

THE PURSUIT OF INSULAR AUTHENTICITY:

The Spelling Reform of Loanwords in Palauan

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ABSTRACT: From the late 19th to the late 20th Century the language situation in Palau underwent dramatic changes due to continual foreign rule. Twenty years after its independence, the Palauan government and traditional leaders are seeking to bolster the Palauan language in order to establish a firm national identity. The Palau Language Commission was officially launched by the government in 2009 for vitalisation purposes, and as a part of the endeavour, is now working to make a loanword dictionary by which it officially recognises loanwords that are commonly used as a part of Palauan language. In the process of this work, the spelling of loanwords has been reconsidered and reformed for more ‘authentic’ spellings. This spelling reform has some internal disagreement and incoherency due to conflicting positions of various Palauan people. This paper analyses the ongoing loanword spelling reform process as a pursuit for linguistic authenticity that contributes to the reinforcement of national identity.

KEYWORDS: Loanwords, Orthography, Palauan, Language change, Insular authenticity

Introduction

By the end of 21st Century about half of 6000-7000 languages in the world are estimated to disappear (Unesco, 2011; Reh, 2014). With the growing concern about language death, preservation and revitalisation efforts are being made in communities by governments and non-profit organisations, etc. Although Palauan, the traditional language in Palau, is not officially acknowledged by UNESCO as being endangered, the Palauan people feel it is threatened by English, a subsequent official language (Office of the Vice President 2010)¹. In order to help protect and vitalise Palauan, the Palau Language Commission (PLC) was established in 2009. The purpose of the PLC is to establish standardised grammar rules and orthography including the spellings of loanwords for the preservation of Palauan (Palau Language Commission, nd). The mission statement clearly conveys their concern and needs to define the appropriate strategy for dealing with the increase of English loanwords. The ministry of education

¹ UNESCO classifies the degree of endangerment as: safe, vulnerable, definitely endangered, severely endangered, critically endangered, and extinct. Palauan is classified as “safe”.

also recently published a book that suggested replacing 150 English words with Palauan words, and states its apprehension for the extreme influence and possible loss of Palauan in the younger generation as follows:

we need to remember that mixing Palauan and English in speech can eventually lead to the loss of our language. We would not want to lose our language, and in order to save our language; we need to speak more in pure Palauan. We want to always acclaim the language that has always been ours. (Palau Ministry of Education, 2015:2)²

While working to replace some English loanwords with Palauan words, Palauan policy makers also recognise that many loanwords are indeed irreplaceable and necessary as a part of the Palauan language. The PLC acknowledges the importance of loanwords and states that their mission is to “ensure that these rules [of standardised language use] are flexible enough to evolve in response to the ever changing world around us especially to the realities of cultural exchange, technological advancement, and knowledge expansion” (Palau Language Commission, nd). To this end, after finishing their first task of assessing the validity of current orthography, the PLC is now working to develop rules for appropriate ways of adopting loanwords. In their report on the orthography they stated that their next task was:

To establish additional rules and uniformity to our official guidelines when adopting new words and loanwords into our lexicon. This grammar and orthography by Mr. Josephs and Mr. Emesiochl have most of the basic rules for dealing with borrowed words. There just needs to be a set of uniform procedures by which words are added to our vocabulary. (Palau Language Commission, 2012)

In a highly bilingual community such as Palau it is difficult to decipher which English words constitute as part of Palauan (eg loanwords) or are simply interjected English words. For this reason the PLC aims to ascertain which loanwords will either be recognised or excluded from the official Palauan lexicon. As a result, the PLC has recently printed *Beches El Tekoi Er a Belau* (new loanword dictionary) which acknowledges 142 loanwords and states the procedures concerning loanword adoption³. While adopting these words it was also necessary to decide their spellings. However, developing a spelling consensus for these words was no easy task. Since the spelling recommendations are influenced by individual experiences and backgrounds, opposing opinions emerged regarding the correct spelling of loanwords.⁴

² Ironically this claim was written in English as the preface to the book.

