

Sociolinguistic history of French Polynesia

The sociolinguistic situation of French Polynesia is complex and heterogeneous. The territory never had any form of linguistic unity. It was initially populated by successive waves of Polynesian settlers; while their languages shared many similarities, they were already well differentiated at the time of their dispersal.

On top of the relative linguistic diversity which was always present across the territory, some languages – especially in the Tuamotu and Austral archipelagos – have undergone the influence of the Tahitian *adstrate*, and also, during the past half century, of the French *superstrate*. (A language X is an *ADSTRATE* with respect to a language Y, if it is spoken in an adjacent region, and has some form of influence upon it. A *SUPERSTRATE* is a language which imposes itself on another language's area without necessarily superseding it, and has some linguistic impact on the local language.) This evolution, which is still going on today, has sometimes taken the form of a "triglossia" – the coexistence of three languages within the same territory, some-

times even for the same speakers.

At the top, as it were, is *FRENCH*, the official language which is taught everywhere and at all levels of education. Next comes *TAHITIAN*, the territory's language of prestige, which at times comes into conflict with French in administrative and political matters. The third layer consists of the various *VERNACULARS* spoken in the archipelagos other than the Society Islands (e.g. Marquesas, Tuamotus).

In French Polynesia, a multilingual country, the sociolinguistic situation is highly dynamic. The three different linguistic layers which compose it (official language, regional *lingua franca*, and local vernaculars) define an unstable balance. The hierarchy between these layers has been historically shaped up by extra-linguistic forces – economical, political, religious. These result in two parallel processes currently at play in the territory: on the one hand, its *TAHITIANIZATION*, and on the other, its *FRANCIZATION*. The present section will observe these two processes successively.

The historical process of tahitianization

Tahitianization may be defined as the multifaceted linguistic process by which various local dialects of the territory progressively replace their vocabulary, their phonology, or their grammar, with elements of the most prestigious language of the territory, namely the language of Tahiti. The initial phase of this social process dates back to the beginning of the 19th century, in the early stages of the expansion of Christianity.

Tahitianization through religion

The first Protestant missionaries to arrive from Europe belonged to the London Missionary Society, and chose the Windward Islands as the start-

ing point for their missionary work. They rapidly obtained the cooperation of King Pomare II, whom they succeeded in converting. As a consequence, Tahitian became not only the language of Pomare's kingdom (Windward Islands, some islands in western Tuamotu, plus Tupua'i and Ra'ivavae in the Australs) – but also the language of its new religion (Reformed Protestantism).

The codifying of laws in 1819, the translation of the Bible in 1836 and of Davies' dictionary in 1851, all in Tahitian, secured the prestige of Tahitian above all other languages of the region: it was the only written and sacred language of the territory.

In the early 19th century, Pomare's entire king-

dom converted to Protestantism. Reading the Bible in Tahitian became a daily occurrence not only in regions where Tahitian was already spoken, but also in those regions with other Polynesian languages. The first cause of tahitianization was therefore the Christian religion. In 1819, King Pomare II visited the island of Ra'ivavae, in the Australs, which he had recently incorporated into his kingdom. Two Tahitian missionaries travelled along with him and stayed there to christianize the population. The supremacy of Tahitian was in no way contested, as it was both the language of royal power and of God's servants. Local dialects gradually weakened or were even supplanted, as in Ra'ivavae, Tupua'i, or Rapa.

The Protectorate, established in 1842 by France and the Tahitian kingdom, did not change the situation: Tahitian remained the main language of the entire archipelago.

The role played by religion in linguistic uniformization continued throughout the 20th century. On the one hand, the islands which had become Catholic – for example, Pukarua, Fangatau, Napuka – held their services in Latin (at least until the Vatican II council) and, to a lesser degree, in local languages. Conversely, the Protestant church long continued to conduct their services in Tahitian. To this day, children attend Sunday Protestant school in Tahitian on the island of Oparo (Rapa Iti, in the Australs), and sometimes accompany their parents for "*tuāro'i*", discussions relating to the Bible in its Tahitian translation. This is how children who were born in one of the islands most remote from Tahiti are still encouraged to master its language.

Tahitianization through economy

The 18th century explorers, Wallis, Cook and Bougainville, stayed only briefly on the islands, and therefore had no significant effect on local language usage. If their presence did have some linguistic impact, it was not so much due to their use of English, as to the inevitable diseases brought by these foreign sailors, and against which local populations had no immunization. Should some disease have spread through small-scale populations, it could quickly affect its demographic balance, and thus indirectly jeopardize the transmission of certain language varieties. As for external linguistic influences properly speaking, they really began during the first half of the 19th century with the gradual arrival of whalers, and later of sandalwood traders.

