

UC Santa Cruz

UC Santa Cruz Previously Published Works

Title

Community Engagement in the Revised Chamorro-English Dictionary

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/13033297>

Journal

Dictionaries: The Journal of the Dictionary Society of North America, 34

Author

Chung, Sandra

Publication Date

2014

DOI

10.1353/dic.2014.0019

Peer reviewed

Community Engagement in the *Revised Chamorro-English Dictionary*

Sandra Chung and Elizabeth Diaz Rechebei

University of California, Santa Cruz

Contact information for Chung:

Cowell Academic Services

UC Santa Cruz

Santa Cruz, California 95064

schung@ucsc.edu

831 459 2905

Contact information for Rechebei:

P.O. Box 502493

Saipan, MP 96950

sabetcham@gmail.com

670-234-9150

Abstract

Chamorro, an Austronesian language spoken in the Mariana Islands, is both the language of Micronesia with the largest number of speakers and one of Micronesia's two most endangered languages. This note describes the community effort in progress in the U.S. Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) to preserve the language by revising the 1975 *Chamorro-English Dictionary*.¹

Introduction

The Chamorro language, spoken in the Mariana Islands and by many Chamorros in the western states of the U.S., has been a powerful symbol of cultural identity for more than three hundred years. The Mariana Islands were conquered by Spain in the late seventeenth century, after thirty years of warfare. During the next two centuries, many aspects of indigenous Chamorro culture were replaced by colonial Hispanic culture (Spoehr 1954), but the language survived, maintaining its Austronesian linguistic structure while borrowing large numbers of loans from Spanish (Stolz 2003; Borja, Borja, and Chung 2006, 113-120).

The Mariana Islands are currently divided into two political entities within the U.S. and its possessions. Guam has been an unincorporated U.S. territory since 1901, while the Northern Mariana Islands—including Saipan, Tinian, and Rota—have been a U.S. commonwealth (CNMI) since 1976. In this sociopolitical context and in an era of increasing globalization, the Chamorro language has gradually given ground to English.

¹ The research reported here was supported by the National Science Foundation under Grants No. BCS-0753594 to the Northern Mariana Islands Council of the Humanities and No. BCS-0753240 to the University of California, Santa Cruz.

In 1975, Donald M. Topping, Pedro M. Ogo, and Bernadita C. Dungca observed in their introduction to the *Chamorro-English Dictionary* (1975: ix) that Chamorro was spoken natively by some 52,000 people in the Mariana Islands, 40,000 of them in Guam, but “[m]any Guamanian children enter kindergarten able to communicate only in English.” At the time, most preschool children in Saipan, Tinian, and Rota spoke Chamorro fluently, but that situation was about to change. Twenty-five years later, figures from the 2000 U.S. Census painted a more ominous picture of language erosion:² Just 44,907 of the 72,127 Chamorros in the Mariana Islands were speakers of Chamorro, and just 8,903 of these speakers were 5-17 years old. Informal observations by educators and others suggest that today, most Chamorro children in the 5-17 age range speak English, not Chamorro, as their first language.

By 2000, older Chamorros were well aware that their language was not being passed on to children. In the CNMI, this awareness, and the community’s desire to preserve the language for future generations, led directly to the effort to revise Topping, Ogo, and Dungca’s *Chamorro-English Dictionary*.

The Dictionary as Cultural Symbol

The Dictionary revision began as part of a larger, NSF-funded project undertaken by the two of us to upgrade the documentation of the Chamorro language. Among other things, we wanted to realize Topping’s hope “that the Chamorro people will take upon themselves the task of expanding this work into a full-fledged dictionary that will serve either to help keep the language alive or as a fitting tribute to its demise” (Topping et al.

² Census 2000 Gateway, United States Census Bureau.

<http://www.census.gov/main/www/cen2000.html> .

1975: viii). Our plans called originally for the Dictionary to be revised, expanded, and updated by some ten Chamorro speakers working with the support of a linguist (Sandra Chung) and a technical consultant (Cameron Fruit). But the initial meetings we held in Saipan in September 2008 revealed that many more community members in the CNMI wanted an active role in the revision. These people included current and retired teachers and other educators, librarians, government employees, and others who felt a strong desire to help their language survive and to take ownership of the process. Although our project also called for a new reference grammar and videotaped oral histories, the community focused exclusively on the revised dictionary as the symbol of a vibrant, full-service language and a central tool for language maintenance and preservation.

