Orthography

I. Introduction

1. Review

In the late 17th century, Europeans encountered the Polynesian languages for the first time. They used their own writing systems (English, French, Spanish, or Dutch) to record these languages.

Le Maire’s Niuatoputapu word list
- ica for ika (fish)
- outfij for ufi (yam)
- taci for tasi (one)
- tolou for tolu (three)

Captain Cook’s Tahitian word list
- Otaheiti for ‘O Tahiti
- Ulietea for ‘O Raiatea
- Opuuny for ‘O Puni
- Otoo for ‘O Tu

Q1 At this point, no serious attempt was made to establish the standard orthography. Why didn’t they consider the lack of standard writing system a problem?

2. Indigenous writing system?

Polynesian languages did not have a writing system at the time when Cook and others visited these islands. The only exception is Easter Island, where a hieroglyphic writing system seems to have existed. The hieroglyphs, known as the *rongorongo* script, have been one of the mysteries in Polynesia.

- *Rongorongo* is Oceania's only indigenous script that predates the twentieth century.
- In 1864, the first Catholic missionary, Eugène Eyraud reported that he had seen there "in all the houses" hundreds of tablets and staffs incised with thousands of hieroglyphic figures.
- These objects were considered to be *tapu* or sacred prohibition.
- Two years later, only a small handful of these incised artefacts were left. Most *rongorongo* had by then been burnt or hidden away in caves.
- There remain today only 25 known authentic artefacts incised with rongorongo glyphs.
- Rapanui itself no longer possesses a single authentic *rongorongo* artefact. They are dispersed to museums and institutions as far removed from Easter Island as St. Petersburg, Russia, and the British Museum in London.
- Each surviving artefact displays between 2 glyphs and 2,320 glyphs.
- There are over 14,000 glyphs in the entire *rongorongo* corpus.
- *Rongorongo* is a Mangarevan word meaning “professional chanter.” Before this name was given, the Rapanui people had called the inscriptions tā “writing” or *kouhau* “staffs.”

“Easter Island’s rongorongo script” by S. Fischer (http://www.netaxs.com/~trance/fischer.html)
They look like this:

Recently, S. Fischer claimed that the script is made up of chants in Old Rapanui and tell the story of creation. He further claims that the visit of the Spaniards in 1770 is where the idea of writing came from. However, some are sceptical about Fischer’s claim.

Q2 In this writing system, what do the characters represent?
Q3 How can we represent function words such as articles or tense markers?
Q4 Why did it disappear without developing into a standard custom among the Rapanui speakers?

3. Development

After the discovery of the Polynesian islands, missionaries were sent to these islands. Many of the early grammars are based on the data collected by the missionaries: e.g., Kendall (1820), Davies (1823), Andrews (1854). This is when a serious attempt to reduce a language into writing was made. However, there was no standardized writing system, each transcriber using his own method. Thus;

Mariner’s (1817) Tongan
- Finow for Finau (name of a King)
- Hapai for Ha’apa (name of an island)
- motoo for motu (island)

Kendall’s (1820) Māori
- tātu for tātou (1.pl.incl.)
- kadua for kārua (2.d.)
- dima for rima (five)

Andrew’s (1854) Hawaiian
- anó for ‘ānō (now)
- aká for akā (but)
- ike for ‘ike (to know)

Q5 Why was it important to the missionaries to have a writing system?

As more publication was made in the native language, there arose a need for the standard writing system. A typical example is Hawaiian. Being aware of the confusion caused by the variability in spelling, the Mission in Honolulu formed a committee to discuss whether it would be useful to establish the standard orthography.

Q6 Why is it a problem that one word can be spelt in several different ways?
Q7 Do you think it was a good idea to establish the standard orthography? Why?
Q8 Do you think it was a simple task? If not, what kind of difficulties do you think they faced?
4. The power of spelling

Consider the following comments by Te Rangi Hiroa (1932) on some consequences of having a standard orthography.

H in Manihiki

In the northern islands of Manihiki, Rakahanga, and Penrhyn, attached politically to the Cook Islands, the Rarotongan alphabet is used as the result of mission teachers being trained at Rarotonga. In these northern islands the h sound is fully aspirated, but the people have not been provided with the extra letter [because in Rarotongan, it is a glottal stop, which is also lacking in the alphabet]. … Thus the people of Manihiki spell the name of their atoll as Maniiki but pronounce it Manihiki. (p.254)

Glottal stop in Rarotongan

… the younger generation of Rarotongans … have a tendency to drop the glottal closure altogether in some words, because there is no visual sign that it exists.(p.254)

T in Hawaiian

The Hawaiian dialect originally had the t sound, while the k had come to be represented by the glottal closure. In the period when the first missionaries arrived, the t sound was undergoing a process of transition into k, but the change was by no means complete. The missionaries compiled a Hawaiian alphabet .. decided on the use of k instead of t. The transition was thus arbitrarily completed by non-Polynesians, although the island of Kauai continued to pronounce t for the written k, and has so continued up to the present time. (p.254-5)

Q9 Hiroa seems to argue that fixing the writing system affected the pronunciation of some words in these languages. Do you agree?

Q10 Is it necessarily wrong and harmful to establish a standard orthography?

Q11 In your opinion, could there have been a better way to deal with the task of reducing the Polynesian languages into writing?

References:

* The Ethnologue (2000) lists Manihiki (Manihiki-Rakanga) under Cook Islands and notes that the language has limited intelligibility with Rarotongan.