The crews recruited on these boats from various atolls and islands attempted to imitate the language of the officers on board – usually English. This process at first resulted in a fairly rudimentary maritime (pre-)pidgin, based on English (Tryon & Charpentier 2004). The unsettled lifestyle and constant changes in the composition of crews did not help the development or stability of these pre-pidgins, which would have secured their survival. Whales and sandalwood became extremely rare after 1850, and these ephemeral *contact languages* disappeared with the activities which had given birth to them. These first maritime pre-pidgins did not pose any threat to the vernacular languages; for this to happen, it was necessary to wait for more sedentary, prolonged activities.

In the absence of secure anchorage in most of the islands of their Marquesan colony, the French turned their attention to the island of Tahiti, the "New Cythera". This is where they imposed their protectorate in 1842. They maintained Papeete as the administrative centre, a city chosen by Queen Pomare IV in 1827 as the capital. Taking advantage of its excellent harbour, they turned it into a port which became a trading centre with the outside world. All French and foreign shipping companies and all the trading companies were concentrated there. Since the ancient contact language of the early 19th century had long become obsolete, the role of *lingua franca* – i.e. contact language for communicating from one archipelago to another – fell to Tahitian.

As the only means of travel at the time was by sea, the language used by all populations in eastern or southern Polynesia was logically that spoken in Papeete, the main port for the inter-island schooners, where crews spent their leave periods. Moreover, the majority of these crews were Tahitians, and they imposed the use of their language upon other crew members hailing from other archipelagos.

Already the language of trade, Tahitian was also, for over a century (1850-1950), the language of the places where the country's only two raw materials, mother-of-pearl and phosphate, were produced.

The mother-of-pearl industry (flat oysters), concentrated in certain areas – northern Tuamotus, Mangareva, etc. – required a considerable number of divers to collect the mother-of-pearl, as well as workers to clean and empty the oyster shells – as only the shells were being marketed. All these workers came from different archipelagos and spoke their own dialects. The contact language for

all was Tahitian – including for the Chinese traders connected to this industry.

To this day, in replacement of the mother-of-pearl exploitation in the Tuamotus and Gambier Archipelagos, the pearl industry, with its pearl farms, requires extensive labour that cannot be found locally – hence a strong inter-mingling of populations. These situations contribute largely to the expansion of a *lingua franca* to link all those participating in the industry: in all cases Tahitian, or occasionally a slightly pidginized mix of Tahitian and French.

The expansion of Tahitian could also be attributed to another industry which developed between 1911 and 1966: the extraction of phosphates on Makatea, an isolated island of the Tuamotu Archipelago. Migrants came from all over French Polynesia, for stays of varying lengths, to work for the Compagnie Française des Phosphates d’Océanie. During their stay, the common language was Tahitian, which the migrants would then often reintroduce to their own villages upon their return home. In a parallel fashion, the creation of the nuclear test facilities “C.E.P.”, which will be mentioned below, not only had the effect of increasing the pressure of the French language (p.108); indirectly, it also reinforced the use of Tahitian as the default language among Polynesian workers, at the expense of other languages.

An essential corollary to these movements of population for economical reasons was the increasing number of mixed unions, associating men and women originating from different regions of the archipelago. Still today, when Tahitian is the language of at least one of the two parents, then it is generally the language that prevails in the couple. Besides, if they both speak distinct languages other than Tahitian – for example, one speaks Marquesan and the partner speaks Pa’umotu – then the typical situation is that neither of these two languages will dominate. In such a case, the couple often ends up adopting a so-called “neutral” language for use within the family – generally Tahitian, and more and more frequently, French. The couple’s place of residence may be a factor for such a choice. However, just like almost everywhere else in the world, a family will always tend to privilege the language it deems to be the most “useful” from a social or economic point of view, i.e. the one they consider to be the most efficient for the children’s future. This explains why Tahitian is often adopted by families, even when this language is foreign to both parents. For the past

two generations, however, the tendency is more and more to adopt French for this purpose.