We introduced more infrastructure so that we could include everyone who wanted to participate in the revision process. Participants were divided into working groups of 3-6 members, all Chamorro speakers, who met weekly to revise different portions of the Dictionary. There were initially six working groups: four on Saipan, one on Tinian, and one on Rota. In the four years from 2008 to 2011, some 30 community members were active members of the working groups, and many others attended the all-hands dictionary meetings that were held monthly on Saipan. Each working group member was paid a small monthly honorarium. At the beginning, the revision effort was led by Dr. Rita H. Inos, an educator who was a well-known, charismatic figure. After her death in 2009, she was replaced by the current three editors: Dr. Elizabeth D. Rechebei, Manuel F. Borja, and Tita A. Hocog.

The Revision Process

The 1975 *Chamorro-English Dictionary* contained some 9,700 entries. Each entry consisted of a Chamorro headword spelled in the 1971 orthography, annotated for word class, and accompanied by an English definition. Some entries included a brief Chamorro sentence illustrating usage, but most did not; in the entire 1975 *Dictionary* there were slightly under 2,600 illustrative Chamorro sentences. We decided that the first stage of revision should focus on upgrading the illustrative sentences. Members of the working groups were assigned different blocks of entries from the 1975 *Dictionary* to review. They were asked to revise the entries that they were familiar with, by: (1) correcting the headword's spelling and English definition, if needed, and providing (2) three new Chamorro sentences of varying complexity illustrating the headword's usage, along with (3) any additional information. Participants were encouraged to create illustrative sentences that were culturally authentic, varied in form and meaning, and included complex as well as simple sentences. This was work that all participants would enjoy and could contribute to. The working groups were also asked to flag entries that they were not familiar with, so that these could be discussed at the all-hands meetings. They were encouraged to submit new entries—Chamorro words that did not appear in the 1975 *Dictionary*, along with English definitions and illustrative examples. Finally, they were urged to consult widely with other community members who could provide unusual words, identify unfamiliar words, or supply other relevant information.

The 1975 *Dictionary* had been electronically typeset at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, where Topping had worked for much of his life. Topping's former colleagues Byron W. Bender, Robert Hsu, and Kenneth Rehg worked to locate the electronic files of

the entries, and Rehg generously provided us with a copy. With help from Albert Bickford and Ed Quigley, Chung converted the files to an electronic database in SIL's Toolbox format.³ This provided the basis for the revision database, which is housed on a server at UC Santa Cruz. At first, the working groups submitted their revised entries in handwritten form or as Word documents, and Rechebei, Borja, Fruit, or Chung entered them into the revision database. This procedure was soon replaced by a more distributed method of data entry: one member from each working group was given access to a computer and trained to create revised entries in Toolbox which could be merged directly into the revision database. Electronic copies of the material submitted by the working groups have been archived with PARADISEC.⁴

Once this effort was well underway, the editors sought help from the community to identify words associated with traditional cultural practices. Thematic groups were formed to discuss the vocabulary of fishing, farming, traditional medicine, religion, weddings, government, and so on. Some 40 people who were not members of the working groups participated in the thematic groups. The working groups made a systematic push to develop entries for Chamorro surnames and Chamorro place names in the CNMI. Government agencies, such as the Department of Lands and Natural Resources, helped with place names and the scientific names of plants and animals. One working group member, who hosts a weekly radio talk show in Chamorro, used this forum to elicit rare or unusual words from the community.

³ Field Linguist's Toolbox, SIL International. <http://www.sil.org/computing/toolbox> .

⁴ Pacific and Regional Archive for Digital Sources in Endangered Cultures. <http://paradisec.org.au/> .

Meanwhile, Chung and others at UC Santa Cruz upgraded aspects of the entries that did not require native-speaker knowledge of Chamorro. For reasons detailed elsewhere (Chung 2012), the Chamorro-specific word classes (namely, 1, 2, 3) in the 1975 *Dictionary* were replaced with more traditional parts of speech (e.g. n., v.i., v.t., adj., prep., and so on). Graduate student Ruth Kramer began the process of updating the scientific names in the entries; this process was continued in Saipan by Fruit and his son Colin Fruit. Other graduate students identified loans from Spanish or Japanese and added information about the source language to the entries.