³ This dictionary (or booklet) includes loanwords from English and Japanese. Many Japanese words are included because they are commonly used but not incorporated in the previous dictionary, Josephs (1990). They continue their discussion to accept more loanwords from English.

⁴ Debate on the spelling of loanwords (mostly English) is observed in many languages although the case in Palauan is more intricate. As Hasund and Drange (2014) observes of Norwegian: “The issue of loanword spelling is a sensitive one... and proposed spelling reforms tend to cause heated debates” (ibid: 142).

This study aims to explore the diverse identities in the postcolonial island nation of Palau that influence the spelling reform of loanwords. It will examine the social, political, historical, and linguistic causes of the existing conflicting opinions on deciding loanword spelling, and argue that Palau as a whole is pursuing a national identity by developing authenticity of their own language through spelling reform.

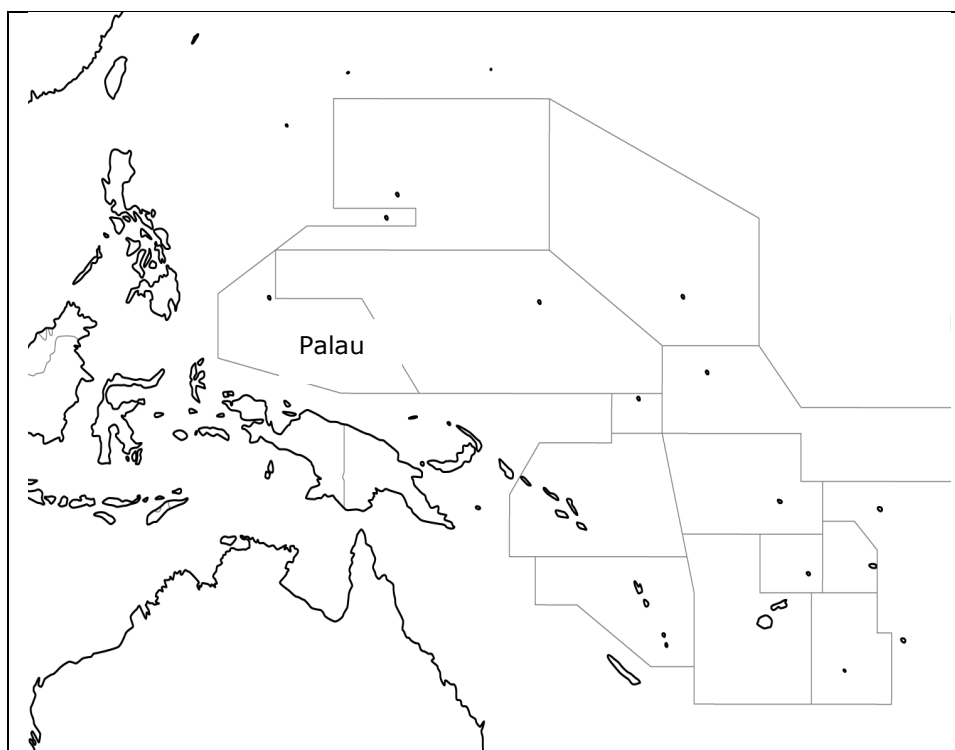


Figure 1. Location of Palau (<http://english.freemap.jp>)