Tahitianization through the education system

For the past fifty years or so, the country’s institutions, schools in particular, have set themselves the task of extending the use of French across the whole territory.⁵⁸ However, while it reinforces the position of the French language, this education system also has a collateral effect, paradoxically, of reinforcing Tahitian, at the expense of all the other vernaculars of the archipelago.

Indirect tahitianization through formal education

Until the middle of the 19th century, education had been left in the hands of the church, which often lacked the material and human resources to fulfil this task. Until the mid-1960s, this led to very different sociolinguistic situations from one archipelago to another, and even from one island to another; in some places the cultural heritage was fairly well preserved, and in others it was disappearing altogether. It was only after the Second World War, following the Polynesian populations’ decision to become a “Territoire d’Outre-Mer (TOM)” (Overseas Territory of the French Republic) that the French government began to invest in education: building schools and colleges, sending conscripts (as part of their national service duties) and training local teachers. Modelled on the French education system in which school is compulsory until the age of 16, and free of charge from kindergarten to the final year of university, the French Polynesian school system has no equivalent elsewhere in the non-French speaking Pacific. Everyone is given a chance, at least in principle, in a compulsory and free system.

Precisely because of its universal spirit, the education system covers the entire territory of French Polynesia. As tuition was exclusively given in French – and later in also in Tahitian – the obvious consequence of such an education system is a widespread acculturation, which takes no account of the linguistic diversity of French Polynesia. On top of this, the system is pyramidal, inasmuch as the success of a student implies that he must continue his education, or find a job, in the main island Tahiti. As a result, the French language has ex-

⁵⁸ This process of “francization” will be discussed later (p.59).

panded, putting Polynesian languages and cultures in danger; in parallel, the central position of Tahiti has been reinforced, thereby eventually condemning the survival of languages other than Tahitian. The territory's linguistic diversity, which had long resisted the missionaries, is on the verge of being eradicated by this pyramidal and assimilatory education system, in just four decades.

Admittedly, the real problem with this situation is not so much the presence – which is historically and socially inescapable – of dominant languages such as French and Tahitian. The highest threat is really the *monolingual mindset* – that is, the idea that a child is unable to learn properly more than one language, so that he has to choose a single language at the expense of others. It is well known that traditional societies of the Pacific – and of most other parts of the world for that matter – are typically multilingual, as each individual is raised to be fluent in two or more languages. Conversely, the monolingual mindset is essentially a historical anomaly, which is due partly to the historical development of centralized states in Europe, and partly to the modern notion of nation-state promoted by 19th-century German Romantics. Rather than impose upon French Polynesia this monolingual ideology, it would be more profitable to everyone to give its citizens the possibility to keep living a multilingual life, by learning languages of national and international communication *in addition to* maintaining their local languages. The debate is therefore not whether French or Tahitian should be taught in schools – of course they should – but whether this learning should be done at the expense of the traditional languages of the territory.

Today, all children of the territory go through the same curriculum, from primary school to higher education. Most of them – apart from Tahitian speakers and to a lesser extent Marquesans and the inhabitants of Rurutu-Rimatara in the Australs – are cut off at an early age from their own ancestral cultures. The following examples will suffice to illustrate this early acculturation via school education.

Children born on the atolls of Pukarua, Fangatau or Napuka for example are highly likely to learn the local language within their family circles, at least with the generation of their grandparents. In the event that their community is equipped with a kindergarten, they can begin their schooling in their familiar environment, in contact with their own language; however, education received at that school will be in French, and Tahitian will already

be present through the media. By the end of primary school, around the age of eleven, they undergo their first separation from their familiar environment: the only secondary school in the region is a boarding school on the atoll of Hao, where they will mix with pupils from other atolls. From that point on, the language they will have learnt during their childhood is already in minority in their daily lives, competing with other languages. Moreover, as many Polynesian teachers speak Tahitian, this is often the only Polynesian language they hear spoken by adults, and perhaps begin to speak themselves – in competition with French. For the best pupils, pursuing further their education will imply a second separation: they will have to leave the Tuamotu Archipelago and head for the capital, Papeete. Once there, exposure to Tahitian will be daily: in Tahiti, everyone ends up adopting either Tahitian or French as their main language. By the time they become adults, these individuals will have lived continuously on their atolls only for a few years during their early childhood – not long enough to thoroughly master the language and culture. This explains how school education, despite all its advantages, leads to linguistic uniformity throughout the territory, and to the loss of its linguistic diversity.