Spelling Reform

One unintended consequence of the revision effort was to crystallize the community's dissatisfaction with the official Chamorro orthography—a spelling system that had been adopted in 1971, used in the 1975 *Dictionary*, and modified in only minor ways since. This orthography ranked the principle “one word, one spelling” over the principle “one sound, one symbol”: it gave a uniform representation to the word in all its different forms. The Chamorro language has some intricate phonemic alternations. As a result, many words had a rather abstract spelling in the 1971 orthography: for instance, /tupu/ ‘sugar cane’, /huŋuk/ ‘hear’, /tommu/ ‘knee’, and /dɔŋkulu/ ‘big’ were spelled, respectively, *tupu*, *hungok*, *tommo*, and *dankolo*. The abstractness made the orthography hard for fluent speakers to use and even harder to teach to children. Unsurprisingly, it also complicated the task of looking up words in the dictionary.

In July 2009, an orthography workshop was held in Saipan, spearheaded by the dictionary working groups and sponsored by the CNMI's Chamorro/Carolinian Language Policy Commission (CCLPC) and the NMI Council for the Humanities. The workshop,

which was attended by many working group members, reviewed the issues with the 1971 orthography, considered various options, and quickly arrived at a proposal for a significantly revised spelling system. This new orthography ranks the principle “one sound, one symbol” over the principle “one word, one spelling”; for instance, it spells /tupu/ as *tupu*, /huŋuk/ as *hunguk*, /tommu/ as *tommu*, and /dɔŋkulu/ as *dɔŋkulu*. (The trade-off is that many words have different spellings in different forms; e.g. *dɔŋkulu* ‘big’ but *dangkulonña* ‘bigger’.) The new orthography was formally adopted by the CCLPC in April 2010 and made the CNMI’s official orthography by the Legislature in December 2010. It has since provided the basis for a complete overhaul of the Public School System’s materials for the Chamorro language curriculum.

From the standpoint of the Dictionary revision, the spelling reform came at exactly the right time. Over the next three years, the spelling of the headwords and illustrative sentences in the revision database was normalized to conform to the new orthography.

Next Steps

The revision database now contains some 10,200 entries. More than 950 of these entries are new; some 800 are entries from the 1975 *Dictionary* that have been flagged as unfamiliar by at least one editor. The remaining entries have been thoroughly revised, with each headword spelled in the new orthography, annotated with traditional parts of speech, and accompanied by three or more new Chamorro sentences illustrating usage. Some revised entries contain many more than three illustrative sentences. The 29,500 illustrative sentences in the revision database form a substantial corpus of naturally occurring (non-elicited) language data, which has already proved to be a valuable resource for the reference grammar.

Numerous entries from the 1975 *Dictionary* do not appear in the revision database. Some headwords that have been removed are inflected words or phrases whose form and meaning are fully predictable (e.g. *dinimålas* ‘bad luck, misfortune’, derived from *dimålas* ‘having bad luck, in an unfortunate situation’ plus the nominalizing infix *-in-*; *agapa* ‘*fafayiña*, defined as ‘right-handed’ but actually a sentence that means ‘he is right-handed; his favored (hand) is on the right’). Other headwords were felt by the editors to be ‘Chamorrized’ English (e.g. *akta* ‘actor’, *bam* ‘bomb’). A very few headwords were viewed as incorrect or offensive. (The community’s most frequent complaint about the 1975 *Dictionary* was that it contained one headword, a phrase whose meaning is predictable but sexually offensive, which had been incorrectly defined as ‘widow’. This headword was omitted from the revision database.)

The three editors have been editing the entries in the revision database since 2010. The editing is a two-stage process: the editors individually review different blocks of entries for content and consistency, and when their individual edits are done, they then finalize the edits as a team. The process is inclusive and produces high-quality output, but is time-consuming. The logistics of team editing are further complicated by geography: the editors do not all live on the same island, and inter-island telecommunications are not robust enough for long meetings via Skype. To date, some 2,100 entries in the revision database have been reviewed by at least one editor, and the editing has been finalized for all entries whose headwords begin with *d*. The current plan is for the editing to reach completion sometime in the next three years. Given the nature of the work, the logistical challenges, and the editors’ other commitments, this may be an overoptimistic goal.