Current Orthography and Problems of Loanword Spelling

Reaching a consensus on loanword spellings is not easy. The disagreement stems partly from the current orthography, which is facing some opposition from the Palauan users and also shows an inability to satisfactorily explain loanword spellings. The first orthography was established by the Palau Orthography Committee in 1972 that was later incorporated in Josephs' dictionary (1975), and has been implemented in schools since. Before the establishment of orthography, Palauan people followed the basic rules described in McManus' wordlist (1950, 1969). The shift of the orthography from old to new faced opposition particularly from Palauans who are used to the old spelling customs. As one of the linguists who was involved in the development of orthography in Micronesia, Reh (2004) observes, "I believe we made some mistakes in carrying out the task that stands at the very core of vernacular literacy -- the development and promotion of viable spelling systems." (Reh 2004:501). It seems that the new orthography established through the leadership of linguists did not win support from users. Shuster (2004) states that Palaun women in power released an eleven-point resolution after their

tenth annual Women's Conference in 2003 that demanded that Palauan orthography be written based on the spoken language. In 2007, the Orthography act (Senate bill No. 7-79) was proposed in Olbiil Era Kelulau (Palau National Congress), which aimed to recognise and formalise the controversial orthography and to require educational institutions in Palau to teach the orthography in classrooms (Kloulecha-Singeo, 2011: 22). This act remains pending largely due to the resistance from older generations (International Information and Networking Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Asia-Pacific Region under the auspices of UNESCO 2012). It can be assumed that the major reason for the establishment of the PLC is actually to settle the endless discord on proper orthography.

After assessing the validity of the orthography and interviewing Palauan language educators, the PLC concluded, "Our research shows that today the resistance is small to none. Majority of respondents, old and young, support the adoption of this existing orthography and Palauan grammar" (Palau Language Commission, 2012). Yet while the PLC insists that the resistance is minor, the orthography demands made at the Women's Conference serve as an illustration of the significant resistance that still remains. Disagreement over the orthography also seems to exist among the members of the PLC, and there is further discussion and consideration of minor modifications of the orthography, even though the PLC has acknowledged the orthography as a whole. This incertitude on the orthography is the underlying root of the loanword spelling reform and disagreement on some spellings.

In addition to this discord among Palauans, the orthography has some shortcomings in the description of loanword spellings. The orthography to be used in the spelling of Palauan consonants is shown on Table 1. Even though it states which consonants are to be used, it does not give clear directions on how "Minor (foreign) Consonants" for loanwords should be used.

Palauan Consonants	b, t, d, k, ch, s, m, ng, l, r
Minor (foreign) Consonants	f, h, n, p, z

Table 1. Letters used for Palauan consonants

Lewis S. Josephs, who was the leading linguist of the Palau orthography committee and the editor of the New Palauan-English dictionary (Josephs, 1990), seems to be wavering on the spelling rules concerning Japanese loanwords.

If the word is borrowed from Japanese and contains no sounds strange to Palauan, it should be possible to spell this word only with Palauan letters, as for basio 'place' and iasai 'vegetables'. If, however, the Japanese word contains sounds which do not occur in Palauan, then it is necessary to use non-Palauan letters such as j, and f. Words of this type include daijobu 'all right', sikojo 'airport', futsu 'common, usual', and keizai 'economics'. (Palau orthography committee 1972:17)... If, however, if the Japanese words contains sounds which do not occur in Palauan, then it is necessary to use non-Palauan letters such as z [z] and h [h]. Words of this type are daiziob 'all right', skoziob 'airport', benziob 'toilet', hutsu 'common, usual', kofi 'coffee', and keizai 'economics'. (Josephs, 1990: xlvii-xlviii)

Here we can see two conflicting examples in the spellings: use of spelling *j* and *f*. As seen in the quote above, spelling *jo* is replaced with *zio*, and *f* is replaced with *h*. Josephs does not state the reason for this change but rather avoids stating specific rules for the loanword spellings. The use of *j* seems to be eliminated later and did not cause much confusion, however the difference between *f* and *h* is still unclear. It also does not state when to use *p*, which needs explanation for the distinction between *b*. These unclear spelling rules also apply to the spellings of English loanwords.