On the Marquesas Islands, the influence of Tahitian in school education starts at a later stage, as the archipelago has both primary and secondary schools. Children on the island of Fatu Hiva for example, will speak the Marquesan dialect of their ancestors during their entire primary schooling, and at the age of eleven at secondary school in Atuona (Hiva Oa), they will become familiar with the differences between their own dialect and that of Hiva Oa. Because dialectal divisions do not hamper mutual intelligibility, Marquesan will continue to be spoken. Tahitian will remain a foreign language to these children, that of the media or of Tahitian visitors, of civil servants, or tourists. It is only in secondary school that Marquesan children are truly confronted with the language of the capital. They have to spend many hours a week learning Tahitian on the pretext of preparing for a possible departure for a higher secondary school in Tahiti.

Just like young Marquesans, children born on the islands of Rurutu and Rimatara in the Austral Archipelago enjoy the benefits of a secondary school within their linguistic area: this helps to delay and limit premature tahitianization, which is taking its toll in other parts of the country.

This pyramidal education system – whereby successful students spend three or four years in Tahiti – aims to create an elite similar to the western model. By ignoring local cultures and languages, this system contributes to their loss. We propose to describe this historical process in terms of “indirect tahitianization” through formal education. Indeed, the paradox is that this education system as it is organized, results in the expansion of the Tahitian language throughout the country, even though the official language of education is not Tahitian, but French. Although schools are a *direct* cause of the expansion of French – as we shall see below – they are also an *indirect* cause of the expansion of Tahitian.

For a long time, the process we just described was the main path taken by the spread of Tahitian – i.e. as the *lingua franca* used among pupils from different islands, or between teachers and pupils. Yet in addition to this *de facto* dominance of Tahitian, schools have only just begun contributing more directly to the expansion of Tahitian throughout the territory: by making it also a language of tuition. Although this last move is a historic victory for supporters of Tahitian against the pressure of French, this is also another occasion for Tahitian to increase its pressure upon the other Polynesian languages of the country. This imbalance is particularly obvious as one examines the Deixonne Act and its ambiguities.

The ambiguities of the Deixonne Act

France is known for its political and cultural model of centralization – known as “Jacobinisme” – which is also well-known for its linguistic impact. The massive linguistic uniformization which characterized France during the 20th century was somewhat slowed down in 1951 as the Deixonne Act legalized the teaching of regional languages in France. However, this law was flawed by so many ambiguities that it did nothing to truly preserve the linguistic diversity of French Polynesia.

To begin with, the first version of this Deixonne Act was restrictive, recognizing initially only four French regional languages – Breton, Basque, Catalan and Occitan. It was not until 1981 that Tahitian was introduced.

Despite it being good news for defenders of the Tahitian language, unfortunately the decree ignored completely the other languages of French Polynesia – Marquesan, Mangarevan, Pa’umotu...

The first Article of the decree was indeed ambiguous:⁵⁹

Articles (...) of the January 11, 1951 Act (...) relating to the teaching of local languages and dialects are applicable in the zone of Tahitian influence.

What was “zone of Tahitian influence” supposed to mean? Should we take Tahitian as the *lingua franca*, then its “area of influence” covers the whole territory – which is tantamount to denying the linguistic diversity of French Polynesia. If, on the other hand, Tahitian is viewed as just one vernacular among others, then it should only be taught within the zone where this language is the unique local vernacular: the Windward Islands, the Leeward Islands, the north-west of Tuamotus, and Tupua’i (see *Map 3* p.75).

Having gained its autonomy in 1984, French Polynesia inherited these ambiguities; and the only language taught in schools alongside French was very often to be the language of Tahiti. Here is, for example, how the first bill of autonomy, in 1984, was formulated: ⁶⁰

“The Tahitian language is to be taught within the normal schedule of elementary and primary schools. In higher levels, it is to be proposed as an optional subject. Upon decision by the territorial assembly, the Tahitian language may be replaced, in certain elementary and primary schools, by one of the other Polynesian languages.”

The wording of this legislative text unambiguously betrays the Tahitian imperialism which was then the norm. Indeed, the choice of Tahitian was the default choice for the whole territory; and only a special authorization, granted by the territorial assembly in the capital, made it possible for certain schools to teach “one of the other Polynesian languages” instead.

In addition, the positive effect of the Deixonne Act was largely weakened by the optionality added

⁵⁹ “Les articles (...) de la loi du 11 janvier 1951 (...) relatifs à l’enseignement des langues et dialectes locaux sont applicables dans la zone d’influence du tahitien.” (extension of the Deixonne Act by decree No. 81-553 dated May 12, 1981).

