabo

bebul



Reception by different stakeholders

- Language teachers
 - Working at official educational institutions
- Language enthusiasts
- Women's groups
 - Guardians of traditional culture
- The general population (???)
 - Future work

Rengil Medalarak

- 2. Cheruung
- 3. Chedeung
- 4. Cheimung
- 5. Cheimung
- 6. Chelonung
- 7. Chelidung
- 8. Cheaung
- 9. Chetung

bunch of Bananas

- 1. Helund
- 2. Cherund
- 3. Chedeund
- 4. Cheaund
- 5. Chemund

C-2-3

Reket-8

Engos-12





Rengiil Medalarak

- Palauan Language Teacher at Belau Modekngei School in **Ibobang**
- Students strongly encouraged to speak entirely in Palauan
- Advanced knowledge of traditional Palauan
- Attitude towards orthography: **positive**
 - Official standardization necessary for education
 - Logical system that can easily be understood and learned
 - Time needed to get used to counterintuitive aspects
 - Self-taught in orthographic conventions, using Josephs' handbooks



Elicita 'Cita' Morei

- Former high school teacher
- Teacher of Palauan language, history and culture at the Palau Community College, the only institute of higher learning in Palau
- Considered a specialist on traditional Palauan issues
- Member of women's organization *Otil a Beluad*
- Attitude towards orthography: **generally positive**
 - Official standardization is useful in education
 - No need to reinvent the wheel



John Bent

- US citizen, self-taught Palauan speaker
- Founder and main editor of Tekinged.com
 - Main website centralizing Palauan language resources
 - dictionary, downloadable books, grammar, educational tools
- Attitude towards orthography: **positive**
 - Official standardization necessary for education, publication, language unity
 - Descriptive attitude
 - Resistance against standardization is contained to small but vocal group

Palauan Language Online: Palauan-English Dictionary

[Search](#) [Quizzes](#) [Random Words](#) [Dosuub](#) [Dekaingeseu](#) [Proverbs](#) [List . . .](#) [More](#)

mengang , v.t. eat.

mengang a omengur; kolii a kliou; kmang.

koliang	<i>v.pf.inch.</i>	beginning to eat up.
kolii	<i>v.pf.3s</i>	<i>kolii a mengang er ngii; mla kolii a kall el rokir.</i>
killii	<i>v.pf.3s.past</i>	
kmang	<i>v.pf.3p.inan.</i>	<i>kmang a mla mekang; klang me ng diak, kolii a odoim, kelel.</i>
kilang	<i>v.pf.3p.inan.past</i>	
kekang	<i>v.recip.</i>	eat (each other's food); eat (food) together. <i>kekang a di du el mengang; kebengur, kolii a kelel, kma a odoim el rokui.</i>
klang	<i>v.r.s.</i>	eaten. <i>klang a mla mekang; odoim a klang, kmang, kolii el rokir.</i>
mekang	<i>v.erg.</i>	get eaten. <i>mekang a klang; kolii, mla kma a kall el rokui; mengang, kelel.</i>
mekelang	<i>v.erg.inch.</i>	beginning to get eaten.

Examples:

◀◻ *Ng mo kolii a bobai.*

> He is going to eat up a particular papaya/some papaya/the papaya.

◀◻ *A techel a charm a kirel mo medul er a ngau e mekang el obengkel a diak a omkukel el blauang me a mechuached el dellomel.*

> The meat is to be roasted and eaten with bitter herbs and with bread made without yeast.

◀◻ *Ng mo kmang a bobai.*

> He is going to eat up some/the papayas.

◀◻ *Te kilang a rokui el ringngo a rengalek er a elii.*

> The children ate all the apples yesterday.

◀◻ *Ng di menga el di mengang.*

> He eats continually.

Proverbs:

◀◻ *Ng ko er a killii a derudm el medel a betok el tekoi.*

> Like one who has eaten the thorny puffer fish, full of many things.

The thorny puffer fish is sometimes gulped by the wide-mouthed grouper fish. The puffer, expanding and extending its thorns in the grouper's mouth, in this predicament are occasionally caught by fishermen. The idiom is applied to anyone who faces more problems, more work, or more sweet temptations.

◀◻ *Ng ko er a rrull el di mededeod el mengang el merael.*

> Like a ray-fish, eating while walking.

The ray-fish does not stop swimming while chewing food it has gathered while weaving along the ocean floor. The saying may be applied to anyone who continues to work or study while enjoying life.

Risel Belau





Risel Belau

- Women's group
 - General older
 - High level of education
 - International experience
- Strong authority regarding traditional culture
 - Cultural activities, media appearances
- Political influence
 - supported by former vice president (Ms. Uduch Sengebau Sr.)