As the editors continue their work, there are some larger issues to grapple with:

– Four of the Mariana Islands have sizable populations: Saipan, Tinian, Rota, and Guam. The Rota dialect differs substantially from the dialects spoken on the other islands. Among other things, the Rota dialect has no geminate consonants and has merged many instances of the low vowels *â* and *a*. Working group members from Rota have a strong desire for the revised Dictionary to include the Rota pronunciation of a headword when it differs from the pronunciation in other dialects. Although the editors have agreed to incorporate this information, it will be challenging to do this systematically.

– Early twentieth-century Chamorro dictionaries, grammars, and descriptions of Chamorro society (e.g Fritz 1989[1904], von Pressig 1918, Safford 1903-05) include some Chamorro words that are not in the 1975 *Dictionary*. These words, which are no longer in use, are given in a non-standardized spelling whose phonetics is not always clear. If these words are included in the revised Dictionary, how should they be represented?

– The Dictionary revision has so far been a CNMI effort. In 2013, the editors visited Guam to verify the pronunciation and definition of unfamiliar headwords and to seek the cooperation of the community there. Chamorros in Guam have also been active in dictionary construction. In 2009, a group restored and completed a grass-roots dictionary, *The Official Chamorro-English Dictionary*, which had been started thirty years before. This other dictionary contains many headwords not in the revision database, and vice versa. The project of combining the two works remains a distant but attractive goal.

– Participants in the revision effort hope and expect that the revised Dictionary will be published in print form. Over and above this, there is the possibility of on-line

delivery. In 2011, graduate student Boris Harizanov began developing a search engine and parser that would enable the revised Dictionary database to be searched on-line. Harizanov's suite of programs can strip off the affixes from an inflected or derived Chamorro word to locate the root. It neutralizes the differences between the new orthography and the 1971 orthography (a version of which is still the official orthography in Guam). Most important, it does not require an exact match in order to display a potentially relevant headword. In other words, it enables users to locate a Chamorro word successfully without knowing exactly how to spell it. Harizanov's search engine has the potential to make the revised Dictionary widely accessible to, and usable by, teachers, students, and other Chamorros in the Mariana Islands and the continental U.S. When it was displayed to working group members in Saipan and Tinian in 2012, it received an enthusiastic reception. The editors appreciate the benefits of making the revised Dictionary available on the web. Whether and when this will happen is ultimately for them and the working groups to decide.

Broader Impact

The revised Dictionary is very much a work in progress. But during the last six years the revision effort has had a clear impact on Chamorros in the CNMI. So far, roughly a hundred community members have been involved, as working group members, members of the thematic groups, interested elders, or in other capacities. For the participants, the revision process has become a way to sustain the Chamorro language and affirm its cultural significance. It has led to increased tolerance among Catholics and non-Catholics in the working groups. It has also engaged the community more generally in language issues. In 2008, English was the language of public settings in the CNMI, even when all

those present could speak Chamorro. Community members made a deliberate effort to speak Chamorro, not English, at the all-hands dictionary meetings. This effort succeeded, and has since spread to other public contexts in the CNMI in which issues of language and culture are discussed. Dictionary meetings have become a venue for sharing words remembered from childhood but no longer widely used, trading information about indigenous cultural practices, and reminiscing about the past. For many participants, the sadness of contemplating the number of Chamorro words that have been lost is balanced by the joy of being able to recover a word that has not been heard for years. That joy is unforgettable.

Sample Entries

aniti n. devil, satan. *Mampus gui' bâba, kalan i aniti.* He/she is so evil, like the devil.

Debi di un mabendisi ya u falaknus i aniti giya hâgu. You should be blessed to expel the devil in you. *Maolekña hao kini i aniti.* You are better than the devil. *Un na'maguf i aniti ni baban bidâda-mu.* Your evil doings make Satan happy. *Suhâyi sa' kalan i aniti.* Stay away from him/her because he/she is like Satan. *I aniti i sainan i baba.* Satan is the lord of evil. The original meaning of this word is 'soul', as in **anti**.

debu' adj. fat, obese, chubby. *Ântis na tiempu, i mandebu' na famagu'un*

manna'magoddai. In the old days, chubby children were considered irresistible.