⁶⁰ “La langue tahitienne est une matière enseignée dans le cadre de l’horaire normal des écoles maternelle et primaire. Cet enseignement est organisé comme matière facultative et à option dans le second degré. Sur décision de l’assemblée territoriale, la langue tahitienne peut être remplacée dans certaines écoles maternelles et primaires par l’une des autres langues polynésiennes.” (Loi n°84-820 du 6 septembre 1984 portant statut du territoire de la Polynésie française, art. 90).

to certain articles: not only would this tuition be optional for students, but the very existence of such tuition in a given school was left entirely up to the teachers themselves. Thus, teachers are allowed to devote one hour a week to the reading and writing of local languages, only if they make a specific request for it. Similarly, article 5 of the Act provides for the *optional* organization of classes and courses in teacher training colleges, relating to local language, folklore and literature. The language examination for the "baccalauréat" (school leaving certificate) is also optional.

Finally, another ambiguity was a result, not of the Deixonne Act itself, but of the notion of *reo mā'ohi* with which it was associated in official discourse. In Tahitian, *reo mā'ohi* means 'native tongue'. In the same way, a plant, a bird, etc. described as *mā'ohi* are "endemic", "indigenous". In theory, this expression *reo mā'ohi* should denote any of the territory's native languages, whether Tahitian (*reo Tahiti*), Marquesan or Reao... However, the equation *reo mā'ohi* = *Tahitian* eventually became obvious in people's minds, as obvious in the official discourse in the 1980's and 90's, until only very recently.

For the next two decades following the 1981 decree, only Tahitian benefited from this recognition through the education system. The only Polynesian language recognized by the French government, Tahitian was *de facto* the only Polynesian language to be taught. Teaching Tahitian began not only at university, where a chair of *Polynesian Languages and Civilisations* was created, but also in secondary and upper secondary schools, in compliance with the framework of the Deixonne Act.

One may regret that school programmes today allow for only a few hours per week to be dedicated to teaching Tahitian – so little compared with the dominant position of the almost omnipresent French language. But on the other hand, even this minimal number of hours represents yet another opportunity for the Tahitian language to gain more and more ground, say, in the Marquesan and Pa'umotu linguistic areas. From a very early age, children throughout the territory learn that the only Polynesian cultural language, the only one endowed with a writing system and prestige, is the language of Tahiti.

As for the other languages of the territory, the French central state never contemplated the possibility of teaching them in any organized way. This only happened in a random, informal way, whenever motivated teachers considered themselves capable of fulfilling such a task – e.g. in

Mangareva, the Marquesas, and Rimatara. Conversely, since most teachers based in the Tuamotus are native of the Tahitian-speaking zone, they almost always teach (rudiments of) Tahitian to their pupils, irrespective of the latter's mother tongues. Finally, it took a change in government before minority vernaculars could be incorporated, at last, in the general education system.

Recent political history:

Linguistic centralization and awareness

The name "Tahiti" is too often used, metonymically, to designate the entire country of French Polynesia. Such practice is more than just a convenient shortcut: it is a true ideology, partly inspired by the French centralizing model. The linguistic Jacobinism mentioned earlier is but one facet of a broader phenomenon, sometimes referred to as *Tahitian imperialism*.

For the two decades following the autonomy of French Polynesia, politicians continued their obsessive centralization around Tahiti, even when they were themselves natives of other parts of the archipelago – as was the case for Gaston Flosse, born in Mangareva. Everything seemed to be organized around a simple model: one country, one capital island, one language.

The term "French Polynesia", established in 1957, was considered – quite rightly – as a reminder of the former colonial dependence. During the 1990's, the desire to coin a different name for the territory gave rise to a new unofficial term: "**Tahiti Nui**". Literally "*Great Tahiti*", this term implies that the immense expanse of French Polynesia, with its five archipelagos, could legitimately be reduced to the status of mere dependencies of the island of Tahiti. And indeed, the term "**Tahiti Nui**" is often translated – including by the very official Minister of Tourism – *Tahiti and its islands*. Instead of presenting it for what it is – an island among so many others – Tahiti becomes an abstract entity, a central point, and the synthesis of an entire country.