Further, the problem with the spellings of English loanwords is fundamental. The current orthography states the English loanword spelling is as follows:

If the borrowed word comes from English -- for example, government, post office, party, etc. -- it is usually spelled as in English, unless a native Palauan spelling has become commonplace, as in the case of skuul 'school'. (Palau orthography committee, 1972: 17)

Since the author did not see the necessity in making rules for words to be added later, his statement does not give directions as to how English loanwords should be spelled, yet only describes the rule for the English loanwords found in the dictionary. It can still be inferred that this rule is applied to words not covered in the dictionary, which would mean that most of these words should be spelled in English since they are mostly newly adopted words. However, the PLC does not support this idea and chose to create their own spellings.

Spelling Reforms of Loanwords

Disagreement on the current orthography among Palauans, insufficient explanation and shortcomings in the current orthographic rules on loanword spellings led to the making of new rules for loanword spellings in *Beches El Tekoi Er a Belau* (ie new loanword dictionary, NLD hereafter). Loanwords in NLD are spelled according to the appointed letters shown on Table 1, however, problems arise as there are conflicting opinions regarding what the correct spelling is⁵. While spellings are simply a set of conventional rules, spelling decisions are influenced by one's opinion and background such as their pronunciation of the word, phonological cognition, orthographic and linguistic knowledge, as well as personal preference. These representations are conflicting among Palauans, and it is labourious to reach consensus even among the members of the PLC.

Loanword spelling is controversial when it involves the “minor (foreign) consonants” (as in table 1). The basic rule that the Palauan orthography follows is the rule of “one phoneme = one grapheme”, which is reasonable from a linguistic point of view. But the reality is that the spelling rules could ultimately be anything as long as the users agree upon them⁶. There is no single “correct” spelling for any word although there are “reasonable” spellings judging from the past usage and linguistic perspective. Spelling changes in NLD are seen in the use of the graphemes *f*, *p*, *z*, which pair up with foreign

⁵ These appointed letter follows the ones in Josephs (1990).

⁶ Rehg (2004) observes that the one phoneme/one grapheme system might be ideal if it is for the ideal language, spoken by an ideal speaker, in an ideal society, designed by ideal linguist, with an ideal theory.

induced phonemes /f/, /p/, /z/. While the PLC still acknowledge those graphemes to be in use, some of them are replaced with “Palauan consonants” (as in Table 1). Table 2 shows such examples of loanwords in NLD.

Letter	Some words in NLD	Phonetic alphabet	Original word
f	bkas faiber	[fkas] [faiber]	fukasu Fiber
p	bapa basbort brablem braibet riport	[baba] ~ [papa] [basbort]~[passport] [prablɛm] [praibɛt] [ribort] ~ [riport]	papa passport problem private report
z	atsienda(atienda) ⁷ siraks	[atʃɛnda]~[aɖɛnda] [siraks] ~ [ziraks]	agenda xerox

Table 2. Controversial spellings related to minor consonants

The use of the grapheme *f* has been implemented in Palauan orthography since the addition of phoneme /f/. The Japanese word *fukasu* was borrowed into Palauan, which is pronounced as /fkas/ and was confirmed by several Palauans that it should be spelled as *fkas*. However, substituting the *f* with *b* was suggested presumably because Palauan originally lacked the sound /f/ and the PLC desired for more authentic Palauan spelling⁸.

Furthermore, a “foreign consonant” *p* is also replaced with a “Palauan consonant” *b*. Palauan phoneme /b/ shows complementary distribution of [b] and [p], but some loanwords are pronounced with [p] where [b] should appear. Accordingly, the phoneme /p/ is acknowledged and the spelling *p* is adopted. The complementary distribution and the existence of /p/ suggests that Palauans can, whether or not they actually do, pronounce [p] in most of the loanwords that contain it⁹. The PLC still acknowledges the use of *p* yet the spellings of some loanwords that contain *p* are replaced with *b*, as in the case of *basbort* (“passport”) and *brokura*m (“program”). Given that some pronounce *basport* as [basbort], the pronunciation of *brokura*m is still [progruam] (as Palauan /b/ realises as [p] before [r]). This demonstrates their strong determination to use *b*. However, the word *riport* (“report”) is not spelled as “ribort”, when having a similar phonological environment as *basbort*. It seems that determining whether to spell with *b* or *p* is based on the speakers’ subjective view. Although the PLC members replaced some *p* with *b*, it is causing incoherency in the usage of *b* and *p*.