Dumebu' i taotao anai pumâra pumeska. The man became fat when he stopped fishing. *Ripâra i taotao yanggin mampus debu', sa' siña ha' siñât chetnut mamis.*

Observe a person who is obese, because it could be a sign of diabetes. Bw: Jp.

dekka' n. pole, stick (used for picking). *Guaha dekka'-mu para i mangga.* You have a stick for picking mangos.

— vt. 1) poke, pick (with pole or stick), pick at (nose or ears), nudge. Si Jose ha dekka' i lemmai nu i gaoli. Jose picked the breadfruit with the pole. *Ha dedekka' si Tun Jose i gui'eng-ña.* Tun Jose is picking his nose. Syn: *gaoli, dossuk.* 3) coax, call attention to, encourage, bring up. *Mungnga madekka' esti hulu'.* Don't bring this up. *Ha keke'dekka yu' si Jose para bai hu dalak gui'.* Jose is trying to convince me to go with him.

matâ'pang *adj.* 1) bland, tasteless, flavorless (of food). *I nengkannu' yanggin ti un nâ'yi asiga, mumatâ'pang siempri.* If you do not put salt in food, it will have a bland taste. *Si nanâ-hu ti interesâo ha bendi i chandiha sa' puru ha' manmatâ'pang.* My mother is not interested in selling the watermelons because they all have a bland taste. 2) unfriendly, stand-offish, discourteous, rude, not hospitable, not receptive. *Ti siña mabisita si Carmen gi gimâ'-ña sa' mampus matâ'pang.* Carmen cannot be visited at her house because she is not very hospitable. *I asaguâ-ña si Rose mampus matâ'pang gi familial Rose.* Rose's husband is very uncivil to Rose's family. *Mungnga mumatâ'pang gi taotao.* Do not be discourteous to people. From **Matâ'pang**, the name of the Chamorro chief who killed Father Sanvitores.

po'lu vt. 1) put, place, establish. *Po'lu fan todû siha i hugeti gi un sahguan.* Please place all toys in one container. Syn: *pega, sa'ang, dipusita.* 2) put it aside, leave it up (to me). 3) leave, abandon. 4) assume, presume, think, believe. *Todû i tiempu hu popo'lu na manmâmaolik ha' hamyu.* I always thought that you people are doing fine. 5) invest, save. *Hu po'lu todû i salappe'-hu gi bangku putno bai hu gâsta.* I invested all my money at the bank so that I would not spend it. 6) let it be. *Po'lu ha'.* That's okay.

References

- Borja, Joaquin F., Manuel F. Borja, and Sandra Chung. 2006. *Estreyas Marianas: Chamorro*. Saipan: Estreyas Marianas Publications.
- Chung, Sandra. 2012. Are lexical categories universal? The view from Chamorro. *Theoretical Linguistics* 38: 1-56.
- Fritz, Georg. 1989[1904]. *The Chamorro: A history and ethnography of the Marianas*, translated by Elfriede Craddock, edited by Scott Russell. Saipan: Division of Historic Preservation.
- Safford, William Edwin. 1903-05. The Chamorro language of Guam. *American Anthropologist* 5: 289-311, 508-529; 6: 95-117, 501-534; 7:305-319.
- Spoehr, Alexander. 1954. *Saipan: The ethnology of a war-devastated island*. Chicago: Chicago Natural History Museum.
- Stolz, Thomas. 2003. Not quite the right mixture: Chamorro and Malti as candidates for the status of mixed language. In *The mixed language debate: Theoretical and empirical advances*, edited by Yaron Matras and Peter Bakker, 271-315. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Topping, Donald M., Pedro M. Ogo, and Bernadita C. Dungca. 1975. *Chamorro-English dictionary*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- von Preissig, Edward Ritter. 1918. *Dictionary and grammar of the Chamorro language of the island of Guam*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office.
- The Official Chamorro-English Dictionary. Ufisiât na Diksionârion Chamorro-Engles*. 2009. Hagåtña: Department of Chamorro Affairs.