This is how, during the 1990's, all administrative ships were named *Tahiti Nui*, and the long-haul airline company became *Air Tahiti Nui*. At the same time, and against the will of the local populations, pregnant women from the Tuamotus or from Gambier were systematically encouraged to travel to Tahiti to give birth, supposedly for health reasons. During that period, registry offices on these islands could only deliver death certificates, and all these mothers gave birth to "Tahitian" babies – or at least babies who were registered as such.

This extreme centralism naturally had a linguistic impact. Tahitian became the only Polynesian language to be taught in secondary schools, the only one used in the media,⁶¹ the only one (other than French) used by the Polynesian government. In the administration, a diglossia was set up with French as the dominant language, with Tahitian as the sole other second language.

In the other archipelagos, this omnipresence of Tahitian was not always well accepted, and triggered some resentment. By refusing to be citizens of a “great Tahiti”, the Marquesans ironically called their own ferry boat “*Ka’oha Nui*” (from *ka’oha* ‘hello, welcome’ in Marquesan). The Pa’umotu, largely represented in the capital Papeete, rarely ventured to speak their language. They were too often pejoratively called *kaina* (‘roughly hewn’). Similarly, people from Reao were stigmatized as “sandal eaters”, and those from Napuka as *napua’a* or *napuaka* (‘pigs’). The native islanders were usually ignored, often treated as inferior, and only very few ever considered defending their cultural heritage or passing on their language: they were resigning themselves to learning Tahitian.

At last, a new approach saw the light of day in 1998, when Prof Louise Peltzer – Professor of Polynesian languages at *Université de la Polynésie française* – was named Minister of Culture (1998-2004). At that time, Gaston Flosse’s government needed the votes of Marquesan officials, and so heeded their demands with regard to languages and culture by alleviating the then prevailing all-Tahitian policy. An academy was set up in the Marquesas; a language day was introduced; a presidential literary prize was attributed to a work written in a native language; many cultural associations, not only Tahitian, were subsidized. These decisions were *de facto* signs of recognition of the territory’s multilingualism. Progress was real, albeit limited: it would take more than that to undermine the supremacy of French or Tahitian.

In 2004, an unexpected change in the political majority brought to power a new coalition – including the pro-independence party *Tāvini Huira’atira* – with the slogan: *taui roa* (Tahitian for ‘complete change’). It was indeed to bring change to the linguistic situation, yet through a long, drawn out process. The vast majority of pro-

independence leaders are from Tahiti, which is also their place of residence. For them, Tahitian has always been the language of protest, the language used when speaking to *ta’ata tumu* (“indigenous people”), by contrast with French. For these politicians, speaking Tahitian in all circumstances amounts to asserting their “ethnic” identity, rejecting any allegiance to the French state, to the point of excluding the *Popa’ā* (i.e. Europeans living in the country who do not speak any Polynesian language). In actual fact, although this period provided the occasion to redefine the relations between French and Tahitian, it involved no progress whatsoever in the preservation of local vernaculars. The centralizing policy was pursued and even reinforced, with other languages being excluded from political matters. After 2004, any minister visiting the islands – including the territorial President – continued to address the citizens exclusively in Tahitian, anywhere in the country. It was quite paradoxical, to say the least, to see such a “Tahitian imperialism” being carried on by those who had so strongly been fighting the “linguistic imperialism” of French.

If this political period had positive effects in terms of linguistic diversity, this was not so much due to action on the part of the government, as to the increasing awareness among the population. To the sound of loud calls for change after years of autocracy, this period opened the way to all forms of protest, and enabled various cultural and linguistic minorities to regain confidence. Thus, when the new coalition in power – under the leadership of Jacqui Drollet, at that time Deputy Prime Minister – decided to speak exclusively Tahitian within the French Polynesian parliament, one Marquesan elected representative, René Kohuotini, decided that he too would only speak his native language; in so doing, he denounced the authoritative attitude of the majority in power, by revealing the absurdity of imposing a single language within the parliament of a multilingual country. Other representatives of the population, who normally expressed themselves in Tahitian, turned to using French exclusively to protest against this new Tahitian centralism. The new freedom of mind that followed the shift in majority encouraged the Pa’umotu living in the capital – until then described as “*kaina*” (“retarded”) – to speak their own language amongst themselves in public, and assert their identity, for example, through festivals of which they are extremely proud today. Aren’t most of the country’s well-known singers natives of their archipelago? This assertion of island cul-

⁶¹ This first took the form of various radio stations during the 1970’s; then the arrival of television in the 1980’s; and later the installation of the first satellite television parabolic antenna in the 1990’s.

tures is conspicuous in the annual arts festival, "Heiva". In 2004, in Tahiti, the cultural delegation from Rapa Iti won several prizes, even though they were mostly speaking in their own language, "*reo Oparo*".