Risel Belau

- Attitude towards orthography: **highly critical**
 - Need for standardization, but ...
 - Critical of strong reliance on an outside authority who is a non-speaker
 - Discrepancy between orthography and pronunciation is confusing to speakers
 - Beneficial to outsiders learning the language, but non-intuitive to native speakers
 - Artificial distance from the spoken form may erode cultural concepts encoded in the language



The role of the linguist

- Outside observers
 - Intermediaries between stakeholders
 - No local cultural and political baggage
 - Expert opinion
 - Providing neutral descriptions and explanations
 - Suggestions based on prior research and linguistic evidence
 - Documenting language attitudes
 - General research
 - Interviews
 - Need for people to be heard
 - Surveys
- Future work in collaboration with local partners



Conclusion

- Orthographies are political.
- Acceptance relies on social/cultural factors
- There may be different solutions
 - depends on what locals prefer
- Linguists can be neutral advisors for decision making

Thank you for your attention





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Word divisions

Cahill, M., & Karan, E. (2008). Factors in designing effective orthographies for unwritten languages. SIL International:

<i>bè-tígín</i>	‘their house’	
<i>bà-sá’án</i>	‘their porridge’	(<i>bè/bà</i> vowel harmony)
<i>hòwwá sá’án</i>	‘woman’s porridge’	

“With these potentially conflicting criteria, the determining factor was the choice of the local people themselves who preferred the pronouns to be separate: <be tigin, ba saan>.”



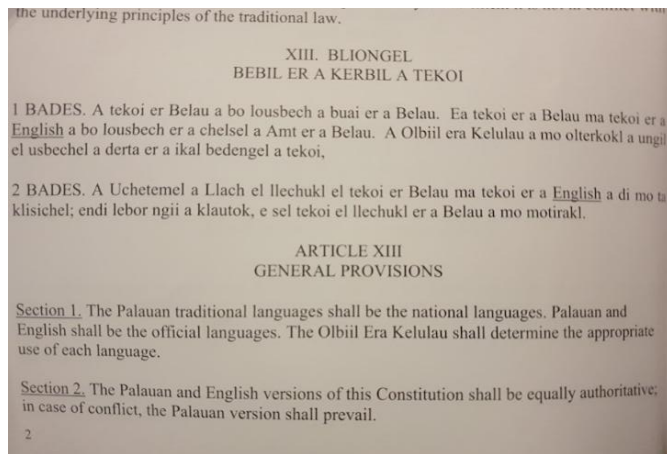
emphatic pronouns of 13c are actually prefixes. If the non-emphatic pronouns were indeed prefixes, then the nonoccurrence of *a* before the verb phrases of 13c could be explained. Assuming that this analysis were correct, it would appear more proper to spell the non-emphatic pronouns as part of the following verb—e.g. *akmong* ‘I’m going’, *ngsmechər* ‘she’s sick’, *təme* ‘they are coming’, etc. The 1972 Palauan Orthography Committee decided against spelling the non-emphatic pronouns as part of the following word, however. The present system of spelling the non-emphatic pronouns as separate words nevertheless has some merits: in sentences like the following, for example, it is easy to analyze the structure and identify the morphemes because they are spelled as separate words:

- (14) a. Ak ko ər a sesmechər.
‘I’m rather sick.’
- b. Tə, di mililil ər a Guam.
‘They only fooled around in Guam.’
- c. A John a dimlak ləbo e le ng mle smechər.
‘John didn’t go because he was sick.’

National Museum

Bilingual (English/Palauan) materials :

- Collection of historical documents
- Books published by the museum
- Interpretation board



中島敦

Atsushi Nakajima

Japanese novelist Atsushi Nakajima came to Palau as an officer of South Seas Government in 1941 and stayed in Palau for a year. His mission was to edit a Japanese language textbook for children in Micronesia, but he could not find any meaning to this job. It was because he could not find the legitimacy for forcing the

people in Micronesia to have the Japanese way of education. Rather than editing a Japanese textbook, he was eager to write novels. He wrote some short stories based on his experiences in Palau and the stories that he heard from his friend, Hisakatsu Hijikata.



Atsushi Nakajima

A meluches a hong el chad er a Siabal el Atsushi Nakajima a mle er a Belau el chad er a South Seas Government er a 1941, e mla er tia el ta el rak. A mle ngerechelel a mlo melodech a hong er a tekoi er a Siabal el bo lousbech a rengalek er a Maikronesia, engdi dimlak lebetik er a belkul tia el urreor. A uchul me ng dimlak lebetik er a belkul a

dimlak lesa a ultutelel a olsisechakl er a rengalek er a Maikronesia el ua teletelel osisechakl el mo er a rengalek er a Siabal. Ng bai dimlak lolodech a hong er a Siabal, engdi ng mle semeriar el meluches. Ng liluches a bebil er a mekekedeb el cheldechaduch el mle ultuil er a lules me a lirrenges er a secheilil er a Hisakatsu Hijikata.