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The Paradox of English in Tonga: Attributed Status vs. Social Aversion

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The Paradox of English in Tonga: Attributed Status vs. Social Aversion

Anthropology

Introduction

My research took place among young adult Tongans, ages 18-30 on the main island of Nuku'alofa in the last remaining Pacific Kingdom of Tonga where Tongan and English are both recognized as official languages. Previous research in Tonga shows that robust sectors of the economy, involving business, tourism, and education, requires English language proficiency for good employment. Consequently, Tongans highly esteem English proficiency, although my experience revealed English practically non-existent in daily communication. Why?

Divulging, interviewing, and surveying the impacts of English, past, present, and future, presented three main reasons for social aversion toward speaking English which for them, often outweigh the positive connections of it. Those reasons: (1) public mockery, even for minuscule mistakes; (2) linked with snobbery as speaking English flaunts connections outside of Tonga, and most importantly; (3) speaking English differentiates you from the community which opposes a core Tongan value of group orientation.



Reasons for English proficiency:

Employment

"All the paperwork; job applications are in English" (Pua, 23)

Tonga's workforce does not wholly base employment around the English language, although many Tongans believe the process involving and requiring the English language as daunting and so rarely even apply.

Higher Education

All entrance exams into secondary schools are written in English including the required graduation exam, the PSSC (Pacific Senior School Certificate). One cannot hope to graduate, nonetheless go onto higher education in and out of Tonga without succeeding on this exam.



"Key to the world." (Ala, 18)

Reasons for social aversion to speaking English:

Public mockery for minuscule mistakes

"...it's a big issue here in Tonga. It's like a tradition because if someone speak English, they mock them..." (Nane, 18)

Tongans are well-known to be humorous people. Hence, laughter can be noted as a part of Tongan culture, but what Tongans see as traditional humor appear as communal ridicule. Even this "traditional" mockery is enough to avoid speaking English, even when required.

Flaunts connections outside of Tonga

"Like those who grew up here [Tonga] and went to the states and came [back]. They like to speak English all the time. They walk around with their friends and speak English, and if they [go up] to someone who doesn't know English, they...tease them." (Ala, 18)

Tongans have linked English to Europeans and have widely regarded them as people of great knowledge. When a person learns to speak English, they cross into another world linguistically as well as socially. Tongan or not, others categorize them as "*fiēpalangi*"* and perceive them as flaunting their knowledge of it.

*English equivalent: "want to be white/american/european"

Opposes Tongan value of group orientation By disconnecting people from community

"In Tonga, when someone speaks in English, the children [mock saying] '*fiēpalangi*. You want to be different. You want to be the smartest.' that's why I don't want to learn English." (Silia, 18)

Main Tongan values revolve around and emphasize group orientation through kinship, formal conformity and rank and authority. However, English labels and crosses boundaries through every form of mass media within an already hierarchical society. When you speak English as Tonga's second language, you set yourself distinct-an act of individuality.



Conclusion

In Tonga presently, this paradox prevails – socially attributed status of the English language and a widespread aversion to speaking it in daily life. Although English undoubtedly links Tonga society with opportunities for economic development, higher education, and cross-national communication ability; many young adult Tongans do not rely on English proficiency for daily sustenance. Sustenance for them is not based upon cash economy or high-powered status, but rather the maintenance of core Tongan values such as: group orientation, interpersonal relationships, respect and love. English proficiency in Tonga does not determine a person's wealth, nor does it increase a person's social status, even though Tongans may suggest these. To Tongans, more importantly, their native tongue maintains their cultural identity and values.

What weighs more?

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