In the Marquesas, the cultural renewal associated with the search for their own identity led primary school teachers to include local languages and cultures in the school curriculum. Oratory art, comedy, language skill competitions are today organized between classes of the same level within the same island, and soon will be between all five of the archipelago's islands.

Tahitian politicians, because of their westernized life-styles, were not aware of such matters. Thus, even in this time of *Tau'i* ("change"), one found very few major innovations in terms of linguistic preservation – with one exception. The new Minister of Education, Jean Marius Raapoto, came from a Protestant family whose love of Tahitian was raised to a cult status. Having completed his studies with a thesis in linguistics, he then began his career in teaching: this background made him understand that the only way to promote languages and cultures was by teaching them at school. Such an approach, which in Europe would go without saying, was seen as a revolution in French Polynesia. This new approach with respect to the territory's multilingual heritage was summarized by the Ministry's full title: "Ministère de l'Éducation, de l'Enseignement supérieur et de la recherche, chargé du plurilinguisme et de la promotion des langues polynésiennes" [Ministry of Education and Research, in charge of multilingualism and of the promotion of Polynesian languages].

It was on this occasion that the ambiguity surrounding the above-mentioned expression *reo mā'ohi* "the indigenous language" was removed. The expression was then updated to specifically designate all dialects of French Polynesia (*reo Tahiti* "Tahitian", *'eo Enata/Enana* "Marquesan", *marau Reao* "Reao", *reko Takapoto* "Vahitu of Takapoto", *tako Fangatau* "Fangatau", *geo Ra'ivavae* "Ra'ivavae"...). Being a linguist, the minister

adhered to the exact meaning of the expression and broke with the habit of limiting the teaching of *reo mā'ohi* to Tahitian alone: this gesture was, for the first time, tantamount to an official recognition of the country's multilingualism.

Taking advantage of the ambiguity of the Deixonne Act and of its subsequent decree, it was then decided to privilege teaching local constituent dialects of *reo mā'ohi*, wherever they were still practised. To do so, specific training courses were organized, and several teachers already trained were invited to begin teaching their own mother tongues: these were suddenly all recognized as *mā'ohi*. Criticisms on the part of those in favour of Tahitian monolingualism remained moderate, and after another change in government, this "experiment" – name under which this new policy had cautiously been presented – was pursued, in the Marquesas, the Tuamotus and the Australs.

Persisting sociolinguistic trends

Far from slowing down, the dominance of Tahitian has only increased lately, thereby threatening even more the vitality of other languages.

The various local authorities have deliberately been promoting only one language: *reo Tahiti*, the language of the capital. Also, the economical downturn since 2008, which has impacted the pearl industry, has forced contracted workers to intensify their work in the industry-related atolls rather than return to their home islands; this only reinforces their use of Tahitian – or rather a *lingua franca*, simplified variety of it – rather than their own dialect. Few will return to their home islands, but instead they gather around the capital Papeete, where they tend to live in poor conditions. These domestic immigrants, speakers of dialects foreign to the Society islands, forcibly shift to *reo tahiti*, the prevailing language which they often master only imperfectly.

Confronted with such a complex sociolinguistic situation, many younger people end up adopting French as their first language.

Enforced francization

Unfortunately, the *tau'i* ("change") was late in coming. For the past fifty years, the government's political and strategic choices had already given a predominant role, in many aspects of everyday life, to the French language.

The decision of General de Gaulle's government in 1963 to transfer the nuclear test centre (the

CEP, *Centre d'Expérimentation Nucléaire*) from Reggane in Algeria to French Polynesia was to have an even stronger cultural and linguistic impact than two centuries of contact between Polynesians and Europeans. The entire population of French Polynesia was more or less affected by this decision. From that point on, the supremacy

of Tahitian as a *lingua franca* was over: in less than a decade, French was to become the dominating language. The economic factors which had led to earlier linguistic changes – especially the gradual tahitianization of the country – through concentration and migration of populations, were suddenly increased tenfold, this time in favour of the language of the European colonizer.