Replacement of foreign consonants *f* and *p* with the original “Palauan consonant” *b*, is a subconscious act of the elimination of foreign influence. While they are aware that foreign consonants are necessary for spelling loanwords, they desire to bring about more

⁷ “Azienda” must be misspelling of “Azienda” since ʔ sound is represented by “zi”.

⁸ The use of the grapheme *f* still remains ambiguous as it is still used for the word *faiber*. It should be noted that the replacement might possibly be caused by confusion due to the rare use of grapheme *f*.

⁹ Complementary distribution of [b] and [p] in /b/ is still a phonetic phenomenon and does not suggest the speakers’ perception of the difference. One possibility for the substitution of *p* to *b* is that the phoneme /p/ has not yet completely become a part of their phonological system and they actually perceive some [p] as /b/.

“Palauanness” in the spellings of loanwords by amending them using only original Palauan consonants. It seems that the members of the PLC more or less agreed upon the substitution of *f* and *p* with *b*, however, it is still questionable if the spellings will win extensive support by other Palauans.

Debate over the use of *b* or *p* was seen in the decision on the official name of the country. At the 1979 Constitutional Convention, delegate Alfonso Oiterong introduced a proposal suggesting that the official name for the country should be “The Republic of Belau”¹⁰. He reinforced his argument stating that this was the original Palauan name. One delegate, John Sadao Tarkong, argued in favor of this proposal, saying that it was important to maintain Palauan names. Delegate Joshua Koshiha (who later ran for President) challenged him, asking “What is *your* Palauan name?” Tarkong apparently forgot that his middle name was Japanese, and replied “Sadao,” which effectively nullified his proposal. Koshiha tried to insist that it is illogical to trace the original Palauan names after the undeniable foreign influence. This story illustrates two sides of the Palauan people: one desiring the authenticity of the language and the other embracing the historical changes as part of their own identity. Seeking the original state of the language, might confirm their identity as an independent nation and not a remnant of foreign occupation. Notwithstanding the goal, it is difficult to trace back the authenticity of Palauan language as it already has, and continues, to change from the influence of foreign languages¹¹.

Linguistic Change and Language Attitude

In addition to the change in the use of *p* and *f*, there are conflicting opinions on the use of the grapheme *z* caused by the actual difference of the pronunciation among Palauans. There is a debate among the members of the PLC over the correct spelling of *agenda*, whether it should be *azienda* or *atsienda*. One member firmly declared that nobody pronounces it as “atsienda” but “azienda”, yet others affirmed it is pronounced as “atsienda” and should be spelled as *atsienda*¹². The pronunciation of loanwords indeed varies among different generations and individuals depending on the speakers’ level of influence from Japanese and English.

The phoneme /z/ had been introduced through Japanese loanwords, and faded after the end of Japanese rule, but was again reintroduced through English, which resulted in the disagreement on the use of the grapheme *z*. Figure 2 shows the results of a survey conducted to check the use of the sound [z] in Japanese loanwords by Palauans from different generations, using a list of words that originally contain the /z/ sound. It is clearly shown that the use of [z] in Japanese loanwords was once common but has since declined and nearly disappeared among younger generations. Matsumoto and Britain

¹⁰ This story was told by Victorio Uherbela, an Angaur state’s delegate at that time (personal communication: 2015/03/24).

¹¹ It should also be noted that in Palauan names includes many exceptional spellings such as “sh” in “Koshiha”, “ch” in “Masaichi” (different from the Palauan orthographic “ch” which represents the glottal stop /ʔ/).

¹² The spelling was first *atsienda* but later altered to *azenda* (a misspell of *azienda*). This may have been influenced by my advice for the member, which in retrospect may have been a mistake.

(2012: 155) observed that the use of [z] in Palauan English is rare, but is still uncertain because there are a good number of very proficient speakers of English in Palau¹³.

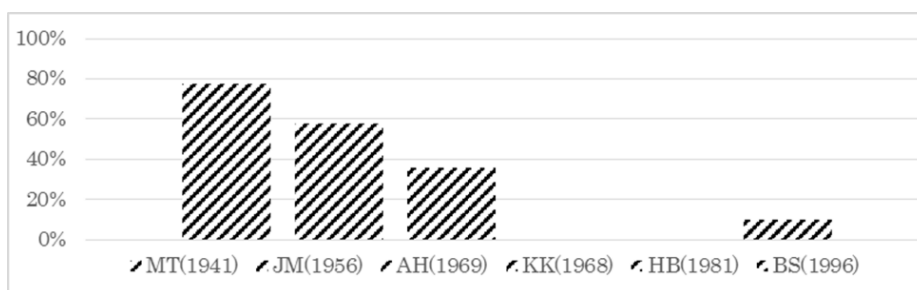


Figure 2. The use of [z] in Japanese loanwords by speakers from different generations (birth year)

The use of the sound [z] is still present depending on the speaker, therefore the use of the grapheme *z* is as reasonable as *ts/s* considering the original pronunciations and spellings. However, the spelling with *ts/s* is supported more among the members of the PLC because their opposition to the strong English dominance and fervency for advocating the strengthening of Palauan language.

A similar case of conflicting opinions was seen in the discussion during the 2nd Constitutional Convention in 2005¹⁴. The Palauan constitution is written in both Palauan and English and prior to the 2005 convention, in the case of an interpretation conflict, English was the prevailing language. However, during the convention the decision was made to instead use Palauan in such instances. During a public hearing held in Ngchesar State before the convention, traditional chiefs of Ngchesar were in the audience. One chief argued against the change from English to Palauan as the prevailing language. Based on his experience as an attorney, the Chief proclaimed that the Palauan language was inadequate for explaining certain concepts in legal terms. Another chief scolded him saying “you are U.S. educated and that is the only reason you find the Palauan language inadequate for legal concepts.” The latter chief’s opinion was affirmed at the 2005 constitutional convention. While the claims of both chiefs depict the sentiments of Palauan people, advocating the stronger status of Palauan language won more support.

The members of the PLC are not highly proficient bilingual speakers of English and Palauan but are Palauan-dominant speakers. It is suspected that the board members of the PLC have been selected by people who are strong advocates of the Palauan language and have power in making designations. The traditional leaders still hold influential

¹³ This observation is based on recordings of conversation among Palauans and speakers may vary in their pronunciation depending on the contextual style (Labov, 1972).

¹⁴ This story was also told by Victorio Uherbelau (personal communication, 24th March 2015). The change was suggested by the resolution of annual Mechesil Belau Women's Conference held before the convention.

status in the society and are often conscious of their responsibility to maintain the traditional culture of the country, which coincides with the opposition to strong English influences.

Conclusion –The Work of Linguists

Reforming loanword spelling to produce a more “authentic” Palauan spelling can be seen as the desire to eradicate the dependency of Palauan language on other languages and to demonstrate its completeness for national identity. Achievability, however, is a highly involved process on account of the conflicting opinions among Palauans of different generations and backgrounds. It is our role as linguist to propound our research to equip organisations such as the PLC with additional insight that assists in furthering their aims of language preservation. While it would appear that this issue is an internal affair that linguists have little part to take in, the truth is that although local communities are looking for outsider help, little academic research is made available for them to utilise¹⁵. It is important for us to be more proactive in seeking ways to connect our research to the work of the community as we receive immense help from the locals for our research.

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¹⁵ Rehg (2014: 66) takes the same position and states: “What I am instead proposing is that, even those who are most deeply committed to the development of linguistic theory might try to combine that work with the documentation and conservation of endangered languages.”

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