The local populations were called upon to build the infrastructure required for nuclear tests (roads, runways, shelters, accommodation...). The military authorities sent recruiting agents to all the archipelagos: during the 1960's, as many as 13,000 Polynesians were employed by the CEP. Population movements continued in this way for the next thirty years, until the final dismantling of the Centre in 1995. A very large proportion of the male working population took part in this programme over varying periods. Absent from their communities, these men learned to live on a salary, abandoning traditional activities such as fishing and agriculture. The rich vocabulary handed down from their elders became useless in this new society based on monetary exchange and the use of French.

Emigration to Papeete was massive. Jobs could be found, but housing was inadequate, so thousands of families left their community to crowd on the outskirts of the capital. The social, cultural and linguistic consequences of this process were to prove enormous for the country: nowhere in French Polynesia was to escape this massive depopulation. Islands and atolls, except for Tahiti, lost a large proportion of the most dynamic generation – young parents with children – thus leaving out an essential link in the transmission of ancestral knowledge.

In Papeete, these immigrants were unable to speak their language outside their family circles. Once out of their homes, Tahitian became the *lingua franca*, a second language for the vast majority of the Polynesian population.

In addition, mastering French was becoming increasingly necessary when looking for work, as it was the main language in professional circles. Indeed, setting up and operating the nuclear test centre involved a massive flood of population originating from metropolitan France. These newcomers had a very different profile from the traditional "Small Whites" who had earlier arrived by mail boat with the dream of living a Tahitian life: for generations, these travellers and small time colonists had demonstrated their will to merge into the population, and even made the

effort to learn local languages, at least to a certain extent. But this was not at all the case with the new arrivals working for the CEP: whether military, civil servants or otherwise, these new "**Fa-rāni**" (French) only came to Polynesia for short periods – a few years at most; their arrival had nothing to do with any love of the country or of its inhabitants, let alone of its cultures or languages. These metropolitans were numerous and endowed with a high purchasing power – enough to impose their way of life and their language in all circumstances.

Once the Polynesians were amongst themselves, they could of course speak the Tahitian *lingua franca*; however, the omnipresence of "**Popa'ā**" (Europeans) rendered these circumstances rare and the use of French became almost compulsory. Gradually, French was spoken in all situations in Papeete: the language from Europe had insidiously overtaken Tahitian in the capital. The bitterness of the Polynesians is expressed by the Tahitian poet Henri Hiro⁶² (1944-1990):

"Si tu étais venu chez nous, nous t'aurions accueilli à bras ouverts.

Mais tu es venu ici chez toi, et on ne sait pas comment t'accueillir chez toi".

("Had you come to our land, we would have welcomed you with open arms.

Instead you came here to your land, and we don't know how to welcome you in your land".)

This process of "francization" spread over three decades, and practically two generations of Polynesians were affected. This being said, the impact of this acculturation varied from one place to another.

Actual nuclear tests were made in the south of the Tuamotu Archipelago. Around the zone of exclusion which included the Moruroa and Fangataufa atolls, different observation bases were set up on the surrounding islands and atolls, where military personnel were accommodated. Whether in Reao, Pukarua, Tureia, Mangareva, or Rapa Iti, the number of military compared with local populations led to profound upheavals in these traditional societies, for whom French had until then been merely a language taught in school, and nothing more. The increase in the number of mixed marriages, the birth of numerous "demis" (mixed-race children), brought about an aban-

⁶² Henri Hiro – quoted by Bruno Saura (2004). The translation is ours (A.F.).

donment of cultures and local languages in favour of French alone. At the close of the nuclear test centre in 1995, most of these mixed couples left the islands, as well as their many young half-castes.

On the rear bases such as the Hao atoll, the intermingling of populations meant the occasional use of Tahitian, but mostly of French. Workers from all Polynesian communities had stayed in Moruroa or Hao, where the use of French was unavoidable at least while the numerous military were present. Within thirty years, the French language had become generalized.

Given the relatively short stays of metropolitan French people, and their staggered departures and return journeys, one might have thought that the use of French, a language less adapted to is-

land life, would fade. But this was not to reckon with the contribution of schools. After three generations of schooling in French, the language was generally understood by the under-sixties. French therefore became the *lingua franca* for all, whatever their knowledge of traditional languages. Today, as we mentioned before (p.72), French has become the home language of nearly 70 percent of the population of French Polynesia.

This generalized francization was partly a declared objective on the part of institutions, and sometimes the mere indirect consequence of seemingly fortuitous events. The acceleration of this phenomenon over the last few decades raises the question of the place Polynesian languages will occupy in the country's future. In some cases, this even begs the question of their survival.